
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

TAKING STOCK AND BUILDING BRIDGES: Feminism, Women's Movements, and Pentecostalism in Latin America¹

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Abstract: As one moves from the social science literature of religion and politics to the literature of women's movements in Latin America, the "silence is deafening" regarding the phenomenon of Pentecostalism, a movement primarily made up of women. This article argues that Pentecostalism does fit into the newer analyses of feminism and women's movements in the region in a much-needed interdisciplinary approach. The research is a literature review reinforced by field study in Central America. Pentecostalism provides an arena where women help each other and can learn civic skills to participate in fledgling democracies in Latin America.

A recent book that provides a wide-ranging overview of gender relations and politics in Latin America points out that "[T]he perception of feminism in the region is largely negative, and feminists are seen as elite, professional women with few interests in common with 'ordinary'

1. The research reported here was supported in part by a grant from the Professional Development Committee of Stetson University. The author appreciates the useful comments of three anonymous reviewers and the editorial staff of *LARR*. An earlier version of this essay was presented to the Latin American Studies Association meeting, March 2000, in Miami, Florida.

Latin American Research Review, Vol. 38, No. 1, February 2003
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women. As such, there have been serious tensions around class and ethnicity" (Craske 1999, 162). This antagonism towards feminism persists even among the urban poor women in Latin America who are active in popular movements for such things as labor equality, basic goods, human rights, and reduction in crime—and who often work alongside men in their struggles. The stereotype of feminists in Latin America as anti-men and as critical of the centrality of motherhood is pervasive and divisive² (Craske 1999, 171; Jaquette 1998, 5).

Feminists have often returned the favor with negative stereotypes of their own that depict popular women's movements as simply "derivative" from the immediate situation the women face, and not as "advanced" or "mature" as authentic feminist movements (Jaquette 1994, 3). An infamous event dramatizing this class tension occurred in Brazil when a busload of women from a Rio de Janeiro shantytown were denied access to the Third Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Feminists in 1985—which may have been a staged media event to discredit the feminists as racists (Craske 1999, 183). Partly in response to this harsh image, feminist scholars have been in the midst of a healthy self-criticism for over fifteen years now in an attempt to define the goals of women's movements more clearly and to be more effective in attaining them.

In the spirit of this self-criticism and refinement, this research note will add another element of tension to the mix of class and culture and gender: the growth of Pentecostal religion in Latin America. The number of studies of the phenomenon continues to increase and is now large enough to allow us to draw some intriguing comparisons between Catholicism and Protestantism, and to understand pragmatic reasons women in Latin America are turning to Pentecostalism. This article will briefly address these points, and then will examine how Pentecostalism does fit into the newer analyses of feminism and women's movements in the region. The research approach is primarily a literature review, reinforced by field study in Central America completed in the summers of 1990 through 2000. I agree with the plea by Christine Bose that the "roles of women in Latin American and Caribbean development, their subordination and forms of resistance, are best understood with an interdisciplinary approach" (1995, 1). The subfield of religion and politics should be part of that interdisciplinary approach. I also argue that Pentecostalism is part of the broad activism of women in Latin America, but we must look closely to see this effect.

2. A recent example is given in a revealing newspaper interview in which a female judge in Guatemala, Judge Marieliz Lucero, was asked about a new declaration for gender justice signed by female magistrates in Latin America. She first stated that "[t]alking about gender does not imply feminism or lesbianism. Rather, we are trying to raise awareness because gender discrimination is a reality in all our countries." (*Latinamerica Press*, 29 January 2001).

Social scientists have somewhat belatedly recognized the massive popular shift that has occurred in the region over the last few decades, as millions of people have converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, primarily to the Pentecostal variety. Table 1 provides some rough estimates of the scope of this movement. In terms of sheer size, the Pentecostal movement is probably the most significant religious movement in the world today; but what is sometimes overlooked is that it is primarily made up of women. Harvey Cox estimates that "Pentecostal churches are growing at the rate of 20 million new members a year and their worldwide membership [has] now reached some 410 million" (1995, xv). Cox notes that an estimated majority as high as two-thirds of these new members are women, i.e., *approximately a quarter of a billion women worldwide*.³ Statistics given in table 1 are only approximate because most Pentecostal churches are easily formed and do not have to register at any central location or even keep track of their membership numbers; however, even as estimates, the figures are impressive. The movement has now inspired over a dozen books analyzing the phenomenon just in Latin America; and as a recent review essay notes, "scholars of religion and politics are no longer asking if Latin America is turning Protestant, or even why. Instead the current debate swirls around the long-term implications that religious change holds for the region" (Garrard-Burnett 1998b, 117).

Most of these new works address the complex social, political, and cultural context of this religious shift, and they make note of the significance of women in the Pentecostal churches. However, in the academic areas studying women's movements and/or feminism, mention is rarely made of the growth of Pentecostal churches, unless it is a vague negative reference (Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995; Craske 1999; Jaquette 1991, 1994; Jelín 1990; Stephen 1997; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993). Thus, as one moves from the social science literature of religion and politics to the literature of women's movements in Latin America, the virtually complete omission of the variable of Pentecostalism is glaring. It is a noticeable gap in the analyses of women's movements because social scientists in both areas appear to have common interests in benefiting women, at least indirectly, through scholarly research and understanding. Religion and politics observers repeatedly note that Pentecostal religion provides positive social and economic benefits for many poor women in Latin America, and more importantly, involves them in large communities of women, which one would suspect would be of interest to scholars of women's movements.

3. To substantiate Cox's estimate of women as two-thirds of Latin America's Pentecostals, Kurt Bowen found that women were 64 percent of his congregational sample of 1,410 Pentecostals in Mexico (1996, 124); and Elizabeth Brusco cites a study of evangelicals in Guatemala that similarly found 63 percent of the members were female (1993, 145).

The hazards of specialization in the social sciences are at work here. As scholars, we narrow our focus to a certain subfield simply because of the human incapacity to stay abreast of research in more than a few areas. However, there is most likely an “Enlightenment prejudice” also operating in the neglect of analysis of Pentecostalism.⁴ The majority of academicians have been trained ever since the Enlightenment—later reinforced by Marxist and secularization theories—to consider religion as merely a force for ignorance that would eventually fade in importance. Furthermore, Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, often has been seen as an imposition by colonial missionaries to oppress indigenous people, particularly women, thus reinforcing the negative attitude. However, scholarship is finally shedding light on the phenomenon of Pentecostalism in Latin America and its far-reaching implications. Before we examine some of this research, it is important to provide clarifying definitions.

PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS IN LATIN AMERICA

This subheading names a massive subject area, but we may at least identify some categories here that inherently show the dynamic relationship between Catholics and Protestants and help us avoid misleading generalizations. Three broad categories of Roman Catholics, all under the leadership of the Vatican may now be seen in Latin America: Traditional Roman Catholics; liberation theology or “progressive” Catholics of the popular church; and Charismatic Catholics. Likewise, three broad categories of Protestants exist: Historic Protestants; neo-Pentecostals; and Pentecostals. These general classifications allow us to organize our study and understanding of literally hundreds of Protestant denominations or non-denominational groups (table 1). We will use the preferred term in Latin America, “evangelical” interchangeably with the term “Protestant.”

(1) “Historic” or Traditional evangelical churches include Presbyterians, Mennonite Episcopalians, Methodists, and Lutherans. Some of these groups have been in Latin America for approximately a century, but they remain fairly small in number. These evangelicals are nevertheless influential because of their support for education, human rights, and health care projects (Garrard-Burnett 1998a, 33–37; 133–37). They often work with progressive Catholics and are comfortable with the teachings of liberation theology. The style of worship for most Historic Protestant churches is formal, even staid, in comparison to Pentecostals.

4. Sociologist R. Marie Griffith (1999, 205) makes a similar argument in regard to feminists’ generalizations about religion in the United States. Also see David Dixon’s review essay “The New Protestantism in Latin America: Remembering What We Already Know, Testing What We Have Learned,” *Comparative Politics* (July 1995): 479–92, regarding scholarly avoidance of Pentecostalism in Latin America.

TABLE 1 Estimated Percent Protestant, 1993

Country	Percent Protestant	Number of Protestant Denominations	Estimated Total Population 1995
Chile	27.9	60	14.3
Guatemala	24.1	215	10.6
Brazil	21.6	124	157.8
El Salvador	20.6	72	5.9
Nicaragua	17.3	79	4.4
Panama	16.7	50	2.6
Honduras	11.0	118	5.5
Costa Rica	10.7	179	3.3
Bolivia	9.3	120	7.4
Argentina	8.0	72	34.6
Peru	7.1	64	nd
Paraguay	6.0	24	5.0
Venezuela	5.3	51	21.8
Mexico	5.2	1,552	93.7
Ecuador	3.8	57	11.5
Colombia	3.8	63	37.7
Uruguay	3.6	25	3.2

Source: Johnston, Patrick. *Operation World*. 5th ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan 1993. Holland, Clifton L. Director of Latin American Socio-Religious Studies Program (PROLADES), 1998.

(2) Neo-pentecostals are found primarily in urban areas and have grown in number among middle-class and upper-class professionals. Many of their leaders are trained in the United States. The major difference between Pentecostals and Neo-pentecostals besides their class-affiliation is the attitude toward material well-being. Neo-pentecostals believe that God rewards good Christians with material wealth, whereas material benefits are more of a by-product than a central goal for the Pentecostals. The politically conservative Neo-pentecostals tend to have more access to television production facilities and more visibility than the other two groupings; thus scholars often lump them together with Pentecostals and misunderstand results. (3) Pentecostals, the primary subject of this article, are by far the largest and fastest growing category of evangelicals, encompassing probably 80 percent of the members. Assemblies of God are the most numerous churches in this category, although the variety of congregational names is now legion. Their theology is based on a personal relationship with God rather than precise doctrine, and they practice experiential, participatory worship with singing, testifying, faith-healing, and speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*).

The broad categories of Catholicism are: (1) Traditional Roman Catholics, a religious affiliation of Latin Americans which has exercised

religious hegemony in the region for close to 500 years, with roughly 90 percent of the people of these countries professing to be Catholic up until the last two decades. However, a common estimate of how many Catholics actively practice their religious affiliation is only 15 percent. This is the category most familiar to scholars, with its characteristics of a hierarchical structure under the Vatican in Rome; prayers to Saints and the Virgin Mary as well as the Christ; ancient rituals and sacraments. (2) Liberation theology or "progressive" Catholicism appeared in scholarship first with the powerful writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez in Peru in the early 1970s, to be followed by numerous other theologians.⁵ They use the Scriptures for elucidating the overall theme that the Gospel takes a "preferential option for the poor" and inspires liberation of the poor from oppressive and exploitative political and economic systems. For our purposes, central components of liberation theology are the emphasis on *praxis*, learning from the pragmatic knowledge of the poor themselves; and the use of lay leaders in small groups called *comunidades eclesiais de base* or CEBs. The CEBs meet in urban neighborhoods and rural villages to discuss the new interpretations of the Scriptures; as well as basic issues such as family budgeting and supplying clean water; and sometimes, the need for radical change in the political system. At least 60 percent of CEB members are women (Drogus 1997a, 2). The willingness of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1970s and early 1980s to encourage the formation of thousands of CEBs in Latin America was partly a practical response by the Church to the severe shortage of priests and nuns. The use of lay leaders and CEBs seemed a perfect way to continue to reach people in the face of a shortage that meant that each priest had an average of 20,000 parishioners whom he rarely saw.

However, to simplify a long, significant, and complex story, the CEBs sometimes became more politically radical than the Vatican anticipated and were very difficult to control. Liberation theology has been called an impetus for the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and for land reform movements in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and countless other voices of dissent throughout Latin America. It inspired courageous martyrdom by archbishops, priests and nuns, and thousands of followers in civil wars and uprisings. It also spread to the Northern Hemisphere in the form of Black Liberation Theology; Feminist Liberation Theology; and Ecotheology. Finally, in the 1980s, the Vatican began to clamp down on liberation theology by dramatically chastising the most politicized Church officials and by appointing a series of conservative bishops to Latin America.

5. For a recent assessment by liberation theology scholars see David B. Batstone, Dwight Hopkins, and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Liberation Theologies, Postmodernity and the Americas* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Since the late 1970s and 1980s, the Church has faced a far different challenge than internal political tension: massive conversions from Catholicism to Evangelicalism that threaten its religious monopoly. Although Protestant churches had been in Latin America at least since the 1890s, it was not until the 1980s that the evangelicals began to make serious inroads on the Catholic membership. This occurred in recent decades for several reasons: a religious resurgence in the United States of conservative churches that emphasized and funded evangelical proselytizing, particularly in Central America; plus, a new approach to mission work of using autonomous, non-denominational "faith missions" that are highly flexible and adapt to local situations in the field. Other reasons given for the success of evangelization are more debatable: that people felt betrayed and dissatisfied by liberation theology's politicization of religion within the Catholic Church; and that evangelical missionaries used bribery through food and supplies and safety in exchange for conversion (Hallum 1996, chapter 2). In the next section, we will examine more complex reasons for women to convert to Pentecostalism long after the missionaries leave their neighborhood.

In any case, one response of the Catholic hierarchy to this encroachment has been to offer an alternative worship style to their members, which is our third category: (3) Charismatic Catholics worship in a manner outwardly similar to Pentecostalism in the use of testimonies and praise singing, Bible study, and more participation than in Traditional worship. Thus, while the Catholic leadership has sharply condemned the Protestant "sects," it has also learned from them and has encouraged Charismatic practices, while still trying to define what is distinctively Catholic in their beliefs. "Folk Catholicism" is a small category of churches that combine Catholic theology with ethnic styles of worship.

Given this relatively new environment of religious *choice* in Latin America, what are the reasons poor women have given for choosing Pentecostalism? Which factors appear to make Pentecostalism more appealing than Catholicism to these women? After we address these issues, we will return in the conclusion to the argument that Pentecostalism has inherent characteristics of a women's movement. In the following discussion, the intent is not to discount the intense religious experiences and motivations of the Pentecostals by limiting the emphasis here to "worldly" benefits, only to focus the scope of the analysis.

WOMEN AND CONVERSION TO PROTESTANTISM

Health and Healing

In a 1997 book, historian R. Andrew Chesnut asserts that illnesses flowing from poverty and the felt need for faith-healing provide the key to comprehending the appeal of Pentecostalism in Brazil and

presumably, much of Latin America. Through lengthy interviews with ninety Pentecostals—mostly women—in Belém, Brazil, Chesnut offers many powerful testimonies, and he notes that 46 percent of the female interviewees had converted to Pentecostalism because of physical illness of themselves or in their families, whereas, 25 percent of the men had. Furthermore, 80 percent of thirty years of testimonials compiled by the Assembly of God church in Brazil related to illness and faith-healing (1997, 8). The author describes numerous examples in detail, revealing the following pattern: desperation from illness and unavailability of secular medicine in the slums, grateful acceptance of prayers for the power of healing, the healing experience itself, then conversion and transformation of the new Pentecostal (p. 79). For the skeptics among his readers, Chesnut makes two points regarding faith healing: first is the importance of a “community of spiritual medics” who must provide emotional comfort and strength to the patient in their group; and secondly, he notes that medical science itself is now recognizing and re-searching the therapeutic benefits of prayer and ritual acts (p. 87).

The author presents a compelling and persuasive case for faith healing as the primary explanatory variable for the massive conversion to Pentecostal Protestantism; and since women remain the primary caregivers concerned with family health, it is also a variable that explains why the large majority of Pentecostals are women. Chesnut dismisses previous hypotheses that point to urban anomie, millennial/apocalyptic expectations, or political manipulation as causes for the growth. Rather, he is convinced from his research that women in the poorest neighborhoods of Latin America seek out the most available, effective, and affordable means of coping with health crises for themselves and their families. He points out that the strict obedience to scriptural laws by Pentecostals also means an overall healthier lifestyle because of the absence of excessive drinking and careless sex. In later chapters, Chesnut broadens his definition of health crises to include the sickness of alcoholism, domestic violence, and adultery.

Resisting Poverty

In the Pentecostal churches, a *place* is provided for women to pool their meager resources, share child-care needs, support each other financially and emotionally during emergencies, and in many cases, raise their standard of living. Chesnut concluded from his study in Brazil that, faced with governmental indifference or antagonism, “Pentecostalism stands out as one of the principal organizations of the poor” (p. 104). It is true that most Pentecostals tithe to the church (from the Biblical injunction to give a “tithe” or ten percent of what they have to God), but they regard this as a gift that will come back to them—which often happens.

Anthropologist Sheldon Annis conducted a well-known analysis of micro-level economic change in an indigenous Guatemalan town. Although his original research design concerned migratory labor and land distribution, Annis learned to his surprise that the factor most predictive of which families would be upwardly mobile was Evangelicalism. He found that overall, average Catholic wealth was only 81 percent of the average Pentecostal wealth, and that Pentecostals were more than twice as likely as Catholics to own a vehicle. Furthermore, Pentecostals showed more future orientation than Catholics because the Pentecostal children were more likely to go to school and Pentecostals were more likely to work in upwardly mobile occupations leading to micro-business ownership (e.g., sewing, tourism, and transportation). Pentecostals who remained in agriculture used more advanced farming than the subsistence Catholic farmers, planted high-yielding crops for sale, and fared better than Catholics in almost every measure of agricultural productivity (Annis, pp. 102–05). It is not so much a different *work* ethic that is operating here, since one rarely finds a Guatemalan who is not hard-working, regardless of his or her religious beliefs; rather, it is a stronger *savings* ethic because Pentecostals emphasize accumulating their earnings over time and practice an ascetic lifestyle that provides a bit more money to save.

A review of the literature on Protestants in Latin America uncovers at least twenty independent case studies that report findings consistent with Annis's regarding upward mobility of evangelical converts.⁶ Amy Sherman's 1997 publication of her dissertation, for instance, links the Pentecostal belief in a spiritual transformation as a gateway to the socio-economic transformation she found in her Guatemalan case studies. That is, the theology of "rebirth" leads to a sense of power and hope for the possibility of changing everyday living standards—and the more strict

6. In addition to works by Annis, Bowen, Brusco, Burdick, Chesnut, Cox, Green, Hallum, Ireland, Mariz, and Sherman, cited in "References" below, see David Clawson, "Religious Allegiance and Economic Development in Rural Latin America," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 26 (November 1984): 499–524; Liliana R. Golden, "An Expression of Cultural Change: Invisible Converts to Protestantism Among Highland Guatemala Mayas," *Ethnology* 30 (October 1991): 325–38; Conrad L. Kanagy, "The Formation and Development of a Protestant Conversion Movement Among the Highland Quichua of Ecuador," *Sociological Analysis* 51 (Summer 1990): 205–17; selections in Daniel R. Miller, ed., *Coming of Age: Protestantism in Contemporary Latin America* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994); Blanca Muratorio, "Protestantism and Capitalism Revisited in the Rural Highlands of Ecuador," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 8 (October 1980): 37–60; James D. Sexton, "Protestantism and Modernization in Two Guatemalan Towns," *American Ethnologist* 5 (May 1978): 280–302; Philip W. Thornton, "Resocialization: Roman Catholics Becoming Protestants in Colombia, South America," *Anthropological Quarterly* 57 (January 1984): 28–38; Paul R. Turner, "Religious Conversion and Community Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18 (September 1979): 252–60.

or “orthodox” the theology, the more impact it has. Sherman’s work has a tone of advocacy; however, implying that Protestantism is *the* answer to the presumed goal of capitalistic development.⁷ In contrast, other works describing family economics and Pentecostalism see it more as a pragmatic means of dealing with immediate poverty, without precluding the possibility of more broad-based activism in the future. Linda Green, for instance, presents a case study of a Guatemalan village made up largely of widows and children because many of the men had been killed in the lengthy civil war. Green found that for these Maya women, Pentecostalism was a “religion of survival” (p. 162), as church members socialized at evening services, and worked together to build houses and to plant and harvest corn (pp. 173–75). Similarly, Cecilia Loreto Mariz describes the Pentecostal value of saving money plus an ascetic lifestyle as key to their greater likelihood of raising their standard of living when compared to Catholics. Mariz considers this religious community-building as a “coping strategy” in the face of poverty.

Research about Protestantism in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua confirmed these observations, as I repeatedly heard stories from Pentecostal families about how the women had converted first, brought other members of their families to the church, and gradually found their lives changing. For instance, in the village of Pastores, Guatemala, the Pentecostal preacher explained to me why he first converted. He pointed proudly to his wife Hortensia and said that he drank alcohol and was bringing the family to ruin until she took him to her church and prayed for him to join the believers. Now the family was prospering in relative terms, and he was adding to their income from his occasional preaching instead of spending precious funds on alcohol. In several dozen interviews, this progression was a common story.

Resisting Machismo

Numerous works on Pentecostalism in Latin America note its value for helping women confront the demon of *machismo*; i.e., the complex of male behaviors such as excessive drinking, violence against women, chronic infidelity, abdication of household duties, and a general identification with the street culture rather than with the home. I regularly encountered stories of overcoming domestic abuse during interviews with evangelicals; it is also referred to in most of the previously-cited works and is a central theme for Andrew Chesnut. Chesnut (1997) recounts one patient explanation given to him by a young female

7. Carol Ann Drogus (2000, 265) points out that Sherman asserts that religious orthodoxy is the influencing variable for improved economic standards, but that Sherman is not as careful as other authors in considering other explanatory variables such as education and ladino ethnicity.

Pentecostal when he asked what women gained from going to church:

Look, the majority of women who attend church have problems with their husbands. These are the problems that most afflict them. For example, sometimes the husband suddenly “arranges” another woman out there. So at church we have prayer groups and through prayer, God removes the other woman from her path. Also, the majority of women at church are young women, and most young women have emotional problems. A wife often has problems with her husband when he drinks too much, and they fight constantly. And so here at church we get together to pray and through prayer, God blesses the couple. (106)

Comparing Catholics and Protestants

A need persists in the research for systematic comparison between Catholics and Protestants, although Ireland (1999), Mariz (1994), Burdick (1993, 1998), and Smith (1998) have made significant contributions on this question. It is very important in such a comparison to be clear and consistent in which categories of both large bodies are being compared. For instance, in the numerous studies that favorably compare family economics and “upward mobility” of Protestants with Catholics, it is likely that Traditional Catholics are the ones being compared, and this category is often only nominally religious for a variety of reasons, including the serious shortage of Catholic clergy. That is, only 15 to 20 percent of the Traditional Catholics attend Mass weekly, much less attend lengthy worship services three to five times a week as Pentecostals do. When we examine why women seem to be particularly drawn to Pentecostal churches rather than Traditional Catholic membership, it may simply be that Pentecostals offer many more opportunities for worship, socializing, and support. Therefore, what is being compared may be extremely different levels of religious activity and community-building rather than different theologies. This would explain Mariz’s conclusion, after making the specific comparison between *progressive* Catholics (the CEBs) and Pentecostals in Brazil, that they have more similarities than differences. She writes in her concluding chapter (1994, 161):

The comparison of the subjective experiences offered by the participation in Pentecostal churches and CEBs has suggested that despite the different intentions and worldviews of each group, there is a high probability that the Brazilian CEBs and Pentecostal churches will have similar unintended consequences. In different ways, both help the poor to cope with poverty and adjust to the new class relationship and the modern state in Brazil.

Considering women’s specific experiences, John Burdick finds fewer similarities in his comparisons of Catholic base communities and Pentecostals. He finds that the women he met in Brazil tended to prefer the Pentecostal churches because the members gave testimony about their personal problems and needs rather than discussing lessons about eco-

conomic and political systems. Ironically, it was the *less* political setting that was often more empowering. More than one female Pentecostal described feeling inferior and illiterate at the CEB meetings, but feeling empowered at the Pentecostal churches to quietly confront their wayward husbands using their gifts of the spirit and the authority of the Bible.

Carol Ann Drogus (1997a) does not offer a side-by-side comparison of Pentecostal women and women CEB participants in Brazil; however she does offer an intriguing argument for such a comparison. She writes that “gender identity, rather than liberation theology, provides the ‘glue’ that holds together a politically diverse constituency in the communities’ social movements” (p. 24), particularly their common experiences as mothers. Thus, she may agree with Mariz that the two categories have similarities that override differences in politics and theology, and further, that the most important similarities—at least for large majorities of the members—are gender experiences. In the comparative analyses of religion and gender, a particular area of untapped research are the relatively new Charismatic Catholic groups. Case studies examining how they differ from Pentecostal groups, and of the contrasts or commonalities of gender experiences between these Charismatics and evangelicals are needed.

CONCLUSION — PENTECOSTALISM AS A WOMEN’S MOVEMENT?

Most analyses of women and insurgency in Latin America highlight the recent political gains of women in the region. In the mid-1990s, women were serious presidential candidates in Colombia, Honduras, Venezuela, and Bolivia, joining President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of Nicaragua (1990–97), and Rosalia Arteaga who was briefly Ecuador’s president. In Argentina, women hold 25 percent of congressional seats thanks to a quota law, and in Guatemala, the New Guatemala Democratic Front (FDNG) helped place three Maya activist women in Congress. This activism is in addition to the highly-visible political mobilization of women’s labor groups, human rights organizations, and in Guatemala, Maya indigenous rights groups. These are impressive

8. As for predicting the *political* direction the Pentecostals might take, we may discount some premature assumptions that Pentecostals would invariably support conservative or reactionary governments. Brian Smith has conducted a thorough review of the religion and politics research on Latin America, and he argues persuasively that a likely scenario for the future will be for progressive Catholics and Pentecostals to work collaboratively on behalf of the poor, in their own communities if not at the national level. (He does acknowledge that before they work together, a period of healing will be required to recover from the animosities that occurred during the transition to a pluralistic society.) Smith explicitly rejects the notion that Pentecostals will foster a conservative, authoritarian rule because there are too many examples to the contrary in Latin America. (Ríos Montt and Jorge Serrano, both short-lived, conservative, and corrupt presidents of Guatemala are *Neo*-pentecostals.)

developments which would have been inconceivable even a decade or two ago, and they deserve recognition and careful study.⁸

However, many of the same women who are active in movements reject the category of “feminists” because they see feminism as hostile to men and to their own maternal identities, and they have provided feminist scholars with a strong theoretical challenge.

Feminist theorists are thus in the midst of a scholarly soul-searching, and several are acknowledging that Latin American women have lessons to teach the scholars. As Jane Jaquette writes, “Latin American women’s movements seemed to be inventing a new kind of feminism, which was at the same time maternal and community-based.” (1998, 12). Drogus similarly notes that the social activists in the CEBs she examined in Brazil were not feminists in the Northern sense of opposing tradition, but rather saw their activism as an “extension of their traditional roles . . . justified by a continued belief in women’s essential nature and role as caregiver and mother” (1997a, 165). Patricia Chuchryk observes from her study of women’s groups in Chile, that “change begins at home. Women’s political activity should be defined by them on the basis of their concerns and their needs” (1991, 173). Along this line, another recent collection of Latin American case studies concludes that the household is the most useful unit of analysis for understanding women’s contributions (Bose and Acosta-Belén, 1995). Sociologist Christine Bose has noted that in the context of extreme poverty in much of Latin America, much of women’s organized resistance to economic inequalities is based on survival needs beginning at the household and neighborhood level, and that “survival itself is an act of resistance” (1995, 5). We have seen how Pentecostal churches have become such a collective survival strategy chosen by tens of millions of Latin American women, yet Bose does not mention them.

Jaquette observes that one area of very little progress for women in Latin America has been the issue of men’s equal responsibility in the family and the weakening of the harmful mentality of *machismo*. Yet, as we have seen, this is an area in which Pentecostalism is a particularly potent force for change. One of the few scholars who has explicitly made the connection between Pentecostalism and women’s concerns is Elizabeth Brusco (1993; also see Smilde 1994, 139–59). Brusco concludes from research in Colombia regarding the problem of *machismo* that what occurs with Pentecostal conversion is a transformation of male as well as female roles in a way that overcomes underlying gender inequalities. She (1993, 148) explains the deep significance of what occurs when men are changed by Pentecostal conversion:

The ideology of Evangelicalism condemns aggression, violence, pride, and self-indulgence while providing positive reinforcement for peace-seeking, humility,

and self-restraint. This applies to male as well as female members . . . In evangelical households the husband may still occupy the position of head, but his relative aspirations have changed to coincide more closely with those of his wife. This last fact is key to the analysis of Colombian Pentecostalism and, I believe, constitutes a change of revolutionary proportions.

Brusco's analysis is anathema to some feminist scholars in my experience; however, her research is thorough and her analysis is among those that deserve serious discussion rather than mere dismissal by Latin American feminist studies. Brusco argues that the evangelical women in her study no longer expend energy competing with men or defending themselves against them, because they are now on the "same side." If men share the domestic values of their wives and also measure success in terms of the stability of their homes and the achievements of their children, many of the deepest aspirations of these Latin American women would be attained. Furthermore, Lynn Stephen (1997) notes that *machismo* was a serious obstacle for Salvadoran women to organize politically. Conquering *machismo* in their homes may be seen as a prerequisite step for entering politics.

The fact that two-thirds of the religious category of Pentecostals are women is not itself enough evidence to label this growing phenomenon as also part of the women's movement, but it is enough evidence to raise the question. I argue that Pentecostalism is a women's movement because it is women collectively supporting each other in opposition to the status quo, both at the level of opposition to religious hegemony by Catholics and at the level of the households in opposition to poverty and *machismo*. Recent writings by feminist theorists would seem to accommodate this argument. Pentecostal membership is voluntary after all, and in fact, it requires real courage for some women turning away from generations of Catholicism—yet tens of millions of Latin American women are making this decision. Also, we have seen that they have pragmatic reasons *as women* to join other women in these churches in an effort to improve their lives and their status in the home.

Nikki Craske's work (1999) provides an opening for inclusion of Pentecostalism in analysis of women's movements in Latin America. She presents the important conceptualizing in a classic article by Maxine Molyneux (1985) of "practical gender interests," in which women join together spontaneously around such issues as food availability, utility services, economic demands, and other interests that may include their male partners; and "strategic gender interests," in which women exclusively and self-consciously join together to demand gender equality. Political scientist Georgina Waylen explains the feminist category: "these strategic gender interests [are] often called 'feminist' or women's 'real' interests, and, according to Molyneux, require a feminist level of

consciousness to struggle for them" (1996, 20). The implication that "strategic gender interests" are more elevated and legitimate is clear, and it is also clear that middle- and upper-class women have been the primary participants in this feminist category of women's movements. However, Craske argues "that there is no clear boundary between practical and strategic issues, and that frequently issues have both practical and strategic elements to them, as does the struggle to combat them" (p. 204). She suggests that it is more helpful to see these different types of gender interests in a dialectical relationship rather than in a sharp dichotomy (p. 19). Clearly, Pentecostalism is serving strategic gender interests, as women address problems of inadequate health care, poverty, low self-esteem, and abusive men; and in the process of coming together, a shift may occur in which women begin to explore the deeper causes for their life situations and inequality.

Working on pragmatic issues may serve as a prerequisite for considering strategic gender issues in two other ways: in easing household demands and through leadership training. First, Craske observes that a common theme in her interviews with political women in Latin America was the need for "a cultural change which erodes the idea that the domestic world is women's sole responsibility" (p. 68). We are reminded of studies about the effectiveness of Pentecostal teachings against alcoholism and infidelity, and particularly of Brusco's research in Colombia in which men experience a transformation in regard to accepting their familial duties. It is also true that Pentecostal women stress abstinence from extra-marital sex, tend to delay marriage, and usually accept the use of birth control (Drogus 2000, 269) to reduce family size.

In regard to the claim that leadership training occurs in Pentecostal churches, this may seem nonsensical to scholars of women's movements because males hold the titles of leadership and are the named preachers in Pentecostal churches. Recently, a few female religion and politics scholars have examined the paradox of women voluntarily joining organizations where they may not be official leaders in regard to middle-class, evangelical churches in the United States, which also are majority female (see Brasher 1998; Griffith 1998; Ozorak 1996). One of their conclusions is that women define power differently from men, such as in relationships with each other and with God, and that they do not feel disenfranchised if they do not have official titles. The implication from this research is that when researchers use the presence of women in the leadership hierarchy as a standard for measuring their power, they are adopting a traditional "male" standard, and may overlook women in spiritual and community leadership roles. Returning to Latin American research, Chesnut found among his Brazilian sample that 80 percent of the women were spiritually gifted with healing ability or speaking in tongues—twice as many as the men—and were considered the spiritual

leaders. Burdick's (1998) sensitive study of the building of self-esteem among black women in Brazil that comes from their religious participation is another illustration.

Women's empowerment in Pentecostal churches is significant in comparison to the alternative of traditional Catholicism in which they are excluded altogether; or in contrast to secular society in countries with few voluntary associations to nurture participation. When women regularly give testimony and lead healings and prayer in front of large groups, and when they plan church functions and charity programs, they are acquiring confidence as well as learning valuable skills of public speaking, budgeting, organizing, and mobilizing others. In the literature of religion and politics in Latin America, a consensus is emerging regarding the formation of civil societies and acknowledging that churches "can provide the skills and nurture the dispositions and values conducive to active citizenship" (Ireland 1999, 112).

In conclusion, I argue that the study of the cultural shift of large-scale religious conversion by women in Latin America should not be confined to the subfield of religion and politics, but should be included in the current reexamination of all feminist theory. Important questions deserve careful study, including the influence of the variable of *place*, and how different geographical and cultural settings *contextualize* different roles for religion to play in women's lives. We also need to attempt to uncover the *internal conflict* that women in Latin America may experience as they find support in the Pentecostal churches. These questions will not be answered, however, in the prevailing attitude that ignores the religious variable for women in the region. To summarize, if feminist scholars now argue that the household is the best unit of analysis of women's contributions, and that change begins at home, and that men need to be transformed in the home; that feminism in Latin America is an extension of maternal and community concerns; and that survival itself is a form of resistance—how can we simultaneously ignore Pentecostalism, which addresses all of these issues?

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