Southern Religion with a Latin Accent

In North America, the Pentecostal Movement is viewed as quintessential southern religion. Its linkage to the Wesleyan-Holiness strand of southern Methodism has been demonstrated repeatedly. Its earliest manifestations in the Twentieth Century lie in Kansas, Missouri, Texas and Arkansas. Following its explosion at the Azusa Street Mission in 1906 in downtown Los Angeles, it found fertile soil in places like the Carolinas, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida. Even now a listing of Pentecostal denominational headquarter cities is dominated by such southern sites as Cleveland and Memphis, Tennessee; Dunn, North Carolina; St. Louis, Joplin and at the edge of the Ozarks, Springfield, Missouri; Atlanta, Georgia; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Washington, D. C.

A quick and dirty survey of Pentecostal televangelists yields similar results. The preponderance of programs originating in cities such as Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; Atlanta, Georgia; and elsewhere throughout the southern United States is overwhelming. One might conclude from this that a real Pentecostal is one who refers to his or her sisters and brothers sans the first “t.” They are Penecostals [pronounced slowly, Pen-ny-c6s-tals].

In spite of all this, there is another group of Pentecostals who are giving new form and meaning to the term “southern religion.” They do not refer to themselves as Penecostals, for they do not speak with a southern, North American, English accent. They refer to themselves in the Latin accents of the deep South. They are Pentecostdles [pronounced staccatto fashion, Pen-te-cos-tá-les]. They are filling the countries south of the Rio Grande with headquarters in cities such as Santiago, Chile; Mexico City, Mexico; Lima, Peru; San José, Costa Rica; San Salvador, El Salvador; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Rio de Janiero, Brazil; and Maracaibo, Venezuela. They speak Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and a range of languages indigenous to the peoples of Central and South America and the islands of the Caribbean.

Pentecostalism was initially a North American export to the Latin American context. It arrived there with the aid of personal correspondence, early Pentecostal publications, personal testimonies, and missionary activity. It quickly found fertile ground where it took root and grew to become the incredible force it is today. According to David Stoll, Is Latin America Turning Protestant? (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 8–9 (See the review on pp. 189–190), the growth of the Evangelical share of the Latin American population, and especially the growth of the Pentecostals has been nothing less than breath-taking. Between 1960 and 1985 it doubled in size in Chile, Paraguay, Venezuela, Panama, and Haiti. It tripled its size in Argentina,
Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. It quadrupled in Brazil and Puerto Rico, quintupled in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Peru, and Bolivia, and sextupled in Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, and Columbia.

Donald Dayton has noted that there are now, in many places throughout Latin America, more practicing Pentecostal believers than there are practicing Roman Catholics. Just one illustration is sufficient to demonstrate the impact of the growth of Pentecostals in Latin America. The Roman Catholic Church lists 126,000,000 on its parish rolls in Brazil. Of these, about 12.6 million are regular churchgoers. By comparison, according to the statistics available from the Assemblies of God, by December 31, 1990 Brazilian Assemblies of God “members and adherents” outnumbered the 2,181,502 “members and adherents” in the United States by a margin of nearly seven to one with 14,400,000. They accounted for nearly 61% of all Assemblies of God “members and adherents” worldwide. More importantly, however, when they are added to the remaining Protestant population in Brazil, they constitute a significant spiritual force on the rise.

In the eyes of many in Latin America and throughout the Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostals are linked to the “problem of the sects.” In some areas, as Pentecostals have gained ascendancy from minority to majority status, those who were the majority have become alarmed. Pentecostal growth in Latin America has led recently to public comments by Archbishop Edward Cassidy of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity,1 and on his recent visit to Brazil, by Pope John Paul II.2 It is not growth alone which elicits such comments, but frustration with the present and fear about the future. What is really at the heart of Roman Catholic defections to Pentecostal calls? How will Pentecostals live when they outnumber those who they have often portrayed as their religious “oppressors”? Will they be gracious, or will they merely trade places, forcing their “oppressors” to live within the limits of a new “oppression”?

On the whole, North American Pentecostals tend not to think about such things. They are not, after all, in any real danger of becoming a majority force. But Latin American Pentecostals must think about the dangers of such rapid growth and apparent success. Is it healthy and hearty growth? Do they run the risk of entering into triumphalism? Is Pentecostal growth linked with the economic, political and personal goals to lift the poor from their poverty or to attack the status quo?

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1"Clash of Religions Tears at Latin America,” Pasadena Star News (June 1, 1991), B-5.
2William R. Long, “Pope Assails Brazil’s Evangelical ‘Sects’,,” Los Angeles Times (October 14, 1991) A4. The speech given by the Pope has been published in English as “A Pressing Hunger for Bread and Justice,” Origins 21:21 (October 31, 1991), 329, 331-333. Section 3 (p. 331) includes his comments on the “sects and new religious groups” among whom Pentecostals are considered to be.