The Pentecostalization of Latin American and U.S. Latino Christianity

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David Stoll and David Martin argue that Latin America is in the midst of a Protestant Reformation that will forever change the political economy of the region. They challenged and/or nuanced a previous generation of theories that suggested that Pentecostal growth was due to a kind of naive opiate of the masses “pie-in-the-sky after you die” theology and right-wing dictators who used Anglo-American missionaries and Pentecostals to fight against progressive Catholic liberation theologians. They argued that the Catholic Church itself was partly to blame for the massive defections to Pentecostal and evangelical Protestantism because it spent too much time mixing religion and politics and not enough time promoting spiritual renewal and meeting the basic spiritual needs of the people. Martin and Stoll posit that Pentecostal growth is in part due to the continuing influence (both ideologically and economically) of Anglo-American missionaries and that the spiritual reformation taking place today is a largely Protestant reformation that is challenging the Roman Catholic Church’s historic dominance of the Latin American religious marketplace.¹

Is it? Although Martin, Stoll, Christian Lalive d’Epinay, Elizabeth Brusco, John Burdick, R. Andrew Chestnut, Edward L. Cleary, O.P., and Phillip Berryman have all documented the growth of Pentecostal and evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, a number of other scholars, such

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as Walter Altmann, T. E. Evans, Kurt Bowen, Anne Motley Hallum, Paul Jeffrey, and Brian H. Smith, have noted that Pentecostal growth is either beginning to taper off or has remained relatively flat over the past decade in some countries. Furthermore, as I shall show shortly, the phenomenal growth of the indigenous Protestant Pentecostal and Catholic Charismatic movements challenge and revise these theories. I argue that the demographic shifts taking place in Latin America today continue to shape the religious reformation taking place among Latinos in the United States. In fact, expanding on the work of Andrew Greeley, I point to growing evidence that suggests that Latino Protestants and Catholics are arriving in the U.S. already Pentecostal or Catholic Charismatic. If this is true, then many (though still not a majority) of the “mass defections” to Pentecostal and evangelical Protestantism reportedly taking place here in the U.S. are actually taking place in Latin America.

I contend that all of the discussion over Anglo-American missionary-sponsored Protestant Pentecostal growth has obscured five trends that lend