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and the Case for Religious Motivation

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Abstract

The literature on the success of Pentecostal Protestantism in Latin America has yielded a number of hypotheses about the role of material deprivations in producing converts. The gist of the hypotheses is that people will seek supernatural solutions to their thwarted social and material desires. But analyses of national samples from eighteen Latin American nations, in surveys collected by the Gallup World Poll, fail to confirm these hypotheses. This suggests that deprivation theory should be extended to include religious deprivation. According to this extended theory, people will pursue or initiate supernatural solutions to their thwarted existential and moral desires. This hypothesis is consistent with the fact that most religious movements have originated among the privileged and, in the case of Latin American Protestantism, the fact that an effort by the Catholic Church to counter the Protestant threat by supporting Liberation Theology (which assumed the primacy of material deprivations) failed, while the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (which is aimed at religious motives) has successfully generated a strong Catholic response to Protestantism in Latin America.

Observers of the rapid spread of Pentecostal Protestantism in Latin America are in remarkable agreement about who is joining: The typical convert is a very poor, uneducated, married older woman with health concerns who lives in a rural area (Brusco 1993; Burdick 1993; Chesnut 1997, 2003a, 2003b; Cox 1995; Gill 1998; Hallum 2003; Martin 1990, 2002; Stoll 1990, 1993). More is meant by these observations than mere description. They are interpreted to demonstrate that Protestantism, especially of the Pentecostal variety, appeals primarily to “the damned of the earth” (Martin 2002: 3). It should be noted that the names cited above constitute an exceedingly distinguished set of scholars.

Unfortunately, most of the support for these generalizations does not come from survey data or even from personal observation of Protestant gatherings in Latin America. Instead, the claims often seem to have been assumed on the basis of social scientific preconceptions. “Everyone” knows that religious movements are always “the religious revolts of the poor” (Niebuhr 1929: 19) that occur as “the desires of the poor to improve the material conditions of their lives . . . become transfused with phantasies of a new paradise” (Cohn 1961: xiii). Indeed, “everyone” knows that participation in any social movement is prompted by material factors rather than by idealism or faith. As Marx explained, to suggest that people act from religious motives is to attempt to explain a “reality” by reference to an “unreality,” which is, of course, “idealistic humbug” (1998 [1845]: 61).

Even when scholars do not simply assume the role of material deprivations in producing Latin American Protestants but rely on actual observations of people attending services, they can be badly misled. Any crowd of Latin Americans that is fully representative of the population will contain a very substantial percentage of poor, uneducated people. Hence observing a preponderance of such people at a Pentecostal service would not necessarily indicate anything except that Pentecostalism does not appeal exclusively to the rich.

Valid generalizations about the kinds of Latin Americans who convert to Protestantism require reliable surveys. Fortunately, such data are now available.

THE DATA

This study is based on data collected as part of the Gallup Organization’s World Poll, which involves annual surveys in each of 160 nations. The surveys are based on personal interviews with a random sample of the population, usually involving 1,000 respondents in each nation. We are grateful to the Gallup Organization for giving us full access to this extraordinary and growing database. In this study, we have selected data from the annual surveys of Latin American nations. No surveys were conducted in Cuba, Jamaica, or Puerto Rico. Four tiny nations that were included in the Gallup World Poll were omitted from our study on grounds that they are not a historical part of Latin America. Three of these are former British

colonies: Guyana, Belize, and Trinidad and Tobago. Haiti is a French-speaking cultural outlier. That leaves eighteen nations that are culturally and historically identified with Latin America: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. To maximize the accuracy of the statistics for each nation, we combined the surveys that were conducted in 2007 and 2008. The analysis that follows is based on the combined samples from all eighteen nations ($N = 34,401$), and then each overall finding is examined for each nation separately. It will be important not to confuse statistical and substantive significance. When statistics are based on such a huge number of cases, even very trivial differences will be statistically significant. That does not make them of substantive interest.

In what follows, we test the consensus about who is converting to Protestantism in Latin America. Then we reflect on our findings in an effort to redirect the standard social scientific approach to explaining religious movements.

Social Status

It has long been regarded as beyond dispute that sects arise because of lower-class misery and dissatisfaction. Eventually, this assumption was formulated in what became known as deprivation theory, which explains that people adopt supernatural solutions to their material misery when direct action fails or is obviously impossible (Glock 1964). Every study of the rapid spread of Pentecostal Protestantism across Latin America has attributed it to the remarkable appeal of this emotion-laden faith to the impoverished masses. But is this true?

Table 1: Income and Protestantism

Income Level	Percent Protestant
Poorest 20%	20
Lower 20%	20
Middle 20%	19
Upper 20%	21
Highest 20%	18

$p = 0.001$.

In fact, Table 1 suggests that Protestantism in Latin America is not primarily a movement of the poor. In each nation, survey respondents were grouped into five income groups based on quintiles of the distribution of incomes in their society. Of those in the poorest fifth, 20 percent are Protestants. Variations up the income scale are minute, with a very slight drop-off among the richest fifth (18 percent),

but the effect is statistically significant ($p = 0.0001$). However, suppose that instead of combined data for eighteen nations, we had to rely on a series of studies based on only one nation at a time? In that case, almost half of such studies would have found no statistically significant correlation between income and Protestantism, six studies would have found a slight but significant negative correlation (the poor being a bit more apt to be Protestants), and four studies would have found a significant correlation showing that the rich are a bit more apt to be Protestants (see Table 2). The only conclusion such a muddle can support is that Latin American Protestantism is certainly not a movement based on the poor but appeals equally to people of all levels of income.

Table 2: Income and Protestantism: Gamma Values

Country	Income
Argentina	-0.25
Bolivia	NS
Brazil	NS
Chile	-0.27
Colombia	-0.13
Costa Rica	NS
Dominican Republic	N/A
Ecuador	NS
El Salvador	NS
Guatemala	0.09
Honduras	0.16
Mexico	-0.21
Nicaragua	NS
Panama	0.22
Paraguay	NS
Peru	-0.14
Uruguay	-0.22
Venezuela	0.27

NS = Not statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level.

N/A = Relevant variables were not available for a particular country.

Table 3: Education and Protestantism

Education	Percent Protestant
Less than 8 years	23
Secondary only	19
College	16

$p = 0.001$.

Table 3 shows a slight education effect: 23 percent of people who have less than eight years of schooling are Protestants, while only 16 percent of those who attended college are Protestants. Of course, this is statistically significant. However, when individual nations are examined, things again become muddy. In thirteen nations, there is no significant correlation between education and Protestantism; in four, there is a negative correlation; in one, college-educated people are more apt to be Protestants than the less educated (see Table 4). We conclude that Latin American Protestantism appeals about equally to people of all levels of education.

Table 4: Education and Protestantism: Gamma Values

Country	Education
Argentina	-0.25
Bolivia	NS
Brazil	N/A
Chile	-0.31
Colombia	NS
Costa Rica	NS
Dominican Republic	NS
Ecuador	NS
El Salvador	NS
Guatemala	NS
Honduras	0.08
Mexico	NS
Nicaragua	NS
Panama	NS
Paraguay	N/A
Peru	-0.15
Uruguay	-0.35
Venezuela	NS

NS = Not statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level.

N/A = Relevant variables were not available for this country.

Gender and Marital Status

All around the world, women are more religious than men are (Stark 2002), and in all religious groups for which data exist, women outnumber men (Stark 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), with the exception of Satanists in Canada (Statistics Canada 1993). In keeping with this reality, it is claimed that Latin American Protestant Pentecostalism is “a movement primarily made up of women” (Hallum 2003: 169). Therefore Table 5 shows some very surprising data: Women (20 percent) are only slightly more likely than men (18 percent) to be Protestants in Latin America. As usual, this difference is significant ($p = 0.001$), given the huge number of cases on which the table is based. Not surprisingly, on the nation level, there is no significant gender difference in eleven nations, women are slightly more apt to be Protestants in six nations, and male Protestants exceed female Protestants in one nation. The conclusion must be that gender is essentially unrelated to becoming a Protestant in Latin America.

**Table 5: Gender, Marital Status,
and Protestantism**

Percent Protestant	
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	20
Male	18
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Married	20
Unmarried	19

$p = 0.001$.

Table 5 also shows that there is an utterly trivial relationship between marital status and becoming a Protestant in Latin America: 19 percent of unmarried people are Protestants compared with 20 percent of the married. This too is statistically significant. And here too the relationship is insignificant in eleven nations, while the percentage of married Protestants exceeds the percentage of unmarried Protestants by a tiny margin in seven nations. Thus we see that marital status is essentially unrelated to becoming a Latin American Protestant.

Age

In contrast to the reports of observers of Latin American Protestant converts, research on conversion to other religions typically has found that younger people are more apt to convert than are older people, youth being less bound by social

ties (Stark and Finke 2000: 119). Table 6 gives very modest support to that claim. Of people under 30 years of age, 21 percent are Protestants compared with 17 percent of those over 50 years of age. But here too there is mud at the level of specific nations. There is no significant age effect in twelve nations, there are more Protestants among older people in two nations, and the percentage of younger Protestants is higher in four nations. The data show that younger people are at most very slightly more apt to have become Protestants.

Table 6: Age and Protestantism

Age	Percent Protestant
15–29	21
30–49	20
50+	17

$p = 0.001$.

Health

It is assumed that many Latin Americans convert to Pentecostalism because they have health problems and seek relief in religious healing (Chesnut 1997). Table 7 reveals a minuscule difference in this regard: 20 percent of those reporting that they had health problems were Protestants, and 19 percent of those without health problems were Protestants. Although this is statistically significant ($p = 0.04$), it is of no substantive significance. Indeed, the difference is insignificant in fifteen nations and barely significant in three nation. Clearly, people do not become Protestants in search of healing. However, this must not obscure the fact that healing is a major aspect of Pentecostal religion as practiced. As with all human groups, health problems abound among Pentecostals, as do healing services. But there seems to be no statistical grounds for supposing that people often convert in search of healing.

Table 7: Health and Protestantism

Has Health Problems	Percent Protestant
Yes	20
No	19

$p = 0.04$.

Rural/Urban

As for Protestantism doing better in rural areas, the data offer no support. Table 8 shows that while 20 percent of people who live in rural areas have become Protestants, so have 20 percent of those in urban areas. Looking within nations, we find that people who live in a rural area are very slightly more likely to be Protestants in two nations and less likely in nine nations; there is no significant difference in seven nations. Therefore rural people are not the basis of Protestant growth.

Table 8: Rural/Urban and Protestantism

Rural/Urban	Percent Protestant
Rural	20
Urban	20

Not significant.

To sum up our findings, the prevailing notions about who in Latin America is especially prone to becoming a Protestant and why are unfounded. Instead, Protestantism seems to appeal fairly equally across the demographic spectrum. If people are turning to Protestantism to escape their deprivations, these deprivations are evidently not of the standard material variety.

RELIGIOUS ATTRACTIONS

When we mentioned to a colleague that we had found little or no support for standard materialist explanations of conversion to Latin American Protestantism, she expressed her sympathy because, of course, that left us with nothing to publish! On the contrary, our “non-findings” provide a suitable occasion to challenge the widespread belief among social scientists that religious effects cannot have religious causes but must always be the result of underlying material concerns. We do not suggest that religious effects never have material origins, but we shall argue that religious actions often arise from religious causes.

This is hardly the first time that research on religious movements has failed to support the material deprivations approach. For example, it has been (and often still is) taken for granted that American evangelical Protestants are very disproportionately recruited from the ranks of the poor, uneducated, elderly, and rural segments of the population. But careful research has found no support for these assumptions (Smith 1998). In fact, American evangelical denominations “are remarkably heterogeneous in terms of social status” (Stark and Finke 2000:

198). In similar fashion, research on conversion to Christianity in China failed to support the material deprivations explanation. Chinese Christians are equally distributed across age, rural/urban, and educational groups, and, if anything, there is a slight tendency for Christians to be overrecruited from among Chinese in the upper income categories (Stark and Liu 2011).

It also is pertinent that materialist assumptions are inconsistent with a substantial literature on how and why conversions take place. Perhaps the most surprising thing that has been turned up by studies of conversion conducted over the past forty years is that few converts were looking for religion when it found them (Kox, Meeus, and t'Hart 1993; Lofland and Stark 1965; Smilde 2005; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Although conversions are brought about by people who have strong religious motives for seeking to spread their faith, they usually have to kindle religious interests and concerns in the people whom they eventually convert. That is, very few people are walking around seeking a religious solution to their needs, of whatever variety. Typically, religious interests and concerns must be generated by others, and that seems to happen very rarely unless bonds of trust and affection already exist or form between those seeking converts and those they convert. Other things being equal, people join religious movements when their social ties to members overbalance their ties to nonmembers (Lofland and Stark 1965; Stark and Finke 2000). Often, people seem to pay little attention to religion while they are in the process of converting. As a young woman who had contact with members of the Unification Church put it: "These are the nicest people I have ever met. What I don't understand is why they are so wound up about this religion." Several months later, she got wound up about the religion too but still had only a sketchy idea about the group's doctrines (Stark 1963). Of course, as was clear to that convert, people who are seeking converts do stress the religious benefits of their faith. But these benefits always take a spiritual form and seldom, if ever, are linked to material deprivations.

SPIRITUAL DEPRIVATION

The most fundamental human existential concerns are universal. Does life have meaning? What can we hope for? Does virtue exist? Is death the end? The desire for effective answers to these questions can be identified as a potential for spiritual deprivation. This is not to propose any sort of universal religious imperative; it is to propose that religion is a universal element of human cultures because it can satisfy some equally universal human concerns (Geertz 1966; Smith 2007; Stark 1999). Of course, there are people who regard these existential concerns as being of no interest, and many people probably would pay the concerns little heed if they were not schooled in their significance. Even so, most religious movements seem to have arisen from the founders' spiritual deprivation. Nor were their

spiritual deprivations merely a reflection of their material deprivations; most founders were from powerful and privileged backgrounds. To reverse Marx, most new religions are “opiates of the elites.”

Consider that Buddha was a prince, that fifty-five of his first sixty converts were from the nobility, and that the other five might have been nobles too—we simply don’t know their backgrounds (Lester 1993: 867). For another major example, after many years of effort that gained him only two converts, Zoroaster built a successful movement after converting the king, the queen, and then the court, of a nearby kingdom. The early Taoists as well as the Confucianists were recruited from among the Chinese elite, and, of course, Moses was raised as a prince. Or consider two small sects that appeared in ancient Greece: the Orphics and the Pythagoreans. According to Plato, both movements were based on the upper classes: Their priests “come to the doors of the rich . . . and offer them a bundle of books” (in Burkert 1985: 296).

Nor is it true that most, let alone all, of the Christian sects arose from the lower classes. With the possible exception of some Anabaptist movements, the great Christian religious movements that occurred through the centuries were very obviously based on people of considerable wealth and power: the nobility, the clergy, and well-to-do urbanites (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992, 1998; Stark 2003a). For example, the Cathars enrolled a very high proportion of nobility (Costen 1997: 70), as did the early Waldensians (Lambert 1992). Luther’s Reformation was supported not by the poor, but by princes, merchants, professors, and university students. It is estimated that at the outbreak of the first French War of Religion in 1562, 50 percent of the French nobility had embraced Calvinism (Tracy 1999), but very few peasants or members of the urban poor rallied to the Huguenots (Ladurie 1974). Furthermore, of 482 medieval ascetic Roman Catholic saints, three fourths were from the nobility, and 22 percent were from royalty (Stark 2003b).

Many sociologists continue to cite the Methodists as a classic proletarian movement (Niebuhr 1929), seemingly ignorant of the fact that John Wesley and his colleagues did not depart from the Church of England and found Methodism because they were lower-class dissidents seeking a more comforting faith. They were young men of privilege who began to assert their preference for a higher-intensity faith while at Oxford. By the same token, the prophets of the Old Testament all belonged “to the landowning nobility” (Lang 1983), and contrary to the beliefs of most sociologists, so did most members of the Jewish sect known as the Essenes (Baumgarten 1997). If they thrive, nearly all religious movements attract many lower-class adherents, as, of course, the Methodists did. But like the Methodists, these movements originate in the religious concerns of the privileged, not in lower-class dissatisfaction.

Clearly, then, history tells us that the correct generalization ought to be that religious movements are not “revolts of the poor” but spiritual ventures of the privileged. But why do the privileged embark on these ventures?

INSUFFICIENCIES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF PRIVILEGE

Having never been rich, let alone born into privilege, most scholars share with the vast majority of people many unfounded illusions about what it is like to be at the top of the social pyramid. Although popular rhetoric abounds in adages minimizing the importance of wealth and status, most people don't really mean it, and their perceptions are clouded by envy as well as by rampant materialism. Oh, to be born a Rockefeller! That Laurence Rockefeller played an active role in founding and funding various New Age groups such as Esalen seems mystifying (Kripal 2007). But the fact is that wealth and power do not satisfy all human desires. Thus Abraham Maslow (1971) wrote at length about the need for self-actualization, and the Nobel laureate economist Robert William Fogel (2000: 2) linked this to privilege: “throughout history . . . freed of the need to work in order to satisfy their material needs, [the rich] have sought self-realization.” Buddha could not find satisfactory purpose and meaning when living in a palace; he found it under a banyan tree.

Clearly, it is necessary to add a fundamental extension to deprivation theory as it was originally formulated. It is not merely that people will adopt supernatural solutions to their thwarted material desires, but that people will pursue or initiate supernatural solutions to their thwarted existential and moral desires—a situation to which the privileged are especially prone, since they are not distracted by immediate material needs.

But if the privileged are more prone to recognize and act on their spiritual deprivation, this form of deprivation is, in principle, universal and hence can serve as a basis for the spread of religious movements. Effective revivalists always stress spiritual deprivation.

In any event, strong faith usually develops after conversion (Lofland and Stark 1965). Once immersed in a group of people who are deeply committed to a religion, most converts develop a similar level of commitment and soon begin to seek to spread their faith. For example, 83 percent of members of evangelical Protestant megachurches reported having shared their faith with friends during the past month, and 53 percent said that they also had done so with strangers (Stark 2008). Thus it is that religious convictions are the mainspring in the growth of a religious group as they motivate members to seek converts. That is, people may join for essentially social reasons (the pull of their social ties), but they are recruited by people whose motives are religious, and thus religious movements depend on religious motivations.

This principle is clearly demonstrated by comparing a very ineffective Catholic response to the Protestant challenges in Latin America with a very effective response—the first based on deprivation assumptions, the second being an enthusiastically religious response.

LIBERATIONISTS AND CHARISMATICS

During the 1960s, as energetic Protestant groups, most of them in the Pentecostal tradition, began to make rapid inroads into Latin America, some Catholic theologians diagnosed the success of these groups as an appeal to the material deprivations of the masses. In response, these theologians fashioned a counterstroke that, although long on theological language and imagery, was essentially political. Known as Liberation Theology, it was a mixture of Marxism and Catholicism that aimed at “mobilizing the poor for their own liberation” (Drogus 1995: 465). The proposed tactic to achieve this liberation was to unite small groups of lower-class Latin Americans into a form of utopian socialist commune, wherein they would have their political and moral awareness raised and serve as models of progress for other people living in the surrounding area. These communes were called Base Communities, in accord with the long-range plan to rebuild societies from below, from a new base. The primary theorist of Liberation Theology was the Peruvian Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, who redefined salvation, discarding the emphasis on the individual and arguing instead that salvation is collective, taking the form of saving the masses from bondage. The emphasis was on the political transformation of society, in contrast with the Pentecostal emphasis on the miraculous transformation of the self.

Liberation Theology greatly appealed to many American priests and nuns, especially those associated with the Maryknoll Mission Society, as well as to American and European intellectuals (especially social scientists) and to many clergy in Latin America—it was officially endorsed at a conference of the Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1965. Although Liberation Theology was said to be a response to the poverty of the masses, in reality national Catholic officials sanctioned Liberationists and their programs according to the extent to which Protestant groups were making headway in their nations (Gill 1998). But the support was to no avail. Base Communities failed to arouse the masses to attempt to establish Christian Socialism. There were many reasons for this failure. For one thing, most of the Base Communities never developed beyond loosely organized, nonresidential study groups that formed in urban neighborhoods (Gooren 2002). In keeping with the tepid sort of religiousness that prevailed in Liberation Theological circles, these Base Communities were not attractive to poor people but appealed mainly to more educated, bookish people (Burdick 1993; Hewitt 1991; Mariz 1994). Consequently, few Latin Americans ever became involved in

Base Communities—probably no more than two million out of a total population of nearly 600 million (Cavendish 1994; Hewitt 1991). Indeed, it has been suggested that Liberation Theology “had more influence on Catholics . . . in Europe and the United States, than in Latin America” (Gooren 2002: 30).

Liberation Theology led nowhere because it was neither a revolutionary nor a religious movement but involved a weak, self-canceling mixture of the two. More important, the attempt to offer religiously tinged solutions to material deprivations did nothing to stem the rapidly rising tide of Pentecostalism, if for no other reason than that compensation for material deprivations is not the basis of the Pentecostal appeal, as we have seen.

But then came the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, which was initiated by an outbreak of “baptisms in the Holy Spirit” that began at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in 1967 (Laurentin 1977; Mansfield 1992) and was taken south by American priests in the early 1970s. It is revealing that the members of this movement “initially called themselves Pentecostal Catholics” (Chesnut 2003b: 61); and aside from some distinctive elements of Catholic culture, such as an emphasis on the Virgin Mary, it is difficult to tell Protestant and Catholic charismatics apart. Both conduct vibrant, emotion-packed worship services during which clergy and members of the congregation often engage in glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. Both put great stress on miraculous healing.

Having evolved into an international movement with a central headquarters in the Vatican, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCR) now provides the backbone of Catholic commitment in Latin America. Although there are no reliable national statistics on CCR membership, it is estimated that there are at least 30 million members in Latin America, according to the coordinator of the CCR in the Vatican (Martinez 2009). In any event, the impact of the CCR on the religious life of Latin America has been immense. Just as Protestant Pentecostals fill soccer stadia for massive revivals, CCR revivals fill the same stadia. In addition, the CCR has established tens of thousands of weekly prayer groups, which, unlike the Base Communities, have generated intense levels of public commitment. For example, Catholic Mass attendance had long been notoriously low in Latin America, but today according to World Poll data, Latin Catholics display remarkably high levels of Mass attendance—in excess of 60 percent a week in many nations. This was accomplished not by sermons about how the Church could organize to mitigate material deprivations, but by sermons invoking the Holy Spirit, thereby activating religious motivations for religiousness.

CONCLUSION

Reliable data allow us to overwhelmingly reject the scholarly consensus that Latin Americans are flocking to join Pentecostal Protestant religious groups in response

to material deprivations. These results add to a substantial body of evidence demonstrating that it is false to assume that people embrace religion only as they are driven to do so by their material deprivations. More frequently, people seem to be drawn to religion by social ties and because of the spiritual satisfactions it gives them. Indeed, most religious movements have been founded by people who are quite lacking in material deprivations, that is, by the wealthy and privileged who have found materialism wanting and have therefore suffered from spiritual deprivations. All of this is in keeping with the well-known finding that within an unregulated religious marketplace, it is the more “religious” denominations that thrive, while the more political and “philosophical” denominations languish.

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