

**RESEÑA BIBLIOGRÁFICA**

Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll (Ed.),  
*Review of Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America*,  
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U.S. social scientists have only just begun to notice the emergence of popular Protestantism in Latin America, and already the editors of this book are recommending that we re-think the phenomenon. This view results perhaps from the tendency in some prior works on the subject to see Protestantism as a single entity, a force imported from the United States, with essentially similar results throughout the vast, presumably homogeneous, region to the south.

To be sure, there are many similarities among the nations of Latin America, not the least of which are their historical ties to the Iberian peninsula and the Catholic Church. The region as a whole has also been relegated to Third World status by ongoing processes of the Modern World System. The consequences of this status have included, since 1950, rapid socio-economic change resulting in an increase in economic inequality and the fragmentation of traditional social relations. This process has accelerated since 1980, when very serious economic crises began to affect all of the nations of the area. The growth of Protestantism parallels this decline in social and economic stability.

It is tempting to explain the one process in terms of the other, not only because of their simultaneity but also because Protestantism first emerged in the context of rapid socio-economic change and the breakdown of traditional society in Europe. The editors of *Rethinking Protestantism* ask us to re-think such easy comparisons between Europe and Latin America, as well as assumptions about the homogeneity of the latter. We are asked to look rather at the diversity of contexts where Protestantism is emerging as an important social force, and at the diversity of the processes involved in that emergence.

In his introduction, Stoll delineates the major patterns of Latin American Evangelical Protestantism. Like the book's other contributors, he uses the word *evangélicos* as the umbrella term for all the new Protestant sects which, despite their differences, have much more in common than any have with mainstream "historical" denominations such as Methodists and Presbyterians. Stoll also gives a useful review of the literature, placing this

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new work in its context. He goes on to state that “[e]xplaining why so many Latin Americans join Protestant churches is not the object of this collection” (p. 7). Stoll instead sets out two main issues addressed in the book. First, how are evangelicals responding to the social crises in Latin America, and second, how are they affecting the societies around them? In answering these questions, the authors demonstrate that a great deal more research on the subject remains to be done before we can begin to generalize. These articles point out the directions such research might fruitfully take, however, and provide a solid basis for future work.

The first three articles, on Brazil, do much to portray the great diversity of religious identities and social behavior in the continent’s largest nation. In his piece on small towns in the vicinity of Rio de Janeiro, John Burdick takes aim at some of the more widespread stereotypes of Brazilian Protestants, with a view to exploding these myths. The prevailing opinions about *crentes*, as they are called in Brazil, are that they are politically conservative, they do not participate in local community organizations, and they are not active in labor unions. Using the anthropological field methods of participant observation and open-ended informant interviews, Burdick found variations in levels and types of political activism from one community to another. The author shows that statements from pastors and church literature, the bases for many contemporary social science analyses of Protestantism in Brazil, are not sufficient sources of information. It is important to analyze behavior at the local community level, using intensive field methods, in order to get at the day to day realities of Protestantism.

Ireland’s work in Campo Alegre, a town near Recife, is even more local and more intensive than Burdick’s. Like Burdick, Ireland calls into question the assumption that *crente sare* apolitical, demonstrating that even in a community of 12,000 they are politically quite diverse. He delineates two types of *evangélicos* in the town: church *crentes*, who are pro-government, and sect *crentes*, who are against all forms of hierarchy and reject politics as part of the world and the Devil. Even this typology has its drawbacks, however, as the reality is “a repertoire of myths, symbols, and doctrines” (p. 61), in the contexts of which individuals negotiate their lives.

Freston’s article has a much broader basis than the previous two, focusing on Protestant political action in Brazil’s national elections. He describes three historical phases in the emergence of Brazilian Protestantism, spanning the period 1910 to 1990. The political behavior of Protestants has varied depending on the histories of the congregations to which they belong. Freston minutely analyzes national-level elections in terms of Protestant participation, pointing out that since 1986 they have become an important, albeit quite diverse, force to be reckoned with on the Brazilian political stage. The author points out that although some Protestants are similar politically to the religious right in the U.S., Brazilian conservatism is quite distinct from it. The complexity and diversity of denominations and the political history of the nation are quite sufficient for the analysis of the many variations on the national political theme.

Coleman et al. also use national-level data to analyze political behavior among Protestants, focusing on El Salvador. Like other articles in the book, this one criticizes conventional wisdom about evangélicos. Coleman et al. base their arguments on an analysis of data from a public opinion poll conducted in 1989 by the Central American University. The poll includes data on Protestants, Catholics and non-believers. The main findings of this research are that Protestants are among the poorest *Salvadoreños*, and

that a majority felt that the existing political system was unjust. Protestants also were less likely to have voted for the U.S.-backed conservative ARENA party in the 1989 election. The authors conclude that their data contradict prevailing views that Protestants are upwardly mobile, politically conservative, and heavily influenced by conservative U.S. missionaries.

Brusco's article takes to task the assumption that Protestant women have little power in their churches. She criticizes earlier authors for limiting their analyses of women's power to the authority structure of the church, thus ignoring the importance of women's roles within their own domain—the family household. She reports that her work in Colombia demonstrates that “evangelicalism reforms gender roles in a way that enhances female status” (p. 144). She found that conversion to evangelicalism causes men to change their behavior and attitudes in ways that enhance the well-being of their families.

Abstention from alcohol, as well as the other vices of machismo, which Brusco identifies as “smoking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes” (p. 147), redirects money as well as the husband's attention to the household as a whole. This change, in turn, results in women having resources not available to their Catholic sisters. Brusco implies that this advantage is an important motivation for women to convert, and explains the higher conversion rate for women.

Linda Green's study is the only one in the book which focuses on Protestantism in rural areas; in this case, Guatemala. The economic crisis in Latin America generally has been accompanied in Guatemala by the ruthless destruction of traditional rural society by the military.

As part of their campaign against “subversion”, the army has murdered many Catholic clergymembers and lay leaders. This helps to explain the high rate of Protestantism in Guatemala: Protestants are seen by the military as non-subversive. Like Brusco, Green studied women, but her work does not examine gender relations. Rather, she reports on the lives of widows, of whom there are a great many in Guatemala due to the wholesale slaughter of men by the army. Green finds that widows tend to move from one religious organization to another based on their pragmatic perceptions of the benefits available in each. In fact, the women see no contradiction in belonging to more than one church at the same time. In the end, Green finds that evangelical churches provide widows and their families with one means to “recapture control over their lives” (p. 175) in a context of extreme social upheaval and unpredictability.

Gill's work on evangélicos in La Paz, Bolivia, echoes Green's theme of shifting religious affiliations based on pragmatic concerns. She describes La Paz as “a vibrant religious marketplace where practitioners of various sorts compete for the souls of Bolivians” (p. 181). Bolivia has always been one of the poorest countries in the region, but in the 1980s it reached “the brink of chaos” (p. 181), with annual inflation at 14,000 percent and with the cocaine trade providing the only source of hard currency. Austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund in 1985 only made things worse for ordinary Bolivians, and it is in this context that the rate of conversion to Protestantism began to increase. Like the widows in Guatemala, residents of La Paz change religious identity frequently, and many subscribe to more than one doctrine at a time. Illustrating her points with individual case studies, Gill finds that religious change is a dynamic process of reinterpreting the meanings of religious symbols over the span of an individual's lifetime.

In her conclusion, Garrard-Burnett asks whether the surge in Protestantism represents Latin America's Reformation. She points out that the articles in the collection demonstrate that such comparisons with Europe are not useful in this new context. In fact, there is no cohesive pattern of the "spirit of capitalism" among Protestants in the region. She concludes that the emerging face of Protestantism is "corporate, nucleated, flexible, and responsive to local conditions and circumstances" (p. 205). It remains for future researchers to document the ways that these conditions and circumstances, and the responses to them, vary from one part of Latin America to another.