Chapter 10
The Role of Women in the Development of New Religious Movements in Latin America: The Case of Pentecostalism

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we focus on the growth of “new religions” and new religious movements in Latin America and attempt to find explanations for this growth. Although other explanations for the increase in religious plurality exist, we focus on the role of women in this development. The expansion of movements such as Pentecostalism is challenging the centrality of Catholicism in many Latin American countries. Basically, we therefore aim to answer the following question: Why has Pentecostalism grown so much in some Latin American countries while Catholicism has experienced a certain decline? One possible explanation for this is the role of women in this expansion, which has fostered greater social cohesion within families and communities. Pentecostalism has led to a certain empowerment of the women living in precarious conditions, affording them greater visibility and importance within their communities and giving them a role in the re-education of behaviours that are rooted in male domination.

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INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 20th century saw an important growth around the world and especially in Latin America, of new religions and creeds that are different from Catholicism. Some authors saw them as new religious movements that often emerged and grew as reactions against leading ‘official’ religions, such as Catholicism and Lutheranism (Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001; Introvigne, 2001; Prat, 2001). Some of these movements were born in the USA as branches of the Baptist, Methodist or other faiths, but they developed differently in Latin America. In our opinion, these are not “imported movements”. Rather, they are movements similar roots but their own distinctive features because of the different processes involved in adapting to their host countries and societies in Latin America. We also find similarities and differences in the part that women have played in these movements.

Traditionally, Latin American countries have been Catholic. However, the supremacy of Catholicism has been questioned by the appearance and development of new evangelical religions. Some authors (Semán, 2001; Anderson 2004; Davie, 2011) maintain that the traditional supremacy of Catholicism is coming to an end because of an increasing process of religious pluralism that runs in parallel with a process of secularisation. In this context, the greatest success has been achieved by the Charismatic Movement, a group which includes Pentecostalism. Before continuing with our analysis, we would like to point out that while in the United States the terms “evangelical” and “reborn” differentiate between certain groups of Protestants, in Latin America the terms Protestant and Evangelical are used indistinctly.

In this chapter we suggest that the emergence of Pentecostalism has been possible thanks to the significant implication of middle and working class women and women of certain ethnic groups, who have encouraged their husbands and families to join the Pentecostal religion. Our questions are intended to find explanations for what motivated this process and why Pentecostalism has attracted women from depressed economic environments. Our answers are linked to the fact that this religion offers opportunities for reshaping individual behaviors and lifestyles, especially those of men. Women have been empowered and these women have become the protagonists of a new form of religious identity (Hallum, 2003). The expansion of Pentecostalism is especially evident in countries such as Brazil or Guatemala but it has also affected to a greater or lesser extent every country in Latin America. Poblete (2006) considers that, depending on the country, Pentecostals represent between 10 and 20% of the population and have a strong presence in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Although their presence in Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia
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