

How Pentecostals brought 'the fiesta spirit' to church in Latin America

A look at the religion's theological roots and how the faith took hold in the region.

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New Christian houses of worship are opening every day across the global south – from Africa to Asia to Latin America.

But most are not the traditional Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant sects that have dominated the Western world's religious-political affairs for centuries. The majority are Pentecostal.

Modern Pentecostalism, whose name comes from the biblical term Pentecost commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, grew out of the Holiness movement at the turn of the 20th century in the US.

Pentecostals place strong emphasis on personal experience with the "Holy Spirit," such as speaking in tongues, divine healing, and prophesying. In the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey in 2006, most Pentecostals said that they had experienced divine healings or received revelations from God.

"Renewalists," a term that includes those belonging to Pentecostal denominations and "charismatics," who have adopted the expressive worship services of Pentecostals but belong to Catholic or mainline Protestant churches, now make up an estimated one quarter of the world's Christians, according to the World Christian Database. That number was just 6 percent 30 years ago.

For decades, Pentecostalism remained on the margins of US society, even as missionaries poured into Latin America. Pentecostals now account for 13 percent of Latin Americans. When accounting for "charismatics," the number shoots up to 30 percent.

This conversion was once observed – mostly in awe – purely as a demographic trend. Attention is now turning to its deeper societal impact.

Scholars say there are many reasons why Pentecostalism has attracted so many adherents. Aggressive evangelism, led at first by US missionaries, has certainly played a role. So has urban anomie and economic crisis. But each country has its own set of factors too, from civil war to natural disasters.

A 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, for example, brought a current of US Christians to Central America, says Paul Freston, a leading expert on religion in Latin America. Today the country has the highest percentage of Protestants in Latin America.

Pentecostals across the region, most of whom considered themselves Catholics before, say they converted in order to tackle their problems, for a sense of community, or simply because Pentecostalism offered something that the rituals of the Catholic mass did not. Most Pentecostal services today are rollicking events that include 10-piece bands, movie screens, and emotional testimonials – a reflection of society's preferences. It's what Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, calls "bringing the fiesta spirit to church."

Pentecostals have been particularly skilled at reaching out to the region's poor, providing answers to the overwhelming problems their poverty provokes each day. The Catholic answer, in the 1960s, came in the form of "liberation theology," a Marxist-tinged approach to addressing the needs of the oppressed. It had enthusiastic supporters across Latin America, but soon got wrapped up in cold war politics. Religious scholars often quip: "Liberation theology opted for the poor, and the poor opted for Pentecostalism."

"A lot of these folks are marginalized in their own societies, and here come the Pentecostals. They are not just meeting their spiritual needs," says Mr. Lugo, "they are providing them with an outlet for their own leadership. They provide a sense of empowerment, which no doubt has to be very attractive to people when nobody else [pays attention to] them."