

# Introduction

I was glad when Fortress Press decided to issue an abbreviated version of my book, *Histories of the Latin American Church: A Handbook*. The original text, while a labor of love and passion, could be considered too unwieldy for the casual student curious about Christianity in Latin America. Its detailed treatment of over twenty countries, their chronologies, popular devotions, and eminent personalities make up the bulk of that particular project. This *Brief Introduction* is essentially the first part of that larger work: general essays on history and theology, basic information on religious traditions, and a few sections culled from the appendix. It is designed to serve as a more manageable introduction to the topic for undergraduates, seminary students, and curious onlookers wishing for a bird's-eye view. For those who want to come down from the heights and pursue a more in-depth journey throughout the individual countries that make up modern Latin America, the larger volume is to be preferred.

Within the last twenty years there has been a renewed attention to the many expressions of Christianity around the world. Church history texts that begin in Palestine, travel through Europe, and then culminate in the United States are no longer acceptable in the college or graduate classroom, and indeed they should not be. The Internet, to a great extent, has helped facilitate the interest in world

Christianity, not only in the resources available and the personal connections individuals make but in the daily news. Just this year, Arab populations have tried to alert the West of the violence being suffered by millennia-old Christian communities in Syria and Egypt, and in parts of Africa legislators debate the passage of draconian laws against sexual minorities drafted with the support of evangelical churches from both there and the United States. As one of the most densely populated regions of the world with civilizations dating back thousands of years and some of the strongest emerging economies looking forward, Latin America can no longer be relegated to a secondary role in global affairs. Similarly, Latin American Christianity stands poised to play an even greater part in the future of the faith worldwide. It is both Western and global, heir to European, African, and indigenous theologies, worldviews, and spiritualities. It was postcolonial before that became “a thing.” Its Pentecostal churches send missionaries around the world, and one of her sons now sits upon the papal throne as head of the Roman Catholic Church. No religion, including Christianity, is monolithic. Whether one is a believer or not, Christian traditions are products of cultures and worldviews interacting with one another. The “great traditions” of denominations and dominant powers and the “little traditions” of local customs and observances collide, collude, and come together within larger cultural contexts to create varieties of faith and devotion. For the Christian, this is to be expected and valued being that Christianity itself begins with the story of incarnation within a particular people, place, and time.

In roughly the last two centuries, the meaning of “Latin America” has been debated again and again. There are several popular uses of the term:

*Geographic:* For many, especially in the United States, the name refers to everything south of the US border, including the parts of the region that speak English (Belize, Bermuda, Grenada, Barbados), French (Haiti, Martinique), and Dutch (Suriname). The historic and cultural differences make this definition too broad for our use.

*Linguistic:* Strictly speaking, this would point to all regions in the Americas that use a Romance language. It was in this sense that the French sought to make allies of the Ibero-American countries in the nineteenth century to counter the political and economic weight of Anglo-America and Teutonic Europe. While narrower than the usage above, it is still too broad, forcing one to include not only Haiti and Guadeloupe, but also French-speaking Quebec.

*Historical/Cultural:* These are the regions that have been united by a common historical experience of Iberian conquest, colonization, and nineteenth-century independence movements, which were then followed by a period of populist regimes and civil wars until the present time. This is the definition used in this book. It is identical to Ibero-America but with the important caveat that the region's cultural identity cannot be defined solely by Spanish and Portuguese domination; Amerindian and African elements have been equal components (all in various combinations in various proportions) in the formation of a new cultural identity that is more than the sum of its parts. It is a cultural *mélange* to which are constantly added new elements: Italian, German, Japanese, Arab, and Korean, among others. Under this banner, I also include the Latin American diaspora in the United States. The migration of Mexicans, Cubans, and Central Americans into the United States, as well as the movement of the US border over parts of

what were once Mexico and the Spanish Empire, has resulted in a continuity of culture that transcends political boundaries. Add to this the fact that the United States is the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in world and one has further reason to include it within our definition.

Readers will note that I use the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* interchangeably to describe the populations in the United States that have their roots in the cultures and histories of Latin America. I do so to avoid repetition, aware that the terms carry certain sociopolitical connotations. The same goes for the words *indigenous*, *native*, *Indian*, or *Amerindian* used to designate the people living on this continent before European contact. Because dates, events, and narratives have sometimes been conflicting, absent, or difficult to ascertain, I have tried to reconstruct them to the best of my ability. Any errors or omissions contained herein are strictly my responsibility.

This book you hold in your hands (and its heavier incarnation) has been my constant companion for well over a year now since inception. The trials, hopes, visions, and tears of a continent have informed and enlightened my own perspectives of the Christian religion not only there, but as I explore the faith in the United States and elsewhere. These very same stories of human failing and human potential have grieved and energized my soul. In addition to assisting readers in their research I hope it will also lead them to appreciate the beauty and color of a people in this sun-kissed region. On this level as well I hope this book serves as a guide to fellow Hispanics seeking to recover a past too often ignored by the churches and the academy. In the words of the Brazilian Protestant theologian Rubem Alves:

The historian is someone who recovers lost memories and distributes them as a sacrament to those who have lost the memories. Indeed, what finer communal sacrament is there than the memories of a common past,

punctuated by the existence of pain, sacrifice and hope? To recover in order to disperse. The historian is not an archaeologist of memories. The historian is a sower of visions and hopes.

This work would have been impossible without the gentle guidance and support of Will Bergkamp, Lisa Gruenisen, and the team at Fortress Press who have allowed me this small contribution to academia. I continue to be indebted to my teachers, whose voices linger and inform my efforts. The congregation at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Chicago has accompanied me through times of joy and struggle; in their encouragement, their ministry has challenged me to step out of the comfort of the mythical ivory tower. This is the point where one would say a few sentimental words of thanks for one's spouse or significant other. Seeing as that is not possible, I will continue to be grateful for the endless well of faith and support that is my mother, Eva. She taught me to pray in Spanish when I was four and, decades later, continues to remind me that faith must be a matter of the heart and hands as well as the head. Besides, what kind of Latin boy would I be if I did not acknowledge my *mamita*? Finally, for the companionship of dogs, demanding to play on a summer afternoon or curled at my feet on a polar vortex night, good Lord, we give thanks.

Joel Morales Cruz

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