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## Latin American Evangelicals: In a League of their Own

When you hear “Latin America,” do you think of Venezuela’s oil, or Brazil’s growing biofuel industry, or Mexican emigrants to the United States? That would not be surprising in this time of rising fuel and food prices and our unresolved immigration crisis.

But perhaps the explosive growth of evangelicalism in Latin America has attracted your attention. If so, what do you think is the relation between evangelicals there and here?

In the movie “Full Metal Jacket,” a Marine colonel remarks, “Inside every Vietnamese there is an American waiting to get out.” Many American evangelicals imagine the same thing about their counterparts to the south. Perhaps it is a vestige of an earlier era of condescending missions, or a legacy of the Cold War, but the attitude is prevalent among American evangelicals that their Latin American brothers and sisters in the faith will naturally gravitate to their own political views and their own assumptions about America’s role in the world.

In recent years, evangelical Christianity has grown rapidly in Latin America. These believers now comprise approximately 12-15 percent of the population in what is historically a Catholic-dominated region. Political trends in this population are already an important factor to be reckoned with and will likely grow in importance in the coming years.

For liberal critics of American evangelicals, the possibility that Latin American evangelicals might be just like US evangelicals is worrisome, because survey data reveal strong affinities between American evangelical identity and some conservative political views. For instance, a University of Akron/Pew Forum poll in 2004 found that among traditional American evangelicals, 76 percent approved of President Bush’s foreign policy; 87 percent thought the Iraq war was justified; 82 percent thought preemptive war is justifiable; and 74 percent believed that the US has a special role in the world.

But scholars such as Paul Freston and Tim Shah, who specialize in the study of global evangelicalism, would argue that such findings in the US are not nec-

essarily indicative of the attitudes of Latin American evangelicals. Part of the reason is that the growth of Latin American evangelicalism has become increasingly indigenous and independent of any direct North American missionary support. And even when Latin American evangelicals are receiving certain political cues from the north, their local context is likely to exert a stronger influence on them. As Shah argues, “Though evangelicals [in the global south] are assumed to be agents of the American religious right and purveyors of militant ‘fundamentalism,’ their lower socioeconomic status often leads them to consider economics at least as important as ‘morality’ and consequently to align with left-wing political movements perceived to be pro-poor.”

To shed further light on this question, Ruth Melkonian and I recently conducted a statistical analysis of international survey data. Using the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, we pooled data from Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. Those polled were asked: to rate their general opinion of the US; if they think the US takes into account the interests of countries like theirs; and how US policies affect the gap between rich and poor countries. In addition, they were asked whether they approve of: American ideas about democracy, ways of doing business, ideas and customs spreading into their country, and US efforts to fight terrorism.

What we found is that evangelical identity is not a significant factor in Latin American attitudes toward the US. In general, evangelicals to the south of us responded like average Latin Americans, not like disciples of an American stereotype.

In short, there is diversity in global evangelical politics. The idea that an American-style religious right unduly influences the politics of Latin American evangelicals is out of date and should be abandoned by both fans and foes of evangelicalism.

—Dennis R. Hoover, Editor

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