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# EVANGELICALISM AS A PROTESTANT MOVEMENT IN LATIN AMERICA CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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## Abstract

Over the last 100 years, the Evangelical movement has shown an unprecedented capacity for globalization. The authors analyse the causes and consequences of the development of Evangelicalism in Latin America. Based on academic literature analysis, the notion and essence of Evangelicalism as a Protestant movement are revealed. The authors provide classification models of Latin American Evangelical Churches and analyse the number of Evangelical Christians in Latin America. The authors study researchers' opinions on the causes and consequences of Evangelical growth in Latin America within the study. It is concluded that the socio-cultural influence of Evangelicalism in Latin America has increased.

*Keywords:* religious influence, Protestantism, Evangelical movement, state, Latin America

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## 1. Introduction

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the academic community began to discuss the 'religious revival' in the modern world [1] when it was discovered that religion was not on the decline despite secularization supporters' forecasts. Conversely, the opposite trend was becoming much more evident [2]. Typically, the studies that examine this issue feature some religious phenomena as proof of this

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process: the expansion of Islamism [3], the emergence of the New Age movement [4] and the rapid increase in the number of Evangelicals in Latin America [5]. This is the subject of our research, reviewing the constitutive historical aspects of the Latin American State and the political and religious influence to give way in current times (2020), to the evangelist confirmation of this era [6, 7].

## **2. The notion and essence of Evangelicalism**

The rise of Evangelical groups in Latin America is undoubtedly a massive-scale phenomenon. It is presented as a highly controversial topic for those who study religion's role in the modern world. However, some conceptual explanation of the reasons for the growth is needed.

First, one must eliminate the incorrect association between the term 'Evangelical' used in Latin America and the Evangelical movement or 'evangelism' from which the former is supposed to have originated. While the influence of the Evangelical movement that emerged in European Protestantism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be traced, in Latin America it is not the same phenomenon. In the United States, an 'evangelist', according to David Stoll, is an individual or group of "theological conservatives with an emphasis on the Bible, personal salvation and evangelism" [8]. In Latin America, the term "evangelist can refer to any Christian who is not a Catholic" [8]. However, this group, which is opposed to Roman Catholicism, does not include groups that are not related to Christianity inherited from the Reformation, such as the various Eastern Orthodox Churches. This group also leaves out specific groups that, although they originated within American Protestantism, are too different from the theological positions taken by Protestant Christianity. These are mainly Mormons (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Adventists (the Seventh-day Adventist Church) and Jehovah's Witnesses (the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society).

On the other hand, one cannot say that the terms 'Protestant' and 'Evangelical' are equivalent. As already noted by A.G. Mendonça [9], the term 'Protestant' is more limited and, in most cases, refers to groups historically associated with the reformist tradition that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Methodists or Presbyterians. Meanwhile, the category 'Evangelical' includes both these groups and other denominations that do not consider themselves Protestants. However, they may have inherited many theological, liturgical, organizational and other traits from Protestants. In this sense, Baptists demand a rejection of 'Protestantism' the most. According to Mendonça, Baptists "do not feel a direct connection with the Reformation but claim to have been before it, identifying with the beliefs and practices of the early Christians of the New Testament" [9, p. 51].

Therefore, the term ‘Evangelical’ in its ability to group all these traditions denotes the entire cumulative modality of Western Christianity not related to Catholicism or Orthodoxy, both in the academic world and based on common sense.

### **3. Latin American Evangelical Churches - classification models**

Researchers have always sought to build classification models of local and transnational Evangelical groups or movements operating in the Latin American region [10]. These models or typologies, usually built around timelines, attempt to portray the growing denominational diversification that has arisen due to the Evangelical congregation’s various growth processes in this part of the world. However, it is always tricky, given the significant national differences in these processes spread over a sizeable continental area of 20 countries and two colonies [11].

**Table 1.** Classification of Evangelical movements.

No.	Evangelical movement	Characteristic features
1	“immigrant Protestantism” [13], “transplanted churches” [14]	The first Evangelical movement to emerge from successive waves of migration from Europe. These groups are generally described as having little impact on promoting Evangelical conversion, and their expansion, when it does occur, is based solely on the vegetative growth of their membership. This group also includes some groups of Lutherans from Germany, Anglicans and Methodists from England, and, to a lesser extent, Mennonites of various origins
2	“missionary Protestantism” [15]	Evangelical denominations were introduced into Latin America through missionaries associated with historic churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist). In some classifications, these denominations are designated as a subgroup within a larger group called ‘historical Protestantism’. They are also the aforementioned ‘immigrant Protestants’.
3	“Pentecostalism” [16]	Includes the denominations that are in some way associated with the American Pentecostal movement by C.F. Parham (Topeka, Kansas), which originated in 1901. This movement contributed to the renewal of the North American Protestant environment, with a particular emphasis on the supposed direct relationship of God with believers through the so-called ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’, which would make possible the frequent and daily experience of miracles, healings of diseases, prophecies, glossolalia.

In countries where the process of Evangelical growth has been more intense and complex, such as Brazil, there have already been several classification attempts made by evangelical researchers in recent decades. Thus, E.G.M. Paegle [12] counted nine systems of classification of various researchers' Brazilian Evangelical field.

A more general classification can be drawn up in Latin America, including some of the leading analysts' systematic observations in this religious field (Table 1).

If we consider 'Pentecostalism', it can be divided into typologies according to its internal differences. For example, M. das Dores Campos [17] views Brazilian Pentecostalism as the development of three historical waves generating different identities: the first, which began in the 1920s, with an emphasis on the experience of 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' and glossolalia; the second wave that developed in the 1950s and 1960s promoting divine healing; and finally, third-wave Churches, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on exorcism rituals.

**Table 2.** Latin America: conversion to Catholicism  
(Catholic population, percent of total).

Country	1910 (%)	1950 (%)	1970 (%)	2014 (%)	Change over 1910-1970 (%)	Change over 1970-2014 (%)
Argentina	97	95	91	71	-6	-20
Brazil	95	93	92	61	-3	-31
Bolivia	94	94	89	77	-5	-12
Chile	96	89	76	64	-20	-12
Colombia	80	91	95	79	+15	-16
Costa Rica	99	98	93	61	-6	-31
Ecuador	88	98	95	79	+7	-16
Salvador	98	99	93	50	-5	-43
Guatemala	99	99	91	50	-8	-41
Honduras	97	96	94	46	-3	-47
Mexico	99	96	96	81	-3	-15
Nicaragua	96	96	93	50	-4	-43
Panama	84	87	87	70	+3	-17
Paraguay	97	96	95	90	-2	-5
Peru	95	95	95	76	0	-19
Puerto Rico	100	94	87	56	-13	-31
Dominican Republic	98	96	94	57	-4	-37
Uruguay	61	62	63	42	+2	-21
Venezuela	93	91	93	73	0	-20

Source: [Pew Research Center, *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>]

#### **4. The number of Evangelical Christians in Latin America**

Published in November 2014, a report by the Pew Research Center entitled 'Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a historically Catholic region' [Pew Research Center, *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region*, November 13, 2014, <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>] yielded important and relevant figures on religious affiliation in the region. This study was conducted between October 2013 and February 2014 among 30,000 people in 18 countries, where 95% of the total population of Latin America lives (Table 2). This study confirms the Evangelical sector's phenomenal growth in this part of the world, which reached 19% of the region's population in 2014, compared with 69% of Catholics.

To get an idea of the extent to which this growth has accelerated in recent decades, it is estimated that in 1910, 94% of Hispanics were Catholic, and only about 1% were Evangelical. In 1950, Evangelicals reached 3%, while Catholics remained at 94%. In 1970, the number of Catholics dropped to 92%, while evangelicals rose to 4%. Therefore, it should be noted that a significant growth impulse (15%) occurred in just over 40 years. In other words, much of the movement from Catholicism towards evangelical churches have occurred 'during the lifetime', as highlighted in the Pew Research Center report. The evidence to support Pentecostals' role in the growth of evangelicals is also essential, as research shows that, on average, nearly two-thirds of evangelicals (65%) identify as Pentecostals

#### **5. The state from the political and religious point of view in Latin America**

Any construction in society's collective imagination, precisely like that of Latin America, also transcends the political and religious construction in its historical development. In that order of ideas, penetration factors from the conquest processes to the consolidation of the nation-states in their independence processes and current social conformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have persisted in the socio-political sphere, including in religious waves.

From this perspective, in Latin America, four (4) ideological confirmation stages have been defined in this review.

1) In colonial times, the Catholic Church promoted evangelization, and for some authors it permeated the institutional structure that would define the Latin American States [18, 19].

2) In the independence period, the French and North American revolutions' influence with their axiological corollaries in favour of freedom and equality. It would also define the constitutional constructs and the political systems to be established in modernity. With them, there is a Liberal religious worldview, more diverse and heterogeneous. However, social and economic problems become more complex.

Authors such as Fukuyama [20], Krauze [21] coincide in recognizing that the cause of Latin America's backwardness dates back to the time of colonization and later to the independence wars because they were highly bloody and violent.

3) In the establishment of the republics, each country had its dynamics but always in the orbit of transnational interests. "This policy of penetration in Latin America, considered as a continent of opportunities, was ideologically based on the well-known 'manifest destiny'. Puritan theological elements made the country consider itself a people by God destined to expand throughout America and constitute the set of geopolitical and geoeconomic ideas. This movement was associated with elements of a cultural, political, and of course, religious nature." [22, p. 55]

It was born in Iberian America resisted overturning its institutions from that mould. However, from a complicated inheritance in which Catholicism and absolutism were integrated, it rendered it radically ineffective to successfully embody that demanding institutional ideal [23].

4) At the time of modernity and postmodernity in Latin America, other elements interact within these societies. For Kliksberg, in the new Latin American context, "the continent has been experiencing changes of great significance that are modifying substantial aspects of the profile of society inherited from the 80s and 90s" [24, p. 2].

Socio-political problems traditional for Latin American countries (poverty, unemployment, high crime rates, corruption, ideological conflicts) determine a vicious circle that is difficult to resolve. Society is going through a serious ethical crisis. The cause of the crisis lies in the loss of values, in a serious spiritual crisis in which people live, immersed in the consumer and hedonistic culture of money and power as false expressions of happiness and personal satisfaction. With unemployment, the crime boom defines a vicious circle that is difficult to solve in Latin America and the severe ethical crisis that societies are going through. The cause lies in the loss of values, family decomposition, and in itself, the severe spiritual crisis in which individuals live, immersed in consumerist and hedonistic culture of money and power as false expressions of happiness and personal fulfilment.

As expressed by Cortina, Individuals do not identify with their society's laws and values because they do not trust that reciprocity will exist if they commit to them. They do not believe that their institutions will respond adequately [25]. Authors such as Bellah [26], MacIntyre [27], Sandel [28] point out the same danger, in the face of which the associative networks and expectations of reciprocity cannot but be deepened. Martin states that the ethical approach to integration is based on developing communicative rationality capable of founding relationships of cooperation and solidarity, on the dynamic reinterpretation of identity in cultural diversity. and constructing an inclusive Latin American citizenship, moreover, on the implementation of concrete integration initiatives that promote the people's dignity and well-being within the framework of the peoples' self-realization [29].

In these dynamics, religion is a substantial element for vindication, hope; in its orbit of action, people find some certainties in the face of their uncertainties. From these realities, Pentecostalism responds as a reactionary movement to a secularized modernity with decentralized faith in God [30]. According to Maravilla [31], likewise, Protestantism arises to confront an era dominated by the scientific spirit in which religion was in frank decline, considered an out-dated and backward element. This contribution transcends the Latin American region, and quickly, its experiential and hopeful trait gave it a significant advance against the Catholic Church. The same is in the studies of Sarrazin & Arango, where this migration represents personal freedom and emancipation from tradition and what was instituted from the same Latin American State [32].

In that order of ideas, Miguez states: "Pentecostalism has grown in Chile, Brazil, and several Central American countries, in a first wave that probably extends between the 40s and 60s, and then there is possibly a second shock wave, located in the 80s, which has affected Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Colombia and again Brazil" [33, p. 63].

## **6. The causes and consequences of evangelical growth in Latin America**

Given the supposed socio-cultural influence of this scale's religious phenomenon in Latin America, sociological analyses have been published regularly from the late 1960s to the present attempt to describe this transformation [34-36].

Among the pioneers who formulated broader socio-historical hypotheses was the Swiss sociologist C.L. d'Epinay [37, 38], who conducted research into Pentecostal Protestantism's rise in Chile from 1965 to 1966 and published a classic on this topic in 1968 [34]. The sociologist's central thesis is that Chilean Pentecostalism "is a communal religious response to the abandonment of large segments of the population; abandonment caused by the anomalous nature of the transitional society" [34, p. 47]. As one can see, this is essentially a 'functionalist' perspective in which Pentecostalism is a sociological view 'response' designed to mitigate the problems that Chilean social strata face due to traumatic socio-economic transformations. Thus, according to d'Epinay, Pentecostalism offers the population an attractive replacement society. This religious denomination provides an efficient response to the needs of people [34, p. 70].

This study actualized new research in other regions of Latin America. Thus, as a critical alternative to d'Epinay's functionalism, F.C. Rolim [39], adhering to Marxist views, spoke of class conflict at the heart of socio-economic policies that encouraged a commitment to Pentecostalism in Brazil and, as a result, throughout Latin America. According to R. Mariano, "Rolim shares the functionalist (...) idea that the expansion of Pentecostals favours socio-economic conditions that lead to social and economic marginality". However, unlike functionalist analyses, such as d'Epinay's, which focuses on "socio-cultural

changes resulting from socio-economic modernization”, Rolim preferred to focus on “political and economic spheres such as class domination, social oppression, and employer oppression” poverty. However, both analyses agree that Pentecostalism is perceived as an ‘answer’ (or solution) to social and individual problems [35, p. 20].

Two decades after d’Epinay expressed concerns about the Evangelical expansion in Latin America; two other researchers resumed the research into this phenomenon: the British sociologist D. Martin [36] and the American anthropologist D. Stoll [8]. The researchers exhaustively investigated the spread of evangelicalism in Latin America. They assumed that the region was undergoing a ‘Protestant explosion’ that would cause a new Reformation, fostering Latin American civilization’s modernization, historically equivalent to Protestantism in Europe and North America since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

According to D. Martin, Latin American countries have always shown interest in including “some cultural forms of Great Britain, the USA, and Germany in the hope of sharing what seemed to be a movement towards progress” [36, p. 102]. In this sense, the more radical strata of the local elite regarded Protestantism as one of the driving forces of cultural agents in developed North Atlantic societies. However, attempts to promote these ‘Protestant’ transformations often hampered by-laws, local nationalism, and foreigners’ rejection. The situation began to change in the 1930s, when “a much larger economic revolution began to advance in Latin America, which pushed it towards global development and urbanization” [36, p. 105]. With the social problems and ‘anomalous’ situations that occurred during and due to this transition, Protestantism, in its Pentecostal format, found a historic opportunity to expand into the region efficiently. Protestantism became an efficient provider of “new orientations, new meanings, new individual dignity, new support networks, new leadership opportunities (...) so that the reorientation offered by Evangelical Protestantism grew in strength and commitment, especially in Chile and Brazil” [36, p. 105].

D. Stoll, in turn, argues that the growing evangelical churches in Latin America provide the poor with a new type of social group that allows them to confront the misery of violent social change and the State’s bureaucratic indifference. As a consequence of this commitment, a structured social life will emerge “on a much more stable basis by overcoming male dependence on alcohol, restricting male sexual freedom and establishing church authorities as a kind of court of appeal for female victims” [8, p. 25]. According to D. Stoll, popular groups in evangelical churches are like “a utilitarian community in which marginalized segments of the population adapt to capitalist development, organizing themselves into charity societies” [8, p. 26].

Speaking about the analysis of evangelical growth in Latin America conducted by D. Martin and D. Stoll, one can note that the idea of a modernizing ‘Protestantization’ of this region is still prevalent. However, this idea, rejected by many researchers [40, 41] because of its reductionism, can be opposed by R. Mariano’s argument that evangelical growth in Latin America with



Pentecostalism's supremacy tends to enter into a modernization symbiosis with the social reality existing in Latin America. R. Mariano believes that the gap between evangelicalism and the surrounding culture is narrowing as religious syncretism begins to form. Creating independence about the influence of religious matrices of North America, contributing to the rejection of ascetic and cultic practices, penetrating new social spaces, such as digital media and politics, accepting the status of a significant religious minority and striving for prestige and social recognition [42].

Another researcher, Paul Freston, examined the possible limits to the Evangelical population's growth in Latin America. In his research [43], P. Freston writes about the 'Protestant transition', a specific moment soon when this form of Christianity, stagnating and stopping to grow, will undergo internal transformations.

On the example of Brazil, according to P. Freston, the Evangelical ceiling will be reached by 2030-2040 due to two factors. First, there will be a limit to Catholic decline; there is a substantial Catholic core that will not disappear, and in Brazil, this core makes up from 25% to 30% of the population [43]. Second, just over one in two people who leave Catholicism currently convert to evangelicalism. In other words, due to current trends, Brazil will never have an evangelical majority. Moreover, the Catholic Church is learning (albeit slowly) to compete better and increase its congregation. At the same time, it is not easy to imagine that the share of the population who consider themselves Catholic will become less than 40% [43]. In the case of Latin America in general, P. Freston forecasts the following [43]: Latin America as a whole faces a pluralistic religious future in which Catholicism will maintain its position as a more significant denomination (still with a majority of the population in some countries but not in all) and residual social and political privileges. However, the situation will vary significantly in different countries. As the number stabilizes, the percentage of born parishioners and older converts will increase. Simultaneously, the requirements for the education system and other types of church leaders will increase. There will be less triumphalism and higher social impact expectations, and interactions with other religions will radically change. There will also be other ways of dealing with politics.

## **7. Conclusions**

Today, there is an increase in the social and cultural influence that the commitment to evangelicalism causes beliefs, values, and practices of groups and individuals of Latin American society. The evangelical religion impacts a significant share of the lowest strata of Latin America, where it proliferates.

The period from 2020 to 2040 will show if this is a spark of 'symbolic protest' against the region's social and economic realities or fundamental changes in Latin America's current religious landscape. Nevertheless, the truth is, whatever the outcome, there will be no almost absolute Catholic monopoly in Latin America soon, like there used to be.

However, the task of rebuilding the concept of society under the premise of the common good must be based on joint work between those who hold political power. Therefore, it is necessary to develop state programs that would contribute to the creation of optimal conditions for the development of society. People need to be sure that the state guarantees them security and the opportunity to earn money to meet their basic needs. Thus, people will have more opportunities to pay attention to ethical values and develop spiritually. In conjunction with religious freedom, the relationship of being, of their fellow men in their act of faith, with firm beliefs such as particular and private values, can purposefully transcend these spaces.

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