

COMMENTARY:
THE INTERSECTION OF THE ARIS/PARAL REPORT
WITH PASTORAL CONCERNS

by
Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo

Any social science report is preferable to journalistic and anecdotal evidence for shaping pastoral policies. The ARIS/PARAL Report provides a rigorously scientific survey of how Latinos/as identify with religion in the United States today. Moreover, because it surveyed almost 3,000 self-identified Hispanics throughout the United States, the ARIS/PARAL data is more comprehensive than the various regional or selective surveys that have been issued to date concerning Latino religious identification. Written in the form of an essay exploring how these findings intersect with pastoral concerns, this commentary is intended to foster an on-going dialog of church leaders with social scientists.

The finding in this report most likely to receive public attention is that in the past ten years the percentage of Hispanics in the United States who identify Catholicism as their religion has dropped from 66% to 57%. One can expect these numbers to be challenged on methodological grounds. The standard mode of conducting a survey in the United States is through telephone interviews with the premise that every household has a phone and that at least one adult answering that phone represents a family. While that is probably true for the vast majority of persons in the United States, there is reason to suspect that it does not apply evenly to Latinos/as, especially to recently arrived immigrants from Latin America. These immigrants may reside at places where there is no phone, so when a computer generates a list of residences to be called for the survey, the recent immigrants are not included. Moreover, there may be several young men living temporarily living together in an apartment. Even if they had a phone, the one person who might answer would not represent a family group. The survey would also need Spanish-speaking interviews to get information, since recently-arrived immigrants from Latin America are among the most likely to speak only Spanish. Lastly – an perhaps most importantly -- among the foreign-born, only Spanish-speaking population in the United States, many refuse to participate because they have reason to fear government connections to a survey.

Every survey of Hispanics, including ARIS, faces these methodological challenges of gargantuan proportions. Researchers have devised various methods to meet these challenges. ARIS accounted for this difficult-to-survey group by weighting the responses of the foreign-born Hispanics who speak English so that their attitudes are attributed to the other foreign-born who speak only Spanish. Weighting is an acceptable statistical remedy, but it does increase the familiar “plus or minus percentage range.”

ARIS took a more conservative approach than another recent survey that weighted the foreign-born based on a sample of groups in the only Spanish-speaking category.¹

The researchers took different paths to the same goal. However, among Hispanics there is a very great sociological difference between those who are foreign-born but come to the United States as children and the foreign-born who immigrate as mature adults. It is only common sense that a child who entered the United States as a one-year old will have a different outlook and set of language skills than a grandmother who is over 60 when she comes into the country. The child will grow up hearing English-spoken in the neighborhood and Spanish in the home; in most ways there will be little difference between this child and another brother or sister actually born in the United States. By age 15, the fact that this person was born in another country may have no impact on their language skills or cultural behavior.

The *abuelita* on the other hand, may never learn to speak English well, and will continue to reflect the traditions and customs she had learned as a child in her native Latin America. As different as these two Hispanics will be in actual fact, they are both classified in the same category as “foreign-born.” In the ARIS survey, the child who grew up in the United States and speaks English fluently is used as the model to “weight” the foreign-born like the grandmother, who speaks only Spanish. Other surveys use the weighting vice-versa, so that the attitudes of the *abuelita* are projected onto the child raised in the United States.

It may be that surveys in the future will have to ask not only about where a person was born, but at what age they came to reside in the United States. The first generation – that is the foreign-born who have come to the United States and the second generation – that is Latinos/as born in this country have been joined by a third generation, the one-and-a-half, who are foreign-born but raised in the United States. Still, these distinctions are not always evident until after the survey is completed. Since surveys are expensive to conduct surveys, it may be some time before we can revisit this issue with methods that better capture the Hispanic differences.

Until these survey issues are readdressed, we can only recognize the different approaches in the interpretations. ARIS reports that foreign-born Hispanics are less likely to be Catholic (54%) than the US-born (59%), while the Pew Hispanic Center has a huge imbalance between foreign-born Catholics (76%) and the US-born Latinos/as who are Catholic (59%). The immediate solution is not easy. Because the questions about religious identification asked by these surveys are not alike, a Solomonic choice to divide the difference will not produce a reliable result. The ARIS numbers offer the advantage of having asked about religious identification without “steering” the respondent into the categories of “Protestant, Catholic or Jew”.

¹ The Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation 2002 National Survey of Latinos used a weighting procedure that allows for a 10.11% plus or minus sampling error for Salvadorans and an even higher rate for Colombians.

PARAL accepts that the ARIS results, while needing cautious interpretation, are reliable on the important issue of Protestant/Evangelical membership. The drop of 9% in the membership of Latino Catholics does not mean that these persons joined other churches. Hispanic membership in Protestant churches barely changed from 26% in 1990 to 25% in 2001, while Pentecostal membership rose fractionally from slightly more than 3% in 1990 to 4% in 2001. These percentages are also confirmed in other surveys. Thus, even with all the limitations in these studies, there is agreement that there is no significant trend for Hispanic Catholics to leave their faith for Protestant and Pentecostal denomination.

What is unique to the ARIS/PARAL Report is its attention to persons who profess to belong to no religion at all. In the United States' Hispanic population, the fastest growing religious group over the past ten years are those who claim to have no religion, going from 6% in 1990 to 13% in 2001. Although it may seem contradictory to claim that those with no religion are a religious group, the ARIS/PARAL Report clearly shows that an overwhelming percentage of those with no religion believe in God, in miracles and heavenly concern for them and their needs. What then can be said pastorally about this change and the others described in this report? My comments below are meant to stimulate discussion and further research by posing some key issues.

Pentecostalism

While the ARIS/PARAL Report tells us that the percentage of Hispanic Pentecostals rose only fractionally in the past decade, we need to recognize that *there are many more Hispanic Pentecostals today than in 1990*. Without counting children and teenagers, ARIS/PARAL estimates that the number of Latino/a Pentecostals has skyrocketed from 438,000 to 918,000. This huge increase of Pentecostals appears linked to the rapid growth of the Latino population during the past ten years. In other words, Pentecostalism has kept pace with the dynamics of Latino demography and its increase in membership has not significantly diminished the Hispanic members of other denominations.

Many pastoral leaders are likely to question a report that there has been no percentage increase of Hispanic Pentecostals in the United States because this finding of the ARIS/PARAL Report runs counter to a common perception. Popular opinion commonly supposes that Latino Pentecostal faith communities have been growing at the expense of other denominations, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. There are some possible explanations of why such an impression had gained popular credence despite empirical evidence that principal increase of Hispanic Pentecostals comes through demographic growth rather than conversion.

- **There are more Pentecostal churches today than in 1990.** Because Pentecostal churches typically have less than 100 members in each congregation, their numbers grow at a faster rate than in denominations that prefer larger church membership. Part I of the PARAL Report showed that of those surveyed in 2001,

27% of the congregations in all other denominations were founded after 1995. The similar number for new Roman Catholic parishes was only 17%. However the growth in the number of churches is not the same as growth in the members of the churches. More than a third of Roman Catholic parishes serving Hispanics, for instance, are “mega-churches” with 1,000 or more members.² In many circumstances, there are more Latinos/as in one Roman Catholic parish than in 10 Pentecostal churches counted together. Nonetheless, the higher number of Pentecostal congregations may give the impression of greater growth than among Roman Catholics.

- **Popular opinion often assumes that trends in Latin America – such as conversions to Pentecostalism -- are automatically duplicated among Latinos/as in the United States.** Some may interpret **transnationalism** as a manifest dependence by immigrants on the society and culture of the country of origin, and in so doing deny any unique Latino reality in the United States. It is an on-going temptation to uncritically use data from journalistic sources or from case studies as substitutes for sociological analysis of Latinos/as in the United States.
- **While Latino Pentecostalism has high rates of “switching in,” it also has high rates of “switching out.”** Latino conversion to Pentecostalism must be balanced by consideration of recidivism in order to get an accurate picture of membership patterns. The general ARIS 2001 report showed that in the Assemblies of God, for instance, a full fifth (20%) of the members were converts, but another 14% had left the Assemblies for other denominations. Although there was an overall growth rate of nearly 7%, we arrive at that number by subtracting those who “switch out” from those who had “switched in.” There are high demands placed on participation in the life of the church by Latino Pentecostalism and while this fervor may attract new members via conversion, the intensity of commitment sometimes diminishes over the course of time with the result that people eventually move into another church and denomination.

Although it appears that there might have been an overestimation of the growth of Pentecostalism among Latinos/as, that is no reason to dismiss the growing importance of this faith and its modes of religious expression. As stressed above, there has been a substantial increase in the number of Hispanic Pentecostals. They have provided “a critical mass” to these congregations throughout the United States. There are now enough Pentecostal Latinos/as to support a host of congregational activities that might not have been possible ten years ago. For instance, with more than million Hispanic Pentecostal adults and children, there are increased success rates for summer camps, bible schools, revivalist crusades, and mass public concentrations of worshipping Pentecostals.

² These findings are reported by the National Survey of Leadership in Latino Parishes and Congregations, Part I – The Congregations: Brooklyn College (RISC) 2002.

The organizations of Hispanic Pentecostal ministers and pastors also have increased visibility and clout.

What might be the pastoral implications from these findings about Pentecostalism?

1. The increasing frequency of regional and national efforts from Latino/a Pentecostals generate greater visibility and influence for their churches. Such efforts are more likely to find success because the threshold number of participants to ensure success can be reached more easily. Hispanic Pentecostalism now has reached sufficient size to enjoy a “critical mass” for its activities.
2. The influence of Pentecostalism approximates a form of “popular religiosity” that is growing alongside a Roman Catholic popular religiosity which has been focused on traditional devotions and practices among Latinos/as. This development might encourage theological reflection about a concept of “Pentecostalistic” in explaining styles of worship, music and preaching.
3. There is need for more sociological study of Hispanic Pentecostals, both in congregations affiliated with denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God as well as those which are independent.

No-Religionism

The rapid growth in the numbers of Latinos/as who profess to belong to no religion is widespread and dramatic. On those terms alone, it merits description as an “-ism.” The ARIS/PARAL Report indicates that while half of these persons consider themselves “secular” in outlook, that still leaves at least half who consider themselves “religious” in some sense. Moreover, as recorded by this report, 85% believe in God and nearly three out of four believe in miracles and attention by God for them and their personal needs. There is reason to interpret the no religion category as “believers without an institution.” Where do the non-secular Hispanic believers find God, if not in a parish or congregation? Could these include persons involved with the secret religious rites of religions like Santería? In some instances, respondents who answered “no religion” may have meant: “No particular religion, because I believe in them all.” In sum, even if surveys disagree with how many Hispanics fit this description, there is strong evidence that their numbers are growing and that this group merits greater pastoral attention.

It would be a mistake, however, to lump all of these into the same socio-economic categories. In fact, one of the reasons that we can speak of “no religionism” is its crossing of various sociological boundaries. The no religionists include the foreign born, many of whom are male, single and young. But we also find persons of the second generation born in the United States to immigrant parents, and there are numbers as well of Latinos/as whose families have resided in the country from generations. The authors

of the report use the term “unchurched” to refer to persons claiming no religion, but included in this category are both those who have never formally participated in church life as well as the “lapsed”, that is persons who once were active in church but have ceased to participate. Another term used in the report is “cohabitate” for unmarried people living together. Certainly, “cohabitate” is a precise term, but in some contexts “common law marriage” may be preferred to describe long-standing and permanent family relationships that originate in social contexts where formal marriage ceremonies were not required by law. Other segments of the PARAL Study offer an opportunity to include factors such as intermarriage, residence in the suburbs, and loss of the Spanish language as important influences upon this no religion group of Hispanics. In sum, to further analyze this important group of Latinos/as it may be necessary to utilize types or sociological groupings such as have been employed by others.³

Ecological factors within regions of the United States may also be important. For instance, Hispanics living in the West South Central United States (*Louisiana, Texas, Arizona and Oklahoma*) are the least likely to belong to this no religion category (10%) and the most likely to identify as Roman Catholics (63%). On the other hand, although relatively there are relatively few Latinos in the West North Central part of the country (*Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas*), they appear more likely to be of no-religion (30%) than Protestant (23%). If we recognize that churches in these states have not responded at the pace of the demographic explosion, then one reason that Latinos/as in these states reported no membership in any particular religion may be that there are as yet few Latino faith communities to which they might belong.

What might be the pastoral implications from these findings about Latinos/as who profess no religion?

1. There is need for sociological examination of patterns of immigration, settlement and issues such as generational change, intermarriage with non-Hispanics and socio-economic circumstances.
2. We should not presume that all Hispanics professing no religion are lapsed or unchurched Roman Catholics. Nor is it clear that they are inclined to seek membership in Pentecostal or Protestant churches. In other words, no religionism needs to be analyzed as an important new religious identity among Latinos/as.
3. We need to consider seriously the impact on Hispanics of secularism that can be seen in the popular culture and is transmitted primarily through the public schools.
4. The concept of “no religion” merits analysis as an expression that believers feel little loyalty to any organized religion or denomination, while remaining constant in belief and

³ Consult the typology of Hispanic youth described by Kenneth Johnson Mondragón in *Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry in the Catholic Church of the United States: An Overview of Recent Findings*. (2002, Instituto Fe y Vida: Stockton, CA).

perhaps even fervent in the practice of religious customs and traditions within the home. We should conduct research to see where “no religion” means “no particular religion.”

5. Christian denominations may have to consider as competition for the loyalty of Latino no religionists the various alternate faiths: Santería, Buddhism, Wican, and Native American religions.

Roman Catholics

While the drop in the percentage of Latino/a Roman Catholics may be the most discussed result in the ARIS/PARAL Report, there are other significant results that should be listed for pastoral reflection among Catholics.

First, there is no evidence of “defection” by Hispanics to Pentecostal churches. The survey shows there has been no significant increase in the percentage of Pentecostalism to the detriment of Roman Catholicism. Hispanic movement into Protestantism, which most agree was rising appreciably in the 1980s, has slowed to a trickle. The ARIS/PARAL Report confirms a finding from the 1997 survey conducted by William D’Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge and Katherine Meyer which stated:

...Latinos were not more likely to shift from Catholicism to other denominations than other Catholics. In spite of numerous reports of many Latino Catholics switching to Protestant groups today, the proportion of Latinos doing this was not greater than that of other Catholics.⁴

- **Second**, there is considerable sociological evidence that the differences between Latino Catholics and Euro-American Catholics are being reduced in terms of mass attendance, sacramental instruction, leadership roles, etc. The ARIS/PARAL Report shows that 46% of Latinos/as attend mass regularly, which compares favorably to attendance reported in 1997 by *American Catholicism* for all Catholics.
- **Third**, the ARIS/PARAL Report shows that in mixed marriages, (i.e. unions where one of the partners is Roman Catholic and the other is not), the children of Hispanics are most likely to be raised as Roman Catholics.
- **Fourth**, The ARIS/PARAL Report shows that when given an open-ended question, there is a tendency to choose “no religion.” But other surveys suggest that the foreign-born who speak only Spanish are likely to identify as Catholics when “steered” to this category. Perhaps there is a significant identification by

⁴ See D’Antonio, William et al. eds. 2001. *American Catholicism*. (Altamira Press: Walnut Creek, CA.), page 154.

immigrants from Latin America with Catholicism as a preference, which does not translate into participation.

With such clarifications, we can consider what the rapid rise of no religionists among Latinos/as means pastorally to Roman Catholicism. Clearly, it would be erroneous to suppose that all 13% of such Latinos/as declaring no religion in 2001 had been part of the 66% of Latinos/as who reported belonging to Roman Catholicism in 1990. Nonetheless, the rapid drop from 66% to 57% of Catholic Hispanics can best be explained by relating the rapid growth in the no religionists to the loss by Roman Catholicism.

Such rapid changes are seldom attributable to a single factor. The drop in the number of Roman Catholic Hispanics must be understood sociologically in the context of:

- social dislocation among some immigrants from a Latin American country
- intermarriage with Euro-Americans or persons of other faiths
- the rapid dispersal to regions which previously had few Hispanics
- new pastoral policies.

This last is an area directly controlled by church officials. As observed by Mary Beth Celio,⁵ Director of Research for the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle, the establishment of a new Code of Canon Law that took place during the 1980s has reformed centuries-old practices that date back to the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Previously, Catholic teaching encountered the objections of the Protestant Reformation by emphasizing that the sacraments did not depend upon an individual's level of appreciation for validity. Sacraments were efficacious *ex opere operato* (upon performance) according to Trent and the catechisms that preceded the Second Vatican Council. Among the most salient of these reformed practices after the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law is the refusal to baptize children, or administer First Holy Communion or perform church weddings unless there is a contractual form of association with the parish before conferring the sacraments. The Catholic survey conducted by Dr. Celio and her associates in 2000 reported that parishes with Hispanics are more likely to contact adults in sacramental preparation courses (21.4%) than parishes without Hispanics (14.2%). But while her report states that deferring the sacrament often becomes a means of attracting Latinos/as to more active participation, it does not tell us what happens to those Latinos/as who decline to attend the sacramental preparation classes.

These observations are not intended as a criticism of current Roman Catholic theology and sacramental practice, but as a reminder that policies often produce

⁵ In "Passing on the Faith in the Contemporary American Parish: Challenges and Models" a paper presented at the Religious Research Association/Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah: November 1, 2002. The paper utilized data from a stratified random sample of parishes in a survey conducted in 2000 under the umbrella of the Cooperative Congregational Studies Project, Faith in Communities Today.

unintended consequences. In this case, it seems legitimate to ask if Latinos/as always understand the reasons when they are told that baptism has been “deferred” because they have not been active members of the parish or are unwilling to take courses in religious education as preparation.

What might be the pastoral implications from these findings about Latino/a Roman Catholics?

1. Catholic theologians and pastoral leaders might examine current policies, asking the question if eliminating “cultural Catholicism” has the consequence of creating a large number of Hispanic believers with no religious affiliation.
2. Catholic leaders could consider a coordinated pastoral approach for Latinos/as who decline an invitation to undergo extensive preparation for the sacraments.
3. More attention might be paid to the challenges to Hispanics of raising children in the Catholic faith when one of the parents belongs to another denomination or professes no religion.
4. Pastoral methods need to recognize the diversity by culture, social status, education and the like in shaping the apostolate to Hispanics. One size does not fit all.

Protestantism

At the beginning of the 1980s, it was generally thought that Protestants accounted for 15% of Hispanics in the United States, and Roman Catholics were between 80% and 85% of all Latinos/as.⁶ The results of the NSRI 1990 survey showed that Hispanic Protestants were 26% of those surveyed -- without including about 3% more of Pentecostals, who also were “non-Catholic.” Some speculated that Protestantism would grow with another 9% increase between 1990 and 2000. The ARIS/PARAL for 2001, however, showed 25% of Hispanics are Protestants, which means that another pattern has developed.

Clearly, Protestantism is changing among Hispanics in the United States. While nearly a third of the Protestants (31%) report that they are converts, often from Roman Catholicism, two-thirds of those surveyed in 2001 have always been Protestants. The ARIS/PARAL Report offers empirical evidence that Protestantism among US Hispanics is professed principally by those born into the faith. Not only is it increasingly frequent that Hispanic Protestants were born into the faith, they are also more likely to be born in the United States (76%) than Hispanic Roman Catholics (59%). Perhaps most

⁶ See Roberto O. González and Michael Lavelle. 1985. *The Hispanic Catholic in the U.S.: A Socio-Cultural and Religious Profile*. New York: Northeast Hispanic Pastoral Center, pg. 151.

significantly, Hispanic Protestants (75%) overwhelmingly tend to marry other Hispanic Protestants.

Less clear in the ARIS/PARAL Report are the implications of a shift away from “Protestant” or specific denominational labels to a generic “Christian” category. The number of Latinos/as using “Christian” rose from 5% in 1990 to 8% in 2001, while “Protestant” fell from 3% to 1%. It may be that the use of the term “Christian”⁷ is supplanting both “Protestant” and “Evangelical”. There was also a rise in the category “Other Christian” which includes the Church of Latter Day Saints and those who called themselves “Evangelical.”⁸ Hispanics were less inclined to call themselves “Baptists” in 2001 (5%) than in 1990 (7%). Jehovah’s Witnesses and Methodists also fell from 2% each in 1990 to 1% each in 2001. But do these trends have theological significance? For example, we simply do not know if Methodists who identify their religion as “Christian” are any less Methodist. Hence, while the ARIS/PARAL report tells us that “Christian” is used more frequently today, we do not yet have a clear sense if such usage has weakened denominational identities. We can be sure, however, that Hispanic Protestants maintain higher levels of religious conviction than Roman Catholics. When asked for a measure of agreement or disagreement with various religious belief, these Protestants are more likely add the descriptive “strongly” to their convictions than Roman Catholics.

What might be the pastoral implications from these findings about Hispanic Protestantism?

1. Most Latino/a Protestants are not converts. We might consider the Protestant experience among Hispanics beyond the witness narratives of conversion from Roman Catholicism that have often been considered the typical route to the faith.
2. There is reason to explore the fluid boundaries between Protestant denominations experienced by Hispanics in the United States. This exploration could combine both sociology and theology.
3. Along with Pentecostals and Roman Catholics, Hispanic Protestants might study the roles of tradition and cultural expression as they relate to religion in terms of worship, styles of preaching and prayer.

⁷ Technically speaking, Roman Catholics are Christians. In fact, some Roman Catholic publications tend to prefer the term “Christian” to “Catholic.” However, when Protestants use the term they sometimes exclude Roman Catholics. They prefer to be called “Christian” rather than “non-Catholic” or “Protestant” because their religious affirmation should be described in positive terms rather than as a negative condition or as a protest against Roman Catholicism.

⁸ The national survey of leadership in the PARAL Study found that native Spanish-speakers were more likely to describe themselves as “*evangélico*” than as “*protestante*” while English-speakers among Hispanics preferred “Protestant” to “Evangelical.” This suggests that “*evangélico*” does not mean the same in Spanish as “Evangelical” in English. ARIS, as suggested in the preface, did not conduct interviews in Spanish.

Conclusions

The data produced in the ARIS/PARAL Report has been reexamined in this commentary for their intersections with pastoral concerns. Through the generosity of the Lilly Endowment, we have been not only able to offer this data collected by ARIS, but also to initiate a dialog among religious leaders and social scientists. These efforts, named the Amanacer Program will be directed from the office of Religion In Society and Culture (RISC) located at Brooklyn College, where this report was edited and printed.