

Cultural Conflicts and Identity: Second-Generation Hispanic Catholics in the United States

Wade Clark Roof and Christel Manning

Introduction: The Browning of America

The scene is Los Angeles, California on a Sunday morning, and on first glance it is not all that unusual: a Roman Catholic

Church in a Hispanic neighbourhood with hundreds in attendance. But on closer look, there are some peculiarities: some people are leaving, others are just arriving. Those leaving are Mexican

Americans, those arriving are from Central America—mainly Salvadorans and Nicaraguans. This Sunday they hold their own services at different hours, each celebrating their own ethnic and religious traditions. On the first Sunday of the month they gather for joint Eucharist in which prayers are recited using both traditions.

Welcome to the new multicultural, multi-ethnic Hispanic world now emerging in the United States. It is a world created by the massive population shifts of a global economy and the bringing together of many diverse nationality groups into close proximity. The Hispanic population is one of the most rapidly growing in the United States. In 1980, the U.S. Census reported that Hispanic residents numbered 14.6 million; by 1990, that figure had grown to 22.4 million. If one takes into account that there are between 3 and 5 million undocumented Hispanic immigrants in the country, and that the vast majority of these are not reported in the census, then we can safely conclude that the Hispanic population is roughly between 26 and 28 million by now. By the year 2000, Hispanics are expected to be the largest minority in the United States. A youthful population combined with a high fertility and continued immigration suggests a high potential for Hispanic growth and growing visibility in the decades ahead—in effect, the “browning” of America.

Hispanics are the most rapidly growing sector of the Catholic population and well on their way to becoming the majority within the American Church. About one-third of the nation's Catholics today are Hispanic, and in another decade they should make up about half the country's Catholic population. There is also a growing Hispanic presence within evangelical Protestantism as the numbers of Hispanic congregations rapidly expand. Thus religious life in the United States, too, is “browning.”

In this paper, we explore the situation of second-generation Hispanics in the United States. Our view is that second-generation Hispanics have a different experience from that of previous immigrant groups in America, and that their course of assimilation is on a somewhat different path. Attention is given to the cultural and religious conflicts involved in forging a new and distinct ethnic identity. . . .

Distinctive Styles of Catholicism

Hispanics in the United States typically encounter a style of Catholicism that is very different from what they have known previously. American Catholicism was shaped largely by European immigrants, particularly the Irish who predominate in the Church hierarchy. Compared to Euro-American Catholicism, Hispanic Catholicism is less legalistic and moralistic, and much more joyful and festive. Personal, expressive styles of faith predominate, involving practices like giving and asking for blessings, praying to Mary and to the saints, using holy water, making *promesas*. Hispanic forms of faith and spirituality are more diverse and syncretistic, drawing off a rich mix of Catholic as well as indigenous native traditions, e.g. the *costumbre* of Central America, the *santeria* of Cuba, and Aztec rites. For Hispanics, God is viewed as joyous and personal, unlike the colder, more distant views of Deity held by many American Catholics. Thus in the American context, two religious cultures come directly to clash: the Hispanic tradition with its emphasis on folk practices and customs of the people, and the more dominant Anglo-Saxon/Irish and German mentality of the American Church which gives priority to belief and institutionalized practices. This clash has many consequences.

First, there is the difference in relation to the organized Church. Being religious is not regarded by Hispanics in the same way as by most people in the United States, largely in terms of participation in, and loyalty to, the institution itself. American Catholics place considerable importance, for example, upon attendance at Mass. Yet only 40 percent in a New York survey of Hispanics say they go "frequently" (Doyle and Scarpetta, 1989: 55). And when they do go, they often report high levels of negative experiences with American church life. Hispanics place a great deal of emphasis upon wearing medals, keeping altars at home, saying grace at meals, and reading the Bible. Personal and family-based religious activity takes precedence over institutional practices.

Second, for Hispanics Catholicism historically was understood as a communal experience. It was the religion of the people. To be Hispanic meant to be Catholic, a fusion which made for a strong identity. This is in marked contrast to the practice of faith in the United States where the liberated individual makes a personal choice and commitment. Traditional communal styles of religious belief and practice are embedded in a distinctive language and culture, whereas in a more rationalized, compartmentalized society, the individual believer reigns supreme. . . . Practically, it means that social support and communal identity are easily undermined in the American context where faith is practised largely as a choice or personal preference.

Third, there is the quality of *personalismo*, the pattern of close, intimate personal relationships common to Spanish cultures. Under its influence, the religious life is looked upon as a set of deeply personal relationships with the saints, godparents, the Blessed Virgin, and other spiritual powers. Hispanics look upon these relationships in much the same way

they look upon friendships—that is, as opportunities for developing particular styles of relationships. By means of prayer or lighting candles or making promises, they expect these practices to deliver the favors, help, or protection they need. Religion is personal and negotiable. Folk practices like these reinforce weak loyalties to the Church since such personal relationships with the saints and spiritual powers take place outside the religious institutions.

For the second generation, there is strong anti-institutional sentiment. It is greatest among those with militant Chicano ideologies, but even among the non-militant the sentiment is quite strong. On just about every possible indicator, we find that the younger the population, the weaker the Catholic belief and the lower the level of Catholic practice. Further, the study in the New York archdiocese shows that Hispanic young people within parishes report a much greater amount of negative experience with the Church—upwards of 40 percent as compared to about 25 percent among older participants. But there is more than a sense of distance from the Church. Individual religious practices have declined significantly for the second generation as well. Practices that have declined by 10 to 20 percent from the first to second generation include house blessings, saying grace, and saying the rosary. Even folk customs show a similar pattern: use of charms, visiting mediums, and making *promesas* are all less popular for the second generation. Yet some customs seem not to have changed very much. Many young Hispanics continue to wear crosses, burn incense, and keep pictures and images of revered personages.

The second generation is prone to the shift from a collective-expressive to an individual-expressive mode of identity. Whereas the collective-expressive entails

the identities of a people bound up with a distinctive language and culture, the individual-expressive privileges personal autonomy and greater choice of identity. Applied to religion, this means that belief and practice themselves become more a matter of voluntary adherence as reflected today in high rates of religious switching and dropping out of religious institutions altogether by the youth. Voluntarism becomes a principle for Hispanics in much the same way as it operates for young Americans more generally. . . .

McNamara's study reveals that high school Hispanic seniors are no more orthodox or traditional in their views than Anglo seniors. In their views on the importance of religion, church attendance, and degree of religious conviction, he found no statistically significant differences. Even on ethical issues like premarital sex and abortion, there were no differences. There are some differences for those who still speak Spanish. On attitudes toward the Church as teacher, for example, those who spoke Spanish were more likely to acknowledge the Church's authority in matters of faith and morals; they were more orthodox and traditional in their views generally and somewhat more likely to take responsibility for sharing with others and to express concern for world hunger. But once speaking Spanish at home ceases and families are upwardly mobile, the pattern is that of assimilation. That is, loss of language and movement into the middle class are associated with a decline in ethnic and religious identity.

Modified Pattern of Assimilation?

Let us return to the main question: Are there signs of an alternative, or modified pattern of assimilation? We believe there are.

Many young Hispanics in the 1960s and 1970s came to understand that radical politics and religion need not necessarily be opposed. Cesar Chavez had marched under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, signalling that for popular Catholicism—if not for official Catholicism—God was a living presence in the farm workers' protests. Liberation theology helped to bring about a swing to the political left and awareness that Hispanics themselves must assume responsibility for the Hispanic sense of powerlessness. Liberation theology accomplished something else as well that was important to younger Hispanics—it focused attention on social justice and economic issues and helped undo the widespread perception that the Church was allied with the political right. This change of perception opened up new possibilities of involvement and lessened the psychological distance which many felt toward the institution. And probably no event had a bigger impact in galvanizing the new consciousness than did the murder in San Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero by right-wing gunmen. Afterwards, pressures mounted on the Church to speak out against injustice.

Young Hispanics often experience ambivalence toward the Church, caught between a popular Catholicism that supports the political concerns of the people, on the one hand, and an official Catholicism that does not, or does so slowly or reluctantly, on the other. Those who remain active within the Church tend to be the more traditional, less radical types. Many feel alienated and left to themselves by the Church's failure to speak to the needs of the Hispanic communities and to create a separate Hispanic Catholic identity within the American Church.

This ambivalence is often resolved by joining the popular charismatic movement. The charismatic movement has appealed especially to Hispanic Catholics,

early on to those who spoke English and more recently to those who prefer to speak and worship in Spanish, because they find the movement's style of worship and prayer warmer, more personal and intimate. Compared to traditional American Catholic parishes, those that are charismatic are much more alive, joyful, and celebratory. Speaking in tongues, healing, and witnessing all add to the expressive character of Hispanic religious life and are in keeping with the culturally based *personalismo* theme. The charismatic movement gives expression to a powerful spirituality, in many respects still in its nascent form. Not surprisingly, there is considerable suspicion and criticism of the movement on the part of the hierarchy of the American Church. Questions are raised about the lack of contact with Catholic tradition, lack of concern by charismatics about social issues, and about linkages with Pentecostal theology, reactions which have led to debate about how the movement is likely to fare in the long run. Even so, it is fair to say that the movement is responsible for keeping many Hispanics within the Catholic fold who otherwise would probably abandon the Church.

But there are other, far more serious ways that Hispanic conflicts with the Church are expressed: in large numbers who become "unchurched" or who convert to evangelical Protestantism. The "unchurched" refers to those who are not actively involved in a parish, do not attend church in a regular way, and whose spiritual lives generally are not centred around a sacramental community. . . .

Language is important for maintaining an ethnic and religious identity, as is reflected in great numbers of unchurched Hispanics. Once Spanish is dropped in favour of English, a significant component of the religious plausibility structure is removed. Among second-generation

Catholic Hispanics growing numbers prefer Mass in English, even though this can pose serious identity problems. Young Hispanics often do not feel that they fit into their parents' churches, nor do they feel fully accepted in Anglo churches. Those with higher levels of education and better jobs will often choose an Anglo congregation, mainly because they feel an affinity with certain Anglo values. The pull in this direction can be strong:

Latin machismo, for example, feels antiquated to many, and in Anglo churches women find more opportunities to serve on an equal basis. Also, the authoritarian Latin American family model runs counter to the more democratic North American family model where children are free to make their own decisions. Furthermore, the repressive views of marital sex and money management in Spanish congregations, legacies of Old World Catholic teaching, are a sure turn-off for young Hispanic couples (Tapia, 1991: 21).

But the turn-offs about religion which young Latinos feel—gender-related issues, for example—are the same as those that young Americans generally feel. Regardless of ethnic background, members of the so-called "baby boom" generation born after the Second World War are more likely to leave churches where they feel at odds with the values and lifestyles, and to shop around in search of more congenial and supportive congregations, or simply to abandon organized religion altogether to pursue their own deeply personal spiritual quests.

Many convert to what the Catholic Church has long called the Protestant "sects." Actually "conversion" is somewhat misleading since it is really more a matter of defection, or religious switching, than a sharp break in religious outlook. Just how much defection overall has occurred is difficult to judge. A Gallup Poll in 1986 reports that 19 percent of Hispanic

Americans identify themselves as Protestant; data from the National Opinion Research Center in 1988 suggest that the figure might be as high as 23 percent. Whatever the figure, it is probably growing in the 1990s. The Church's neglect of the needs of Hispanics, the lack of Spanish-speaking priests, and vigorous proselytizing by Protestants are often cited as factors in this conversion.

The Protestant churches that are most successful in attracting Hispanics are Pentecostals, Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists. These churches organize new congregations in storefronts in urban ghettos and in people's homes in more settled residential areas, places where people feel comfortable and relate to one another, and can find intimacy in small groups, a personal relationship with God, and an opportunity to express their feelings by festive singing. They read the Scriptures together and pray together, both bonding experiences. The congregations offer social services, drug rehabilitation, help in finding jobs. Much of the success of these groups lies in their ability to provide Hispanic ministers who are sensitive to the people's wishes to hold on to as much of their ethnic culture as possible while adjusting to American life. In one study, for example, over 80 percent of ethnic ministers said that the people they serve would want to maintain their own culture or blend American ways and ethnic ways but be identified as "their ethnic selves first and American second". Only 10 percent said the people preferred to be as American as possible (King, 1991: 48). It would appear that these churches have found the right balance between ethnic identity and American assimilation.

Who joins these churches? Are they primarily first-generation immigrants who feel lonely in a new environment, or are they mostly second- and third-generation

Hispanics experiencing upward social mobility? Many poor Hispanic immigrants do of course join storefront Protestant churches, but Andrew W. Greeley's nationwide study (1988) shows conversion is greater among the second generation as they discover incongruities between Catholicism as they once knew it and their new way of life. It appears that it is among those experiencing, or expecting to experience, some rise in socio-economic status that such incongruities are felt most intensely. Hispanic-style Evangelical Protestantism, so it seems, offers a kind of resolution, religious fervour combined with ethnic identity plus legitimation of the newer, more American values of work and family responsibility. According to Greeley, Hispanic Protestants in the United States have higher income and educational levels than Hispanic Catholics. Whatever the explanation for this pattern, the emotional experiences in Pentecostal and evangelical congregations probably do help Latinos to take charge of their lives, and perhaps are a stabilizing influence on personal and family life.

The Future

In the future will second-generation Hispanics and beyond follow the pattern of assimilation like so many other groups, or are they on some other trajectory as a result of their distinctive experiences?

Hispanics have sought to carve out a "middle way" in the assimilation process, seeking to maintain a strong group identity and at the same time adapt to American ways. Obviously, this is not an easy path. The solidly middle-class sector, having adopted English and become more exposed to the larger culture, will no doubt continue to assimilate. Already it is apparent that for the second generation there are religious trends which are increasingly

the same as those among young Americans generally, e.g. religious switching, dropping out of organized religion, and interest in spiritual matters. In the future, there may be even greater convergences and, most likely, fewer psychological conflicts as Hispanics come to believe and practise in ways very much like other Americans. None the less, a hyphenated identity as Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American, or Cuban-American is here to stay as Hispanics continue to define, and redefine, the relative ethnic versus American components of what Herbert J. Gans (1979) calls a "symbolic ethnic" identity.

Among the working class, however, which includes many Hispanics caught in dead-end jobs with little hope of upward mobility, there may well be a much stronger ethnic identity. These Hispanics take great pride in their ethnic and religious traditions. Popular Catholicism has a strong hold on them, shaping their cultural styles and sensibilities. Even among those who speak English, there is a strong desire to have Spanish as an option—an indication of how much they want to hold on to their Hispanic heritage and culture. Bilingualism is of enormous symbolic significance, for it expresses the ambiguities that many Latinos feel about assimilation into Anglo culture. The answer lies not in complete absorption into American life and values, but rather in the formation of a distinct Chicano-American identity combining elements from both cultures.

Where this might lead religiously is not altogether clear. However, some possibilities may be glimpsed by returning to the example of the multicultural parish in Los Angeles with which we began. Many of the new immigrants come from places in Central and South America where a process of *concientizacion* (self-awareness) is already in motion as a result of several decades of exposure to liberation theology. They know

about cultural and religious critique and of the need for forging new visions of faith in a new land. Moreover, the circumstances under which they now meet and discover one another are empowering. Thrust together into urban environments such as in Los Angeles and elsewhere, and driven by the newer ideologies of cultural pride, immigrants in multicultural parishes learn from one another and find strength in their common goals.

It is too soon to know if an indigeneous North American liberation theology will take shape, and if so, just what its thrust will be, but there are signs of an emergent fervour, of the coalescing of forces, and of the networking of influentials—in short, a time of ethnogenesis. We might reasonably expect greater mobilization around Hispanic cultural and religious ideals in the years ahead. Religious communities are likely to play a big role. Religion in America has in the past provided the social space necessary for new groups to work out definitions of who they are and how they fit into the American mosaic. As Hispanics work out who they are and how they fit in, they will help redefine and reconstitute America itself.

References

- Doyle, Ruth T. and Scarpetta, Olgo (1989) *Hispanics in New York: Religious, Cultural, and Social Experiences*, 2nd ed. New York: Office of Pastoral Research and Planning, Archdiocese of New York.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1979) "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," in Hebert J. Gans et al. (eds) *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Reisman*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 193–220.
- Greeley, Andrew M. (1988) "Defection among Hispanics," *America* 159: 61–62.
- King, Eleace (1991) *Proselytism and Evangelization: An Exploratory Study*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Georgetown University.
- Tapia, Andres (1991) "Viva Los Evangelicos!", *Christianity Today* (28 October).