

Clara Buitrago Valencia

Missionaries: Migrants or Expatriates?

Guatemalan Pentecostal Leaders in Los Angeles

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Clara Buitrago Valencia

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Guatemalan Pentecostal Leaders in Los Angeles /**

Clara Buitrago Valencia. –

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Pentecostalism in Guatemala	2
1.2. Inter-American Mobility and New Pentecostal Missionary Flows: Evangelizing from the South to the North	4
1.2.1. Missionaries from the South to the North: Expatriates or Migrants?	7
1.3. Guatemalan Independent Pentecostal Leaders in the Interamerican Social Space Established Between Guatemala and Los Angeles: A Praxeological Approach	10
1.4. Structure of the Dissertation	12
2. Literature Review: Delimiting Pentecostalism and Outlining Studies Dealing with Latino Pentecostalism and Migration in the United States..	15
2.1. Delimiting Pentecostalism	15
2.2. Studies on the Relation Between Latino Pentecostalism and Migration in the United States	23
2.2.1. The “Incorporation Approach”	25
2.2.2. The “Religion on the Move” Approach	31
3. Description of the Research	39
3.1. Theoretical Framework	39
3.1.1. Praxeological Approach to the Study of Religion	40
3.1.2. Bourdieu and the Study of Religion: Towards a Religious Praxis	42
3.1.3. Between Embodied and Objectified Conditions of Praxis	46
3.2. Methodological Framework	51
3.2.1. The Fieldwork	52
3.2.2. Biographical Narratives	57
3.3. Process of Analysis and Writing	61

4.	Guatemalan Pentecostal Leaders in Los Angeles: Contexts of Departure and Arrival since the 1970s	64
4.1.	Los Angeles in the 2010s	64
4.2.	Historical Trends in Los Angeles	67
4.3.	Guatemalans in Los Angeles: Changing Migratory Flows since 1970	70
4.3.1.	The 1970s: The Beginning of Guatemalan Migration to Los Angeles	70
4.3.2.	The 1980s: Economic or Political Immigrants? Social Turmoil in Guatemala	74
4.3.3.	The 1990s: Changing Context, Shifting Expectations	85
4.3.4.	From 2000 to the Present: Inclusion and Exclusion Conditions for Guatemalans in a Megalopolis	89
4.4.	Conclusions	95
5.	The Religious Field in Los Angeles in 2014: The Scene of Latino Pentecostalism	96
5.1.	Latino Pentecostalism in Numbers	97
5.1.1.	Pentecostal Churches' Ties to Latin America	100
5.2.	Pentecostal Latinos and Their Churches: The Dimension of "Achievement of Eminence"	105
5.3.	Who is in Charge? The Dimension of "Religious Authenticity"	106
5.4.	Where Can the Guatemalan Pentecostal Independent Leaders of this Study Be Placed in Los Angeles's Religious Field?	110
5.5.	Conclusion	112
6.	Immigrant or Expatriate? The Self-Perception of Guatemalan Independent Pentecostal Missionaries in Los Angeles	113
6.1.	Methodological Considerations Regarding Habitus Analysis	114
6.2.	Results of the Habitus Analysis	118
6.2.1.	Leaders by Divine Consecration	118
6.2.2.	Leaders by Professional Consecration	133
6.3.	Interpreting the Results	140
6.4.	Conclusions	144

7.	The Centrality of God	146
7.1.	The Call: Articulation of a Career as a Religious Leader	147
7.1.1.	Reviewing the Literature about the “Call”	148
7.1.2.	The Call in the Cases of Guatemalan Independent Pentecostal Leaders Studied	152
7.2.	Diversity in Pentecostal Praxis	166
7.2.1.	God-as-Restorer Paradigm	167
7.2.2.	God’s Love Paradigm	173
7.2.3.	Spiritual Warfare Paradigm	178
7.3.	Pentecostal Praxis and the Habitus Oriented Towards Professionalization as a Religious Agent: Some Final Observations	185
7.4.	Conclusion	189
8.	Conclusions	192
8.1.	Being a Pentecostal Missionary	193
8.2.	Diversity in Pentecostal Praxis	199
8.3.	Bringing Together Guatemalan Pentecostal Independent Leaders’ Identities and the Structural Conditions in Los Angeles	200
8.4.	Contribution to the Sociological Study of the Relationship Between Religious Life and Migration	204
9.	Works Cited	208

1. Introduction

... about 25 years ago, in 1989, I went to Los Angeles for the first time, because of the special invitation of a preacher ... There, we went to some missionary conferences, where ... a lot of impetus was given to missionary work, and in fact that is what remained in my heart: those teachings of missionary work. And it is also where in my heart has been born the idea of opening churches in different places, in other countries ...

These are the words of Pastor Alvaro Sánchez¹ when he referred to his first trip to Los Angeles in 1989. Alvaro Sánchez is the president of an independent Pentecostal church, with congregations not only in Guatemala City, but also in Los Angeles, CA, North Carolina, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Mexico. In this missionary effort, Alvaro Sánchez is not alone. Many men and women of Guatemalan origin, who participate actively as leaders of independent Pentecostal churches, dedicate an important part of their time to evangelizing in the context of the Interamerican social space established between Guatemala and the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, CA. They are an example of the new modalities of religious expansion in times of transnational migration.

This dissertation focuses on the universe of these religious agents, considering the general context of social conflict, change, and inequality that Guatemalans have to face in Los Angeles. The study explores the trajectory of Guatemalan independent Pentecostal leaders who evangelize in Los Angeles, considering how they understand their work, their religious beliefs, and the interaction between their religious praxis and the social, economic, and cultural dynamics in which they are involved. To accomplish this task, after a detailed description of the social, economic, and cultural dynamics as well as the reconstruction of the religious field of Los Angeles, biographical narratives of Guatemalan independent Pentecostal leaders are analyzed using the Habitus Analysis approach.

1 The names of interviewees and congregations that have participated in this study have been modified. In addition, the information regarding their age, place of birth, and the residence of the congregations are presented in general terms and without detail for the purpose of maintaining their anonymity.

1.1. Pentecostalism in Guatemala

Pentecostalism is a movement within Protestant Christianity that originated in the United States in the early twentieth century. Different authors (Dayton 2004, Droogers 1998) define Pentecostalism as a religious movement that finds its doctrinal foundation in the passages of the New Testament, which speak of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ, as described in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. While practices vary, Pentecostal worship services often involve experiences that believers consider “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” such as divine healing, speaking in tongues, receiving direct revelations from God, and exorcism.

This religious movement made its appearance on Guatemalan soil in 1934, when the American denominations *Church of God* and *Assemblies of God* sent missionaries to El Quiché and Totonicapán (Garrard-Burnett 1998, 37). However, it was not until the 1960s that Pentecostalism experienced years of rapid and steady growth (Garrard-Burnett 1998). According to the 2014 Pew study “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region” for most of the twentieth century, from 1900 through the 1960s, at least 90% of the Guatemalan population was Catholic. Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Protestantism² has gained massive influence with many Guatemalans having joined evangelical Protestant churches. Roughly four-in-ten Guatemalan adults (40%) describe themselves as Protestant, making it a significant religious movement in this country (Pew 2014). At the same time, “*evangélicos*”—as Protestants in the region are often called—include many Christians who belong to Pentecostal churches.

According to this Pew study, across all Guatemala, nearly three-quarters of Protestants (72%) identify themselves as Pentecostal Christians, either because they belong to a Pentecostal denomination or because they personally identify themselves as Pentecostal regardless of their denomination.

2 Protestants in Latin America, like Protestants elsewhere, belong to a diverse group of denominations and independent churches. But unlike in the United States, where the labels “born again” and “evangelical” set certain Protestants apart, in Latin America “Protestant” and “evangelical” are often used interchangeably. In this dissertation, “Protestant” is broadly used to refer to members of historical Protestant churches (e.g., Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Lutherans or Presbyterians), members of Pentecostal churches, and members of other Protestant churches.