

Abstract for a paper to be presented at the 14th Assembly of IAMS August 2016

“The Conversion of Latin American Catholics”

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“Scratch a Pentecostal and underneath you will find a Catholic”. This popular saying from Latin America begs an important question about those who become Evangelical Protestants from a Catholic background: in what senses do they change, and how much of their Catholicism do they take with them into their new evangelical identity? Can it even be said that they experience a ‘conversion’? In the taxonomy of Lewis Rambo they undergo an ‘institutional transition’, though most do interpret their experience as a conversion. This paper therefore discusses what remains and what changes when a person becomes an Evangelical or Pentecostal from a Catholic background in Latin America. The growth of Evangelical Protestantism is already well documented providing quantitative up-to-date data which clarifies the reasons why people convert, and this research is reviewed. There is however little on what happens to people once they have converted. A questionnaire distributed through contacts in Latin America provides qualitative data and stories which illuminate the main issues and highlight the influences of family, upbringing, culture and context on the conversion experience of those surveyed. The wide range of attitudes amongst evangelicals to their former Catholic identity is explored, along with the influence of the close association between Catholicism and cultural and familial identity. Associations with Catholicism within Pentecostalism are discussed. The academic consensus which views conversion as a process rather than (or as well as) an event implies that it may be some time before a convert comes to terms with their Catholic background. The paper concludes with what Evangelicals and Catholics can learn from these experiences.

Indicative Bibliography

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