I went with long hair and a ring in my ear . . . but something stronger than myself touched my heart, it lifted me up and I walked to the platform . . . I threw myself down on the floor and I started to cry. I started to see my life one by one, step by step, everything that was my earlier life.


Introduction

This chapter applies the conversion career approach to Latin America by analyzing how people’s involvement in religious organizations there is likely to evolve in the course of their lifetime. The conversion career includes all episodes of higher or lower participation in one or more religious organizations during a person’s life. The posited levels of religious participation include preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. The central question in this chapter is: what are the crucial factors that may cause people in Latin America to become religiously active or inactive at a certain stage of their lives?

During each individual’s life, differing levels of religious participation are influenced by social, cultural, institutional, individual, and contingency factors. At the same time, careful attention must be paid to the five main phases of a person’s life cycle: childhood, adolescence, marriage, midlife, and old age. This chapter attempts to provide a systematic schema for understanding the conversion narratives of Pentecostals, Catholics, and Mormons that were collected by multiple researchers in various Latin American countries. In particular, I focus on the varying levels of religious
involvement of each of these individuals over time. This is an exploratory approach to be confirmed by larger and controlled samples.

The chapter begins with an analysis of Pentecostal, Mormon, and Catholic conversion careers in the selected Latin American cases. The studies I quote from are excellent ethnographies, mostly collected by anthropologists, featuring rich conversion stories from randomly selected informants. A final section comparing Catholic, Mormon, and Pentecostal disaffiliation addresses a major gap in the literature on conversion: the issue of backsliding or leaving a given affiliation. The conclusion weighs the importance of the types of factors mentioned above by relating the case studies to the different levels of the conversion career: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation.

**Pentecostal Conversion Careers in Latin America**

Based on an analysis of many of the conversion stories contained in the literature on Latin America and my own fieldwork in Nicaragua, I argue that many informants did not really convert to a Pentecostal church in the strict sense of having a change of worldview and identity. Most people only joined the Pentecostal church for a while (that is, affiliation in the conversion career typology). Making this distinction between conversion and affiliation makes it easier to analyze the significant desertion rates in Pentecostal churches all over Latin America. It also helps explain the high mobility of some believers, who move easily from one church to another.

Few authors actually write out the conversion stories of their informants. Others report that they collected conversion stories, but they do not actually write them out or they use only tiny fragments of them. This is regrettable if one wants to identify the degrees of religious participation—in short, the person’s conversion career.

The very first book on Pentecostalism in Latin America contains excerpts from thirty-four conversion stories from Brazil and Chile. Willems skillfully combined secondary materials, ethnographic methods (participant observation and interviews), and surveys in three states of Brazil and three provinces of Chile. He interviewed many leaders and collected thirty-four life histories from random members of many different churches. In all cases, the informant’s initials, age, occupation, marital status, and religious background are mentioned. The only missing information is the age at which the conversion took place. Forty years later, this material is still very rich and the parallels with conversion stories that were collected decades later are very strong. In fact, many of the stories—right down to the phrasings—are identical to the more recent conversion accounts.