Research on Protestantism in Latin America: a Bibliographic Essay

by John H. Sinclair

A generation ago John A. Mackay observed, "There was a time ... when two illusions were current regarding the religious situation in Latin America. One illusion was that this region was the most solidly Roman Catholic of all the great areas of the world. The other illusion was that Latin America is an area where Protestant Christianity has little significance. Recent dramatic events have brought both these illusions to an end."

Especially over the latter part of the twentieth century there has been an increasing awareness in the world Christian community of a vibrant and growing Protestant presence in the midst of Latin American society. Protestantism has achieved a new level of maturity in its understanding of the complex social and political realities of the continent and its place in that society. The following review of research on Protestantism in Latin America comes from an immense body of literature and is necessarily highly selective. Whereas in the early years of the twentieth century serious research often fell to expatriate missionaries and scholars, in the last half-century much valuable research has come from scholars born, raised, and educated in Latin America. Considerable research has been done by recognized academics; other studies, often of equal value, have been produced by lay scholars. The most insightful research will always come from those whose personal destiny is caught viscerally in the subject of their endeavors.

Not until the early twentieth century was Latin America defined as a cultural and political entity rather than as merely geographic areas identified as South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. For many years it seemed that Latin America was not considered of great importance by world historians. Arnold Toynbee visited the region only once, making a brief stop in Puerto Rico. Though he wrote little about Latin America, he at least foresaw a time of increased importance: "There are things happening in Latin America today, things, that, in my judgment, could have the same historical significance as the Renaissance of the fifteenth century."

Protestant Christianity in Latin America often was thought to lie outside the purview of Christian history; it was seen merely as an extension of Protestantism from North America, Britain, and Europe. This echoed the way that Roman Catholicism in Latin America was understood as a projection of Iberian Catholicism. Latin America as a world region and in particular the uniqueness of Latin American Protestantism were slow to be recognized.

Research from the Early Years

Since Protestantism arrived late in Latin America, much significant research did not begin until the mid-twentieth century when the burgeoning growth of evangelical Christianity caught the attention of the Christian world. Nevertheless, an early effort to place Latin American Protestantism in its proper context can be dated to 1900 and 1901, when Hubert W. Brown gave lectures at Princeton, Auburn, and Western seminaries that were published as Latin America: The Pagans, the Papists, the Patriots, the Protestants, and the Present Problem.

Two indigenous interpreters of Latin American Protestantism in the first half of the twentieth century stand out: Erasmo Braga and Alberto Rembao. Braga, a Brazilian Presbyterian, wrote Pan Americanismo: Aspecto religioso (1916), which opened the religious dialogue between the Americas. Rembao, a Mexican Congregationalist, followed a generation later with Discurso a la nation evangelica; this work recognized the emergence on Latin soil of an authentic new religious community called los evangelicos. Within this period appeared a cadre of outstanding writers such as Sante Uberto Barbiere (Argentina), Gonzalo Baez-Camargo (Mexico), and Santiago Cancini (Uruguay). There were also expatriate missionary authors: John A. Mackay, W. Stanley Rycroft, Reginald Wheeler, Webster Browning, and Kenneth Grubb.
The classic work of this era is without doubt Mackay’s volume The Other Spanish Christ (1932). Of this monumental work Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote, "This is a profound and well documented study of the spiritual history of Indo America.... With a perception, so special of the Anglo Saxon race, Mackay establishes landmarks and traces relationships which other writers hardly recognize." Following in Mackay’s footsteps was his disciple W. Stanley Rycroft, who wrote two definitive volumes, Sobre este fundamento (1944) and Religion y fe en la America Latina (1958). These volumes summarize Latin American religious history, the principal ideological currents of the time, and the achievements of Protestant work in Latin America.

The research done by Gonzalo Baez-Camargo on early Protestants in Latin America, beginning with those summoned to appear before the Spanish Inquisition, is of immense historical value. Thomas S. Goslin in Los evangelicos en la America Latina, siglo XIX presents an overview of developments in the early to late nineteenth century. Kenneth Grubb, for many years associated with World Dominion Press, contributed several volumes in the 1920s and 1930s on mission work among indigenous South American groups. George Howard, a Uruguayan Methodist, surveyed religious liberty for Protestants in Religious Liberty in Latin America. This book was widely distributed among the members of the United States Congress because of its implications for the rights of United States citizens living in Latin America. James Goff documented religious persecution in Colombia in a doctoral thesis published by a Roman Catholic documentation service in Mexico. Roman Catholic scholars also moved to take seriously the presence of Protestantism in Latin America, as reflected in the research done by Camilo Crivelli, Angelo Rossi, and Prudencia Damboriena.

Another source of information about the early years of Protestantism in Latin America is the preparatory studies and the proceedings of the major Protestant conferences held in Latin America between 1916 and 1961. This literature includes research on the growth in numbers and in vision of the Protestant denominations in Latin America. A series of twenty-six study papers on the role of Protestantism in Latin American culture were presented at the annual study conferences, 1957 through 1967, of the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America. These conferences included addresses by leaders of nondenominational mission boards, such as Kenneth Strachan of the Latin America Mission, as well as denominational board executives.


Widening Academic Perspectives

By the 1960s interest in Protestantism in Latin America as a subject of serious research had extended beyond students of religion and history. For example, a body of literature began to be produced by sociologists of religion. Among these were the North American Emilio Willems (writing on Protestantism in Brazil and Chile) and the Swiss scholar Christian Lalive D’Epinay (on Pentecostals in Chile). Following soon after, Cornelia L. Flora, a sociology doctoral researcher, studied the mass mobilization of Pentecostals in Colombia to affirm lower-class solidarity. Gonzalo Castillo Cardenas, a sociologist of religion and member of a new generation of Protestant researchers, documented the struggle of indigenous peoples for a place in modern society in The Life and Thought of Quintin Lame.

A critical study of the older Protestant churches in Peru and Chile by Juan B. A. Kessler stands as one of the first works that penetrated below the level of triumphal mission board reporting. The doctoral dissertations of Paul E. Pierson and Robert L. McIntire on the inner
struggles of Presbyterianism in Brazil were significant contributions. Wilton Nelson's study of Protestantism in Costa Rica is in need of revision and updating. Daniel P. Monti's analysis of the impact of immigrant Protestantism in the Rio de la Plata region during the nineteenth century details the arrival of the Waldensian, the German Lutheran and Congregationalist, the Swiss and Dutch Reformed, and other immigrant churches. This volume was followed by an in-depth study by three sociologists, Waldo Villalpando, Christian Lalive D'Epinay, and Dwain Epps, who researched the interplay of the historical, sociological, and theological impact of the Rio Platense Protestant community. The Mennonite immigrant communities in Paraguay were documented by J. W. Fretz. Wilkens Winn recounted the Central American Mission's pioneer missionary work in Honduras and Guatemala.

The first bibliography on Protestantism in Latin America, Protestantism in Latin America: A Bibliographical Guide, was the work of the present author when he served as secretary for Latin America for the Presbyterian Church (USA). The compilation of this volume in 1967 (also a revision and amplification in 1976 that included 3,115 listings) was made possible through the efforts of more than forty Protestant mission historians in every country in Latin America.

In 1973 the Asociación Interconfesional de Estudios Teológicos at the Instituto Superior Evangelico de Estudios Teológicos (Buenos Aires) initiated a more comprehensive bibliography on religious materials published in Latin America (and in relation to Latin America). Entitled Bibliografia teológica comentada, it was a multiyear project (from 1973 to 1990).

The Mennonite missions and national churches in Latin America published an excellent listing of historical materials in "Mennonites in Latin America." As far as the author can ascertain, no similar comprehensive listing of other denominational materials has appeared.

Missionaries and Church Leaders

The pioneers of evangelical Christianity in Latin America were mainly the colporteurs of the Bible societies from North America and Great Britain. The work of James Thomson, the tireless Scottish Baptist layman who began work in South America in 1816, was researched by Donald Mitchell, a missionary from New Zealand serving in Peru. He drew heavily from the travel letters of James Thomson, published in London in 1827.

Arnoldo Canclini authored one of the several books about Commander Allen Gardiner, an early Protestant missionary martyr. Francisco Penzotti, an intrepid Argentine colporteur, wrote his autobiography, which spanned sixty years of journeys around South America.

The story of Robert R. Kalley, M.D., an independent missionary with a Congregationalist outlook who pioneered Protestant work in the Madeira Islands and Brazil, was written by Michael Testa in 1963. The lives and work of Bishop Sterling of the Falkland Islands and Edward F. Every of the SPCK, British Anglicans serving in southern South America in the 1880s and 1890s, reflect the deep commitment of British evangelicals to extend their ministries out beyond the expatriate communities.

The work of the Methodist lay educator William Morris is detailed in the story of the founding of industrial arts schools in Argentina. The contribution of another pioneer missionary, David Trumbull, in Chile, is told by Irven Paul in A Yankee Reformer in Chile.

The early missionary efforts in Colombia of Henry Pratt and other Presbyterians were researched and presented by Wilmar A. Quiring in "The Establishment of Evangelical Christianity in Colombia, 1825-1900." A fascinating unedited autobiography of Alexander Allan, a New Zealand Presbyterian missionary in Colombia, is to be found in the Day Missions Library of Yale University Divinity School.

Robert L. Wharton, founder of the influential Presbyterian school La Progresiva in Cardenas, Cuba, is the subject of a biography by Rafael Cepeda. The biographies of two outstanding Mexican Protestant lay leaders, Moises Saenz and Ignacio Gutierrez Gomez, are among the many biographies that enrich the history of Protestantism in Mexico. A biography of Frederick J. Huegel, pioneer Disciples of Christ evangelist, was written by his son. Three disciples of Gonzalo Baez-Camargo edited a volume of essays on the contributions of this distinguished Christian educator and journalist. A biography of Mexican Congregationalist Alberto Rembao, erudite editor of La Nueva Democracia, the leading Protestant journal for...
intellectuals between 1920 and 1963, is still to be written. El Centro Alberto Rembao has recently been established in his home city, Guadalajara, to encourage study of this great journalist's writings.

We know of the work of Frederick Crowe, the pioneer Bible colporteur to Guatemala (his first visit took place in 1835), through his autobiography.56 The official documentation related to his residence in and subsequent expulsion from Guatemala has been compiled by David Escobar.57

Protestantism in Particular Countries

The research that has been produced on Protestantism in Brazil is vast. Emile G. Leonard wrote a social and ecclesiastical history of Brazilian Protestantism in French in 1953, which was translated and published in Brazil in 1963.58 A cadre of trained social scientists and mission historians has written on many aspects of evangelical Christianity in that country.59

Research on Mexican Protestantism was ably carried out by Jean-Pierre Bastian, a Swiss sociologist who spent years teaching at the Comunidad Teologica de Mexico. He has published several books on Mexican Protestant history.60 Churches in the Dominican Republic were researched by William L. Wipfler in 1964, with special attention to the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Episcopal churches.61 Marcos Antonio Ramos has provided in recent years a survey of the Protestant movement in Cuba.62 Guatemalan Protestants depend on an eighty-five-year-old but valuable unpublished manuscript by Edward M. Haymaker, who garnered historical material from the early years not found elsewhere.63 A centennial history of the Presbyterian work in Guatemala was prepared in 1983 by Jose G. Carrera and the late David Scotchmer.64 An example of the numerous sociological studies on Protestants in Guatemala is God and Production in a Guatemalan Town.65

Ecuador has long had the smallest percentage of Protestants of any Latin American nation. The basic research in that evangelical community was carried out by Washington Padilla J. in the 1970s but was cut short by his untimely death. Simon Espinosa finished the research in 1989.66 Juan B. A. Kessler has given us a good survey in Historia de la Evangelizacion en el Peru.67

A recent doctoral dissertation by Donna Laubach Moros, a Presbyterian mission worker in Spain, gives us the first major work in English on Protestantism in Venezuela.68 This study is complemented by Domingo Irwin's studies on the early missionary work of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance in western Venezuela.69 Irwin is a professor of history at the Universidad Andres Bello in Caracas.

General Histories

Two researchers have given us an overview of two hundred years of Protestantism in Latin America: Jean-Pierre Bastian and Hans-Jirgen Prien. Their works should be read together to get a complete picture. Bastian writes as a sociologist of religion, and Prien as a church historian. Bastian's Una breve historia del protestantismo en America Latina70 interprets the implantation of Protestantism within the framework of forces of social, economic, political, and ideological change. La historia del cristianismo en America Latina71 by Prien was published in 1978 in German and in Spanish in 1985. The work has special significance for Lutheran Protestants, since the author carefully details the penetration of Lutheranism through immigrant communities in Latin America.

These two histories are supplemented by the sections on Protestantism in a multi-volume series published by the Commission on the Study of the Christian Church in Latin America (CEHILA).72 The CEHILA project was launched in 1973 when a group of Roman Catholic and Protestant historians met in Quito, Ecuador, under the guidance of Enrique Dussel of Argentina. The twenty-year writing project took its perspective from liberation theology. The basic question the historians asked was, How has the church in Latin America been an instrument of liberation and of oppression? Writing from such a point of view is difficult, since much church history is written from a triumphal stance, largely for the consumption of supporting constituencies. Each of these volumes has a section written by a Protestant historian on Protestantism in the author's country. The contributions vary in perspective and
quality, yet the collection as a whole is valuable as a complement to the above-mentioned histories.

There have been very few attempts to research the historical context in which Protestant missionary expansion was carried out in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recently an excellent doctoral dissertation was written by Arturo Piedra Solano, from Costa Rica, at the University of Edinburgh. Based on research in the archives of missionary societies, Piedra gives us the full story behind the decision to exclude most missionary work in Latin America from the agenda of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh.73

The Protestant section of CEHILA sponsored several study conferences in the early 1990s that focused on the distinct role of Protestantism in Latin American culture. Two volumes of essays emerged from those conferences, Protestantismo y cultura en America Latina and Protestantismo y politica en America Latina y el Caribe.74

An anthology of documents on the early years of Christianity in the New World, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, was prepared in 1989 by the late H. McKennie Goodpasture.75 Published by Orbis Books, the anthology includes original material about the missions in the West Indies, Central America, Mexico, southwestern United States, Peru, and Brazil; the beginnings of Protestantism; the emergence of Roman Catholic lay movements; the model of "a new Christendom"; and the impact of the Second Vatican Council on Latin American life.

Pentecostalism and Future Challenges

New chapters in Protestant research have been written in the past twenty years by Latin American Pentecostal researchers such as Juan Sepulveda of the Iglesia Mision Pentecostal (Chile) and Manual Gaxiola of the Iglesia Apostólica de Mexico; both hold doctoral degrees from the University of Birmingham. Two Internet services now link Pentecostal researchers: SIPALC (Information Service on Pentecostal Studies in Latin America), Lima, Peru, directed by Bernardo Campos, and CEEP (Center for Pentecostal Studies), Conception, Chile, directed by Luis Orellana. Bibliographies of Pentecostal studies are available on these electronic services. In March 2002 the Catedra Pentecostal Latinoamericana Itinerante was initiated, meeting for the first time at the Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana in San Jose, Costa Rica. This innovative project will annually bring together researchers on Pentecostalism in Latin America, and its location will move from country to country.76

For the English-speaking world there are available several volumes on Pentecostalism in Latin America, written by both secular and church historians. Three that warrant mentioning here are Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America, edited by Edward L. Cleary and Hannah W. Stewart-Camibno; Fire from Heaven, by Harvey Cox; and In the Power of the Spirit: The Pentecostal Challenge to Historic Churches in Latin America, edited by Benjamin F. Gutierrez and Dennis A. Smith.77

Most textbooks tell the story of Christianity as a record of events that happened in Europe in past centuries; Christian history in the non-Western world seems tacked on as an afterthought. A consultation in April 2001, The History of the World Christian Movement, highlighted the vastly expanded scope of Christianity and outlined the issues to be faced by mission historians wishing to recast the historiography of non-Western Christianity. The consultation projected publication of a series of books over a five-year period to fill the gap in the education of most Christians concerning the global spread of Christianity. The first volume, authored by Dale Irwin and Scott Sunquist, appeared recently.78 Latin American mission research is now challenged to position its work within the context of global Christianity.

In recent years the Pew Foundation has funded a series of studies on religious liberty and evangelization in several world areas under the direction of the Center for Religion and Law at Emory University. One of these volumes, Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism, delves into specific areas of tension faced by Roman Catholicism, nondenominationalism, and historic Protestantism.79 Special attention is given to Cuba, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, Argentina, and Chile.

Unfortunately, to date only one attempt has been made to write an ecumenical history of Latin America.80
An authentic cultural history of missions in the twentieth century needs to be well researched, well presented, and sensitively interpreted. To undergird such research there is urgent need for the preservation of mission archival material within and outside of Latin America. In November 2001 the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College sponsored a consultation on nondenominational mission archives. This area, so vital to mission research, has been neglected for years. These archival materials are especially important for research related to evangelical Christianity in Latin America because of the important contributions of nondenominational missions.

It is to be expected that many young mission researchers will emerge from the growing Protestant community in Latin America. There are now graduate academic programs that can provide their training. Much of the basic research, however, will continue to be done by lay historians as they record, evaluate, and organize the fast-moving events in Latin America. The field of oral history is a promising new area of research for which minimal training is required and yet which produces significant results.

Protestant mission historians have responsibility for recording and interpreting significant and still unfolding chapters of Christian history in Latin America. To the present, little has been done to organize the research potential of the evangelical seminaries of Latin America. However, programs that encourage mission research related to specific areas are slowly emerging.