PRAGMATIC CONSUMERS AND PRACTICAL PRODUCTS: 
THE SUCCESS OF PNEUMACENTRIC RELIGION AMONG 
WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA’S NEW RELIGIOUS ECONOMY 

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The development of a free-market religious economy in Latin America over the past 
half-century has resulted in a proliferation of new spiritual enterprises. In the highly 
competitive popular religious marketplace where spiritual goods are produced, 
offered, and consumed by the region’s impoverished majority, pneumacentric or spirit-
centered groups have prospered like no others. Pentecostalism, the Catholic Charismatic 
Renewal, and African diasporan faiths have been successful in their appeal to 
popular religious consumers to the point that they have cornered the market of faith 
among the disprivileged of the region. Since the great majority of Latin American reli-
gious consumers are women, any religious enterprise interested in growing must pro-
duce and market spiritual goods and services that meet the specific tastes and preferences 
of those who constitute the majority of the market. Thus, employing the theoretical 
tools of religious economy, this article analyzes the success of the three major pneu-
macentric enterprises among Latin American women of the popular classes. 

Since women constitute the great majority (at least two-thirds) of religious practition-
ers in Latin America, any spiritual firm interested in prospering must develop and 
market products that appeal to the particular tastes and preferences of female con-
sumers. This is not say that all Latin American women share a common gendered reli-
giosity. Gender identities can vary according to social class, ethnicity, nationality, region 
and individual differences. Nevertheless, the African diasporan religions, Pentecostalism, 
and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) are thriving in the region in large measure 
due to the popularity of their products among women from the popular classes. 
This article employs the theoretical framework of religious economy to analyze the reasons for 
the extraordinary success of these three religious groups among poor Latin American women. 

BARELY VISIBLE 

Before proceeding with our analysis, it should be noted that there is a surprising dearth 
of literature on the subject. Given the preponderance of women in Latin American faiths, 
one would expect a well-developed academic bibliography on women and religion in Latin 
America. Such is not the case, however, due to a couple of reasons. First, historically most 
researchers have been men, who have been more likely to ignore or overlook the impor-
tance of women in religious enterprises. Second, studies of religion in Latin America have 
tended to focus on the ecclesiastical elite, primarily the clergy and secondarily, high rank-
ing lay leaders, who are often men.
In the past decade and a half, the roles of women have become more visible as a small group of predominantly women scholars has turned their attention to the subject, particularly in studies of Base Christian Communities (CEBs) and Pentecostalism. The main question that has emerged centers on whether active participation in these religious organizations reinforces traditional patriarchal norms or if it empowers and liberates CEB and Pentecostal women. Most analyses have discovered the co-existence of liberating and patriarchal elements, but on the balance see both Pentecostalism and the CEBs as positive forces for women’s empowerment.

Brusco’s pioneering study on Protestant women in Colombia found such liberating elements in their evangelical faith that she regarded it as the more progressive of Molyneux’s two types of women’s collective action movements. The first type is based on women’s practical interests and struggles against some challenge to their ability to fulfill traditional obligations. Such movements tend to have a relatively narrow scope. Going beyond mere practical interests, the second type is based on women’s strategic interests and seeks to change the hegemonic gender system. The result is a more comprehensive form of collective action that resembles Western feminism (Brusco 1995). In contradistinction to Brusco, this article regards all three pneumaticentric (spirit-centered) groups as fitting squarely within the parameters of Molyneux’s first type of women’s collective action movement. The appeal of the CCR, diasporan groups, and Pentecostalism is firmly rooted in the crises and affliction that results from the inability of women to realize their practical interests, such as health and family, in the face of grinding poverty.

**LATIN AMERICA’S NEW RELIGIOUS ECONOMY**

If Latin American women are now free to purchase religious products that respond to their spiritual and material needs, it is due to the region’s historic transformation from a monopolistic religious economy to an unregulated one in which faith-based organizations, like commercial firms, compete for religious consumers. In the new free market of faith, Latin Americans are at liberty to choose among the hundreds of religious products that best suit their spiritual and material needs. After four centuries of religious monopoly in which the only choice for the popular classes was either to consume the Catholic product or not consume at all, impoverished believers, and indeed all Latin Americans, can now select from among a dizzying array of religious options that range from the African-Brazilian religion of Umbanda to the New Age group known as the Vegetable Union (União do Vegetal in Portuguese).

In a competitive religious economy, such as the one that has developed in Latin America over the past half century, there is no place for the type of questionable product that indolent religious monopolists produce for a market guaranteed by state coercion. The invisible hand of the free religious market is as unforgiving with religious firms as it is with their commercial counterparts (Finke and Stark 1992:17). If for example, religious consumers demonstrate a strong taste for more participatory types of faith (as they actually have), those religions that restrict lay participation will either have to modify their products or face marginalization, even extinction. In order to thrive in the new religious economy, Latin American spiritual firms must develop an attractive product and know how to market it to popular consumers. If Charismatic Catholicism, Pentecostalism, and African diasporan religions are thriving at the turn of the century, it is because they have learned to compete effectively in a pluralistic environment. On the other hand, if Catholic Base Christian Communi-
ties (CEBs) and mainline Protestantism are stagnating it is primarily because they lack competitive products of mass appeal and are not skilled marketers.

Some readers who are not familiar with the application of microeconomic theory to the study of religion may be surprised or even disconcerted by the description and analysis of religious phenomena in economic terms. Indeed the application of microeconomic theory to religious activity is a fairly recent development in the sociology of religion. North American sociologist Peter Berger pioneered the practice in the early 1960s by applying microeconomic principles to his analysis of ecumenism. A few years later in his classic book, *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger illuminated the dynamics of both monopolistic religious economies and free market ones through the deft employment of microeconomic theory. Berger’s dynamic model demonstrated, for example, that in a pluralistic religious environment, the faith that was once imposed as the product of a monopoly now must be marketed and sold to customers who are free to purchase the goods that most appeal to them (Berger 1969:138).

While Berger’s subsequent work veered off in a different direction, another North American sociologist of religion, Rodney Stark, began to analyze the vibrant U.S. religious economy by employing the theoretical tools of microeconomics. One of his greatest contributions to the field is the discovery that rates of participation in religious activities are greater in unregulated spiritual economies than in monopolistic ones (Finke and Stark 1992:18). Thus, historically, a higher percentage of North Americans than Latin Americans has attended religious services and engaged in ecclesial activities. The application of microeconomic theory to the sociological study of religion is now commonplace in research conducted in the U.S. but remains rare in scholarly work on religious activity beyond North American borders.

In the Latin American context, most scholars of religious studies acknowledge that faith organizations must compete with each other in the new pluralist economy but the dynamics of such competition are often obscured by a rather nebulous conception of the religious economy as an “arena” or “field.” This approach typically rejects the market model for its alleged reduction of “trajectories through the religious arena” to “purely opportunistic efforts to solve concrete problems” (Burdick 1993:8). In what is otherwise one of the most illuminating comparative studies of Latin American religion over the past decade, anthropologist John Burdick reduces the market model of religious competition to spiritual opportunism. But Burdick and other North American students of Latin American religion need only look at the religious “arena” in their home country to realize that the world’s largest and most competitive spiritual market offers not only opportunities to solve personal problems but also provides faith communities, legitimation of secular status, and other rewards. That believers seek such rewards, including the resolution of concrete problems, in an open religious market in no way makes them spiritual opportunists. Is it opportunistic for an impoverished *favelada* or slum-dweller in Rio de Janeiro to choose the Assembly of God over participation in a local CEB because the former offers faith healing and other gifts of the Spirit while the latter does not?

There is no more powerful theoretical paradigm than religious economy for understanding why certain faith-based organizations thrive while others stagnate and fail. A vaguely conceived religious “arena” in which religious groups may or may not compete with each other cannot adequately explain the rise of certain religions and the decline of others. Ironically, it is the economic model with its emphasis on religious competition that reveals the impor-
tance of religious organizations as personal problem-solving agencies, especially among the popular classes. Popular religious groups that do not put faith healing, for example, at the center of their praxis, will have no mass appeal in Latin America. In other words, the economic model reveals that there is strong consumer demand for the production of divine healing and those religious firms that produce it most efficiently and market it attractively will be the ones to prosper.

Thus while studies in religious economy are standard fare among social scientists analyzing North American spiritual enterprises, Latin American scholars have generally either eschewed the market model or ignored it. To date, political scientist Anthony Gill is the only major scholar in the field to have applied microeconomic theory to the analysis of Latin American religion. His deft application of the market model to the political orientations of the Catholic episcopacies in Latin America clearly revealed what some in the field had long suspected. In *Rendering Unto Caesar*, Gill demonstrated that above all it was religious competition from surging Protestantism that led bishops in such countries as Brazil and Chile to adopt a preferential option for the poor and then to oppose military dictatorships as anathema to what they perceived to be the interests of the popular classes. Conversely, Gill showed that where Protestant growth was much slower, as in Argentina, episcopacies not only failed to opt for the poor but often actively supported the generals in their authoritarian rule. Hence the preferential option for the poor in nations with high levels of Protestant competition was essentially a member-retention strategy aimed at those segments of the Catholic community that were most likely to convert to Pentecostalism. Not surprisingly, Gill’s work has proven extremely polemical, especially among the community of scholars who have written sympathetically on liberationist Catholicism in Latin America.

The development of a pluralistic economy, of course, is dependent on legal and constitutional guarantees of religious liberty. While Stark argues that a free market religious economy is the “natural” type, the history of the West during the last millennium demonstrates pluralism to be the exception to the norm of spiritual monopoly. In any case, it is only in those societies in which the state does not favor any one religious organization over others and all enjoy the same legal rights that free market economies will develop.

In Latin America it was only during the period that spans the mid-nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth that liberal constitutions disestablished the Catholic monopoly and declared freedom of worship. By the 1920s, from Chile to Mexico, Latin Americans enjoyed the legal right to affiliate with religions other than Catholicism. It should be noted that African diasporan groups generally did not benefit immediately from constitutional guarantees since the ruling elites considered such religions as Umbanda to be closer to witchcraft than to religion. Indeed it was as late as the 1960s, ironically under military rule, when African-Brazilian religions were accorded full legal status and the persecution of their practitioners and desecration of their terreiros ceased (Brown 1986).

With the legal framework in place, a free market in faith will develop in which religious firms must compete with each other for the loyalty of spiritual consumers. The will to compete in a free market is predicated on the premise of member maximization. That is, religious firms, especially those belonging to proselytizing faiths, such as Islam and Christianity, prefer more followers than less. A larger membership base means more souls saved and greater resources for the spiritual organization, which must depend on tithes and donations from believers in the absence of state subsidies (Gill 1998). Non-proselytizing religions
such as the African diasporan groups do not possess the same will to compete as Christian denominations, but the prestige and livelihood of the *maes-de-santo* (priestesses) of Umbanda and Candomble largely depend on the number of ritual clients and the amount of their payments or donations for services rendered.

In turn, competition for religious market share introduces the crucial element of consumer tastes and preferences (Berger 1969:145). Religious monopolists naturally need not concern themselves with producing and marketing an attractive product. In a free market, however, religious firms ignore consumer preferences at their own peril. If Pentecostals, Charismatics and African diasporan groups have prospered in the new economy, it is because they have developed religious products in accord with popular consumer preferences. Father Edward Doughtery, one of the North American founders of the CCR in Brazil, even conducts market surveys to “determine what the customers want” (Doughtery 1998). Those groups without appealing products will either be driven to the margins of the market where they might survive by supplying a small niche of consumers or be altogether forced out of the business of religious production.

Another major facet of the free market economy is the privatization of religion. Religion in monopolistic economies constructs a common Weltanschauung that binds society together and gives ultimate meaning to social life (Berger 1969:134). In marked contrast, religions of the competitive market provide meaning to and address the spiritual concerns not of society in general but of individuals. Thus religion operates predominantly in the private sphere, often far removed from its locus in the public arena of monopolistic economies. It follows then that the most successful firms in a free market economy will tailor their production and marketing of religious goods to the exigencies of private life (Berger 1969:147). Again, the Latin American market offers a clear example of privatization. In addition to their common element of pneumacentrism, the prosperous Pentecostals, Charismatics and African diasporan groups share a strong emphasis on faith that addresses matters, particularly afflictions, of private life. Almost in diametrical opposition, the anemic CEBs have tended to give privilege of place to matters of public life, such as working to construct more just Latin American societies. As Burdick (1993) demonstrated in his study of CEBs on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, the small ecclesial groups often do not provide opportunities for members to discuss individual afflictions, such as alcohol abuse, domestic discord and illness. Particularly in the popular Latin American religious marketplace, the relegation of such private concerns to the margins practically guarantees that an organization will fail to attract substantial numbers of adherents.

The final salient characteristic of the unregulated religious economy is its vibrancy. Challenging decades of accepted sociological theory, Stark has convincingly demonstrated that pluralistic religious economies are more dynamic than monopolistic ones. A comparison of Latin American and North American religious economies confirms Stark’s thesis. Until the emergence of the free market in faith in the 1950s, Latin Americans regularly participated in church life at one-third the rate that North Americans did. If Latin America currently appears to be experiencing a religious renaissance it is because institutional religious participation has greatly increased across the board. Of course there are still winners and losers in a competitive economy, but even the former religious monopolist has witnessed a recent surge in participation. Thus, the theoretical tools of religious economy will allow for better comprehension of the great appeal of spirit-centered religion among Latin American women.
MARQUEE PRODUCTS: PNEUMACENTRISM AND DIVINE HEALING

Despite their significant differences, the CCR, Pentecostalism, and diasporan groups are united by two enormously popular products. Pneumacentrism and supernatural healing in their diverse forms are the biggest sellers for all three of these prosperous religions. Not only are spirit-centered religiosity and divine curing the two products that initially attract the neophyte, they are also the ones whose long term consumption keeps religious consumers coming back for more. And above all, it is the production and marketing of these two marquee products that propel the CCR, Pentecostalism, and diasporan groups to the top of religious charts. Given that at least two-thirds of believers who regularly consume these popular products are women, analysis of their particular appeal to those who constitute the great majority of the religious clientele (if not unofficial producers) in Latin America is imperative.

Pneumacentrism, while not an exclusively female product, is so successful because it fulfills the particular needs and desires of women from the popular classes. In part, this derives from the cultural realm in which, throughout Latin America, traditional (if not hegemonic) notions of gender view women as more receptive to matters of the spirit and the “heart.” Most Brazilians and Mexicans, both men and women, would think it perfectly “natural” that the spirits and Holy Spirit manifest themselves more often in female believers.

Another cultural factor relates to the phenomenology of spirit possession. Traditional Latin American gender roles conceive sexual intercourse as an act in which the man possesses and penetrates the women, filling her with his presence. Diasporan religion conceives of spirit possession in a similar fashion. The _lwas_ and _orishas_ “mount” and “ride” their human “horses” or mediums to the extent that the body and consciousness of the mother-of-the saints are completely possessed by the spirit. While it is totally acceptable if not “natural” for women to be ridden and mounted by diasporan spirits, Brazilian and Caribbean men do so at the risk of being perceived as homosexual.

Possession by the Holy Spirit in Pentecostalism and the CCR is not apparently associated with homosexuality, but it too is usually conceived by both men and women as an act of penetration and possession. The third person of the Trinity, a masculine figure, takes and fills the believer with His spiritual power. For women used to being possessed by their husbands or partners, the concept of being taken by the Holy Spirit is natural and logical. Thus most Latin American women are culturally predisposed to be more receptive to matters of the spirit(s).

If gender roles prime women’s receptivity to the spirit(s), the ecstatic power offered by pneumacentric religion maintains their loyalty to the product. The ecstatic component of this supernatural power typically occurs during the moment of spiritual possession in which the believer enters into a dissociated state of consciousness. The original Greek meaning of the word ecstasy, “being taken out of place,” neatly captures the sense of transport or flight felt by those being possessed by the Spirit or spirits. For many Charismatic and Pentecostal women, baptism in the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of charismata, such as glossolalia, are charged with eroticism. In fact, female narratives of such experiences often sound like accounts of an extraordinary encounter with an ideal lover.

Since poor women of color are relegated to the least desirable social and physical spaces in Latin America on account of their sex, class, and skin color, it should be of little surprise
that they enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to be carried away by a supernatural power from a mundane place of poverty and crime to a heavenly state of bliss. The bliss that is frequently suffused with eroticism by Charismatic and Pentecostal women can be understood as spiritual compensation for hegemonic sexual norms that focus on male gratification to the detriment of female pleasure. Thus the Holy Spirit becomes a kind of super husband or partner, demonstrating love and affection toward women whose worldly mates neglect or abuse them.

The supernatural power received during spirit possession fortifies and energizes believers well beyond the moment of communion with the guias, orixas, or Holy Spirit. The spiritual force remains with practitioners of pneumacentric religion well after the relatively brief moment of possession has ended. Outside the walls of the temple and terreiro, believers draw on this divine power to confront the tenacious demons of deprivation, such as substandard housing, crime, domestic abuse, illness, etc. These poverty-related afflictions often seem so overwhelming and intractable that millions of poor Latin Americans believe the only way to cope with them is through divine assistance.

While the experience of personal empowerment through spiritual possession also appeals to millions of men in the region, it is especially attractive to poor women of color. Sexism, racism, and classism push Black, mulatta, Indian and mestiza women to the farthest margins of political, economic, and social power in Latin America. Residing in the least desirable urban barrios or the hunger-filled countryside, poor women of color constitute the most impoverished and oppressed social group in Latin America. Hence, in the orishas and Iwas and Holy Spirit, these women find all the supernatural power they need to struggle against their social, political, and economic disempowerment. Imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit, for example, the demons of deprivation no longer seem invincible.

An important by-product of the power derived from communion with the pneuma is authority. The spiritual gift of prophecy, which is almost exclusively received by women in Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations, converts women into respected moral authorities whose divine revelations can challenge the authority and conduct of brothers in the faith. In fact, the prophecies received by women frequently revolve around the transgressions of men. And though they risk alienating or even losing their husband or partner, CCR and Pentecostal women can exercise their spiritual authority at home in an attempt to expel the demons of drink, infidelity, violence, gambling, among others, from their men. In the best case scenario for the woman, the errant husband or partner comes to realize his wicked ways, repents, and then converts to Pentecostalism or joins a Charismatic community.

The authority claimed by diasporan priestesses is not so much a moralistic one but rather one that derives from their expertise in communication with the guias and Iwas. The success of any medium in attracting clientele is largely a function of her ability to receive efficacious spirits that are capable of resolving clients' problems. Of course as head priestesses of their own terreiros, female devotees of diasporan religions exercise spiritual and sacerdotal authority to a degree that is practically unimaginable for Pentecostal and CCR women.

HEALING THE OTHER

The second major product of Latin America's three premier religious groups has an even stronger appeal to women. Faith healing, more than any other product, is the one that initially leads prospective religious consumers to the door of the terreiro or temple. Having failed to resolve their affliction through secular resources, millions of Latin American men
Pragmatic Consumers and Practical Products

make their way to Pentecostal churches, Charismatic prayer circles and Umbanda terreiros in search of supernatural succor for their drinking problem, illness or employment woes. Likewise, women knock on the same doors attempting to resolve their poverty-related maladies. It is sickness and domestic strife, however, that leads them there more often than alcoholism or employment problems. But the relative importance of these afflictions in compelling religious consumers to sample pneumacentrist products does not explain *cura divina*'s unique appeal to women from the popular classes. Rather, the explanation lies in the gendered nature of health care and parenting.

Whereas men seek divine intervention for their own personal problems, women are just as likely to be imploring the spirits to resolve the illness of their son, daughter or husband as they are to be seeking their own cure. This concern for the welfare of others, particularly family members, is what researcher Carol Ann Drogus found to be the salient feature of female religiosity among a diverse group of members of Brazilian Base Christian Communities (1997:182). Diasporan, CCR, and Pentecostal women have more immediate concerns, such as health crises, to worry about than issues such as social justice that require a long-term perspective. Nevertheless, that women belonging to such radically different religious traditions as the pneumacentrists and the CEBs share what Drogus calls an "other-oriented" religiosity points to a common cultural denominator.

In Latin America, as in most of the world, patriarchal cultural norms assign mothers the primary responsibility of parenting. While the father is supposed to be the family's chief breadwinner, the mother is to take charge of raising the children. Mothers are charged with the physical, emotional and moral welfare of their children. The role of nurturer and caregiver is a decidedly feminine one from Chile to Mexico. That two of the professions most strongly associated with these qualities, nursing and teaching (at the elementary level), are almost exclusively female in Latin America bears testimony to the gendered division of labor. In reality, a large percentage of mothers, especially single ones, bear the double burden of childrearing and breadwinning. In any case, whether married, in a consensual union or single, mothers are expected to resolve the wide array of crises that their children may suffer. From bed-wetting to substance abuse, mothers must often single-handedly attempt to resolve their children's problems. When the crisis exceeds maternal and familial resources, it is the mother who is expected to seek assistance outside the home.

The range of secular options for poor children in crisis is limited in Latin America. The private clinics and institutions that attend to the physical and emotional needs of middle and upper class children are normally prohibitively expensive. Public resources, such as health clinics, are meager and often of dubious quality. Thus, it is typically after a failed attempt to resolve a son or daughter's crisis, that an afflicted mother makes her way to one of the three religious groups in question in search of healing. In the context of inadequate familial and social resources for responding to the physical, emotional and psychological crises of disprivileged youth, the healing power offered by the diasporan spirits and Holy Spirit becomes an attractive, if not the only, alternative source of healing. If the product of divine curing proves effective by healing the child's affliction, the mother will probably become a regular customer of the terreiro or church that facilitated the cure. Therefore it is the convergence of gender roles and poverty that makes the product of supernatural healing so popular among women from the disprivileged classes in Latin America. Religious enterprises without such a product will not thrive in the popular market of faith.
UNIQUE PRODUCTS: THE VIRGIN, CONVERSION, AND AMORALITY

The Virgin

In addition to these two standard products, each of the three religious groups has its own unique good or service that is particularly appealing to female consumers. The Virgin of the CCR, the conversion experience of Pentecostalism and the relative amorality of diasporan religions are products that are especially, though not exclusively, attractive to women and serve to complement the two aforementioned standard products. Brief consideration of each will further illuminate the reasons for the great success of these pneumacentric religions among Latin American women.

The dynamic presence of the Virgin in the CCR allows Charismatic women to have the best of both worlds. Like their Pentecostal sisters, Charismatics enjoy the ecstatic masculine power of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Pentecostals, however, women of the CCR also have access to the feminine strength of the Virgin Mary in her myriad Latin American manifestations. While she does not offer the explosive force of the third person of the Trinity, she represents the ideal of maternal strength and sacrifice in the face of extreme adversity. Millions of Catholic women in the region find hope, inspiration and compassion in Aparecida, Guadalupe, Lujan, Nazare and other national and regional incarnations of the Virgin. As a poor mother who suffered the ultimate loss, the death of one her children, Mary is able to console and empathize with afflicted Catholic women from the popular classes like no other Christian figure. Again this is not to imply that she does not appeal to Catholic men. Rather that her femininity and maternity are especially attractive to those Catholics who share the same characteristics. It is the CCR’s virgophilia that most differentiates it from its virgophobic Pentecostal rival.

Born Again

While Pentecostal churches do not offer any good or service comparable to the Virgin, they do produce another product that is of special interest to disfranchized Latin American women. The doctrine of conversion, which is peculiar to salvationist religion, calls upon those who wish to affiliate with a Pentecostal church to “accept Jesus” and to reject their sinful past through spiritual rebirth. In sociological terms, religious conversion can be thought of as a process in which a person experiences a positive transformation in his or her individual identity and self-worth. Stark and Bainbridge (1987:197) have pointed out that religious conversion holds the greatest appeal among those individuals and groups who have been negatively evaluated or stigmatized by society. Poor Latin American women of color undoubtedly figure among those who have been appraised most negatively by Latin American societies. Since their lives have been more difficult than those of most other social groups, many are all too ready to jettison their past for a future filled with the hope and happiness of eternal salvation.

Perhaps more than other products, the doctrine of conversion gives Pentecostalism a competitive edge over its two main rivals in the contest for female souls. Conversion in most Pentecostal churches involves rejecting one’s worldly past for a godly present and future. More specifically, the asceticism and ideological dualism of classical and modern Pentecostalism demand that converts renounce the pleasures and vices of the street for the joy of church and family life. In demonizing the street, Pentecostalism condemns the very type of
behavior and activity that brought many women to the temple doors in the first place. After sickness, it is behavior associated with the male prestige complex or “machismo” that most often compels afflicted women to seek divine assistance. The alcohol abuse, physical and verbal abuse, infidelity, gambling and prostitution of their husbands or partners figure among the main afflictions that impel poor Latin American women in search of divine healing.

Their new faith teaches them that their husbands or partners are captive to demonic forces and furnishes them with several strategies to deal with the problem. The most obvious and comprehensive solution is the spouse’s conversion, which, though often difficult, is a real possibility given that approximately half of married crente women share the same faith with their husbands. However, if she is unsuccessful in converting her husband to the fold, she has access to networks of sisters in the faith who provide spiritual and psychological support in the intimacy of prayer circles and other church groups for women. Of course many of her spiritual sisters have experienced or are experiencing the same type of marital conflict with their own husbands. Finally, in addition to the new-found moral authority discussed previously, Pentecostal women have the option of making Jesus and/or the Holy Spirit the primary objects of their desire. The love and affection they once might have showed toward their husband can be redirected toward a super(natural) masculine figure that empowers rather than disempowers her.

Cura Without Conversion

The success of diasporan religion demonstrates that significant numbers of religious consumers are not looking for a dose of conversion in their quest for healing. Many who frequent the iles of Santería and the terreiros of Umbanda are simply looking to resolve their problems and are not interested in acquiring a new religious identity that could require significant changes in their lifestyle. It is diasporan religion’s relative doctrinal amorality that allows for supernatural cura without conversion. Since the diasporan cosmos is colored in shades of gray in contrast to the black and white world of much of Christianity, it lacks the moral absolutism of its Pentecostal and Charismatic rivals. In a highly competitive market where pneumaticism and divine healing have become standard products among the most prosperous firms, it is this product that most distinguishes diasporan groups from their Christian rivals. The question that arises here then is the special appeal of doctrinal amorality to women.

Along with sickness what most impels women to consult with the spirits at a diasporan center is strife with their spouses or domestic partners. More specifically, in her study of Umbanda in Porto Alegre, Lerch (1982:256) found infidelity to be the principal problem of married women. Both patriarchal cultural conditioning and the fear of losing a possible source of income typically result in the jilted wife directing most of her hostility toward the other woman who is trying to “steal” her husband. Since male infidelity is more tolerated (if not condoned) than female and occurs more often, it is to be expected that many more women than men would be seeking supernatural intervention for such a problem. The amoral exus and other liminal spirits of diasporan religion, in contrast to the moral Jesus and Holy Spirit of the CCR and Pentecostalism, are more than willing, for the right price, to declare spiritual warfare on a spouse’s lover. In fact, Pomba Gira, the Umbandista patroness of prostitutes, is a specialist in “getting romantic rivals out of the way.”

For ages sorcery has functioned as a “weapon of the weak” in which those on the margins of social, economic, and political power turn to magic and religion in an attempt to
exercise control over their own lives and influence their social superiors. As one of the most historically oppressed social groups in much of the world, women have had a much greater need for sorcery than men. In stark contrast to its main rivals, diasporan religion through its product of relative doctrinal amorality offers female clients the option of resolving their own problems through the spiritual neutralization of rivals and enemies. For many Caribbean and Brazilian women suffering from their husbands' infidelities it would seem more cost and time effective to contract an exu to "remove" the other woman than it would be to pray to Jesus for the conversion of her husband or romantic rival. In any case, diasporan religion's unique product of doctrinal amorality gives female religious consumers a distinctly non-Christian alternative for dealing with marital strife.

CONCLUSION

Any attempt to understand the fate of a given religious enterprise in Latin America's new free market economy must take into account the tastes and preferences of the largest group of spiritual consumers—women. Since women represent at least two-thirds of religious consumers, spiritual enterprises interested in prospering must develop and market products that fulfill the particular needs and desires of female believers. In the case of poor Latin American women, these interests tend to be extremely practical, such as issues of family and health. If the CCR, diasporan religion, and Pentecostalism have come to corner the region's free religious market in the past three decades, it is largely because, in their own manner, they all have designed and marketed goods and services that respond to the practical interests of poor women. Religious enterprises that have failed to develop and market products that heal the feminine wounds of poverty find themselves on the margins of the Latin American market.

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NOTES

1 Sociologists Stark and Finke view religious doctrine as the main product of any faith-based organization (17). Their narrow pairing of the religious product with doctrine, however, requires amplification. The religious product is not only the organization's set of beliefs and principles but also the practice of such beliefs in the form of worship or liturgy.

2 The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is the Latin American Church's largest and most dynamic lay movement. It is essentially a Catholic version of Pentecostalism. The four major African diasporan religions are Brazilian Candomble and Umbanda, Haitian Voudou, and Cuban and Puerto Rican Santana.

3 On Pentecostalism see Machado (1996); Mariz (1995); Flora (1976); Burdick (1993); Pepper (1991); Brusco (1995); Gull (1998); Steigenga and Smilde (1999); and Chesnut (2003, 1997). Drogus (1997), Machado (1996); Mariz (1995); Burdick (1993), and Hewitt (1991) have written on the CEBs.

4 The conceptualization of laity as religious consumers does mean that they do not engage in spiritual production on their own, beyond the pale of specialized producers such as priests. Rather, the concept is meant to capture their primary role in organized religion as customers or clients that purchase spiritual goods from those who specialize in religious production. In religious economies, like commercial ones, the fundamental dichotomy is between producers and consumers.

5 The three pneumacentric religions have mushroomed over the past five decades. Only arriving to Latin America in the early 1970s, the CCR claims approximately 25 million members today (Comunicado Mensal 4/97). Similarly, Latin American Protestantism grew tenfold from 1940 to 2000, with Pentecostals accounting for some three-quarters of a total Protestant population of 50 million (Freston 2001:194). Statistics for diasporan religions are harder to come by, but African-Brazilian religions can probably count some 15 percent of Brazilians as
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practitioners and clients. In the Caribbean, numbers are higher with Barrett estimating a Santeria population of 18 percent in Cuba (2001:225) and another generally reliable source putting the Vodou community at 44 percent of the total Haitian population (www.adherent.com)

'Orishas are the spirits of Vodou while the orishas are those of Santerna and Candomble.

'Guias are the spirits of Umbanda.

In the CCR’s first decade the Virgin was a peripheral figure due to Pentecostal influence in the movement. As the church’s pressure mounted to ensure the CCR’s Catholic identity, the Virgin began to move toward center stage. Today, today, where the Virgin is often the largest and most enthusiastic organizer of celebrations for the day of their patroness.

REFERENCES


WWW.adherent.com/religions-by-adherents.htm#oruma, accessed 5/15/01