

## Reconfiguring Protestantism and Minorities: A Review Essay

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# Reconfiguring Protestantism and Minorities: A Review Essay

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*Choosing the Jesus Way: American Indian Pentecostals and the Fight for the Indigenous Principle*, by Angela Tarango. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. xii, 219 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.95 paperback.

*Latino Pentecostals in America: Faith and Politics in Action*, by Gastón Espinosa. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. xi, 505 pp. Photographs, tables, graphs, notes, index. \$35.00 hardcover.

*Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture*, by Felipe Hinojosa. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. xvii, 297 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

IOWA IS A MIDDLE PLACE, as Dorothy Schwieder has helped us understand.<sup>1</sup> It is obviously so geographically, but less obviously so socially and culturally. Contemporary Iowa is, for example, neither mostly urban nor mostly rural, mostly Republican nor mostly Democrat; it is, in important ways, both urban and rural and a political swing state. Among other things, being a middle place means that Iowa is and has been a more complicated place than it might seem.

One major area of increasing complication is religion. On the one hand, religious institutions, communities, and believers are and have been important in Iowa since before statehood. (One religious historian has coined the phrase “the Bible Suspender”

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1. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Ames, 1996).

to call attention to the persistently high percentage of religious affiliation in Iowa and the Midwest compared to the more [in]famous Bible Belt.<sup>2</sup>) On the other hand, the varied currents of religion in Iowa are shifting. Religion in Iowa is being restructured or reconfigured.<sup>3</sup> In part, the shifts entail, in the words of religious historian Randall Balmer, a “reconfiguration of Protestantism away from the mainline toward evangelicalism.”<sup>4</sup> However, the shifts also entail moving from Catholicism or other or no religious traditions to evangelicalism.<sup>5</sup> (Of course, there are other aspects to the shifts, too, such as moving away from Christian traditions altogether.<sup>6</sup>)

The three volumes reviewed here help highlight some things happening in Protestantism that will only become more significant in Iowa if the state’s current demographic trends continue. Two of the books concern Pentecostalism; the other, Mennonite Anabaptism. In other words, they are about what have until recently been considered minority traditions within Protestantism.

A brief sketch of each of these traditions should help with understanding these books. Pentecostalism is a Protestant movement born in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. It arose largely out of a convergence of Wesleyan and Keswick Holiness traditions. Beyond the classic pietist-evangelical experience of conversion to Christ, these Holiness traditions encouraged believers to seek and manifest a “second blessing” of sanctification or an experience of the “fullness of the Spirit.” Pentecostalism took such convictions a step further. The movement emphasized the continued availability to believers (that is, those

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2. Philip Barlow, “A Demographic Portrait: America Writ Small?” in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America’s Common Denominator?* ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004), 27.

3. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ, 1988).

4. Randall Balmer, “Iowa” in Religion Section, *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton (Bloomington, IN, 2007), 714.

5. On religion in Iowa and the Midwest, see also the review by Marvin Bergman of two recent volumes by Robert Wuthnow in “Reconsidering the Heartland: A Review Essay,” *Annals of Iowa* 72 (2013), 274–80.

6. See, for instance, Joseph Weber’s study of Fairfield in *Transcendental Meditation in America: How a New Age Movement Remade a Small Town in Iowa* (Iowa City, 2014).

“born again” and “filled with the Spirit”) of the gifts of the Spirit – particularly healing and speaking in tongues – exemplified in the New Testament, most notably at Pentecost. By contrast, Mennonites are part of a Radical or Anabaptist tradition rooted in the Europe of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Begun by the Dutch ex-priest Menno Simons, Mennonites came to stress a voluntary believers’ church instead of an established church that encompassed all citizens through infant baptism and state sanctions (including “the sword”). Further, they stressed that believers should look to Jesus not just for salvation but for the pattern of life to be lived before his return. This pattern, for them, is perhaps best summarized in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount and his Passion. In the face of prolonged persecution, Mennonites formed disciplined, inward-looking, largely German-speaking agricultural communities, and in the name of the Prince of Peace they refused to exert force either on their own behalf or on behalf of governments.

Angela Tarango’s *Choosing the Jesus Way* is narrower than its subtitle suggests. It is not a study of American Indian Pentecostals overall, but only of those in the Assemblies of God (AG). The denominational focus is understandable, though. The AG has the most extensive American Indian archives of any Pentecostal denomination. Further, it is not only a clearly structured institution, but it also has a well-developed mission theology.

Tarango examines the beginnings and growth of American Indian AG missions, congregations, and leadership from 1918 through 1996. The topics covered are varied and interwoven chronologically. For example, she discusses white AG missionaries to American Indians (in places as diverse as Arizona and the New York-Ontario border region); Native missionaries; Native Pentecostals and healing; the formation and development of an AG Bible School for American Indians (now the American Indian College in Arizona); the developments that led to the formation in 1996 of the Native American Fellowship in the AG; and the importance of the indigenous principle in AG mission theory (and its fitful growth in practice). As suggested by the book’s subtitle, the indigenous principle is central for Tarango. “Christianity should be rooted in the culture of the missionized” (5), she writes, such that a self-perpetuating indigenous church can flourish.

Mindful of the dark side of Christianity's record with Native Americans, Tarango (who self-identifies as Latina Catholic) develops an argument that supports what American Indian AG leaders have stressed: Christian Indians are "real" Indians. "American Indian Pentecostals," she maintains, "and a few liberal-minded white female missionaries took . . . the indigenous principle . . . and gave birth to a new form of religious practice that allowed them to negotiate their own complicated place within the AG" (3).

Overall, she makes her case. AG American Indians have sought ways to be Indian Pentecostals and to manage their affairs as equals with their non-Indian fellow believers. Indigenization included not only growing and sustaining their own congregations but also "reshaping" Pentecostal healing so that it became "a Gospel of healing – not just from illness and alcoholism, but also from the bitterness of past wrongs and hatred of white people" (98).

Her analysis is not without some weak points, however. Her evidence is thin when she deals with how much of traditional tribal ways were acceptable to Native AG leaders (89–95) and also why some Native evangelists sometimes dressed "like an Indian" in regalia that was, at times, not of their tribe (103–7). The denominational records and interviews of white and American Indian leaders on which Tarango's analysis is based are undeniably important, yet they limit understanding things "from the bottom up." Despite centering her analysis on the indigenous principle, her book provides only glimpses of the "lived experience" of Native Pentecostals beyond the leaders.

Understanding Pentecostalism from the bottom up is less of a problem with Gastón Espinosa's *Latino Pentecostals in America*. Like Tarango, Espinosa focuses on the AG, not all Latino Pentecostals. However, whereas American Indians had 190 congregations in the AG in 2007 (Tarango, 2), Latinos had some 2,665 AG congregations in the early twenty-first century (Espinosa, 3). Espinosa's book is based on massive amounts of archival, survey, and interview materials gathered over some 20 years. While his book is sometimes lacking in sustained analysis, coherence, and liveliness, the work as a whole is stunning in its depth and scope.

Espinosa makes much the same point as Tarango, but without the *indigenous principle* phrase: "Latino Pentecostals have struggled over the past one hundred years to exercise voice,

agency, and leadership in the AG, in Latino Protestantism, and in American public life" (13). As Native AGs maintained that Pentecostal Christian Indians were "real" Indians, so, argues Espinosa, "the Latino AG . . . succeeded in empowering ordinary people to create an international grassroots movement that leveled the playing field for the poor, oppressed, and working class" in ways that should make class-conscious socialists envious (187). He does establish beyond any credible challenge that Latino Pentecostals are not only key to the contemporary growth of the AG but are also finding a place in the public square that does not conform to current political orthodoxies of right or left.

Espinosa establishes that Latinos were among the earliest converts and missionaries at the beginnings of Pentecostalism in Los Angeles in 1906. Latino Pentecostals quickly took the movement to Texas. By the 1920s, the AG in Texas and California had significant numbers of Latino congregations, preachers, and evangelists, including women in the latter two roles. Also by the 1920s, Latinos of the AG were establishing themselves in Puerto Rico and New York City. White leadership could be patronizing, but Latino self-determination within the AG asserted itself such that by 1971 there were four Latino AG districts fully equal with Euro-American districts. Since then, the four have grown to 14. Espinosa also integrates data on Latino Pentecostal social views (he directed or managed six of the eight surveys he uses). He offers solid evidence to support his conclusion that "after a century of living quietly in the shadows and margins of North American religion and society, Latino Assemblies of God leaders and laity are increasingly speaking out about their personal faith in Jesus Christ and the needs of the poor and immigrants" (418).

Latinos are also Mennonites. The Mennonite denomination that most sought Latinos was the "Old" Mennonite Church (MC), and so Felipe Hinojosa's *Latino Mennonites* focuses on them as Tarango and Espinosa focus on the AG. There are far fewer Latino Mennonites than Latinos in the AG, fewer even than Native Americans in the AG. In 2001 the "Old" Mennonite Church joined other groups to form the Mennonite Church USA, which has roughly 80 Latino congregations (214).

Unlike the other two authors, Hinojosa and his family are integral to his analysis.

My parents [from Texas] first met ethnic Mennonites in Archbold, Ohio, where they worked picking tomatoes on Mennonite-owned farms in the 1960s. My grandmother, Manuela Tijerina, liked that Mennonite farmers honored the Lord's day by not working on Sundays and that Mennonite missionaries offered church services in Spanish for migrant farmworkers. Since those days, both the Tijerina and Hinojosa sides of my family have been integrally tied to the Mennonite experience (ix).

Although less exhaustive than Espinosa, and while paralleling Espinosa and Tarango in highlighting the self-determining trajectory of his group, Hinojosa develops his account in a way that complements Espinosa's analysis of the social views of Latino Pentecostals. Latino Mennonites, according to Hinojosa, participate in a Latino "*cultura evangélica*" that ties them to other Latino Protestants as much or more than to "white Mennonites from the rural Midwest" in language, worship style, faith healing, and focusing on the social needs of the community (8-9). Moreover, an alliance of African American and Latino Mennonites in the late 1960s and early 1970s that drew on the larger civil rights movement of the time helped "shape and define ethnic and religious identity for Latinos in the Mennonite Church" (3).

Hinojosa makes his case by tracing Mennonite missions in Chicago and south Texas barrios as far back as the 1920s and 1930s. As the MC moved outward during World War II and after by combining evangelism and social service, Latinos in Puerto Rico as well as the Midwest and Texas began to form Mennonite communities of their own. By 1968, Latinos joined with African American Mennonites in a race conference connected with the MC's Urban Racial Council, which, in turn, became the Minority Ministries Council a year later. Despite unease over African American dominance of the council, Latino Mennonites "resonated even more with the religious and Protestant underpinnings of the black freedom movement and preachers like Martin Luther King Jr." than with Latin American liberation theology (78). Hinojosa shows that the farmworker movement, a cross-cultural youth convention in 1972, and MC women's conferences were each part of the mix that further fostered Latino Mennonites "staking out a political space in the church by drafting policy statements, planting more than 50 congregations, publishing

Mennonite literature in Spanish, and organizing a Bible school” (175). Such developments were important in shaping the new 2001 Mennonite Church USA, which “is today more evangelical, more politically involved, and more urban, and its Latino and African American members . . . more charismatic in their worship styles” (214) than was the “Old” MC.

So what do these three volumes of cutting-edge religious history research have to do with Iowa and the Midwest? Iowa is virtually invisible in each. Further, each book is about a minority group in a minority Protestant denomination. Neither the Assemblies of God nor the Mennonite Church USA has replaced Roman Catholicism, the Lutheran denominations, or the United Methodist Church as one of Iowa’s top religious groups in numbers or influence. Yet. The reconfiguring of American religion continues apace, and it includes evangelicalism. Evangelicalism has always been broader in compass, belief, and practice than its most combative proponents might suggest.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, the books reviewed here offer strong reasons to avoid, in Hinojosa’s words, “the narrow interpretation of ‘evangelicalism’ as yet another code for white Protestant American identity” (8). African American churches—largely Protestant—have always had an uneasy place within evangelicalism. These three books help show that American Indian and Latino Protestants also do not fully conform to white evangelical notions of doctrinal purity, worship decorum, political conservatism, or individualism.

Further, both the Assemblies of God and the Mennonite Church USA are denominations with midwestern headquarters (in Missouri and Indiana-Kansas, respectively). Denominational web directories indicate that out of 19 Mennonite congregations in Iowa, two are Latino, and that out of 130 AG congregations in Iowa, one is Native American and five are Latino. As Iowa’s population continues to change, these numbers are likely to increase. These three books can help us understand a bit better not just important streams within American evangelicalism but some of Iowa’s present and future religious landscape as well.

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7. For a recent study of evangelicalism that seeks to make this point, among others, see Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York, 2014).