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Brusco's "The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia" - Book Review

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Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995). x + 203pp. \$16.75 paper.

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This book was published in 1995 and has been influential in subsequent sociological studies of the impact of evangelical Protestantism in relation to gender roles. However, it has perhaps received less attention than deserved in Pentecostal circles, a situation this review seeks to remedy.

Elizabeth Brusco studied a network of evangelicals in both rural and urban Colombia in the early 1980s. She lived for an extended period in Protestant homes in both areas, travelled with a Bible Society representative, attended church services, and carried out extensive interviews. As a North American, she was working as an outsider though her upbringing as a Lutheran gained her entrance into Lutheran and other Protestant circles in Colombia (though some of her informants questioned both her salvation and filling by the Holy Spirit).

Focusing on the role of women, her data confirms other studies indicating that conversion to evangelical Protestantism results in better conditions for women. While acknowledging that male conversion strengthens the family because income may no longer be spent on alcohol, tobacco, or illicit affairs, she concludes that evangelicalism changes common patterns for male Colombians most significantly by rupturing the external rather than home-oriented focus of Colombian *machismo*. Thus, men and women find themselves working together toward the common good of the family unit. Brusco asserts that conversion has much more ideological power (and success) than political or feminist movements in elevating the status of women (136). In sum, "The machismo role and the

male role defined by evangelicalism are almost diametrical opposites. Aggression, violence, pride, self-indulgence, and an individualistic orientation in the public sphere are replaced by peace seeking, humility, self-restraint, and a collective orientation and identity within the church and the home. . . .the boundaries of public (male) life and private (female) life are redrawn. . . .”(137).

This book is nuanced in many ways. For example, all Latin American countries share a history of Roman Catholic domination and ties between the Church and government; many have experienced civil war or other forms of violence, and most have also undergone a significant rural-urban shift. Brusco describes in detail how these historic commonalities play out uniquely in Colombia. The section on persecution of Protestants during *La violencia* is particularly poignant. One weakness might be that Brusco barely acknowledges the guerrilla and paramilitary groups, along with the drug cartels, that were affecting all of the country but certainly Bogotá even at the time of her research. This is clearly not the focus of her work, but must have been affecting her subjects in some degree.

Brusco gives great attention to careful definitions – exploring, for example, multiple views of feminism, *machismo* and thoughtfully contrasting Marxist and Weberian ideas of progress with what she terms the “prosperity ethic” of Colombian evangelicalism. Brusco acknowledges studies on these and other topics across many cultures, carefully analyzing how they may or may not apply to the Colombian context.

While the theoretical sections may prove difficult to the non-social scientist, the case studies and rich descriptions of family and religious life provided throughout the book and in the appendix hold the reader’s interest. Of particular interest to *Pneuma* subscribers may be the chapter devoted to describing the face of evangelical Protestantism in Colombia,

an identity “not accurately glossed by any of the religious categories commonly found in the United States” (15). Brusco claims that *evangélicos* in Colombia cluster together as an opposition movement to the Catholic Church, who highly value Bible reading (10). She notes that while traditional churches such as Presbyterians and Lutherans initiated work in Colombia, they have not grown as exponentially as have Pentecostals, and charismatic styles of worship have made strong inroads into liturgical congregations (28). She briefly describes the Iglesia Pentecostal Unida de Colombia (IPU), an oneness denomination that was the largest single Pentecostal organization in the country at the time of her research, with around 850 churches (25). This church and others, she observes, open paths to leadership for women in the ladies groups which may represent the majority of the congregation (28). In a later section, Brusco elaborates on how the acceptance of women as teachers shapes the content and delivery of church teachings (129-34). She describes how the emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers” encourages women to participate, allows anyone called into the pastorate in the IPU to become a pastor without seminary training (27-28), and encourages reading and other quasi-academic pursuits that prepare young people for success in higher education, thus promoting upward mobility (126-27).

This description provides a snapshot of evangelical, not exclusively Pentecostal, churches in Colombia (and feminist theory) in the 1980s. Brusco noted that much had changed in the Colombian church since Flora’s 1976 study (*Pentecostalism in Colombia: Baptist by Fire and Spirit*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses), and indeed, the current state of the church in Colombia in 2013 is not what it was in 1982. However, in addition to describing many churches in Colombia as they were, it sheds ground-breaking light on the influence of conversion on gender roles in the specific case of Colombia, with

implications that have been explored by researchers in many other settings around the world, and touching on issues that readers of Margaret Lamberts Bendroth (Yale University Press, 1993), Mark Chaves (Harvard University Press, 1999), and José Leonardo Santos (Lexington books, 2012) will recognize.