

2018

Latina/o Conversion and Miracle-Seeking at a Buddhist Temple

Stephen M. Cherry

Kemal Budak

Aida I. Ramos

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/lang_fac

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Latina/o Conversion and Miracle-Seeking at a Buddhist Temple

Stephen M. Cherry¹ · Kemal Budak² ·
Aida I. Ramos³

Abstract The growing diversification of the US Latino religious' experiences calls for scholarly attention beyond Protestant or Catholic categories. This study begins to answer this call. Using interview data with 26 Latinos collected over 2 years of observation at the True Lama Meditation Center (TLMC) in Houston, Texas, we describe how Latinos who convert to Buddhism or actively attend the temple while also continuing to attend Christian services (both Catholic and Protestant) see themselves and understand their religious identities and practices. We then explore the reasons for their conversion or changes in religious identities and practices through various theoretical lens. Although the majority of respondents now claim to be Buddhist, many did not switch religions but augmented or extended their religious identities and practices. Reasons for conversion to Buddhism or concurrent involvement at the temple and Buddhist faith practices include seeking material support and miracles and those seeking spiritual fulfillment they felt they were not getting in Christian faith practices.

Keywords Latina/os · Buddhism · Conversion · Switching · Catholicism

Introduction

As the sun goes down on an unusually cold Monday in November in Houston, Texas, a crowd of over 250 people gathers to worship at True Lama Meditation Center (TLMC).¹

¹All names and locations are pseudonyms.

✉ Kemal Budak
kemal.budak@emory.edu

¹ University of Houston—Clear Lake, 2700 Bay Area Blvd, Suite Bayou 1508, Houston, TX 77058, USA

² Emory University, 1555 Dickey Dr., Atlanta, GA 30322, USA

³ George Fox University, 414 N. Meridian St., Newberg, OR 97132, USA

Master Chu, a first-generation Vietnamese monk who somewhat follows the Pure Land Buddhist tradition (Mahayana), founded TLMC in the late 1980s to serve the local Vietnamese community in Stafford, a suburb of the Houston metropolitan area. However, today, the temple's congregation is split into two populations—one that is relatively small and Vietnamese that meets on Saturdays and another that is overwhelmingly Latino of various ages, socio-economic statuses, and national backgrounds that meets on Mondays. According to temple staff, upwards of 90% of the any given service at TLMC is Latino. There are a few Vietnamese practitioners who attend during Latino gatherings, but it is sparse. The majority of the Vietnamese congregation comes on different days, but mostly on Saturdays.²

Although we will further contextualize/describe TLMC in coming sections, a typical Monday service begins with a community potluck dinner where Latina (mostly women) congregants share food over lively and, at times, deeply personal conversation about life and religion. After the communal meal, people line up outside the temple in the backyard near a stage surrounded by various Buddhist images and statues because the meditation hall in the temple cannot accommodate the entire crowd. Master Chu and a Spanish interpreter begin the evening service by telling stories about the Buddha's life or how to properly meditate followed by testimonials from Latinos in the audience, typically in Spanish, about how they have benefited, even been healed, by following Chu's teachings about Karma and the Buddhist path to enlightenment. The stories range from finding jobs to being healed from fatal diseases like cancer. Each week is filled with new miraculous narratives, interpreted from Spanish to English for the Master, who in turn comments on each testimonial (Freemantle 2013).

The service ends with the recitation of mantras in Vietnamese and Sanskrit. After the service, a Latina shares her story with one of the researchers about finally being able to conceive after attending the temple. Others talk about being able to get a green card or how their relationships improved as a result of following the Buddha's teachings. Although a few openly discuss why they left their former churches and now consider themselves Buddhists, many make it clear that they have not necessarily left their former churches but are now attending both and consider themselves Catholic and Buddhist or unaffiliated.

Latino Buddhists, however small in number they may be, are part of a larger pattern of religious switching or shifting religious identities and practices among foreign-born and American-born Latinos. An estimated 32% of the Latinos no longer belong to the religion in which they were raised. Most have switched to evangelical Protestantism or have become religiously unaffiliated (Mulder et al. 2017; Pew 2014; Ramos et al. 2017). Overall, this marks a small but significant change in Latino religious affiliation since 2007 and a pattern that is even more striking among Catholics (Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998; Espinosa et al. 2005; Greely 1994; Hunt 1999; Pew 2014). Roughly 77% of the American Latinos say they were raised Catholic. In 2014, 48% stated that they were still Catholic with nearly 24% stating that they had left the faith (Pew 2014). The largest net gains in religious affiliation as a result of these switching trends is Latino Protestantism and the religiously unaffiliated (Espinosa et al. 2005; Mulder et al. 2017; Pew 2014; others). While we have begun to learn more about

² We do not know the proportion of Latino to Vietnamese attendees at TLMC because of the high circulation of members and the lack of membership tracking by the temple.

Latino conversion to Protestantism, we know very little about religiously unaffiliated Latinos and how they see themselves and their spiritual lives. We know even less about Latino religious identities and practices in the context of other faith traditions.

Using data collected 2 years of observation at TLMC, including interviews with 26 foreign-born Latinos, we describe how Latinos who convert to Buddhism or actively attend the temple in addition to Christian services see themselves and understand their religious identities and practices. We then explore the reasons for their conversion or changes in practice and identities through various theoretical lens that help to explain these decisions. We close with a discussion on limitations and the implications of Latino Buddhist identities on the religious landscape of the USA.

Literature Review

Over the last several decades, numerous studies have increasingly theorized about and examined the reasons why Americans switch religions, but less research has explored religious mobility among Latinos (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Hunt 1999; Musick and Wilson 1995; Perl et al. 2006; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Skirbekk et al. 2010; Sullins 1993). Even less have explored Latino switching trends outside of Christianity (Bowen 2013; Martinez-Vazquez 2010; Steigenga and Cleary 2007). The majority of previous studies have focused on Latino Catholic conversion to Protestantism, often focusing on conversion after being raised Catholic (Hunt 1999; Perl et al. 2006; Ramos et al. 2017). There are several theoretical frameworks that have been mobilized to explain religious switching. These include (1) theories of assimilation, (2) national origins theories, and (3) rational choice theories on religious switching. Conversely, we also consider (4) theories of religious syncretism for those who do not switch religions but augment and extend their religious identities and practices.

First, assimilation theories have been prominently used to explain why Latinos immigrating to the USA are switching religions, particularly to Protestantism, given its majority status in the country (Hunt 1999; Mulder et al. 2017; Perl et al. 2006; Ramos et al. 2017). As Latinos live longer in the USA, over time they may incorporate or adopt more American cultural practices and norms (Zhou 1997). However, assimilation is largely no longer considered a singular and universal outcome for all immigrants but an incremental process that can occur along a host of paths across a single generation or multiple generations depending on the immigrant group, the circumstances of their immigration and a host of other contexts (Alba and Nee 1997). Whereas classical assimilation theories highlight intermarriage between immigrants and natives as well as switching religions as the litmus test of assimilation, measuring the degree to which immigrant ethnic boundaries would be blurred by these couples eventually having children of mix backgrounds or the degree to which immigrants convert to white Anglo-Saxon Protestant religious norms, contemporary theories have increasingly challenged and reshaped these views (Alba and Nee 1997; Glick 2010; Gordon 1964; Lee 2009; Mulder et al. 2017; Perl et al. 2006).

Contemporary theories, including but not limited to the segmented assimilation approach, suggest that assimilation and incorporation depend on and are influenced by the larger social environments groups immigrate to and the complexities of their

various individual group adaptations and behaviors (Alba and Nee 1997; Glick 2010; Gordon 1964; Lee 2009; Mulder et al. 2017; Perl et al. 2006). These contexts, in turn, influence the degree to which immigrants may intermarry or switch religions (Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2015; Perl et al. 2006). It is often not a linear process. However, linear assimilation can and does occur resulting in several paths by which immigrants assimilate—and this may or may not include intermarriage or any subsequent changes in the religion in which they were raised (Bohra-Mishra and Massey 2015; Perl et al. 2006). This may also occur because immigrants want to identify more with the dominant culture, because they are status seeking or rather are switching as a function of their socio-economic circumstance and values, particularly among women (Brusco 2010; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Wilson 1966). This appears to be the case for many Latinos who switch to Protestantism (Calvillo and Bailey 2015; Hunt 1999; Navarro-Rivera et al. 2010).

Second, national origin matters. Latino Catholic switching to Protestantism is a result of a larger historical process in Latin America. Roughly 60% of the Latinos living in the USA who have switched their religion from what they were raised in are foreign-born (Pew 2014). Among those who are foreign-born, roughly 24% converted before they immigrated (30% after) (Pew 2014; Ramos et al. 2017). Latin America comprises a rather diverse group of people, each with a different historical and contemporary relationship to Catholicism and Protestantism depending on the specific country or region (Zhou 1997). Although there is significant evidence to suggest that Protestantism, particularly Evangelicalism and other Pentecostal or charismatic groups, has grown tremendously across all of Latin America, the largest net gains for Protestants has been in Central America—30% of the Guatemalans, 22% of the Salvadorans, and 18% of the Hondurans and Nicaraguans (Barret et al. 2001; Pew 2014). One of the central reasons why these trends of have emerged is civil war and regional violence in many of these countries. This has resulted in the Catholic Church removing priests and paved the way for lay-led Protestants to fill the void (Brusco 2010; Ramos et al. 2017).

Third, rational choice theory has also been used to explain Latino conversion. Rational choice theory suggests that people approach decisions such as religious switching by evaluating the costs and benefits of those decisions and then acting on them in ways that maximize benefits and minimize the costs (Iannaccone 1995, 1997; Sherkat 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1987). These benefits may include physical and material returns—better health, jobs and wealth, or greater spiritual and religious goods such as internal peace, alignment with inner values, promises of salvation and/or existential security and emotional inspiration (Mulder et al. 2017; Ramos et al. 2017). Other extensions of this theory have considered social contexts (i.e., “social embeddedness”) of a religious decision and go beyond a mere calculation of costs and benefits (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). In this line of thought, social sanctions by one’s community shape the people’s religious decisions. However, in the Latino case, those who live in areas with higher concentrations of other Latinos have not been found to convert less than those in areas with a lower concentration of Latinos (Ramos et al. 2017). Likewise, another work has found that for some Latinos, conversion was not simply a strategic calculation to gain benefits or to avoid sanctions, but instead a result of them finding themselves moving into Protestantism unintentionally (Marquardt 2005). Protestant churches provided freedom in religious practice that Latinos felt they

did not have in their former Catholic congregations. Some Latinos in Latino Protestant congregations even still identify as Catholic (Marquardt 2005; Mulder et al. 2017). In interviews with Latino converts, their motivations for conversion were more tied to the supernatural experiences of closeness to God than to gaining social benefits and minimal costs (Mulder et al. 2017).

Fourth, beyond the more common theories and lenses used by previous scholars to explain Latino conversion or religious switching in general, frameworks of religious syncretism that partially build on rational choice assumptions are important for explaining the context of individuals who retain one identity or a set of religious practices while also attending and practicing aspects of other faith traditions (Sigalov 2016). Theoretically, in a free religious marketplace such as the USA, where the First Amendment protects religious liberties and fosters open religious competition, you might expect to find a high degree of religious syncretism, barrowing and mixing—at least on an individual basis (Finke and Stark 2005). Data over the last several decades appear to support this trend (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Roughly one third of all Americans (35%) say they regularly or occasionally attend religious services at more than one place, and most of these (24% of the public overall) suggest that they sometimes attend religious services of a faith different from their own or that of their birth (Pew 2009). Although it might seem that the growth of interracial/ethnic couples, particularly those of diverse faith traditions, are the central cause for this trend, people who are married to a spouse from a faith different from their own are neither more nor less likely to attend multiple types of religious services (Ibid).

Those who attend another faith tradition or actively engage in religious practice outside of their own faith identity are not participating in random religious dabbling or haphazard spiritual seeking but making intentional choices (Roof 1999; Wuthnow 2007). In a study about religious syncretism among Jewish Buddhists (Sigalov 2016), these choices are made in the context of (a) cultural availability, (b) the absence of historical tension between religious groups, (sc) perceived compatibility, and (d) the degree of religious organizational freedom or strictness of each faith tradition. Groups from similar social locations or those who share similar religious backgrounds tend to have more exchanges than those of dissimilar backgrounds, especially if there is no history of conflict between these groups and if they are perceived as compatible or similar philosophically/theologically (McPherson et al. 2001). Americans increasingly rate Buddhism as warm on social thermometers. Those who are not Buddhist themselves but know someone who is Buddhist, for example, are more likely to rate Buddhism warmer than any other faith tradition (Pew 2017). This context appears to be increasingly important.

Although Buddhism's compatibility with Christian traditions, ostensibly seems an unlikely pairing, some scholars find them similar theologically. For example, Grumett and Plant (2012) suggest that there is a connection specifically between Pure Land Buddhism and Catholicism: "Pure Land Buddhism should be viewed not simply as a brand of atheism but as a body of varied teaching in which truths may be found that are capable of informing Roman Catholic theology" (p. 68). Other scholars note how some Asian immigrants in the USA find compatibility across religious practices and philosophies between Buddhism and Christianity, despite church leaders speaking out against the mixing of the two religions (Douglas 2005; Perreira 2004). Since Buddhist leaders do not typically speak out against this mixing (although some may quietly disapprove),

it points to the organizational flexibility and loose structural boundaries in American Buddhism that allows for more freedom to engage in religious syncretism (Iannacone 1994; Sigalow 2016). In the Vietnamese context, this should not be all that surprising considering that one of the fastest growing religious tradition in Vietnam today, Cao Dai faith, has historically mixed or united Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism with elements of Christianity—specifically Roman Catholicism (Ninh 2010). What this means for Latino Christians who attend Buddhist temples or practice both faith traditions is less clear and one of the driving questions of this study.

Setting/Context

True Lama Meditation Center (TLMC), as noted in the introduction, was founded in the 1980s by Master Chu, a first-generation Vietnamese Buddhist monk who immigrated to the USA after the Vietnam War. Although Master Chu loosely follows the Pure Land Buddhist tradition (Mahayana) by directing his congregation to seek repentance and protection through praying to the Buddha Amitabha for a favorable rebirth in the Pure Land, the name of the center and other practices followed by Master Chu resemble those of the Truc Lam Zen School of Vietnamese Buddhism (Thich 2007). As such, TLMC can best be described as a new religious movement and religiously syncretic. However, this is not unique to TLMC but actually very common in Vietnam and across the USA in other Vietnamese Buddhist communities.

Pure Land Vietnamese Buddhism is the most widely practiced type of Buddhism in Vietnam, but it does not have a strong centralized structure and hence has historically taken on many influences, including that of Truc Lam Zen which is one of the oldest meditative traditions in the nation (sometime between 1258 and 1308) (Thich 2007). The intermixing of Pure Land Buddhism practices with Zen mindfulness meditation was widely popularized both before and after the Vietnam War by Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned Vietnamese monk and social activist, who called the re-emergence of this form of Buddhist practice “Engaged Buddhism” (Hanh 1967). In diaspora, Thich Nhat Hanh became a cultural ambassador for Vietnamese Buddhism and an inspiration for many who fled Vietnam, including Master Chu. Although Master Chu does not teach Engaged Buddhism per se, his approach to meditation is similar to Vietnamese Zen (Truc Lam). Conversely, his view on miracles is more grounded in the Pure Land tradition and a belief that all is possible through the Buddha Amitabha.

Vietnamese Buddhism came to the USA in two waves—one during the Vietnam War and a second after the fall of Saigon. Today, 43% of the Vietnamese Americans are Buddhist, the largest percentage of any Asian American population (Pew 2012). However, only 33% of the American Buddhist are Asian and only 26% are foreign-born (Pew 2014). Buddhism is growing in the USA, by some estimates upwards of 170% growth between 1990 and 2000; yet, many scholars are unsure whether these estimates are accurate given that many Americans, regardless of their ethnic and racial background or nativity, might engage in various forms of Buddhism and not necessarily identify themselves as Buddhist on surveys (Bailey 2010). Buddhism is now the third largest religious tradition in the USA but the impact of Vietnamese Buddhism on this growth outside of immigration has been relatively unexplored (Thich 2007). The majority of Americans who self-identify as Buddhist are white converts (44%) (Fields

1992; Pew 2014). Surprisingly, 12% of the American Buddhists are Latino but little to no research has explored why or how they are Buddhist, if Vietnamese Buddhism played a role in their religious journeys or what they actually believe and practice.

Compared to studies in other hemispheres, Buddhism in South America has been relatively unexplored outside of Nichiren groups in Brazil who are largely Japanese immigrants or non-Japanese converts to Zen or Soka Gakkai traditions (see for example da Rocha 2005; Metraux 2014; Usarski 2012; Usarski and Shoji 2016). Although none of the respondents in our study are from Brazil or of Brazilian heritage, the Brazilian case is important in that the majority of non-Japanese converts to Buddhism in these studies were largely Catholic prior to becoming Buddhists. These populations either found Buddhism more spiritually fulfilling or flexible enough to maintain a loose connection to their former religion (Da Rocha 2005; Usarski and Shoji 2016). It is also important to note that many Zen and Soka Gakkai centers in Brazil, and elsewhere, actively seek converts through innovative marketing strategies and recruitment (Metraux 2014). Outside of this, and a few cases in Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela, there is no evidence of significant and widespread Buddhist proselytization in South America, particularly in Central America where the majority of our respondents come from (Mair 2014; Noguchi 2008; also see discussion in Usarski (2012)).

Historically, Buddhism's presence in South and Central America is the result of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigration to countries such as Brazil, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela during the early nineteenth century (Gil 2007; Holland 2010; Noguchi 2008; Mair 2014; Quintero 2008; Usarski 2012; Usarski and Shoji 2016).³ In most cases, these groups remained relatively small in population size and did not proselytize. However, this is not the case with Japanese migration to Latin America prior to World War II (Materson and Funda-Classen 2003). Japanese immigrants in Mexico, for example, like Brazil, actively spread Soka Gakkai Buddhism (Masayuki 1991). Although none of our respondents were Buddhist prior to their immigration to the USA and Master Chu as well as TLMC have no institutional or historical/ideological ties to Soka Gakkai, the spread of Buddhism in Mexico, while relatively small in scope, is important to our current study. Much like the cases in Brazil, the majority of non-Japanese converts were former Catholics (also see discussion of Soka Gakkai Latino American conversion in Strand (2003)). More importantly, the reasons Mexicans stated they converted to Buddhism was frustration and dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church, a search for miracles or monetary rewards and spiritual fulfillment (see discussion in Masayuki (1991)).

Method

Data

Data were collected over 2 years of observation at the True Lama Medication Center (2014–2015). In addition to regularly attending weekly religious services and doing

³ Although verifiable statistics are often incomplete or missing, there are an estimated 287 to 600 Buddhist centers in Latin America with anywhere from 150,000 to 920,000 adherents (less than 1% of the Latin American population depending on the country (see Arda 2010; Usarski 2012; Da Rocha 2016).

occasional observations in various days of a week at the temple, and informally interviewing Latinos in attendance with the aid of a Spanish interpreter (if needed), we also formally interviewed 26 Latino of various backgrounds who attend TLMC drawing on a snowball sample. Since none of the authors are members of the temple and as such were outsiders, respondents were selected by those they interacted with at the temple during observation and by word-of-mouth recommendation. Being an outsider posed no issues to access nor did it impact respondent willingness or openness to participation, because the temple is accustomed to having new visitors each week. In fact, many first-timers come to the temple upon the recommendation of Master Chu after they first met with him in his office during counseling and advice sessions. He sees almost 60 people, 6 days a week. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish depending on the language preferences and/or proficiencies of the respondents. Before each audio recorded interview, a brief demographic survey, written in English and Spanish, was given to the respondents.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a line of questioning along several themes: (1) demographic background, including nativity; (2) religion of upbringing/parents; (3) current religious identity/affiliation and the importance of religion in lives; (4) why they attend TLMC; and (5) views on Buddhism and Christianity. Among the 26 interviewees, the final sample is 61% female (39% male) with an average age of 36 (in years). Thirty-three percent of the sample is married and 56% single with the remainder either divorced or some other status. Sixty-six percent of the sample has children with an average of two per household. Sixty-five percent of the sample is foreign-born (35% US born) with 35% born in Mexico, 16% in El Salvador, 5% in Ecuador, 5% in Peru, and 4% in Nicaragua.

The average education is less than high school with only 5% with some college or a bachelor's degree (67% with a high school education). Although our respondents uniformly refused to answer questions about their household income, their educational attainment likely places them in lower socio-economic circumstances based on these educational attainment figures as well as the observation researchers made at the temple. This is particularly true of those who have less than a high school education and are of an undocumented legal status. The median household income of the area TLMC is located is US\$39,787 (US Census Bureau 2010). This number is well below the averages of Houston (US\$46,187) and Harris County (US\$54,457). TLMC is also very close to two Houston suburbs whose median household income is US\$58,780 and US\$89,152 respectively. However, the congregants at TLMC report that they travel to the center from many different zip codes and thus the median income and education of both the center's location and its surrounding area do not necessarily reflect the socio-economic status of those who attend services. In fact, many respondents report attending the center solely to find employment.

Drawing on a phenomenological approach, interviews were hand-coded for emergent themes by one of the authors. Several themes emerged across three domains. The first domain, *religious identity*, produced several themes—(a) Latinos who converted to Buddhism, (b) those who remained Catholic but attend TLMC, (c) those who now consider themselves Catholic and Buddhist, and (d) those who identify as unaffiliated. The second domain, *religious participation*, produced two themes—(a) Latinos who attend both Catholic and Buddhist services and (b) those who exclusively attend TLMC. The third domain, *context and causes of switching*, produced three main

themes with considerable variation with each. These themes are (a) Latinos who attend TLMC seeking material support, (b) those seeking miracles, and (c) those seeking spiritual fulfillment. Exploring these themes allowed us to better understand what the switching experience meant to our respondents, when it occurred and why, while also being sensitive and inclusive in our approach to their explanations (Moustakas 1994).

Results

Identity, Conversion, and Commitment

Buddhism does not appear to be a strong or majority influencing force on the religious identities of our respondents prior to immigration from Latin America nor is it a significant factor in the American religious landscape to which they migrate. As a result, national origins, whether it is Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Peru, appear to have little to no influence on how Latinos who attend TLMC religiously identify. This is consistent with previous studies of Latino switching (Pew 2014). However, Catholicism, as we will see, does appear to be a more salient force in how they see themselves, despite the frequency of where they attend religious services.

While much of the literature on religious switching has focused on a single change of faith tradition, Latinos who attend TLMC have not necessarily switched from one religion to another. Many who now attend the temple consider themselves as affiliates/members of two religions and are active in both (Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Marquardt 2005; Musick and Wilson 1995; Mulder et al. 2017; Pew 2014; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Sullins 1993). Some still consider themselves to be Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant, despite being active at TLMC, while others claim to have no affiliation at all. As such, the majority of our cases appear to be extended or augmented identities and practice versus a complete switching. How they identify, in many cases, does not necessarily capture what they practice, believe or where they attend.

The majority of our respondents (45%), all of whom were raised in a Christian denomination (95% Catholic), now claim to be Buddhist. For example, Santiago, a 20-year-old man from Ecuador who was raised Catholic but now self-identifies as Buddhist stated,

So, it's not that I lost my [Catholic] faith, I just lost my attention to that sort of action within religion because your body is your own temple. Your room is your temple. The house can be a church. Really it don't [sic] matter your location, it depends on what you're doing and what you're saying. So, we [parents and I] left the whole religion thing on the side... It really doesn't matter if you go to church... [At TLMC] I've learned a lot. I've seen people go through the good and bad and [I've heard people] spoke of miracles.

Santiago's words are typical of other respondents who describe their Buddhist identity as somehow non-religious and more spiritual. Emely, who was born in Mexico and has been going to TLMC for 3 years, considers herself to be Buddhist but her parents who also attend the temple with her consider themselves to be *both* Buddhist

and Catholic. “They [parents] don’t really go to Mass on Sundays that much but they hold to their old identity... I am Buddhist.” However, identifying as Buddhist does not preclude her or other Latinos from attending religious services at Christina churches. Fatima, a former Catholic that now self-identifies as Buddhist, stated that she attends weekly Mass at a local Catholic church in addition to her weekly attendance at TLMC. “I’ve been coming here [TLMC] for like three years... but yes, I [also] go to church.”

Others we spoke with who attend services at both TLMC and a Christian church, largely at Catholic Masses, stated that they see themselves as unaffiliated but under similar terms as the descriptions Santiago and Fatima give above. Daniel, a 33-year-old man old from Mexico and former Protestant, for example, explained that he regularly attends services at TLMC, but now considers himself to be unaffiliated. “I just don’t think religion is in one place, it’s like free about, so I’m just a spiritual person who goes where it feels right...I can’t really call myself a Christian or Buddhist, but I come here twice a week, you know for service and help Master [Chu].” Latinos, like Daniel, who identify as unaffiliated or claim no religious preference make up roughly 11% of our sample and largely do not see Buddhism as a religion. Jesus, for example, a Mexican American who has been attending TLMC for 10 years, stated, “I really can’t say religion is important to me because I don’t really have religion...” When asked why he attends services once a week, he suggested, “It’s really peaceful... I think as long as you follow your faith and do good actions... You’re good to go.”

Those who claim to be both Buddhist and Catholic, roughly 28% of our sample, see the two religious identities as harmonious in practice and philosophy. This is also true of those who still claim to be Catholic only but regularly attend both their churches and TLMC or TLMC exclusively. Eighteen percent of our sample state that they have never changed their faith tradition and remain devoutly Catholic. They also state that Master Chu encourages them to maintain their Christian faith. Cristela, for example, a 28-year-old woman from old Salvador who was raised Catholic and still considers herself Catholic, stated, “Master [Chu] encourages me to stay Catholic, so I have...God is everywhere you know, that’s why I still go to Mass every week and then come here for the Master’s advice also.” Likewise, Brian, a Columbian who lives at the temple but still considers himself Catholic and prays regularly to God and Christian Saints, suggested that Master Chu does not want to convert people. “He wants people to become the best version of being a Catholic, best version of becoming a Christian or the best version of their own religion, to practice. And not just pray, you know, to something that comes from a book.”

Many that we spoke to did not see Master Chu as a master per se but a teacher or guide. Corey, for example, who considers himself “a quarter Hispanic” born in the USA and raised by “100% Hispanic grandparents,” still considers himself Christian but only loosely. “[Master Chu] is more a teacher for me... Not a master or anything like that. I mean, he is a master in the sense of what he does and I completely acknowledge that but as a master for me, I see him as a teacher... [Buddhism] it’s not really a religion.” Others we spoke to, like Manuel, a 46-year-old man from Mexico raised Catholic who still self-identifies as Catholic, see Buddhism as a practice versus a religion and thus still see themselves as very Catholic, despite regular attendance at TLMC:

I never heard of Buddhism because Mexico is like all Catholic... I really understand it’s [Buddhism] is a practice about how to be a better human being and

change your life. You can't help others if you don't help yourself. That's what is meditation, it's spiritual. If you are not spiritual you cannot be close to God and I believe God wants us to be close. Being here [TLMC] makes church more special. They support each other and I don't feel like I have to stop being Catholic.

This was a very typical response across those we interviewed.

For example, Mariana, a 26-year-old from El Salvador who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic, stated, echoing the sentiment of Manuel above, "Religion is very important to me. My parents are very Catholic, so I've followed their traditions... being here [TLMC] is part of my Catholic faith, it's like spiritual and good; I respect Buddhism, but I am still very Catholic and still attend my parents' church every weekend." Similarly, Dora, a 57-year-old Peruvian who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic, stated, "I'm Catholic; I'm going to Mass every Sunday... They [friends and family] think that I am crazy but as a normal person, you have to be open minded." Clearly Catholicism remains a salient force and influence on Latino identity in migration to the USA, but, as we have seen, regardless of how the Latinos self-identify, many still attend services at both TLMC and their local church. Master Chu himself, in his weekly service, frequently emphasizes the importance of devotion to their original faith by saying, "Continue to be a good Catholic. Continue to read your Bible." As a result, respondents like Marcella and Santiago pointed out the fact that they started reading Bible more after attending the TLMC. This eclectic approach is something Master Chu welcomes and encourages.

Why Latinos Switch or Actively Attend Services at a Buddhist Temple

According to a recent Pew Research Center study (2014), only 31% of the Latinos who say they have left their childhood religion state that the reason they left is because they had found a congregation that reaches out and helps its members more. However, the Latinos in our study overwhelmingly stated that the causes for their switching or attendance at TLMC were for this reason. Whether this help is physical and monetary or more spiritual and religious, Latinos who attend TLMC are drawn to the temple because they believe they receive something beneficial by attending—something they were not receiving at Christian institutions. Additionally, Latinos found it freeing to leave the normative religious structure of their Christian faiths for the flexibility in Buddhist worship. Some respondents emphasized the constant monetary requests by their former Christian church compared to TLMC, where there is no community pressure for donations. Looking at this in greater depth, we explore these decisions and the meanings/contexts associated with them in the following sections. We break our analysis into two discussions, (1) Latinos seeking material support and miracles and (2) and those seeking spiritual fulfillment.

Seeking Support with Material Struggles and Miracles

Explaining further why he thinks so many Latinos, like himself, attend TLMC, Antonio,⁴ a former Protestant born in Mexico who self-identifies as Buddhist, states that most Latinos are tired of being asked for money in Christian institutions when they

⁴ One of the few college-educated congregants among the respondents.

might not have any or get very little in return for their investment. This theme of church requesting money appeared a few times in the interviews.

Nobody wants to have a veil[ed] sales pitch thrown to them all the time which is which you get that the uh, in the church. In the church, you're expected to pay 10 percent religion tax and whatever else you decide to... I think people come here for both physical and spiritual reasons... You're probably familiar with Maslow's hierarchy and needs, so if you don't have food on the table, if you don't have a source for your personal living and it's a little bit difficult to spend any time or consideration on spiritual needs. One has to follow the other. So, the people want to know about God, want to have a good relationship with God or a God or a source of goodness, if they can't meet their basic needs then there's no real value in pursuing understanding about God if you can't put food on the table.

Expressing a similar sentiment, Christopher, a 25-year-old second-generation Mexican-American man and former Catholic who now self-identifies as a Buddhist stated

[There were requests for] a lot of donations also. It was three times sometimes, sometimes three times at one time. Three times donations that's a lot of donations. Sometimes they [Catholic Church] wouldn't explain what the donations were for...sometimes you don't have the money.

Beyond concerns about not having the money to donate or not getting much in return, many Latinos we interviewed suggested that they actually received material rewards from Master Chu without giving money to the temple—a high return with little investment beyond time. Jorge, for example, a former Catholic who now considers himself a Buddhist, stated

Miracles happen [here] all the time. I mean there's so many it's hard to keep track of. We were driving here today and my wife says, oh, by the way we get free electricity again this month. Oh really, how did that happen? Well, I noticed on the account that they said we overpaid again last month so they gave us free electricity. If you're here on Monday nights you hear some people [say] somehow extra money got into my bank account. It was wonderful, just when I needed it, you know things like that happen a lot. This is the second time. That particular one has happened in the last 4 months or so.

Likewise, Luis, a 46-year-old man from Mexico raised Catholic but now self-identifies as Buddhist, expressed a similar experience:

I was raised in the Catholic Church...yeah, but to be honest with you, yeah, I stop going to the Catholic Church... I mean since I learned a little bit more from the Buddhist, something in my life happen[ed], [that] never happened to [to me in] the Catholic Church. So, that's made me continue to come lot more in [to the] Buddhist [temple]; I don't say that [the] Catholic Church [is] wrong or is bad but I respect... every religion...I don't say I make the one side to the Catholic. I love—I do have a love in that religion [Catholicism] but, I [have] never seen in the Catholic [church]

what I see here in the Buddhist [temple]. Miracles... I lost my job and then I started to practice whatever he [master] teach me before I lost my job and after couple—like three or four months my agent call me back to get the job.

Adriana, a 36-year-old Salvadorian woman raised Catholic who now identifies as Catholic and Buddhists also stated

I am more spiritual than I am religious... people are coming from lower financial classes [to the temple]. So, they need somebody who can teach them how to achieve their goals. The miraculous magic thing can't happen all the time. Working hard is the only thing to succeed in life. A lot them [sic] lost their way because it is hard for them to connect when they come here [U.S.]. Everything here is not like at home... these are not small communities anymore. You get lost in the shuffle [and] the mix... But people, they are looking for some proof that God is here and he exists. We follow the master. He is not gonna lead you go astray.

In all three cases, Adriana, Christopher, and Jorge now see themselves as Buddhist and no longer attend their former Christian churches because they have monetarily benefited from their attendance at TLMC, even though monetary benefits might not have been the only cause.

Many Latinos who attend TLMC are looking for miracle solutions, such as winning the lottery, which will better their socio-economic statuses. Antonio, a 28-year-old former Protestant and current member of TLMC who self-identifies as Buddhist, for example, suggests that the socio-economic circumstances play an important role drawing Latinos to Buddhism, specifically to TLMC and away from Christianity. "Uh, there's probably a couple of good reasons but mainly master's work here is to help Hispanic people, and, well, this is Houston, Texas and there's a lot of Hispanics here." However, more than the fact that Houston has a large Latino population, Antonio suggests that it is their overall socio-economic status that is the real motivation for their attendance at the temple. "Demographically you probably are more aware of this than I am but I would imagine demographically, Hispanics are in more need of help. You know, more than some of the other demographics." As a result, Antonio suggests that most of Latinos who attend the temple, like himself, are there to better their circumstances through the advice, teachings, and miracles given/performed by the Master Chu each week.

Two of the foreign-born Latinas we interviewed, one a former Catholic that now self-identifies as Buddhist and the other who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic, for example, echo the sentiments of Antonio above. Rather than stating they received monetary rewards or jobs after attending TLMC, they stated that they were able to conceive after going to the temple. Commenting on this, Marcella and Fatima stated, "Our children are the miracle. There is a lot of miracles that's why people start coming [here] and more and more. They tell their family members and friends and they just keep coming." Both Latinas no longer attend the Catholic Church; however, others such as Ana, a 23-year-old Salvadorian woman who was raised Catholic but now self-identifies as both Catholic and Buddhist still attends both TLMC and her local parish church. "Since I came here I have a better life." Others like Maria, who now

identifies as both Catholic and Buddhist, stated she was healed by Master Chu, “I asked the master to heal me and he said to just come drink the water and pray. So, I do exactly what he told me... and now my health is perfect now and my mental [state] is also restored.” Ana and Maria did not leave their childhood religion but now attend both services, because they believe that they are able to conceive or are physically and mental better only because of Master Chu and his Buddhist teachings.

Likewise, other Latinos we interviewed have not left their churches to attend TLMC and have also not switched or altered their childhood religious identity. Dora, for example, a 57-year-old Peruvian woman who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic, stated, “He gives a lot of toys for the children. In Christmas, he gives a bunch, a bunch of toys for the kids... school supplies and clothes.” Similarly, Joanna, a 22-year-old from Mexico who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic explains her frustration at her church and why she now also attends TLMC:

I am Catholic. Religion is very important [to me]...but you know people go to church and after church they start criticizing other people and stuff like that. Here it's like we're learning not to do that anymore, you know to be a different person... So many miracles [happen here]...my Dad started volunteering here so [he] stopped drinking... My brother, we had a miracle with him that happened about a year ago around July. His appendix exploded. We didn't take him to the hospital because we thought it was just like a stomach ache and we took him and the doctors were like, “Well, thank God that you bought him here early because he could've been—he would've died.” And, so all the poison went to his body and we told Master about it and Master said, “Don't worry, he's going to be okay.... just have faith in God and in Buddha that everything's going to be okay... so, because of that, we would just meditate and meditate. Not pray but practice in a way... And, when he came out of surgery, he was perfectly fine and the doctor said it was a miracle that [he] survived the surgery.

Whether they are looking for a congregation that reaches out and helps them more physically or monetarily (jobs), Latinos such as Joanna now attend TLMC because they believe that they benefit more from attending a Buddhist temple. However, as subsequent analyses will demonstrate, the better circumstances they seek are not just physical or monetary but also spiritual and religious.

Seeking Spiritual Fulfillment

Although many Latinos in this study now attend TLMC for more material or monetary benefits, the majority now attend the temple because of the religious or spiritual benefits they believe they receive from Master Chu. This is particularly true of those who have switched from a Christian tradition and now consider themselves Buddhist only. Explaining this, Manuel, a 23-year-old former Catholic man from Mexico who now considers himself a Buddhist, states

I needed more spiritual fulfillment than I was receiving in Christianity... since I started having the, the bad interactions with church people who didn't really want me practicing what I believed to be pure religion or pure Christianity, I kind of

stopped going I would feel like I should go someplace [else]. The churches don't practice what they preach. Even if sometimes you might hear the old sermon that says you gotta love your neighbor. Look here, Jesus says love you neighbor, love your enemies. Love those who are beating you, persecuting you. Love those who are just flat-out evil to you, love them and it's going to change things around... Ultimately, I think God is not found in religion.

More than gradually drifting away from the religion he was raised in, Manuel started to question the validity of his church's teachings and the extent they were practicing those teachings. In the end, he found that he was not being spiritually fulfilled and left his former religion for a faith tradition that many, including multiple scholars of religion, do not consider a religion but more a philosophy (Siderits 2007).

Similarly, Roberto, a 24-year-old Mexican man and former Catholic who now self-identifies as a Buddhist, stated

Actually, it was by my mom. She's the one who found out [about the temple]. Since we had a whole bunch of problems like my mom didn't have a strong faith with being a Catholic so [she]... tried to find which ones best suited for her. I stopped going to church. [My parents] were only going cause of confirmation, like when you get in on being a Catholic [member]. I thought [it] was boring. Cause I would just sit there and just look you know. Sometimes I don't even know what they're talking about cause I just [see] them reading off the books which wasn't interesting. It was boring. And then a lot of donations also. It was uh three times sometimes, sometimes three times at one time. Three times donations that's a lot of donations. Sometimes they wouldn't explain what the donations were for.

Like Christopher in prior pages who described his dissatisfaction with tithing or a constant call for donations in his former church, Roberto describes how these same issues drove his parents to seek out another place of worship. However, for Roberto, who states that he stopped going to church prior to this, it was not just the tithing that was a problem but boredom—he was not being spiritually fulfilled.

Expressing a similar sentiment, Maria, a 41-year-old woman from Mexico, raised Catholic but now self-identifies as Buddhist, states that she was not pleased with her spiritual development in the Church. “When I went to church I didn't learn much. We [she and husband] have some wondering and we went to ask [the priest] and then no answer or they don't even expect some kind of questions like that. So, we left that church... I am just more a spiritual person.” Likewise, Santiago, a 20-year-old man from Ecuador who was raised Catholic but now self-identifies as Buddhist stated, “I [have] always been spiritual in nature since little. So, it made a lot of sense that I had to be with a spiritual guru. So, it wasn't until I met the master that a lot more things started to fall into place with the spiritual side of life. I remember the [when] I was Catholic. I went to communion, but it was never really spiritual thing.”

Where Manuel, Maria, and Santiago's switching appears to be self-directed, a spiritual journey of discovery or frustration with the Church, Roberto states that what was happening with his family significantly impacted his decision and ultimately resulted in him leaving his former religion. In all four cases, they no longer self-identify as Catholic nor do they attend services at a local parish church. However, for some Latinos

in our study, Buddhism and attendance at TLMC appears to be just another part of a larger spiritual journey with no fixed end. Carlos, for example, a 39-year-old Mexican man and former Catholic who now self-identifies as unaffiliated stated:

I learned from religion but I have no affiliation with it...I just wanted to learn meditation... Well, it's not really a religion. I mean it has to be, technically, for America. But like, it's not religion it's like practice. I'll kind of stay no affiliation [unaffiliated] and just learn from them [TLMC]. As far as the whole thing for religions and practices and ways of life, I feel like they all serve a greater purpose and that even negative things that happen to people or the world at large helps for a greater purpose.

Others such as David, a 22-year-old Mexican man who was raised Catholic but now self-identifies as both Catholic and Buddhist, have found a balance between both their former and current religion and not only attend both but believe that one benefits the other:

I was Catholic but uh, I wasn't going to church at all. I was just praying at night you know... [We] just can't seem to really feel the, feel the inner peace, the feeling to be a part of something. And here [we do] and I don't know if you've heard of the miracles? Well, once you've been seeing that and we say you know, this doesn't happen at church. I am not going to talk bad about church but... the master doesn't want us to convert, not at all. He just wants people to become the best version of being Catholic, best version of becoming a Christian.

Other Latinos we interviewed, who attend TLMC, have not changed their religious self-identification at all and still see themselves as Catholic—no change from the religion of their childhood.

Dora, for example, a 57-year-old Peruvian who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic stated, "I am glad I came because what is this? Nothing wrong. This is not religion, it's the way to live... that's the reason he [monk] does [services] on Mondays so everybody can go to their own church Sunday. He doesn't want to make you stop [going to] the church, you know?" Similarly, Jose, a 28-year-old undocumented Mexican man who was raised Catholic and still self-identifies as Catholic stated, "If there is a place on the planet where one gets unconditional love, compassion and mercy of God almighty, it's True Lama Meditation Center." In both cases, Dora and Jose believe that they receive spiritual benefits from attending TLMC and do not believe that attending the temple contradicts the teachings of the Church or what God would want them to do. They attend TLMC because they seek the spiritual fulfillment they feel they are not receiving in their churches.

Discussion

Little is known nationally about Latino Buddhists in the USA or US Latino Christians that concurrently attend a Buddhist temple and/or engage in Buddhist practices. Although their numbers are relatively small (12% of all Buddhists), they collectively represent yet another part of the larger pattern of Latino religious switching and shifting

religious identities and practices. The increasing diversification of the US Latino religious' experiences calls for scholarly attention beyond Protestant or Catholic categories or at the least, an exploration of the complex identities and practices of those who still claim to be Christian but have grown more syncretic in their faith practices. Setting out to address this lacuna in the literature by drawing on interview data collected over 2 years of observation at a Buddhist temple in Houston, Texas, we first described how Latinos who convert to Buddhism or actively attend the temple in addition to Christian services see themselves and their religious identities. We then explored several theoretical lenses that might help us understand their faith choices and practices. Several novel findings emerged.

First, Latinos' religious identities at TLMC are fluid. Those who now claim to be Buddhist or both Buddhist and Catholic or even Catholic only or unaffiliated only have their own personal understanding of who they are, their faith, and what constitutes a religion. For many, as we have seen, Buddhism is not a religion but a practice or philosophy that simply reinforces or augments their Christian faith. For others, attending services at a Buddhist temple does not negate or exclude them from being Catholic despite the fact that they no longer attend Mass. Among those who either self-identify as Catholic only or both Buddhist and Catholic, 88% state that they attend mass at a local Catholic church every week or almost every week. One hundred percent also say that they attend services at TLMC every week or almost every week. Among those who now self-identify as Buddhist only or as unaffiliated, 100% also state that they attend services at TLMC every week or almost every week. In all cases, regardless of how they identify, our respondents stated that they either meditate weekly and/or chant Buddhist mantras daily—often in conjunction with praying the Rosary. What this means for Latino religious identities is somewhat unclear outside of holding two identities. The majority of our respondents (45%) now claim to be Buddhist and an overwhelming majority were raised in a Christian denomination (with most being formerly Catholic at 95%). However, these conversions cannot be categorized as a “hard switch” but, instead, their “conversions” translate to an extension of their current religious practices to include Buddhism or an augmentation of their faith perspectives.

On average, Latinos who primarily speak Spanish and are recent immigrants tend to be more disproportionately Catholic and identify in higher proportions with their ethnic and Latino pan-ethnic identity compared to later generations (Pew 2006). This appears to be the case with many respondents in our sample who either still identify as Catholic or Catholic-Buddhist, or even those who see themselves as Buddhist but continue to attend Mass. Catholicism acts as a quasi-ethnic religion (Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990). As such, it can almost function as an ethnic identity, similar to the case of Judaism. Catholicism has deep historical ties with Latino identities, particularly Mexican identities (Mulder et al. 2017; Ramos et al. 2017). Leaving the Catholic label all together may be too drastic for some Latinos who feel it is integral to their ethnic and cultural identity. Indeed, other studies have found that Latinos who were dedicated members at Protestant congregations still identified themselves as Catholic (Marquardt 2005; Mulder et al. 2017). Hence, in our sample, it may be that Latinos who attend TLMC, see maintaining a Catholic identity as an important part of how they understand themselves ethnically. It begs further research to find out how widespread this is, but the pattern is similar to the Jewish Buddhists in Sigalow's study (2016). So-called former Jews who are actively engaged in Buddhist practices or attend a Buddhist

temple/center still see themselves as Jews ethnically and/or still engage in traditional Jewish practices.

Second, there was no discernable pattern of affiliation or self-reported identity in our sample by nativity or country of origin. Given that there is no evidence of significant Buddhist proselytization in Latin America outside of Japanese Zen and Soka Gakkai traditions, largely in Brazil, which appear to have no connections to our non-Brazilian respondents, and given the fact that the USA is not a majority Buddhist country, we find no support for traditional assimilation and national origins theories that attempt to explain Latino switching patterns or augmentations and extensions in faith practices and identities in the USA. However, given that the Houston suburb in which TLMC is located has a higher percentage of Buddhists, specifically Vietnamese, than other areas in Houston that Latinos live in large numbers, perhaps geographic proximity and opportunity played a part in their search for religious change or shaped their religious perspectives (Moore and Vanneman 2003). In an open religious market, availability can inform choice (Brekke 2016; Iannaccone 1991). Yet, this should not be seen as an indication that rational choice theory necessarily explains why Latinos are converting to Buddhism. Many of the respondents in our sample appear to make some rational based calculations but not necessarily to minimizing costs. Likewise, many in our sample are not necessarily switching faith traditions but extending or augmenting their views on religion and the ways they practice and engage those understandings.

Third, whether new converts to Buddhism, unaffiliated, remaining Catholic, or now self-identifying as both Buddhist and Catholic, the overwhelming majority of our sample have a high school education or less. Since our respondents uniformly refused to answer questions about their household income, their educational attainment likely places them in lower socio-economic circumstances, especially for those of undocumented statuses but this is not certain and reveals some of the limits of our small sample. Despite these limitations, only a few of our respondents stated that they left their churches in search of wealth. This seems to go against what we have seen in larger trends for Latinos who seek wealth in churches who promote the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel has had worldwide growth and arose from a charismatic and Pentecostal stream—the very denominations that have seen large Latino growth in Latin American and the USA—but monetary wealth only seems to play a minor role in drawing Latinos to TLMC (Bowen 2013).

There are some patterns, however, that are consistent with the rational choice theory. For example, Iannaccone's proposition of assembling a diversified portfolio of competing religious assets appears to be happening on some level with Latinos at TLMC (Iannaccone 1997:37). In line with his theorization, Latinos at TLMC appear to be hedging their bets by engaging in a variety of spiritual activities across a free religious market. Those Latinos who attend a church service on Sundays and then chant Vietnamese or Chinese mantras on Mondays at TLMC, and visiting Master Chu in his office in all other days of the week for spiritual advice, for example, appear to be doing all they can, covering all religious bases, to fulfill their spiritual needs or meet their miraculous goals. This is especially true of those seeking to have children or get cured from an illness. Yet, many of the attendees at TLMC are "free riders" with little commitment to the center. Only a handful of people contribute to the weekly potluck dinner, for example, and only a small group gives monetarily to the center or volunteers. This is not what Iannaccone would anticipate (Iannaccone 1994). The TLMC's

monetary needs are mostly met through the donations from the Vietnamese portion of the congregation.

Unfortunately, we do not have the data to explore whether those who reached their socio-economic goals or realize their purposes or even found the miracles they were seeking stop attending the temple or not. Despite this limitation, it appears that the most prominent narrative in our sample for explaining why Latinos attend TLMC, engage in Buddhist practices or left their Christian churches, was a genuine hunger to get certain needs met. Much like the cases of non-Japanese converts to Soka Gakkai in Brazil and Mexico, our respondents express a certain level of frustration and dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church, particularly over the issue of tithing (compare da Rocha 2005, 2016; Masayuki 1991). More importantly, like the Soka Gakkai cases, our respondents appear to be searching for miracles and spiritual fulfillment that they were not receiving by remaining only Christian or engaging solely in Christian practices (Ibid). Although the Latinos in our sample might be considered “free riders” through a rational choice lens, Master Chu actually encourages this behavior which points to the flexibility of TLMC as a Buddhist institution and highlights the utility of religious syncretism frameworks for explaining this phenomenon.

Fourth, much like the Jewish Buddhists’ Sigalow (2016) studies, our respondents are augmenting and extending their religious identities and practices by making choices in the context of a free market. Drawing on a religious syncretic framework analysis, there is no historical conflict between Buddhism and Christianity in the countries from which our sample immigrated. They obviously perceive Buddhism as theologically and philosophically compatible with their understandings of Christianity. And TLMC is clearly flexible enough as an organization to not only foster their faith choices and practices but encourage them as well. Buddhism, perhaps as a perceived non-religion, allows an alternative for Latinos—one that does not require them to leave one for the other. Buddhism may also provide the freedom and ability to maintain several ethnic affiliations as opposed to leaving Catholicism altogether. If we put it in rational choice language, it could be that there are less “costs” to becoming Buddhist than Protestant for Catholic Latinos.

It also seems that Buddhism provides many in our sample with a new way to articulate how to live and deal with life. As such, perhaps Buddhism is an attractive religion to people in the USA due to the reasons articulated here by our respondents (see for example Seager (2012) and Wuthnow and Cadge (2004)). This is not completely unique to TLMC. David Chappell (1995) states that Buddhism, specifically Soka Gakkai, is perhaps one of the only religious traditions that is not only appealing to American Latinos but actively prepared to meet their spiritual needs (also see Strand (2003)). Although we do not know how truly generalizable Chappell’s statement is to American Latinos across the nation, it is yet another case outside of our own where we find Latinos interested in or practicing Buddhism. Considering this, Buddhism appears to allow Latinos a more flexible religious identity compared to Christianity—one that they are culturally available to engage. Latinos who struggle to shed a Catholic identity, for example, may be attracted to Buddhism, at least as it is practiced at TLMC, because Master Chu allows them to maintain their prior religious identifications and in fact encourages people to remain active in their previous churches. Thus, Latino Buddhists who still identify as Catholic can still maintain their ethnic roots while also getting their spiritual needs fulfilled at the temple. However, it may also be the case that attendance at TLMC further informs, shapes, and strengthens their existing Christian faith.

We believe this case study is the first step in providing a unique insight into a relatively unknown and understudied component of Latino religious life in the USA. The reasons articulated for becoming Buddhist or engaging in Buddhist practices are complex and multifaceted, as we have seen. However, given the limits of our sample, we do not know how typical Latinos at TLMC are of other Latino Buddhists nationally nor do we know what impact Vietnamese Buddhist centers, Pure Land or otherwise, are having on their faith journey more generally. Clearly, more research is needed that compares multiple sites in various geographic areas, socio-economic (SES) differences, and takes into consideration the ethnic diversity in other Latino communities in the USA. Our study is a step in this direction.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- Alba RD, Nee V (1997) Rethinking assimilation theory for a new era of immigration. *Int Migr Rev* 31:826–874
- Arda (2010) Most Buddhist nations. Quick Lists. Available via The Association of Religion Data Archives, In https://www.thearda.com/QL2010/QuickList_38.asp. Accessed 15 May 2017
- BaileySP (2010) American xenophilia. In *Humanities*. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/marchapril/feature/american-zenophilia>. Accessed March 2018
- Barrett D, Kurin GT, Johnson TM (2001) *World Christian encyclopedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Bohra-Mishra P, Massey DS (2015) Internmarriage among new immigrants in the USA. *Ethn Racial Stud* 38: 734–758
- Bowen PD (2013) US Latina/o Muslims since 1920: from “Moors” to “Latino Muslims”. *J Religious Hist* 37: 165–184
- Brekke T (2016) *Faithonomics*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Brusco EE (2010) *The reformation of machismo: evangelical conversion and gender in Colombia*, 2nd edn. University of Texas Press, Austin
- Calvillo JE, Bailey SR (2015) Latino religious affiliation and ethnic identity. *J Sci Study Religion* 54:57–78
- Chappell D (1995) Racial diversity in the Soka Gakkai. P: 184–217 In: Queen C (ed) *Engaged Buddhism in the west*. Wisdom Publications, Boston
- Da Rocha CM (2005) Being a Zen Buddhist Brazilian: juggling multiple religious identities in the land of Catholicism. In: Leaman L (ed) *Buddhist missionaries in the era of globalization*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu
- Da Rocha CM (2016) Buddhism in Latin America. In: Jerryson M (ed) *Oxford handbook of contemporary Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Diaz-Stevens AM, Stevens-Arroyo A (1998) *The Emmaus paradigm: recognizing the resurgence in Latino religion*. Westview Press, Boulder
- Douglas T (2005) Changing religious practices among Cambodian immigrants in Long Beach and Seattle. In: K Leonard K, Stepik A, Vasquez M, Holdaway J (ed) *Immigrant faiths: transforming religious life in America*. Altamira Press, Lanham
- Ellison CG, Sherkat DE (1995) The ‘semi-involuntary institution’ revisited: regional variations in church participation among black Americans. *Soc Forces* 73:1415–1437
- Espinosa G, Virgilio E, Miranda J (eds) (2005) *Latino religions and civic activism in the United States*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Fields R (1992) *How the swans came to the lake: narrative history of Buddhism in America*. Shambhala, Boston
- Finke R, Stark R (2005) *The churching of America, 1776–2005: winners and losers in our religious economy*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick

- Freemantle T (2013) It is a long wait for a few minutes with Buddhist psychic. in: Houston Chronicle. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/columnists/chronicles/article/It-s-a-long-wait-for-a-few-minutes-with-Buddhist-5076800.php>. Accessed 17 Aug 2017
- Gil G (2007) Oriente en Guatemala. Un chinos, coreanos y japoneses integran las principales comunidades asiáticas del país. *RevistaD*:155
- Glick JE (2010) Connection complex processes: a decade of research on immigrant families. *J Marriage Fam* 72:498–515
- Gordon MM (1964) *Assimilation in American life: the role of race, religion and national origins*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Greeley AM (1994) The demography of American Catholics 1964–1990. In: *The Sociology of Andrew Greeley*. Scholars Press, Atlanta, pp 545–564
- Grumett D, Plant T (2012) De Lubac, Pure Land Buddhism, and Roman Catholicism. *J Religion* 92:58–83
- Hanh TN (1967) *Vietnam: lotus in a sea of fire*. Hill & Wang, New York
- Hunt LL (1999) Hispanic protestantism in the United States: trends by decade and generation. *Soc Forces* 77: 1601–1623
- HollandC (2010) Enciclopedia de grupos religiosos en las Américas y la península Ibérica: religión en Colombia. programa latinoamericano de estudios socioreligiosos. In: PROLADES. http://www.prolades.com/encyclopedia/countries/spanish/rel_colombia09spn.pdf. Accessed 24 May 2017
- Iannaccone LR (1991) The consequences of religious market structure: Adam Smith and the economics of religion. *Ration Soc* 3:156–177
- Iannaccone LR (1994) Why strict churches are strong. *Am J Sociol* 99:1180–1211
- Iannaccone LR (1995) Voodoo economics? Reviewing the rational choice approach to religion. *J Sci Study Religion* 34:76–88
- Iannaccone LR (1997) Rational choice: framework for the scientific study of religion. In: Young LA (ed) *Rational choice theory and religion: summary and assessment*. Routledge, New York, pp 25–44
- Lee C (2009) Sociological theories of immigration: pathways to integration for U.S. immigrants. *J Health Soc Behav* 19:730–744
- Mair J (2014) Fo Guang Shan Buddhism and ethical conversations across borders: sowing seeds of affinity. *Collegium* 15:66–89
- Marquardt MF (2005) From shame to confidence: gender, religious conversion, and civic engagement of Mexicans in the U.S. south. *Lat Am Perspect* 32:27–56
- Martínez-Vázquez HA (2010) *Latina/o y Musulman: the construction of Latina/o identity among Latina/o Muslims in the United States of America*. Pickwick, Oregon
- Masayuki O (1991) The acceptance of Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai in Mexico. *Jpn J Religious Stud* 18:189–211
- Materson DM, Funada-Classen S (2003) *The Japanese in Latin America*. University of Illinois Press, Champaign
- McPherson M, Smith-Lovin L, Cook JM (2001) Birds of a feather: homophily in social networks. *Annu Rev Sociol* 27:415–444
- Metraux DA (2014) Soka Gakkai International: Nichiren Japanese Buddhism. In: Cherry SM, Ebaugh HR (eds) *Global religious movements across borders: sacred service*. Ashgate, Farnham
- Moore L, Vanneman R (2003) Context matters: effects of the proportion of fundamentalists on gender attitudes. *Soc Forces* 82:115–139
- Moustakas C (1994) *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage, Thousand Oaks
- Mulder MT, Ramos AI, Marti G (2017) *Latino Protestants in America: growing and diverse*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham
- Musick MA, Wilson J (1995) Religious switching for marriage reasons. *Sociol Relig* 56:257–270
- Navarro-Rivera J, Kosmin BA, Keysar A (2010) U.S. Latino religious identification 1990–2008: change, diversity and transformation. In: ARIS. <https://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/publications/2008-2/u-s-latino-religious-identification-1990-2008-change-diversity-transformation>. Accessed 4 Jun 2017
- Ninh TH (2010) God needs a passport: Vietnamese Cao daists in Cambodia struggle for religious and ethnic recognition across national borders. *Int J Study Cult Soc* 4:133–160
- Noguchi S (2008) Historia de los inmigrantes japoneses en Venezuela antes de la segunda guerra mundial. *Humania del Sur* 5:27–42
- Perl P, Greely JZ, Gray MA (2006) What proportion of adult Hispanics are Catholic? A review of survey data and methodology. *J Sci Study Religion* 45:419–436
- Perreira TL (2004) Sasana Sakon and the new Asian American: intermarriage and identity at a Thai Buddhist temple in Silicon Valley. In: Carnes T, Yang F (eds) *Asian American religions*. New York University Press, New York
- Pew Research Center (2006) 2006 National Survey of Latinos. In: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2006/07/13/2006-national-survey-of-latinos/>. Accessed 19 March 2018

- Pew Research Center (2009) Many Americans mix multiple faiths. In: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>. Accessed 27 March 2018
- Pew Research Center (2012) Asian Americans: a mosaic of faith. In: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>. Accessed 24 March 2018
- Pew Research Center (2014). The shifting religious identity of Latinos in the United States. In Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states>. Accessed 15 May 2017
- Pew Research Center (2017) Americans express increasingly warm feelings toward religious groups. In: Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups/>. Accessed 28 March 2018
- Putnam R, Campell D (2012) *American grace: how religion divides and unites us*. Simon and Schuster, New York
- Quintero MDP (2008) Presencia del budismo de nichiren daishonin en Venezuela. *Human del Sur* 3:87–103
- Ramos AL, Woodberry RD, Ellison CG (2017) The contexts of conversion among U.S. Latinos. *Social Relig* 78:119–145
- Roof WC (1999) *The spiritual marketplace*. Princeton University Press, Princeton Accessed February 2018
- Sandomirsky S, Wilson J (1990) Processes of disaffiliation: religious mobility among men and women. *Soc Forces* 68:1211–1229
- Seager RH (2012) *Buddhism in America*. Columbia University Press, New York
- Sherkat DE (1997) Embedding religious choices: integrating preferences and social constraints into rational choice theories of religious behavior. In: Young LA (ed) *Rational choice theory and religion: summary and assessment*. Routledge, New York, pp 57–85
- Sherkat DE, Wilson J (1995) Preferences, constraints, and choices in religious markets: an examination of religious switching and apostasy. *Soc Forces* 73:993–1026
- Siderits M (2007) *Buddhism as philosophy: an introduction*. Hackett, Indianapolis
- Sigalow E (2016) Towards a sociological framework of religious syncretism in the United States. *J Am Acad Religion* 84:1029–1055
- Skirbekk V, Kaufmann E, Goujon A (2010) Secularism, fundamentalism, or Catholicism? The religious composition of the United States to 2043. *J Sci Study Religion* 49:293–310
- Stark R, Bainbridge WS (1987) *A theory of religion*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick
- Steigenga TJ, Cleary EL (2007) *Conversion of a continent: contemporary religious change in Latin America*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick
- Strand C (2003) Born in the USA: racial diversity in Soka Gakkai International. In: *The Buddhist Review* Winter online: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/born-usa-racial-diversity-soka-gakkai-international/>
- Sullins DP (1993) Switching close to home: volatility or coherence in Protestant affiliation patterns? *Soc Forces* 72:399–419
- Thich QM (2007) *Vietnamese Buddhism in America*. Available from Proquest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3282670)
- Usarski F (2012) *Buddhism in South America*. In: Abeyanake O, Tilakaratne A (eds) *2600 years of Sambuddhatva. Global journey of awakening*, 1st edn. Ministry of Buddhasasana and Religious Affairs, Sri Lanka, pp 527–540
- Usarski F, Shoji R (2016) *Buddhism, Shinto and Japanese new religions in Brazil*. In: Schmidt B, Engler S (eds) *Handbook of contemporary religions in Brazil*, Brill, Leiden, pp 279–294
- U. S.Census Bureau (2010) *Community facts*. In: American fact finder, U.S. census bureau. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml. Accessed 4 Jun 2017
- Wilson B (1966) *Religion in secular society*. C.A. Watts, London
- Wuthnow R (2007) *After the baby boomers: how twenty and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ
- Wuthnow R, Cadge W (2004) Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: the scope of influence. *J Sci Study Religion* 43:363–380
- Zhou M (1997) Growing up American: the challenge confronting immigrant children and children of immigrants. *Annu Rev Sociol* 23:63–95