

Author provides lens on Latino culture force

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¡SANTO!: VARIETIES OF LATINO/A SPIRITUALITY

By Edwin David Aponte

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According to the Pew Research Center, by the year 2050, 128 million Americans, or 29 percent of the total U.S. population, will claim Latino ancestry. While the classification "Latino" is a broad and complex measure of race and ethnicity, the increase signals a significant demographic shift that will impact every aspect of American social, economic and political culture. Latinos, already the nation's largest minority group, will triple in size and account for most of the nation's population growth from 2005 through 2050.

Numbers do not tell the whole story. A deeper analysis of the Latino designation is needed to reveal what underlying values, loyalties and perspectives are likely to enter mainstream American culture in the coming decades. Edwin David Aponte's new book, *¡Santo!*, provides such a lens by identifying spirituality as the most common predictive characteristic of the projected population boom. He writes that "a better understanding of the pluralistic Latino/a religiosity and spirituality is essential for comprehending contemporary life in the United States and possible trends for the future."

Aponte, professor of Christianity and culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, defines *santo*, or "holy," as a widely conceived description that covers "Latino/a perspectives on traditional religion, life interpretation and explanations (sense-making), healing, health, wholeness, understandings of existence and the future, and balancing relationships at all levels of existence." Latino spirituality as a cultural force is likely to enhance the role of strong families, respect for tradition, generational wisdom, group identity over typical American individualism, collective life over competition, and cultural patterns grounded in practices, beliefs, music, art and language that are more religious than secular.

While Aponte uses basic sociological tools to measure this spiritual content, his insights into what animates Latino culture draw less from social science than from a spiritual pulse-taking of observable characteristics common to the many populations claiming Latino roots. Aponte inventories broad categories of practices such as life-stage rituals, the rhetoric of prayer, storytelling and everyday sayings, and the importance of sacred spaces and shrines, all expressions of spirituality that pervade ordinary life for most Latinos.

Spiritual markers often elude religious identification. Anglo church leaders who think that hiring Spanish

speakers to do outreach ministry or offering bilingual worship services will bring Latinos into their congregations oversimplify the challenges and opportunities of the demographic shift. Aponte devotes much of his book to inventorying the complex identities of the millions of people who regard themselves as Latino. The interchangeable use of Latino and Hispanic barely begins to reveal the many sublevels of identity, beginning with Spanish ancestral strains -- those Latin-language cultures from Southern Europe already enriched by Moorish and Jewish identity -- that mixed with the indigenous peoples, originally from Asia, living in the Caribbean and mainland "New World" when the Spanish ships filled with horses, guns and African slaves arrived to conquer the region in the name of church and crown. The conquerors were themselves absorbed by the indigenous peoples to produce complex overlays of race, religious belief, ritual, art and symbol in the mestizo, or blend, of Hispanic, Indian and African identities.

Contemporary Latino groups with ancestry in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and other Central and South American countries have intermarried among themselves and with Anglo-European populations to produce new cultural hybrids that continue to evolve with each successive generation. Add to this complex mix Latinos who self-identify as Jews, Buddhists and Muslims.

It is from this spiritual and cultural richness that future generations will draw to shape our religious and national life.

Aponte's book also signals difficult challenges ahead. Racial and ethnic diversity has always been a mark of American pluralism. Latino/a American identity, now generations deep, is emblematic of the American "experiment." At the same time, American culture still bears wounds from a history that includes the destruction of native peoples, the institution of slavery and the racial oppression of Latino and Asian peoples based on assumptions of white, Anglo-Saxon superiority. Cultural transformation is now confronting these prejudices.

Past as prologue suggests that dominant cultures will try to control minorities and migrants to meet their own social and economic needs. By 2050, global population shifts will require new power arrangements. Santo, manifested in language, ritual, religion, perception and priorities, portends a formidable cultural force rising within American life that will redistribute political, economic and social influence as new majorities emerge. Now is the time to prepare for this.

Aponte shows the importance of multidisciplinary study of demographic changes to anticipate this shift in national identity. But by highlighting this deepest of identifiers -- spirituality -- he describes the trajectory in ways that social science alone might miss and alerts us all to prepare to meet this wave of spiritual energy.

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