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Growing up in Puerto Rico attending the Northern Baptist Church in a mountainous rural area in the northeastern part of the island, I knew Catholics and Pentecostals from my extended family. My father's family in a mostly white neighborhood was Baptist, while my mother's family in a nearby mostly black neighborhood was Catholic and Spiritist; some became Pentecostals later. We Baptists viewed Catholics and Pentecostals as rivals with accusations of idolatry directed toward Catholics for their worship of the Virgin Mary and saints, while criticizing and sharing jokes of Pentecostals for their literal interpretation, exaggerated charisma, lack of musical talent, ignorance, disorganization, and loudness, with loudness most obvious during their evangelistic services with loudspeakers. Fortunately, our differences did not severely affect our relationships and daily interactions. We faced each other as individuals and as representatives of our churches at funerals, political events, sports events, and pro-family and anti-drug campaigns. We had as guests Pentecostal preachers, musicians, and entire congregations. We also joined them in their services and revivals, a combination of spiritual intimidation and a type of spectacle or entertainment, especially when they danced in the spirit and performed liberación. Ironically, by the late 1980s, my church had transitioned to a charismatic style, emphasizing healing, prophecy, and the Second Coming of Christ with some spiritual dances and deliverances.

Over time, I met other Protestant denominations that, like the Baptists, were transplants from the United States. To begin, we sang hymns originally composed in English accompanied by an organ, used translated devotional and Bible study literature, watched subtitled movies during mission week, and welcomed American preachers and missionaries. We were excited when they visited us, for they brought something different and bigger than us that made us feel unique and special.
The most common denominations were the Nazarenes, with a church in my neighborhood, and the Disciples of Christ and the Methodists, mainly in the cities. I found it peculiar that Methodist leaders would dress up as Catholic priests during mass. Occasionally we invited preachers from these denominations, particularly the Disciples of Christ. Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses with churches in my city were considered separate categories under Christianity, the latter representing a deviation and coming insistently to our doors on Saturday mornings.

Eventually, it was the turn of Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians, which like other Protestant denominations were referred to historically, originally from Europe. I met them when I visited churches around the island as part of a music ministry. We viewed these three denominations as mostly de gente fina y blanca (of sophisticated and white people). My limited knowledge of Lutheranism came after watching a television commercial about doing good deeds in our daily lives and learning it was the religion of a classmate at my Baptist high school. Unexpectedly, when I moved to Michigan to pursue graduate school, I attended the Lutheran church for a few years. It was similar to my Protestant experience, except for the child baptism and Holy Communion every Sunday. During this time, I explored in more detail why and how Lutheranism split from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century and became a distinct branch of Protestantism, but nothing about Lutheranism in Puerto Rico, until now.

In Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Church in Puerto Rico, José David Rodríguez alerts us, almost in a confessional tone, to his perspective as an insider. The author was born and raised in Puerto Rico. His father was a Lutheran pastor, and he has been a Lutheran leader working for Puerto Rico for the last forty years, operating as a student, teacher, and scholar in the United States. Rodríguez’s immediate justification for this book is the lack of inclusion of different interlocutors in the historiography of Protestantism and especially Lutheranism. As the introduction to a sermon, Rodríguez vehemently announces, “I will enrich this Caribbean historiography, employing a postcolonial or decolonial perspective” (p. 4). Along with postcolonial hermeneutics, the author anticipates a less generic and more specific understanding of the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico. This and the book’s accessible style are the book’s greatest contributions. Rodríguez responds to a deep and personal call for dignifying the Puerto Rican Lutherans’ past, and he wants readers to join him responsibly and gracefully (p. 3). To achieve his goals, he invested in “alternative sources and analysis,” although he ended up using less than what is in his list of sources: oral tradition, historical archaeology, social history, and women’s history (p. 40). For Rodríguez, the Lutheran mission is una experiencia de fe (a faith experience), a theological praxis, and a multifaceted project older and larger than Puerto Rico with eternal implications.

Rodríguez begins to recount how Lutheranism, with its various reforms, involuntarily diverged from the Catholic Church and eventually developed a “pure” Lutheran identity amid polemics (pp. 16, 21). The Lutheran mission in the Caribbean unfolds in the first chapters since its arrival in the sixteenth century when it was considered a heresy. The pilgrims on this new road to salvation in the Caribbean and Puerto Rican world, also out of this world, are European Lutherans migrating to the West Indies for social, political, military, and religious reasons; locals forced to work and relocate; African slaves brought to the islands; migrants who kept arriving from other parts of Europe besides Spain, like Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, and England; and new and established people moving across the islands with a Lutheran profile, in the case of slaves, because of an enforced Christianization that led to their “spreading their Lutheran religious expression openly or in a hidden fashion” (pp. 22-23).
Like in Europe and the United States, Lutheranism in the Caribbean spread within the framework of ecumenical Protestantism, alongside its various denominations. In Puerto Rico, this was more the case after the Spanish-American War at the end of the nineteenth century, when in 1898 the US invaded and took over the island of Porto Rico militarily and sociopolitically. Like other Protestant missions, the Lutheran missions had to compete with the long-standing privileged position of the Catholic Church, which saw Protestantism as heretical, socialist, and revolutionary, although as demonstrated in the book, relations between Protestants and Catholics varied from time to time. Without wasting any time, in 1899, Protestant representatives of each denomination met in New York to agree on the geographical area where they would concentrate their mission work. Researching about the Lutheran Church in Puerto Rico, I discovered a YouTube video celebrating its 122 years on the island.[1] According to Reverend Enrique Mercado Cruz, interviewed in the first part of the video, Lutherans did not participate in that meeting, though he does not explain why.

In chapter 2, the author finds that the first Protestant missions in the Caribbean, although a spiritual endeavor, were a by-product of the Americanization agenda, even having the US flag on the altar. During Vacation Bible School in my Baptist church, we also had to pledge allegiance to the Christian flag. The process of Americanization that had started before took a remarkable leap after the invasion in 1898. The persistence of new American settlers, soldiers, military chaplains, and volunteers almost immediately paid off. Puerto Ricans took sides in favor of or against US colonization. Showing some discomfort, if not great disappointment, Rodriguez discusses how these Puerto Ricans included Lutherans, their position sometimes being suppressed by Lutheran leaders. Puerto Ricans, similar to Cubans, had to take sides before between Spain and the United States, as if between a bullfight and baseball.[2] Choosing between two sides continued after US colonization; for some islanders, Spanish Catholicism became synonymous with Puerto Ricanness. However, one of the US Catholic Church’s goals was to use this perspective to its advantage.

The Lutheran mission on the island continued thanks to the tenacity and “sacrifice” of foreign missionaries, some having previous missionary experience as far away as Africa (p. 161). Husbands and single men had the official and leadership roles, and wives and single women had the unofficial and domestic-like roles, with a few exceptions. A group of Puerto Ricans were ordained in pastoral roles after completing the required theological training on the island and on the mainland, despite the hesitation of some foreign leaders, a lack of funding, and poor English fluency. A pivotal figure was Eduardo Roig, who in 1952 became the president of the Caribbean Synod. The Roig families—not many—are known in Puerto Rico as owners of the Roig Commercial Bank and a few industries, like sugar. The prominent role of Eduardo Roig indicates that although the Lutheran mission in Puerto Rico was mostly “focused among the humble sectors of society” helping subalterns “improve their condition,” it also influenced and was influenced by upper-class members (pp. 81-82). However, the experience of my grandmother, a member of the Roig family who grew up poor and lost contact with them, tells us we cannot assume Eduardo’s membership in the upper class. At the center of Rodriguez’s decolonial or postcolonial approach is the inclusion of the experience of Lutheranism in Puerto Rico as part of the historiography of Protestantism, which for him seems no different from “the radical inclusive nature of the power of the gospel” (p. 183). Taking this radical inclusion further, Rodriguez devotes chapter 6 to examining the commitment and contribution of the pioneering native and foreign Lutheran women he mentions by full names, in education, health, social work, music, writing, translation, and women’s organizations.
Over the decades, the Puerto Rican Lutheran mission experienced some growth but not as much as other denominations. Chapters 3 through 7 identify significant accomplishments, such as more locations to worship and serve the community, more ordained native ministers and women’s involvement, incremental financial independence, an increase in participation and use of printed literature and the radio, the distribution of Bibles and other literature in Spanish, development into a separate synod from the United States, more connections and organizations across the islands and Latin America, the strengthening of ties with the church in the US, and the relocation of Puerto Rican ministers to Spanish-speaking missions in the US. From the same five chapters, we also learn about the “price” Lutherans paid due to natural disasters, the language barrier, the spread of diseases including leprosy, the two world wars affecting the male population and families, the Great Depression, the migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland because of high unemployment, insufficient funds coming from locals and the United States, and dramatic infrastructural and economic changes that, although at first glance were beneficial, took Puerto Ricans some time to digest. These changes are largely attributed to the Operation Bootstrap program, which in the 1940s used tax incentives to attract low-wage, labor-intensive industries, particularly textiles and clothing, and later capital-intensive industries in petrochemicals, oil refinement, and pharmaceuticals.

The infrastructure and economic transformations that occurred on the island became most noticeable in the northeastern part of Puerto Rico, today referred to as el área metropolitana (the metropolitan area). Certain parts became known for a high concentration of professional, military, and veteran residents, and also poor sectors. These changes, combined with Puerto Rico becoming a commonwealth of the United States in 1952, had mixed outcomes for the Lutheran Church. These transformations led to a significant migration of Puerto Ricans to the area where Lutherans first established their missions, thus stretching the potential for more people to join their churches. In the novel La Carreta (1953), René Marquéz portrays the move to the city as a stepping stone to the US, which the number of Puerto Ricans exiting the island corroborates. I wonder if the migration to el área metropolitana could have made the Lutherans focus more on that region at the expense of reaching out to other areas. This may answer why, on the website of the Caribbean Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), there are thirty-three congregations and 3,536 members as of 2023. Additionally, the list of Lutheran churches in Puerto Rico shows twenty-six churches, almost all in el área metropolitana.

Future research on Puerto Rican Lutheranism, within or outside the framework of decolonization, nationalization, and indigenization, can “radically” include new topics and delve into old ones, such as the theological and ritual adjustments made; the participation of the church in the community; its relationship with other denominations, the state, and economic structures; and the social opinions and political affiliations of its members concerning such issues as class or financial access, health, traditions, morality, race, sexuality, and gender. By combining these different aspects, studies on liberation theology in Latin America, such as those by Daniel H. Levine (Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism [1992]) and Marcella Althous-Reid (Indecent Theology: Theological Perspectives in Sex, Gender, and Politics [2001]), have offered a comprehensive and integrative understanding of religious experience and their varieties. We must remember that these studies are from a more recent historical period and rely on rich and abundant sources, including documentaries, oral accounts, and interviews. Is the adoption of Lutheranism Americanization in itself? Which features of Lutheranism might have supported Americanization and the subsequent call for indigenization? Is Santa Claus with a straw hat and a machete decolonizing, nationalizing, and in-
digenizing enough? How are these three concepts different, and what are the versions of each?

Near the end of the book, Rodríguez observes that the Puerto Rico synod “will need more time to become a national church” and that this may explain why the Lutheran Church remains smaller than other Protestant denominations (p. 199). He concedes that the Caribbean Synod’s type of congregational/episcopal organization may be too rigid for the necessary changes to be easy to achieve. In the video mentioned earlier about the celebration of the Lutheran Church’s 122 years on the island, which happened virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, church members of various skin colors sing in Spanish, except for one song in English, in different folk rhythms and are accompanied by a keyboard, strings, and folk percussion instruments. The video’s description says that they are also celebrating fifty years of women’s ordination. In a commemorative style, in each of their interventions, Pastor Ivette Salgado and Bishop Idalia Negrón highlight the work and leadership of Lutheran women. Last but not least, the video’s description mentions the tenth anniversary of the integration of the LGBTQIA+ community. Interestingly, in the comments, an individual asks if the Lutheran Church allows members of the LGBTQIA+ community to be ordained and mentions that she disagrees because it is not something early Christians or Jesus approved.

Do nationalization and indigenization now have the same weight? Have Lutherans lost their momentum? Are there other priorities? In Puerto Rico, denominational churches that made nationalization and indigenization part of their denomination’s fabric have actually lost members, and nondenominational churches ambivalent about such concerns continue to experience growth. Those who are part of the nondenominational prosperity gospel and neo-Pentecostal congregations, which have adopted elements of Puerto Rican culture, also lean toward supporting Americanization and statehood (which are not necessarily synonymous). It is not hard to imagine similar dynamics happening in Hispanic and Puerto Rican churches in the United States, both Lutheran and non-Lutheran.

The default in Caribbean Lutherans is, unmistakably, the conviction that there is no other way or better news for humans than salvation through Jesus, a message that has become the most popular in approximately 1 percent of the time humans have existed on earth practicing thousands of other religions and believing or dealing with thousands of spiritual entities and deities. For the same reason, in its official and unofficial forms, Christianity has been greatly influenced by Europe and the United States and, long before, by other empires, like the Egyptian, the Roman, and the Greek. It has been rebuilt in a thousand ways wherever it has settled and been adopted, some variants more successfully than others. Since Santa Claus seems to have come to Puerto Rico to stay, it may be more pressing at this historical moment to resort to something other than Santa Claus with a straw hat and a machete, historiographically, socially, morally, politically, theologially, and spiritually. Perhaps Lutherans have already pivoted, paying a price.

Notes

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