

# INTERVIEW WITH DAVID IGLESIAS

---

*David Iglesias has a legal career of over 35 years, which has been exceptionally diverse and global. He has been a U.S. Attorney, U.S. Navy JAG Officer, White House Fellow, college professor, political economy think tank director, state prosecutor, military war crimes/terrorism prosecutor and spokesman, rule of law instructor in Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, civil rights defense attorney, state-wide political candidate, and criminal defense attorney (representing legendary Navy SEAL Team Commanding Officer Dick Marcinko). His defense of a marine in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba partially inspired the hit movie “A Few Good Men.” Iglesias was named to Esquire Magazine’s 2009 “Best and Brightest” list and authored the book In Justice. He is the son of missionaries and was raised tri-cultural and tri-lingual in Panama and New Mexico.*

*Iglesias is a graduate of a public high school in Santa Fe, Wheaton College, and the University of New Mexico School of Law.*

## INTRODUCTION

This interview is about faith, latinidad, and the law. By some estimates, over 70% of Latin Americans and people with Latin American origins in the United States have a religious affiliation, and most identify as Christian.<sup>1</sup> Many Latin Americans and people with Latin American origins come to law school or to the legal field having some religious background, growing up either practicing a faith or having family member(s) who practice faith. This interview focuses on the importance of faith, latinidad, and the law to explore how these aspects of Latin American background, values, and heritage intersect with the legal field.

### **How has your Latino identity shaped who you are?**

Like many Latinos, I was born in Latin America. In my case, I was born in Panama and lived there until I was almost seven. Then, I came to the United States and spent the next few years here. I went back to Panama for one year in high school. It was a hard year, but it’s the year that God used to force me to relearn Spanish and Kuna (my father’s indigenous language). When I go back to Panama, I use both, and I use Spanish when I’m in the United States. So, it was a necessary experience. Then I spent the rest of my time in the United States, but over the past 30 years as a Navy JAG officer, the U.S. government sent me many times to Latin America. Part of why they sent me was because I am from Latin America. The numbers of Latinos in the United

---

<sup>1</sup> *Religious Landscape Study*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/latino/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/AR7E-GVCU> (last visited Apr. 2, 2022).

States are exploding, and I am very happy that God gave me the background that I have.

### **How has your faith shaped how you view your latinidad?**

Well, many Latinos are religious. The best-known symbol in Latin America is *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, which goes way back to the early days of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. That one symbol has been voted the most potent Latin American symbol, and the cool thing about that is she's not the Maria of northern Europe. She is a brown-skinned, dark-eyed, *morena* from Mexico. The guy who discovered this image was Don Juan, an Aztec gentleman who found it and showed it to the priest and, of course, the priest wanted to know where he got it from. You can't escape the presence of the church, originally the Roman Catholic Church, but more recently, the Pentecostal churches, the charismatic churches, and the evangelical churches are booming.

I took a study group to Colombia years ago and met with a pastor there. He said, "We are worried about you in America. You're losing your faith. We're praying for you." He said he did and saw unspeakable things as a guerrilla when he got radically saved—met the Jesus of history. And it changed his life. When I hear somebody like that saying that Americans are losing their faith, it's a sobering moment. The church is exploding, and there has always been a base of the Christian church in Latin America.

### **How has your faith shaped your legal work?**

Look at the number of times that the word "justice" is found in the Old Testament of the Bible; when I searched for derivatives of the word "justice"—like "justly" and "just"—there were over 300 instances. So, we serve a God that is concerned about justice. Micah 6:8 asks what God requires of us. Well, to love justice. Scripture tells us that justice is important to God.

So, I went in the criminal justice world—I defended and prosecuted people. And we don't have a perfect system. But in every case I ever handled—either as a prosecutor or as defense counsel—what I wanted was a just outcome. Sometimes a just outcome was not prosecuting someone, which got me in some trouble with the Justice Department when I didn't prosecute any voter fraud cases because I couldn't prove any. That was a just outcome. And sometimes, the just outcome is getting the best deal possible for your client, because he or she is guilty, the government can prove the case, and you just work for the best possible deal. So, justice permeates every iota of the legal world, and the criminal justice world in particular.

**Was there a point in your career where your view of justice, and the law, changed? Was it ever challenged?**

I grew up in the church because my parents were missionaries—my dad was a missionary to his own people in Panama. For me, justice was always an amorphous concept, because you hear about it a little bit in church, but it's not something that you hear a lot about. I guess my wake-up call was as a young Navy JAG officer, assigned to defend sailors and marines accused of crimes. It made me realize that this job I have is a serious job, and I have to take it seriously. I have to seek the best possible just outcome. And again, sometimes it meant pleading out, and sometimes it meant fighting the charges and hoping that the trier of fact would make the right decision.

While in the military, my view of justice went from amorphous to real-world. I had to do my best to be fully prepared in representing each client. I realized that if I didn't do my job correctly, a young marine might serve time for a crime they didn't commit. If I don't mitigate and call witnesses, they could do even more time. It was a wake-up call for me. I realized that there are many different areas of law you can practice, but the area of criminal justice is where the rubber meets the road. And you really have to wrestle with concepts of justice.

**Have you found that your latinidad has also shaped your legal work?**

Well, yes. Particularly in New Mexico because New Mexico became the second majority-minority state after Hawaii. But the bar does not reflect the population—the bar is primarily Anglo. When I was trying cases in New Mexico, in a little two-horse town, I was moved when a *viejito* came up to me after to say, “Thank you for representing our people. Thank you for being a lawyer.” It was moving because I didn't know this guy. He was a complete stranger. And he was affirming who I am. That's powerful, and that happened several times.

When you stand up there and you're overtly Latino or Hispanic, looking like I do, people immediately profile you—not always in a negative sense. And one of the things that they want to know is “does this guy know what he's doing?” By the end of the trial, the answer should be yes. Plus, I never went alone. I always had a partner. There is a passage in Proverbs that says two are stronger than one. When you try cases, you should have at least one co-counsel.

**What do you think are the biggest challenges that Latinos face as they enter the legal or the political space?**

I think the biggest hurdle is the presumptions. Is this person here legally is question number one. People might also presume that you're not really qualified—that the only reason you got into law school was because of your

ethnicity. You have to prove yourself. As a college student, I had friends of mine say things like “well, the only reason you got into Wheaton was because of your last name.” I would say, “Well, is that why I got a higher grade in this class than you did?” You always have to have a soft answer at the ready because people do make dumb assumptions.

Another presumption is that you’re only interested in immigration. Some are, but I never practiced civil immigration law—and I practiced 30 years. I did military law, criminal law, and insurance defense work. Latinos go into every considerable area of the law.

**Do you think that faith can be an asset as students enter the legal or political fields? Or is it an obstacle?**

That’s a difficult question to answer. I think you can assume most Latino clients probably have some religious background, because over 70% were raised Christian. I think praying with your clients—if they allow that—is a great idea to let them know that you share a common faith.

In the political field, people may make crazy assumptions because we’re so politically divided right now. I think people now view the word “evangelical” as the “E word,” and they assume that it always has a political application. Coming from me who received two appointments and ran for office, some might find it funny to hear me say that I really like the original use of the word “evangelical”. I’m not very sanguine about how it’s been politicized. It’s been politicized and marginalized. I don’t like that because the word originally means “sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ” and the news that He loves you. That’s really what it was meant to be, but it has been changed over the past 30 years. And not all those changes have been good. So, I shared some of these concerns with a former Bush speechwriter when I was in Washington years ago. I said, “Is there a better term?” He said, “I can’t think of a better term.” He said, “maybe Christ follower.” The original meaning of “evangelical” is beautiful, but what it has become is not. So, I think you have to explain what you mean by an “evangelical Christian” because people will make a lot of negative assumptions.

**Could you speak a little bit about how faith, values, and heritage have a space in the legal field, and why these topics are important to think about?**

The Rule of Law is based on biblical notions of justice. God cares about order and about the law. He cares about justice. He cares about all those things that eventually became a secular legal concept. So, to try to remove the Christian legal concepts from our legal system is impossible. It is like trying to remove the foundation of a building while the building is still there. It is just not possible. But I think Christians need to be winsome about it. Christians need to patiently explain that our legal system is based on Judeo-

Christian notions of fairness, justice, and order, and that we don't serve a God of chaos. We serve a God who loves peace and order.

**Could you tell us about your work at the Wheaton Center for Faith, Politics and Economics? Many students come to law school with ideas of justice and wanting to impact people in some way, but then it often quickly becomes about grades, prestige, and money. Values and faith often get pushed to the wayside. Is there a way that you encourage your students to think about faith and values?**

That's one of the single most difficult questions anyone has to answer: "Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?" Christians should have hope that God cares about where we should go. So, I've pondered this question for over 30 years, and I came up with this acronym: PASO. The P stands for prayer—you have to continually ask God for direction. The A is for ability—are you able to do this? If you want to be a patent lawyer but don't have a scientific background, you're probably never going to be a patent lawyer. S is Scripture—what does Scripture say? Spend time in the Bible and look for passages that might apply to your life. And then O stands for opportunity. If you want to be an immigration lawyer, but there are zero openings—and 100 openings in some other area—maybe immigration is not where you should end up. So, I have found that acronym to be helpful in my life, and I share it with students who ask.

Also, I have four squares I encourage students to consider: (1) things you're good at which you like, (2) things you're good at which you don't like (3) things you're not good at which you like, and (4) things that you're not good at which you don't like. The sweet spot is things you're good at which you like. That's the quadrant you want to be in.

