

**The Christianities of Chiapas, Mexico:  
A Provisional Map of Maya Catholics, Protestants and Zapatistas**

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More than five hundred years after the initial arrival of Spaniards in the New World, there are no indigenous Maya (Indian) peoples who can claim to have avoided very considerable involvements with Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most famously remote of Maya peoples are the Lacandones, a distinctive indigenous Maya group whose numbers are now limited to only a few hundred individuals.<sup>2</sup> In the era of the earliest European intrusion into the area, the Lacandones fled the Spanish onslaught and took up residence in the sparsely populated rainforest (or selva) of what was to become the eastern portion of Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, which borders on Guatemala.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the 1980s, the selva of Chiapas remained very sparsely populated except for those few hundred Lacandones and a few logging interests. In that remote locale, the Lacandon Maya developed a distinctive, decidedly non-Christian cosmological tradition, a religious orientation in which pilgrimage to the archaeological site of

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<sup>1</sup> While the exceptionally unstable situation in Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico—site to what is euphemistically termed an on-going “low density war” involving the EZLN or Zapatista National Liberation Army—continues to evolve, this article depends primarily on reading and conversations that I undertook in Chiapas during May-July 1997. I have not attempted to integrate the most recent events.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Didier Boremanse, *Hach Winik: The Lacandon Maya of Chiapas, Southern Mexico* (Albany, New York: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> For broad background on the state of Chiapas, see, for instance, Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, a Poor People: Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); and Marco A. Orozco Zuarth, *Síntesis de Chiapas* (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: Ediciones y Sistemas Especiales, 1996).



Yaxchilan played perhaps the most oft-documented role. They did, then, probably remained relatively insulated from European influences considerably longer than any other native group in that general vicinity. But, in the past two decades, as the selva has become increasingly heavily populated both by (non-Maya) ladinos and other Maya dislocated from other highland areas to the west (a matter to which I will return), any claim that the Lacandones have remained "uncontaminated" has vanished. At present, few among the younger generation of Lacandon Maya are well versed in the cosmology or rituals of their forbearers; present-day visitors to the area are told that only a few old men really know or care much about "the old ways." Alternatively, by contrast to their ironically famous isolation, the Lacandones are now increasingly involved in the orchestration of cultural and eco-tourism projects that actively invite foreign tourists into their communities and the nearby pre-Columbian ruins of Bonampak. Instead of hiding in the jungle, the Lacandon Maya are discovering ways to market their "exoticism;" they have, one must conclude, joined the global economy.

Moreover, while the religious orientation of the Lacandones may have remained remarkably resilient from the encroachment of Spanish Catholicism for generations, they are at present very heavily involved with Protestants, most notably it seems, with the Seventh Day Adventists who have become so prominent in the area. There has been, in fact, by all assessments, a veritable "explosion" of Protestantism in Latin America in the past two decades—a trend (discussed below) that seems to continue unabated—and neither Chiapas nor the Lacandones is exempt from this latest wave of Christianization. Nevertheless, if huge numbers of Maya in Chiapas have embraced Protestantism in the past twenty years, the Lacandon Maya remain something of an exception inasmuch as they seem to have moved directly from their "old ways" to

Protestant Christianity without ever really participating in Catholicism. That is to say, the overwhelming majority of Maya who have turned to Protestantism were already strongly (if distinctively) Catholic Christians who had become somehow disaffected with that Catholic orientation; but, for the Lacandonés, Catholicism was apparently never a particularly appealing option. Be that as it may, one has to suspect that the Lacandonés' currently paired involvements in Protestantism and in a more entrepreneurial approach to tourism are not entirely incidental.

At any rate, with the very substantial Protestant involvements of the Lacandonés, we remove entirely the prospect that there are at this point any Maya peoples who remain largely untouched by Christianity. By now, so it seems, *all* of the Maya of Chiapas (and likely all the indigenous people in the Mesoamerica) define their religious identities with respect to one version or another of Christianity. Antagonism toward Christianity may remain an option for the contemporary Maya of Chiapas—and antagonism among different strains of Maya Christianity is probably the norm—but indifference and non-involvement in Christianity have become impossible.

If, then, virtually all contemporary Maya are heavily involved in Christianity, that is *not* to suggest homogeneity among the Maya Christians of Chiapas. To the contrary, Christianity in Chiapas is highly diversified and fragmented, to put it mildly. In this complex little state, which is, paradoxically enough, site to Mexico's richest natural resources and poorest people, Maya Christianity is really a set of religious identities rather than a single spiritual outlook. Moreover, tensions—and contentions—between these various strains of Christianity are intense; while the respective versions



of Catholicism and Protestantism in this region are in some instances allied, they are in more instances at radical odds with one another.

With that diversity in mind, the modest agenda of this paper is simply to provide one provisional map of the Christianities of Chiapas, a map or typology that marks three very different sorts of Catholics and then three different sets of Protestants. This six-part division is heuristic and, I hope, somewhat useful, but it—and the labels that it employs—are also highly tentative and subject to lots of fine-tuning. Also, I should note at the outset that what matters most for this typology is *people's own self-description* of their religious identities and orientations; consistent with (one understanding of) the agenda of *Religionswissenschaft*, I will presume no assessment of "good" versus "bad" Christians nor "true" versus "false" Christians. My focus is on understanding the ways in which these Christians understand themselves and their relations to the other Christians around them.

Be that as it may, a first (of three) versions of Catholic Christianity in Chiapas might be variously termed "conventional Catholicism," "conservative Catholicism," or perhaps "institutional Catholicism" (all roughly interchangeable terms that I will differentiate from "traditional Catholicism," which is something very different). By so-termed conservative Catholics I refer to the very familiar, still widespread set of Christians who describe themselves as committed to a largely (supposedly) apolitical version of Catholicism, which continues to regard as authoritative the policies of the Pope and Roman Catholic Church. This mainline, largely ladino (i.e., non-Maya) sort of Mexican Catholicism, though pejoratively termed the "Church of the Rich," is a quite straightforward and unremarkable possibility, the "official Catholicism" of the region if you will. Participants in this version of Catholicism, few of which are Indians, tend to

frown on the blending of traditional Maya religious practices and Christian ones, a blending that is crucial in the other forms of Chiapas Catholicism. Moreover, generally speaking, these mainline Catholics tend to locate the heart of Christian spirituality in prayer and liturgy rather than social activism. In other words, participants in this version of Christianity, while possessing the lion's share of Chiapas' political and economic power, nonetheless, routinely make very explicit distinctions between "religion" and "politics," and then contend that priests and Church officials ought to confine themselves to the former.

By contrast, a second version of Catholicism, which is directly linked with "liberation theology," is variously labeled "liberal Catholicism," "progressive Catholicism" or sometimes "neo-Catholicism." Embracing the widely used self-designation of the "Church of the Poor" (to contrast themselves to the more mainline "Church of the Rich"), this Catholic orientation is much more explicitly political and socially activist; from this view, the supposed separation of "religion" and "politics" is neither possible or even an appropriate aspiration. Deploying a whole series of polarities, Christian identity in this case is often constructed via an explicit—and accusatory—distinction between the Church of the Poor, which is overwhelmingly composed of impoverished Indians, and "official Christianity" (the first entry to this typology), which is associated with a social elite that is ladino, wealthy and politically empowered. Not surprisingly, then, "official Christianity," the proponents of which own and control the vast majority of the land in Chiapas, is likewise associated with corruption, exploitation and hypocrisy—in short, a Christianity that has lost its spiritual moorings and drifted very far from the true message of Jesus Christ. By contrast, the



Church of the Poor is presented as a retrieval of the rightful essence of Jesus' message, a recovery of correct and "truly Christian" priorities.

The social gospel of liberation theology Catholicism has, of course, a deep history and very wide distribution across Latin America; but much of the vigor and distinctiveness of this version of Catholicism in Chiapas owes in large part to the charismatic and controversial person of Samuel Ruiz, bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas from 1960 until just recently.<sup>4</sup> In fact, not surprisingly, given the combination of a uniquely high indigenous population in Chiapas and Ruiz's exceptional energy, it is in this southern state that the tenants and tenor of liberation theology have been far more prominent than anywhere else in Mexico. Though firm statistics on these matters are elusive and unreliable (and religious identity in this context is especially fluid), one can assume that the greatest majority of Maya people in Chiapas would identify themselves as sympathetic to that form of Catholicism promulgated by Samuel Ruiz.

In addition to this familiar tension between the so-termed Church of the Rich and the Church of the Poor is a third, perhaps less obvious but equally important dimension of the Catholic landscape in Chiapas—a component that is especially crucial in explaining the meteoric rise of Protestantism in this region during recent decades. This third possibility, a version of Catholicism that is confined almost exclusively to Maya (non-ladino) people, is variously referred to as "folk Catholicism," "Maya Catholicism," "traditional Catholicism" or, in particularly problematic but still telling term, "syncretistic Maya-Catholic religion." Another possible—and better—label is "costumbre," which is usually glossed as something like custom, habit or practice; this

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Carlos Fazio, *Samuel Ruiz: El caminante* (Mexico, D.F.: Espasa Calpe Mexicana S.A., 1994); Artur Reyes F. y Miguel Angel Zebadúa Carbone, *Samuel Ruiz: Su lucha por la paz en Chiapas* (Mexico, D.F.: Ediciones del Milenio, 1995).

term has the advantage of directing attention to the fact that this is a religious orientation in which actions, especially ritual actions, seem arguably to supercede any sort of doctrinal system of belief.

In Chiapas, by far the most well documented—and most notorious—manifestation of this sort of folk Catholicism appears in the township of San Juan Chamula, in the highland area just a few kilometers outside of San Cristobal.<sup>5</sup> While this version of Maya Catholicism, may, at points, overlap with the likewise largely Maya “liberation theology” Catholics, at other points these two Maya Catholic perspectives are at direct, and even violent, loggerheads. On the one hand, these adherents to *costumbre*—for instance, the chiefs (or *caciques*) of Chamula (figures who will be featured protagonists for the remainder of this article)—regard and identify themselves as “Catholics;” yet, on the other and, those same Maya Catholic *caciques* are likewise explicit in their claims to independence from the authority of the institutional hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. These “traditional” Maya Christians, in a sense, provide a new meaning for that colloquial phrase, “more Catholic than the Pope” insofar as these adherents to *costumbre* are emphatic that participation in their understanding of Christianity does *not* require faithful obedience either to the Pope or to the official policies of the Roman Catholic Vatican.

This intriguing possibility—wherein, paradoxically enough, Maya Indians both embrace and reject the colonialist overtures of the Catholic Church—has been subject of much scholarly discussion. Most conventional discussions of the spread of Catholicism among the Indians of Mexico appeal to the timeworn category of

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<sup>5</sup> For extensive material on all aspects of Chamula, see Ricardo Pozas Arciniega, *Chamula*, 2 volumes (Mexico, D.F.: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1977); and Gary H. Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).



"syncretism" in order to accentuate the blend or mixture of European beliefs and practices with indigenous beliefs and practices. More recent scholars, however, have expressed their discontents with this timeworn explanatory strategy; David Carrasco, for instance, refers to "the ubiquitous and lazy category of syncretism"<sup>6</sup> and then reminds us that the 1995 *Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion* assesses syncretism as "a term of dubious heritage and limited usefulness often employed to ascribe insincerity, confusion, or other negative qualities to a nascent religious group."<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, as every visitor to the Maya zone will notice, ritual activities undertaken in the predominantly Indian Catholic churches certainly do have a distinctive flavor that partakes of both European-derived practices and indigenous ones. Perhaps the most unmistakable interlacing of traditions involves the very explicit correlation of Catholic saints with indigenous Maya deities.

While this sort of blending of Euro-Catholic and indigenous elements, which is really at the core of this so-termed "traditional" or "folk" Catholicism, is in evidence across the entire Maya zone, in Chiapas it is, as noted earlier, the much-studied highland Maya village of San Juan Chamula that occupies a uniquely prominent place. The Catholicism of Chamula was, of course, originally orchestrated and overseen by Spanish and then ladino priests; but, over time, the role and influence of the caciques or indigenous ruling factions of Chamula continued to expand until, by the 1960s and

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<sup>6</sup> David Carrasco, "Mesoamerica as a New World: Colonialism and Religious Creativity," in *Comparative Studies on the Popular Religions in U.S.A. and Mexico*, ed. Michio Araki???, p. 13

<sup>7</sup> *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (American Academy of Religion, 1995), 1042.

1970s, those Maya caciques began to forcibly remove the non-Indian priests.<sup>8</sup> For their part, authorities of the Catholic Church likewise became sufficiently disenchanted with the non-compliance of Maya caciques' styles of "Catholic" worship and celebration, and thus felt compelled to excommunicate the Chamulas. At that point, formal ties between the Chamula church and the Vatican were severed.

At present, then, while the Chamulas remain emphatic of their self-designation as "Catholics," they do *not* acknowledge the authority of the Catholic Church, and priests (that is, official representatives of the Catholic Church) visit the village only for special occasions, most notably baptisms. On all other occasions, the indigenous leaders of Chamula manage their own religious affairs with complete independence of the institution of the Catholic Church. Any suggestion that this severing of ties with the Vatican was a consequence of indifference or apathy for "Catholic" spirituality could not, however, be farther from the truth. The nearly constant improvisational ritual activity that is undertaken inside the principal church at the center of Chamula, together with the fabulously elaborate schedule of annual celebrations, punctuated by the yearly carnival season, testify to the community's stunningly involved religious life. Every description of Chamula comments on the exuberance with which these people celebrate and express their religious convictions; it is, in fact, difficult to visit Chamula any time of the year without encountering one sort of procession or another.

Even for historians of religions in the tradition of *Religionswissenschaft* (like myself), that is, scholars who are, in the main, averse to making normative judgments concerning the religious traditions that they study, the knotted ethical questions issuing

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Isabel Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas: Religión y migración en tres municipios de los Altos de Chiapas: Chenalhó, Larrainzar y Chamula* (Mexico, D.F.: Claves Latinoamericanas, 1994), pp. 173-76



from the Chamula situation really do present an interpretive dilemma. On the one hand, the aggressive ways in which the indigenous population of Chamula has embraced various elements of European Catholicism but then rejected the hegemonic authority of the Roman Catholic Church would seem to be a heroic exercise in self-determination and resistance to colonial suppression. From that view, the caciques of Chamula emerge as heroic fighters against colonialist oppression and for indigenous self-determination. From that perspective, the Maya "traditional Catholics" of Chamula seem to deserve congratulations for the aggressive wherewithal that enabled them to take precisely what they wanted and needed from their Spanish Catholic colonial oppressors and then, as it were, to throw the rest back into the face of the Catholic Church. From that angle, the constant claim of the caciques of Chamula to be the "protectors of tradition" rings true.

Yet, on the other hand, as one learns more about the socio-economic complexities of the situation, those same Chamula caciques emerge as something more akin to the overlords or "political bosses" of a exploitative religio-political "system of cargos" in which a privileged minority brutally extort and manipulate the larger body of Chamula's Maya residents.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, these "cargos" or religio-political term offices have for generations been monopolized by a relatively small number of very powerful Chamula (Maya Catholic) families who totally dominate the economy; to control cargo entails not only oversight of ceremonial events but also very considerable responsibility, and thus privilege, in the economic sphere.

Additionally, there is clear evidence of a kind of long-running collusion, a "sweetheart deal" of sorts, between these Chamula caciques and the PRI (Partido

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<sup>9</sup> See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 229-233.

Revolucionario Institucional), the ruling national political party of Mexico for some 70 years (a domination that has finally ended with the 2000 Mexican presidential election). For their part, the caciques have been famously successful in delivering the votes necessary for the election of national- and state-level PRI candidates; and, in return, the PRI officials do not meddle in the local affairs of the Chamula caciques, who are thus afforded free reign to govern (and exploit) their local constituencies in whatever way they choose. With that in mind, the removal of ladino Catholic priests from Chamula emerges less as a heroic act of indigenous resistance to Euro-colonial oppression than as a kind strong-arm political tactic on the part of the caciques to remove obstacles to their domination and exploitation of the citizenry of Chamula. From that view, which one has to suspect is considerably closer to the reality of the situation, the caciques of Chamula are much more the *exploiters* than the *exploited* insofar as these Maya authorities conduct themselves like the overlords of a corrupt political patronage system. Exercising a kind of Maya-on-Maya violence, the Chamula caciques strategically make demands and grant favors in such a way that perpetuates their control over the religio-political and economic workings of the entire township.

Adding more still to the interpretive challenge, though it is clearly an exercise in institutionalized exploitation, this type of cacique governance—a practice undertaken in other Chiapas communities as well, though apparently nowhere with the intimidating efficiency of Chamula—is underwritten by the caciques' twin (and seemingly contradictory) claims (a) to be the faithful "Catholics" and (b) to be protectors of the traditions and "costumbre" of their Maya ancestors. It is indeed ironic (though probably not uncommon) that the adherents to a syncretistic religious orientation that is so deeply and unmistakably indebted to Europeans—and to that extent a "foreign" religious



orientation—can position themselves as the “rescuers” of the indigenous culture and customs.

Ironies and ethical judgments aside, consideration of this very same sort of religio-political manipulation by the Maya Catholic caciques of Chamula allows us to redirect attention now toward the various sorts of Protestant Christianity in Chiapas. In that respect, it is noteworthy that these abuses of power, abuses undertaken in name of “the preservation of costumbre,” not only incited the ire of the Roman Catholic Church, they, moreover, ironically enough, have also contributed very substantially to the veritable “explosion” of Protestantism in Chiapas in the past two decades.<sup>10</sup> In other words, as self-appointed defenders of both Maya costumbre and (their version of) Catholicism, it is not surprising that the caciques of Chamula find themselves at odds not only with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, but even more so with the fast-increasing presence of Protestants (or “Evangelicos”) in this region.

Before addressing the diversity of Chiapas Protestantisms, some very general observations about Protestantism in this context should serve, I think, to confirm the caciques’ perceptions that mounting Maya enthusiasm for evangelical Christianity really does provide a very real threat to the traditional Catholic status quo in contexts like Chamula. Yes, the caciques are right to feel nervous about the rising tide of Protestantism.

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<sup>10</sup> Among many available sources on the spectacular growth of Protestantism in Latin America, see David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990); José Míguez Bonino, *Faces of Latin American Protestantism*, 1993 Carnhan Lectures (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995). On the history of Protestantism in Mexico and specifically in Chiapas, see, for instance, Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 179-183.

Where Catholicism has been an essential component of the Chiapas religious landscape from the initial sixteenth-century arrival of Europeans in the area, the first substantial Protestant presence did not emerge until 1910.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the Second World War, the period between 1949-1960 witnessed a great intensification of Protestant activity in Chiapas. By 1980, there were reportedly some 1442 Protestant churches in Chiapas, and since then growth has continued unabated.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the exceptional case of the Lacandonese' recent engagement of Protestantism directly from "the old ways," the great majority of Mayas who find their way into Protestantism orientation had been previously Catholic. That is to say, virtually all of the Maya who have recently joined the swelling ranks of Protestantism in Chiapas are disaffected Catholics of one sort or another; it is zero-sum game insofar as Protestant gains are Catholic losses. And, consequently, endemic tension, competition and polemical exchanges between the region's Catholics and Protestant are hardly surprising.

For instance, in Chiapas, one hears very often—either from non-Maya Protestant missionaries or from Maya adherents to Protestantism—the polemical assessment that the ostensible "conversions" of large numbers of Maya to Catholicism beginning in the sixteenth century were actually nominal, superficial or "incomplete conversions" insofar as those Maya Catholics remained "heathens at heart," still attached to their indigenous ("pagan") deities and ritual practices, which were just were dressed over with a kind of thinly Christian veneer. By contrast, according to this polemical argument, those formerly Catholic Maya who have now embraced Protestantism have finally undergone a much deeper or more genuine conversion—a "conversion of the

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<sup>11</sup> Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 183.



heart," so to speak—which thus presumably constitutes their first "real" embrace of truths of Christianity.

Moreover, when Protestants in Chiapas, including recent Maya converts, explain the attraction of their evangelical religious orientation they nearly always do so by asserting its superiority over Catholicism. One often hears from (Maya) Protestants, for instance, that (Maya) Catholics drink too much alcohol; another persistent Protestant complaint is that (Maya) Catholics are preoccupied with over-elaborate rituals and festivals (which, of course, include lots of drinking)—and, in both those respects, not surprisingly, one often hears that it is the traditional or "costumbre" Catholics of Chamula that are the very worst offenders. Additionally, advocates for the superior virtues of Protestant Christianity often maintain that (Maya) Catholics disrespect women, and thus exclude women from decision-making both in the public and private spheres. Along those lines, there are also recurrent claims that (Maya) Protestant men are much less inclined to beat their wives than are Catholics, much more respectful of their children, and more likely to undertake the sort of steady employment that will provide reliable support for their families. Whether these broad assessments of Catholics versus Protestants are empirically true is, of course, debatable; but there is little question that these are common accusations.

Furthermore, Protestants in Chiapas, not unlike their spiritual counterparts in other contexts, place a stress on individuality that tends to put them at odds with Catholics. The characteristically Protestant preoccupation with individual autonomy, and thus a tendency to stress the rights and potential of the individual over the group, eventuates in a general suspicion and disdain for hierarchy whether in the context of ecclesiastic institutions, government bureaucracies or even families. Yet another

prominent point of contention comes in the Chiapas Protestants' decidedly non-Catholic emphasis and slant on eschatology inasmuch as these Evangelicos live with urgent anticipation of a relatively near millennium, "second coming" or rapture—an attitude that does even more to undermine the authority of merely human, "this-worldly" governmental persons and agencies. In short, yes, the traditional Catholic caciques of Chamula have good warrant to feel threatened by the speedily growing numbers of Evangelicos in their midst; Protestants are *not* likely to be cooperative in bearing a heavy share of the expenses for elaborate religio-civic ceremonial activities that they regard as entirely irrelevant for the exercise of "true (Protestant) Christianity."

All of these generalizations, of course, deserve lots of qualification. Nevertheless, it should be apparent that the Protestant-versus-Catholic rhetoric of contemporary Chiapas is strikingly resemblant to age-old Reformation dynamics insofar as, on the one hand, Catholics (at least of "conservative" and "traditional" Catholics) tend to locate the center of their Christian spirituality in the realm of ritual and, very broadly speaking, sacramentalism; yet, on the other hand, Protestants are locating the center of their Christian spirituality in realm of ethics, daily life and proper living, that is, ostensibly "good and clean lifestyles." Ironically, Protestants provide yet one more Chiapas group that claims to be the "rescuers and defenders of tradition," but, in their case, the claim is grounded in a conviction that Evangelicos are recovering the purity of "primitive" (first-century) Christian patterns of belief, worship and lifestyle—patterns that were, from the Protestant perspective, corrupted first by the Roman Catholic Church and then degraded yet further by the excesses the "traditional Catholics" of Chamula.



At any rate, while there is a widespread participation in these very general tendencies and anti-Catholic complaints, Protestantism in Chiapas is hardly a monolithic phenomenon. To the contrary, just as there many sorts of Catholics—or actually more so than in the case of Catholicism—there are innumerable sorts of Protestants on the scene. Organizing the terrain among three broad sorts of Protestants provides a useful, if very imperfect arrangement; in this case the lines are considerably more difficult to draw than in the case of Catholicism. Again the labels are problematic, but consider in turn (1) historical Protestant denominations, (2) sectarian Protestants and (3) Pentecostals.

The first major strain of Chiapas Protestantism, in itself significantly diversified, is composed of groups associated with the historical (mainline) Protestant denominations, most notably, it seems, Presbyterians and Baptists.<sup>13</sup> In most cases, these historical denominations were already well established elsewhere in Mexico, and thus are carried into the southern state of Chiapas by Mexican (as opposed to North American) adherents of those faiths. At the risk of stating the obvious, the very different (non-Catholic) priorities of these denominational Protestants are, for instance, unmistakably apparent in the decidedly plain and unadorned church buildings in which they meet and undertake the exercise of their Bible-based Christian worship; many Protestant churches are identifiable as such only by a sign announcing their particular affiliation. In San Cristobal, for instance, though both sorts of churches serve predominantly Indian congregations, the juxtaposition of famously elaborate baroque façades like that on the 450-year old Santo Domingo Catholic church and the newly

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<sup>13</sup> On Protestantism in Mexico and specifically in Chiapas, see, for instance, See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 184-91.

erected ramshackle sanctuaries of the Baptists provides clear evidence of very different religious priorities.

At any rate, alongside these mainline denominations is a second, even more diversified set options that could be termed "sectarian Protestants," an imperfect label that sometimes carries a pejorative implication that these groups occupy the periphery or "fringe." Most prominent in this arching category, which represents even faster growth in Chiapas than the mainline denominations, are Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah Witnesses, and Mormons or representatives of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. By contrast to the mainline denominations—and irrespective of the substantial antagonism among these various sectarian groups—the vitality of these versions of Protestantism in Chiapas owes most to missionary activity that is sponsored by some sort of base or "mother church" in the United States rather than elsewhere in Mexico.

For several reasons, these orientations, while, on the one hand, vigorously campaigning for new converts are, on the other hand, prone to a kind of sociological and political isolationism. Jehovah Witnesses, for instance, ironically enough, pose a political challenge to the authority of the traditional Catholic caciques by adopting a decidedly apolitical religious orientation.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, by placing their focus on an imminent millennium and otherworldly rapture, Jehovah Witnesses are led into a kind of non-involvement in the ordinary social affairs of the present world—an "*in* this world but not *of* this world" attitude. They have prohibitions against voting, against participating in non-church social organizations, against military service, and against reverence for any flag or national insignia, which might be interpreted as an unhealthy compromise of totally faith centered Christian priorities.

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<sup>14</sup> See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indigenas*, 201-204.



Also among this group, the "messianic orientation" of Seventh Day Adventists, that is, their preoccupations with an Jesus' imminent second coming, seems to be even more threatening to the traditional (or folk) Maya Catholic caciques of Chamula for several reasons.<sup>15</sup> Their close ties with Adventist organizations in the United States and elsewhere make them seem especially "foreign" and thus subject to accusations of some sort of insidious "imperialist agenda;" their insistence on Bible-based Saturday worship, which Adventists regard as a return to the practices of the early Christian church, carries with it a dismissive rejection of nearly all "traditional Maya Catholic" ceremony.

Moreover, in the realm of ethics and daily life, Adventists disrupt traditional Maya Catholic practice by insisting on abstinence from smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol or coffee, and (in some cases) eating meat. And, that they undertake to build their own Adventist hospitals, clinics and schools has the effect of disconnecting and isolating them from the more long-established community based services of the Maya Catholics. In short, Adventists have been every effective, either deliberately or inadvertently, in finding ways to escape and exempt themselves from the authority of the Maya Catholic caciques of Chamula and elsewhere.

A third and last category of Protestantism in this provisional typology—so-termed "Pentecostals"—is a different, non-parallel category insofar as it refers to religious identities defined via participation in 'charismatic' devotional practices—e.g. glossolalia or speaking in tongues, miracle cures, and otherwise "emotional or personalistic" devotion—a style of worship that cuts across Protestant denominational and sectarian lines.<sup>16</sup> The spectacular growth of Pentecostalism in Chiapas, which is actually part of a much wider phenomenon that is sweeping Latin America, is

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<sup>15</sup> See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 198-200.

<sup>16</sup> See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 209-211.

associated especially with migrant Mexican workers who have visit the U.S.A. and then return to their homeland. Given that constituency, it is not surprising that Pentecostalism has grown especially quickly in rural areas or among "marginalized" urban populations. Pentecostals, in fact, are likely the fastest growing segment of the Protestantism in Chiapas; some estimates suggest that 70% of Protestants in Mexico (and in Latin America more generally) fit this basic description as "Pentecostal."<sup>17</sup> It is, however, crucial to keep in mind that the very loose designation Pentecostal refers to participants in a whole variety of Protestant (and even Catholic) organizations that are very different in other respects.

Simplistic as this little six-part typological map of the Christianities of Chiapas may be, it does allow me to end this article with brief comments on the religious dimensions of the two most high profile socio-political crises in the state's recent history: first, the phenomenon of the "expulsados," or the expelled ones, and, second, the Zapatista uprising of 1994. While both crises are more routinely addressed in terms of the abuse of the human and political rights of the Maya, I would submit that neither crisis can be understood without attention to the so-termed "explosion" of Protestantism and the contestation between competing views of Christianity. Both are assuredly religious as well as political crises.

First, the phenomenon the "expulsados" draws us back again to the machinations of the "traditional Catholic" Maya caciques of Chamula, from whose perspective the rapid rise of Protestantism constitutes, above all, a dire threat to their enduring domination of the political and economic, as well as the more strictly religious

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<sup>17</sup> See Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 211.



affairs of Chamula. If ladino representatives of the Roman Catholic Church constituted one sort of challenge to the smooth running status quo of the Chamula caciques' control over the communities within their township, the increasing influence of Protestants, or "Evangelicos" as Protestants are often collectively termed in this context, has constituted an even more serious threat—a threat that continues to grow all the time. Yet, from the perspective of the politically disenfranchised Maya in the Chamula region, the rise of Protestantism—and the appeal of this version of Christianity—owes in no small measure to the fact that this is perhaps the most promising means of escaping that coercive (traditional Catholic) authority under which they have so long suffered. For Maya peasants who are tired of being so heavily taxed (or, in their view, extorted) in order to support a religio-political system for which they see no rewards, Protestantism provides both the means and a strong theological rationale for organized resistance. Via adherence to Protestantism, non-compliance with the "traditional Catholic" caciques becomes a religious right and even a religious obligation.

For the caciques' part, they already have a clear precedent for how to deal with subversives within their communities. Just as they had with the ladino Catholic priests, whom were expelled beginning in the 1960s, the caciques undertook to eradicate the Protestant resistance by simply forcing the evangelical malcontents to leave. Given both the resources and the incentive to enforce the continuation of their position—and given that the caciques had an ideal rationale (or rationalization) in their self-appointed role as the "protectors of costumbre"—the ruling factions of Chamula began as early as 1974 to forcibly expel Protestants from the municipality or township of Chamula.

These, then, are the so-termed "expulsados" or the expelled ones.<sup>18</sup> By 1985, already

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<sup>18</sup> See Rosa Rojas, *Chiapas: la paz violeta* (Mexico, D.F.: LaJornada, 1995), 109-111.

10,000 Maya residents of the Chamula area, nearly all of them Protestants (or "Evangelicos") had been expelled from their homes and deprived access to the land on which their families had traditionally farmed.

While the 'official' explanation for this forced relocation is that the Evangelicos constitute "a threat to *costumbre*," there is actually a conjunction of motivations for their expulsion. These Protestants certainly do, for better or worse, threaten the smooth functioning of the elaborate ceremonial life of the traditional Catholics; from the Protestant view, all that ritualizing is an unhealthy distortion of "true Christianity," a expression of completely misguided priorities that has to be resisted. Perhaps even more serious, however, is the Protestants' unwillingness to vote for the PRI candidates who have enjoyed a virtual lock on the Chamula electorate for decades. In other words, fully aware of the mechanism that keeps the traditional Catholic *caciques* in control, these Protestants threaten to disrupt the "sweetheart deal" between the national and state-level PRI office holders and the local authorities of Chamula. But, by virtue of an odd logic—and this, for historians of religions, is one of the most fascinating dimensions of the situation—the *caciques* apparently presume that while it may be wrong (or may be perceived as wrong) to expel people from their homes on "political" grounds, to expel people on the basis of "religious" differences is entirely justified, perfectly acceptable and perhaps even heroic. All manner of coercion and manipulation is justified when (ostensibly) in the service of "*costumbre*," and thus to force their own constituents into exile on those grounds appears to be more a matter of pride than secrecy or shame.

At any rate, some of those "expulsados" from the highland zone of Chamula have taken refuge in the lowland rainforest or *selva* of eastern Chiapas, ironically the



same zone into which the Lacandon Maya had fled from the Spaniards 400 years earlier; but an even greater number of these expulsados have taken up residence in squatter communities around the edges of San Cristobal de las Casas, communities in which one can find all three of the strains of Protestantism mentioned above. Whether the expulsados will ever have the opportunity (or the inclination) to return to their traditional homelands remains an open question.

Finally, even the briefest discussion of the religio-political landscape of contemporary Chiapas must take note of the Zapatista uprising that, on New Year's Eve in 1994, brought the eyes of the globe to this otherwise obscure southern state of Mexico.<sup>19</sup> Taking advantage of the festivities of the holiday, the EZLN (the Zapatista National Liberation Army), the "army that came out of the jungle," under the direction of Sub-commandante Marcos, selected this as the opportune day to launch well orchestrated, simultaneous surprise attacks on San Cristobal and several of the other principal towns in Chiapas. In the context of those initial surprise attacks, a force of young, disciplined, mostly indigenous but not very well armed men and women freed some 179 "political prisoners" from a penitentiary near San Cristobal; the largely Maya rebels also took the governor of Chiapas hostage, and then announced themselves in rebellion against the Mexican government, the army and the police. The Mexican government responded quickly and with a formidable show of firepower. The lightly armed EZLN, the "Zapatistas" as they are most often known, were seriously

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<sup>19</sup> The literature on the Zapatista rebels is remarkably voluminous and ever increasing. See, for instance, César Romero Jacobo, *Los Altos de Chiapas: La voz de las armas* (Mexico, D.F.: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1994); George A. Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1994); Guido Camú Urzúa y Dauno Tótoro Taulis, *EZLN: El ejército que salió de la selva* (Mexico, D.F.: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1994); Rosa Rojas, *Chiapas: la paz violeta* (Mexico, D.F.: LaJornada, 1995); and Yvon Le Bot, *Subcomandante Marcos: El sueño zapatista* (Barcelona, Espana: Plaza 7 Janés, 1997).



overmatched, and the initial military exchanges were short-lived (with very uncertain causality counts). Nonetheless, the Zapatista rebels retreated to the refuge of the selva and even now, some six years later, the state of Chiapas remains in a kind of standoff between the occupying Mexican army and the rebels hidden in the jungle.

Within days of the initial uprising, the Mexican government appointed a "Commission for Peace and Reconciliation," presumably to address a slate of 34 broad-ranging issues for which the Zapatistas demanded attention, but negotiations stalled without resolution. Over the years since 1994, intermittent attempts to restart the talks have been similarly inconclusive. The present—and on-going—stalemate is euphemistically termed a condition of "low density war."

In the context of the present discussion of the Christianities of Chiapas, it is perhaps most noteworthy that the very carefully self-designed identity of the EZLN, while overwhelmingly composed of Maya Christians—both Catholics and Protestants—is explicitly *not* aligned with any specific religious orientation. To the contrary, Zapatista literature and the public statements of Sub-commandante Marco—statements that are very widely circulated in the international media and on the Internet—repeatedly emphasize that people of conscience from any religious orientation are welcome into the ranks of the EZLN. According to Marcos, this is *not* a religiously based movement.

These claims to neutrality in religious matters serve the Zapatistas in several important respects. For one, among the most common explanations for the Zapatista uprising (the explanation apparently favored by most voices within the Mexican government) is that the revolt was instigated primarily by the liberation theology elements of the Catholic Church, specifically Bishop Samuel Ruiz and his followers



(the second entry to the preceding typology). For his part, Bishop Ruiz, for decades the most high-profile and vocal spokesman for redress of abuses against the Maya, on the one hand, has been predictably supportive of the demands of the Zapatistas; from the view of this most articulate representative for the Church of the Poor, the indigenous people of Chiapas have suffered so much and so long that their indignation is fully justified. Yet, on the other hand, Ruiz is always cautious to stop short of condoning the violent means embraced by the Zapatistas. Given the combination of his stature and his sympathies, it is, then, not surprising that the Zapatista rebels demanded Ruiz's involvement in the peace negotiations; and unquestionably, Ruiz's cathedral at the center of San Cristobal remains the most public site for the dissemination of pro-Zapatista literature.

For his part, Sub-commandante Marcos, by wide consensus a master at manipulated the media and thus international perceptions of the EZLN agenda, will take every opportunity to deny that the Zapatista movement is primarily an expression of liberation theology/Church-of-the-Poor Catholicism—or, for that matter, any other specific religious orientation. When asked, for instance, whether he chose the *nom de guerre* 'Marcos' with reference to Saint Mark, Marcos, a poet and former university professor, jokingly responds that the last time he was in any church was on the occasion of his first baptism; that is to say, he (unlike the great majority of EZLN participants) adopts a kind of left-leaning "secularized" intellectual stance that is ambivalent (which is not to say antagonistic) toward religion in any form. In Marcos' reading of Mexican history, religion has much more often served as a force for social division rather than of

unification—and the tumultuous history of Chiapas especially should demonstrate to us the veracity of that assessment.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, in his strategic attempt to build a broad-based coalition of support for this movement, Marcos—who relies on the rhetoric of democracy rather than Marxism—nonetheless, constructs the identity of the EZLN primarily along the boundaries of economic and political consciousness rather than either religious faith or racial/ethnic identity. That is to say, one of Marcos' greatest challenges has been to hold together what is—with respect to religion (and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity)—a highly diversified constituency. While the ranks of the Zapatistas do most certainly include a high proportion of Church-of-the-Poor Maya Catholics, a very substantial proportion of the EZLN is constituted of Maya Protestants, that is, indigenous people whose have suffered not only at the hands of so-termed Church-of-the-Rich ladinos, but even more at the hands of the "traditional Catholic" Maya caciques; the great majority of Maya "expulsados," for instance, are sympathetic to (if not actual members of) the EZLN. Furthermore, the EZLN enjoys considerable support elsewhere in Mexico (and internationally) from other left-leaning constituencies—intellectuals, students and members of political parties in opposition to the PRI—which are not Indians, not poor, not rural and not uneducated—and not, by self description, particularly "religious."

In sum, then, the Zapatista uprising, as George Collier suggests, is more aptly defined as a "peasant rebellion" (if by peasant we mean rural people that produce their own food) than a race-based "Indian rebellion."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Zapatista movement is conceptualized as a "religious war" or a "holy war" (both terms that Marcos would most definitely avoid) only in a very limited, but nonetheless important, sense. Rather than

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Pérez-Enríquez, *Expulsiones Indígenas*, 238-39.

<sup>21</sup> Collier, *Basta! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas*, 7.



locating the identity of the EZLN with respect to any specific religious tradition or mythology (say, Catholicism, Protestantism or even a generic story of Jesus), Sub-commandante Marcos has positioned the movement with respect to what might be termed a Mexican "civil religion"—that is, in relation to the Mexican mythology of the revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata whose famed battle cry, "Land and Liberty!" remains entirely apt to the EZLN.

Chiapas is, as we have seen, site to all sorts of fractures and fissures with respect to religious allegiances to various sorts of Christianity; Marcos is definitely correct that religion has, in this context, served more often as a force of division than of unification. But in the (almost) unanimously revered figure of campesino leader Zapata—a man proudly poor, close to the land and only reluctantly a bearer of revolutionary arms—Marco finds an exemplary model of the sort of simple, dignified life to which Maya Protestants and Catholics alike can aspire. In that sense, then, despite Marcos' explicit claims to the contrary, the EZLN does have a "religious" (or quasi-religious) foundation insofar as it is grounded in a sacred story or, if you will, a foundational mythology—namely, the myth of Emiliano Zapata together with his revolutionary comrades and sympathizers. The mythico-historic story of Zapata provides the Zapatistas a cosmogony.

Thus, for all of Marcos' attempts to distance himself from the Catholic Church and to position the EZLN as an advocate for religious tolerance rather than commitment to any specific faith stance, historians of religions are certain recognize the Zapatistas as, at a minimum, a "quasi-religious" movement. The endurance and appeal of the EZLN, a community whose struggle is grounded in a shared affirmation of the foundational sacred story of Zapata, reconfirms again that, in Chiapas, while religion is

the subject of perhaps the greatest disagreement and contestation, it is also the dimension of life that inspires the most passion and urgency. In this context—and perhaps any context—it is impossible to imagine assembling a large body of committed followers without some sort of “religious” basis.