Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth

Religious Division and Its Sociopolitical Causes and Consequences in Ciudad Quetzal, Guatemala

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Introduction

Joe Brew

"Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth" – The title of this project is more than just a whim of our collective imagination. In fact, it stems from a complicated and mature pre-Columbian theology that, in many ways, survives to this day. In Mayan chiliasm, "Heart of the Sky" refers to the masculine half of the divine being; "Heart of the Earth," denotes the feminine part (similar to the "mother earth," notion of the indigenous of North America).[1] We chose this name for our project because we think that it aptly describes the characteristics of religious division in Ciudad Quetzal. "Heart of the Sky" applies to Evangelical Protestants, now perhaps a majority in the area, with their focus on faith over work, the after-life over this one, and the spiritual over the material. "Heart of the Earth," is a reference to the Catholic Parishioners of Ciudad Quetzal, namely those that associate themselves with Liberation Theology and its stress on the political and social matters of this world.

"Corazon del Cielo, Corazon de la Tierra[2]" – The phrase became a sort of mantra for our summer, because it seemed to capture so well the work we were doing. Religion was central to many aspects of daily life in Ciudad Quetzal, and the upcoming presidential and congressional elections appeared to highlight the division that we were studying. But "Religious Division and its Sociopolitical Causes and Consequences" fails to capture the totality of our experience. The Biehl International Research Internship (which so generously provided the funding for our work) gave us much more than just the means to delve into academic questions that have long perplexed and fascinated us.

Though the study of religion and politics was our guiding purpose during the summer, Guatemala was much more than a research project: our Guatemala was crowding into jam-packed buses while the speakers blared Mexican accordion music and the *ayudante*[3] demanded his three *quetzales*; it was waking up early to the smell of *Nescafé* instant coffee;

[1] This concept of God as a mother figure came up in our work this summer with Catholics who begin the Our Father with the line "Madre-Padre Nuestro" ("Our Mother-Father"). For more on the background of this name, see Sexton, James D. 1999 "Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth and Other Mayan Folktales." Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press

[2] *Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth* in Spanish

[3] *Attendant* in Spanish

it was dogs barking at night and roosters crowing in the morning; it was "teaching" a basketball workshop to children in the community of Chillaní; it was fleeing from the rancid neighborhood dog named Dreadlocks and flocking to the neighborhood ice cream shop just to flirt with Claudia, the girl behind the counter. The Guatemala we remember was the soft pat-pat-pat sound of Mayan women making corn tortillas by hand; it was playing musical chairs with our neighbors (and a seemingly arbitrary number of chairs); it was attempting to survive the ravines and mountains of Ciudad Quetzal on the rickety old bikes we purchased from Don Galindo. Guatemala, for us, meant kayaking across Lake Atitlan during a storm; it meant teaching English to rowdy 7th grade girls and too-cool-for-school boys; it meant sunshine every day except for when we hung our clothes out to dry; it meant drinking beer with nuns and playing soccer with Evangelicals.

But not all is well in the "Land of Eternal Spring."[4] Guatemala also meant taxi drivers refusing to take us home at night because the area we lived in was so plagued by violence; it meant facing the fact that a student we knew and taught was killed for having witnessed a murder; it meant teary-eyed neighbors coming to us for help when the M-13 gang called demanding money.

Guatemalans are a religious people with their eyes toward the sky but their feet firmly planted on this earth. The legacy of civil war, and the problems of gang violence and political corruption are foremost in their thoughts, and part of this project is an effort to better understand those problems. Yet we left Guatemala feeling as little and helpless in the face of these issues as the day we arrived. The time we spent in Ciudad Quetzal, and even this project, are little more than *encounters*: encounters with a different past, encounters with a different people, encounters with ourselves. It's frustrating and humbling to know that we can only skim the surface, that our project is all diagnosis and no prognosis, and that experience – whether academic or personal – is so often limited to the level of *encounter*.

One of our fondest memories is that of a dinner with our Kaqchikel-speaking neighbors. Wanting to make friends (and find interviewees), we proposed that the family come over. "Can we all come?" the mother asked. "Sure," we said, "how many of there are

[4] Simon, Jean-Marie. 1987. "Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny." New York: WW Norton.

you?" "Sixteen." The next night we supplemented our insufficient cooking with a few carryout pizzas, and the family – mother, sister, daughters, sons, and cousins – strolled in at around 8:00 (the invitation, of course, was for 6:30). When the initial introductions ended, we sat around in silence, staring at one another. What might have been a dinner host's nightmare – complete quiet at a table of nearly twenty – was in fact pleasant. We were all so mutually fascinated by each other that we didn't need words. And though conversation picked up as the night went on, that moment best captures our summer: staring silently, paralyzed by what we saw. Our encounter in Ciudad Quetzal left us stunned by the splendor of the land, and shocked by the tragic violence endured by that land's people; awestruck by their faith, and distressed by the burdens of their past. Guatemala truly is "A Beauty that Hurts,"[5] and our *encounter* there was just that: painful in knowing the extent to which injustice has tainted the lives of so many Guatemalans; yet beautiful in imagining – and seeing – ways by which Guatemalans reclaimed their right to identity in the realms of politics, culture, society, and religion.

[5] Lovell, George W. 2000. "A Beauty that Hurts." Canada: University of Texas.

Heart of the Earth

The Roman Catholic Church in Ciudad Quetzal

Joe Brew

"As long as there are oppressed people in Latin America, there will be Liberation Theology."[6]

Juan-Luis, "Jesus Nipalak'in" Parish Priest

During his May 2007 visit to Latin America, Pope Benedict XVI stated that the region's 16th-century conversion to Catholicism "did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Colombian cultures, nor

[6]Juan-Luis (last name withheld), interview by author, August 1, 2007.

was it an imposition of a foreign culture."[7] A few days later, the Catholic president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, rebuked the pontiff demanding "[his] holiness to offer us an apology, because what happened here was genocide."[8] The history of the Catholic Church in Latin America is a controversial one that defies characterization. It is at the same time a story of the coming-together of a continent and the genocide of entire peoples. In Guatemala, the Church's legacy is one of both liberation and repression, a wellspring of hope and a source of fear. Priests are variably "saints," or "anti-Christs," and the mention of Catholicism can conjure up diverse images from that of pious, habit-clad nuns to mud-covered guerrilla priests.

How can we account for such polemic? The best way to understand the Guatemalan Catholic Church's disputed legacy is through an analysis of its past, and the Church's centrality in the bloodstained political and social history of the country.

I. Historical Roots

> *"Fray Bartolome de las Casas is going over the heads of the king and of the Council of the Indies.... Without anybody's permission, he addresses himself directly to the Holy See. He asks Pius V to order the wars against the Indians stopped and to halt the plunder that used the cross as an excuse."*
>
> *Eduardo Galeano,* Memory of Fire

Colonialism and the Church-State Union

Early Spanish conquistadors relied heavily on Catholic religious discourse to justify the "right to conquer and colonize."[9] Men like Hernan Cortes (conquistador of the Aztecs) and Francisco Pizarro (conquistador of the Incas) were supported and encouraged by their Catholic sovereigns to go in search of "gold and souls."[10] Although the pursuit of the former often superseded that of the latter, Catholicism

[7]"Faith, Not Politics, Will Save Latin America: Pope" (no author). *Catholic World News*. May 14, 2007. www.cwnews.com. Accessed 20 August, 2007.

[8]Kennedy, Alex. "Venezuela's Hugo Chavez Calls on Pope to Apologise." *Bloomberg*. May 18, 2007. www.bloomberg.com. Accessed 20 August, 2007.

[9]Chasteen, John Charles. 2006. *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, p. 26

[10]Saxon, Dan. 2007. *To Save Her Life: Disappearance, Deliverance, and the United States in Guatemala*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 65

nevertheless motivated and rationalized the colonial project. Even in the minds of many of the conquered peoples, religion was central to colonial success; the Spanish might not have been able to defeat the Aztecs at Tenochtitlan in 1519 were it not for the early belief that Hernan Cortes was the god Quetzalcoatl.[11] After a welcoming parade of "gold, pearls, and green feathers," the Aztec emperor Moctezuma told Cortes "thou hast come to occupy thy throne."[12] Religion has been central to some of Latin America's most decisive political and social events. Though the Catholic Church's political character has changed drastically since the colonial period, the existence of that character as an important impulse in the lives of powerful political actors is unquestionable. Catholicism as an active and reactive social force in Latin America dates as far back to the institution of Catholicism as a religious force.

Catholicism spread quickly in most of Latin America, especially in the economic centers of Mexico City and Buenos Aires. In Guatemala however, where there was little gold, no silver, few towns, and only mild interest in Catholicism on the part of the Mayan aboriginals, Western religion only slowly crept in.

In order for the Catholic Church to accomplish its evangelizing mission, it had to ally itself with the temporal powers of the day - namely, the Spanish crown. The numerous Mayan ethnic groups that inhabited the area of Guatemala at the time of Spanish arrival already had a complicated theology, a highly-advanced system of mathematics, science, and writing, as well as deeply-ingrained cultural practices. These, combined with the fact that the crown was much more focused on exploiting the mines of Zacatecas (Mexico) and Potosi (Peru) than exploring the Guatemalan highlands, put Spanish Catholics intent on spreading the good word in a difficult position. If there existed no spiritual, cultural, or social vacuum for Western Christianity to fill, and

[11]Cortes, Hernan. 2000. *Cartas de Relacion*. Madrid: Dastin Historia. Another example of the Catholic Church serving as a legitimizing force in the colonial project is the case of Cortes' official chaplain and orator, Gonzalo de Illescas, who, along with Cortes, exagerated the Mexica peoples' ignorance by inflating the extent to which they actually believed Cortes to be a god. In fact, by 1519, relatively few Aztecs believed that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl, and Moctezuma invited Cortes to the capital with the intention of tricking him into revealing his true motives. Were it not for Bernal Diaz, who wrote an alternative account to Cortes' *Cartas*, Cortes' version of events (and the church's) would likely be the only version. See Diaz del Castillo, Bernal. 1963. *The Conquest of New Spain*. Trans. John Michael Cohen. Penguin Classics, p. 7

[12]Galeano, Eduardo. 1985. *Memory of Fire: Genesis*. Trans. Cedric Belfrage. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 67

if not even the crown showed much concern for evangelizing to Guatemalans, how could the relatively few members of religious orders in Guatemala convince the indigenous peoples of the merits of the Catholic Church? The answer, according to human rights lawyer Dan Saxon, was simple: to win converts, "they would first have to destroy the entire Mayan culture, which they nearly did."[13]

Emulating a system used by southern Spaniards to exploit Moor laborers after the *reconquista*, the Spanish organized Guatemalan peasants into the *encomienda* system by which conquistadors were held responsible for the conversion and care of their indigenous workers. In exchange for this "service," the Spaniards were free to exploit the indigenous for their labor. In this instance, the Church conveniently allied itself with social and political apparatus of the state in order to win converts. As successful as this strategy may have been, the state-run, church-endorsed *encomienda* system was shut down less than a century after its creation, largely at the behest of members of the Church itself.

Dissident Voices

The *encomienda* chapter of Guatemala's history is a testament to the degree to which the Catholic Church has historically involved itself in politics, as well as to the diversity of opinion within the Church. Though many Ecclesiastical figureheads, including the Pope, fully endorsed the *encomienda* method as a means to economic prosperity, evangelization, political control, and social organization, dissident voices condemning abuses of the system quickly arose within the church. After his arrival in the Americas as an *encomendero* in 1502, Bartolome de Las Casas was radically changed by the cruelties he saw. He became a Franciscan missionary, and wrote and spoke publicly against the Church and State for what he saw as an abuse of power. By the 1520s, las Casas' message that "the will of the conquistador... was the only thing protecting the Indians," had spread, and even the Pope began to take notice.[14] In 1537, while Las Casas was living in Guatemala, a papal bull declared that the Indians of the Americas were indeed human beings, a development in no small way inspired by the

[13]Saxon, p. 66

[14]Anthony Dutto, Louis. 1902. *The Life of Bartolome de las Casas and the First Leaves of American Ecclesiastical History*. U.S.A.: Harvard University Press, p. 34

rattle-rousing of Las Casas. Five years later, the New Laws of the Indies for the Good Treatment and Preservation of the Indians initiated the process which would eventually lead to the abolition of the *enocmienda* system altogether.[15] The Las Casas chronicle marked a significant shift in Catholic Church history; no longer was the Church invariably a dependable ally of the state, and no longer could the state expect the unquestioning support of a Church that had previously been the perfect motivating and legitimizing force.

Las Casas noted "that the Indians preferred going to hell in order to not have to be with the Christians."[16] His criticism extended beyond that of individuals, as he attributed the crimes committed against the American indigenous to systematic injustice with its root in both State and Church authority, a sort of early conception of what Liberation Theologians would later call "structural" or "social" sin.[17] Thus, Las Casas marks a shift not only from a State-allied Church to a Church that serves as a social and political check on the State, but also to a Church that serves as a social and political check on itself. After only 50 years of colonialism, the Church had become so involved in the political and social aspects of the expanding Spanish Empire that Las Casas saw it as natural for a member of a religious order to take an active role in policy-making. It is not surprising that Catholics often refer to Bartolome de las Casas as the "Father" of Liberation Theology.

The Majority Strikes Back

Though Las Casas offered a sort of political opening for the changing Catholic Church, little changed for those most affected by the injustices of the colonial machine in Guatemala - the indigenous. The Church, despite its dissident voices, remained largely a tool of the *status quo* for the justification of the political and social repression of the majority indigenous population during the colonial period. Even the churchmen and churchwomen who were most genuinely concerned with the plight of Guatemala's poor were largely unaware of the role that the

[15]Chasteen, p. 56

[16]Galeano, Eduardo. 1971 *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. Mexico, D.F.: Siglo Veitiuno Editores, p. 64

[17]Alcala, Manuel. 1985. "Pecado Social y Pecado Estructural." *Razon y Fe*. p. 112 as quoted in Landon, Michael. (year unkown) "The Social Presuppositions of Early Liberation Theology." *Center for Christian Education*, p. 16

Church was playing in the destruction of native culture. In 1625 a judge in Samayac banned all indigenous dances since they "bring to mind ancient sacrifices and rites and are an offense to our Lord."[18] And when Church teachings were not quite enough to justify the cultural terrorism endured by the Guatemalan indigenous, the European Enlightenment conveniently provided the scientific rationalization for their exploitation.[19]

With notable exceptions like Las Casas, dissent in the colonial period was kept to a minimum; the Church, in order to remain a relevant and acting force in Guatemala, at times simply went along for the ride. From land expropriations, to forced labor and tribute, Guatemala's poverty grew alongside the power and influence of the Catholic Church. By keeping dissent to a minimum, and keeping the mutually beneficial relationship with the State in good condition, the church became the largest landowner in the 17th century and continued in that position until after independence.[20]

The early 19th century independence movement polarized the Catholic Church. The liberal, enlightenment-influenced rhetoric of Independence leaders rubbed off on Church officials, planting ideas of liberty, equality, and justice which would play an important role in the later developments of Liberation Theology. Yet the Church was viewed by revolutionary leaders as a bastion of conservatism and a symbol of inequality. Furthermore, anti-Church rhetoric by these leaders radicalized the Catholic Right, and the 19th century largely saw a drive towards traditionalism. Though the Church lost influence in government policy and social happenings in the capital, its landholdings and influence with the rural population made it so that the it could still govern most aspects of daily life in post-independence Guatemala. And when all the revolutionary rhetoric of independence settled, the Church remained the most powerful institution in Guatemalan politics.

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[18]Acuna, Rene. 1975. *Introduccion al estudio del Rabinal Achi*. Mexico City: UNAM, as quoted in Galeano, Eduardo. 1971 *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. Mexico, D.F.: Siglo Veitiuno Editores, p. 204

[19]Lebrun, Francois. 2004. *L'Europe et le Monde: XVIe-XVIIIe siecle*. Paris: Collection U, p. 210. Despite the Church's 1537 declaration that Indians were "fully human," scientists variably used skin color, skull size, and theories on social Darwinism to justify certain political and social policies.

[20]Sierra, Oscar. 1990. *Guatemala: Retos de la Iglesia Catolica en una Sociedad en Crisis*. San José: Editorial DEI, p. 19

Liberalism and the State as Enemy

However, after three and a half centuries of undisputed power, things began to change. Justo Rufino Barrios became president in 1871, and the Church began to lose influence in Guatemala's "Liberal Revolution." The anti-clericalism that had taken off in Europe mid-century had made its way across the Atlantic. Under the guise of liberalism and nationalism, the Guatemalan State began distancing itself from the Church, which "as an extra-national institution... must be rendered temporarily impotent."[21] Radicalized by land expropriations, the expulsion of Jesuits and the Archbishop, and Barrios' invitation to protestant missionaries, the Guatemalan Catholic Church took refuge in tradition and anti-liberal ideology[22]. As the State moved to the left, the Church moved to the right. And for the most part, it stayed there for the next century.

Without a political ally in the State (neither the Spanish Crown nor the nascent independent Republics could be counted on for support), the Church had no choice but to temporarily downplay its political role. No longer could it pressure politicians into making certain decisions, nor did it have the property and wealth to exercise the same social clout over the Guatemalan population that it had before. By 1879, not only could the Church not own property, it was legally barred from participating in any way in politics.[23]

Friends Again, but the Union in Turmoil

The late 19th century split with the State was more of a trial separation than a permanent breakup. The Catholic strategy of averting political involvement during the Liberal period allowed it to survive into the regime of right-wing dictator Jorge Ubico, who befriended the Church and mended some severed ties with Rome. By the time of the outbreak of World War II, Catholicism was again central to State policy, and Catholics played important public roles in the realm of education.

With the Revolution of 1944, the Catholic Church was strong enough to take an active role in politics; Archbishop Mariano Rossell publicly condemned President Arevalo's left-leaning policies and many

[21]Pike, Frederick B. 1959. "The Catholic Church in Central America" *The Review of Politics*. Vol. 21, No. 1. p. 84

[22]*Ibid*, p. 90

[23]*Ibid*, p. 91

clergymen expressed outrage that the new government would do nothing to change the anti-Church laws of the 1870s.[24] When the communist-inspired reformer Jacobo Arbenz took power in 1950, the Church went into panic; were it not for Rossell's strong support of the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup, Arbenz might have not been exiled and right-wing General Carlos Castillo Armas might have never come to power.

The early 1960s were years of change and innovation in Latin America, but things in Guatemala seemed to have reverted to the past. The nation was again ruled by a military dictatorship, the land reforms initiated by the Arbenz administration had been reversed, and the Church and State could once more count on one another against the threat of communism.

Vatican II, Medellin and the birth of Theology of Liberation

The 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council, and the subsequent meeting of Latin American Bishops at Medellin, Colombia in 1968 are often characterized as the starting point for a politically-active Catholic Church. But as a brief review of Guatemalan Church history shows us, Catholicism had important social and political agendas dating back to the arrival of the Spaniards. Though popularly portrayed as the moments in which the Catholic Church emerged as a political actor, the Church was actually politically involved long before Vatican II and Medellin would redefine this well-established political power's social and political orientation. The Church reforms of the 1960s were turning points - not starting points - to the long saga of Catholic political involvement in Latin America.

Vatican II permitted radical change in Ecclesiastical organization, and opened the doors for the later reforms of Medellin. Vatican II called for mass participation in "the difficult, but most honorable art of politics."[25] Put simply, Vatican II represented "an opening to modernity and to reading the signs of the times. And the signs of the times in Latin America were widespread poverty and social ferment."[26] Significantly, it allowed for greater input from laypeople, and when the Latin American

[24]*Ibid*, p. 91

[25]*The Documents of Vatican II*. 1966, New York. p. 286-7

[26]Vasquez, Samuel. 2007. Interview with Krista Tippet on *Speaking of Faith*. Transcript availabe at http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/latinomigrations/transcript.shtml. Accessed 21 August, 2007.

Bishops convened at Medellin to discuss the implementation of these reforms, pressure from the Church's lay population, as well as the Church's growing revolutionary left-wing, made it clear in which direction the discussions would head. The Bishops forcefully condemned the social injustices of the era, and called for a "preferential option for the poor," as a means to ending the grotesque disparities that marked Latin American economies.[27]

Though Bishop Casariego was upset with what he perceived as communistic reforms that focused too much on the "technical aspects of social problems," there was little he could do to stop the Church from its collision course with the repressive Guatemalan State.[28] Indeed, priests like Camilo Torres, who called for "fundamental change in economic, social, and political structures," had already joined guerrilla organizations and many were actively involved in revolutionary "consciousness-raising."[29] Liberation Theology, a branch of Catholicism that offers "an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor," was born.[30]

Reaction

Politics, always central to Catholic theology in the Americas, had taken a decisively populist turn, and the threat to the status quo was tangible. The Guatemalan State apparatus, already weary of a first wave of guerrilla warfare, began viewing the Catholic Church suspiciously, and anti-clericalism re-emerged onto the national scene. And while Bishops like Juan Gerardi Conodera and Prospero Penados preached Liberation Theology, the Catholic reaction to revolutionary Christianity was strong and even more immediate than that of the state. Cardinal Casariego told his congregants that "the teachings of Medellin are not the Gospel,"[31] and Pope reminded the faithful at the next conference of Latin American Bishops at Puebla that the "conception of

[27]Saxon, p. 69, also Williams, Edward J. "The Emergence of the Secular Nation-State and Latin American Catholicism" *Comparative Politics.* Vol 5. No 2. January 1973. p. 271

[28]Mario Casariego, first pastoral letter. 1965. "En la Caridad Sera el Consuelo para Todos". As quoted in Saxon, p. 70

[29]Chasteen, p. 275

[30]Berryman, Phillip. 1987. *Liberation Theology.* Meyerstone Books.

[31]Mario Casariego, "Resumen de las Palabras de Saludo al Clero de la Arquidiocesis, en el retiro mensual del 19 de enero de 1971," as quoted in Saxon, p. 70

Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth, does not tally with the Church's catechesis."[32]

II. Revolutionary Religion: Liberation Theology, War, and the Catholic Leadership of Ciudad Quetzal

> *"I never present myself as a priest. I don't dress as a priest, I don't look for people to call me 'Father.' The idea is being* with *the people."*[33]
>
> *JosePérez, "Maria Nipalakin" Parish priest*

By the early 1970s, the Guatemalan Church was suffering a crisis in leadership. According to conservatives, it was Vatican II's fault for having "projected profound doubts on the meaning of priests' missions, making them question... the mission itself"[34] Conservatives also perceived a hyper-politicized Church that had alienated itself from its core, traditional congregation. Liberals blamed the crisis on the Catholic reaction, like the pope's insistence that priests should not be "political leaders."[35] To these critics, the Church was doing nothing in the face of the grave social injustices being committed by the Guatemalan State. Liberals believed that despite the reforms of Vatican II and Medellin, the Church was not doing enough to push for the radical social change that "the people" desired. Whatever the diagnosis for the Church's illness, the prognosis was clear: Guatemala needed more priests. From 1964 to 1978, the population of Latin America grew by nearly 50%, yet the number of priests was stagnant.[36] The Church itself was divided over the new Liberation Theology, and evangelical Protestantism was spreading through Guatemala like wildfire.

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[32]John Paul II. 1979. *Opening address at the Puebla Conference*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, accessed through www.skepticfiles.org on 20 August, 2007.

[33]Pérez, José. 2007. Interview by the author. 3 August.

[34]Berryman, Phillip. 1987. Interview as quoted in Smith, Christian. 1991. *La Teologia de la Liberacion, Radicalismo Religioso, y Compromiso Social*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 172

[35]Kelleghan, Kevin M. 1979 "Protestantes y Curas 'Disidentes' se Inconforman Porque el Papa Rechazo la Teoria de la Liberacion" 30 April, *El Excelsor*, Mexico. CELAM collection at the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica (CIRMA), Antigua, Guatemala.

[36]Smith, Christian. 1991. *La Teologia de la Liberacion, Radicalismo Religioso, y Compromiso Social*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 172

The Priests: JosePérez and Juan-Luis

It was into this scene of division that JoseFrancisco Pérez arrived in Guatemala. Like so many clergymen in Guatemala in the 1970s, Pérez was foreign, young, inexperienced in politics, and eager to make a difference. "I came to Guatemala trying to find something, and Liberation Theology just kind of fit in with everything... that I was looking for." While working in nearby El Milagro, Pérez likely witnessed an influx of Mayan refugees fleeing the violence in the countryside to come to areas near the capital, like Ciudad Quetzal. He also saw government repression firsthand and was driven to join the Ejercito Guatemalteco de los Pobres (EGP - Guatemalan Army of the Poor), a guerrilla organization in 1974. "Mostly I was just a resource at that time."[37] Influenced by the new Liberation Theology, Pérez' alternated parochial work with guerrilla collaboration until 1980, when he left the Church and joined the guerrilla movement full-time.

Father Juan-Luis, Ciudad Quetzal's only other priest, went through a similar transition - only two decades earlier and on the other side of the world. While fulfilling his military service for the French Army in the Algerian War, Juan-Luis "discovered the culture of a people, and their reasons for fighting."[38] So, when the pope asked foreign priests to go to Latin America to fill the pastoral void, Juan-Luis, like Pérez, enthusiastically hopped on board. "But really it's thanks to the Arabs that I'm here - and to their liberation movement against France."

While Pérez's religious transformations led him to participate in a war, Juan-Luis experience in war is what led to the changes in his theology. But neither priest's experience with politics and religion was unidirectional in impact. Father Jose Pérez' personal theology was clearly influenced by his political and social experiences. And after his "conversion" to the Church of Liberation, politics would alter his conception of God and the Church. Likewise, after Juan-Luis experience with imperialism drew him to the Latin American Church, his post-arrival encounters with other priests and catechists in Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador further radicalized him. This back-and-forth impacting of religion and politics was typical of Liberation Theology and its

[37]Pérez, José. 2007.

[38]Juan-Luis (last name withheld). 2007. Interview by author. 2 August.

insistence that sin be analyzed at the institutional level.

The eighties were rough years for both priests. Juan-Luis was in El Salvador, where violence escalated, particularly after the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Meanwhile in Guatemala, where it was common practice to "disappear" priests, nuns, and catechists, the Spanish priest Jose Maria Gran's 1980 death evoked outrage from the left as well as the center.[39] In 1981, the disappearance of Jesuit priest Luis Pellecer sent EGP members like Father Jose Pérez into panic mode.[40] Pellecer had been "sent from one place to another" by the EGP and was familiar with many of their operations and operatives.[41] When Pellecer was forced by the military to make a public confession, Pérez had to flee the area near the capital. "They had brainwashed him. And there was panic, since at this time many of our houses, and our people were falling. So, Tina and I went to Solola, we went to the mountains."

The Catholic Guerrilleros of Ciudad Quetzal

Pérez fled the capital with a fellow revolutionaries and friends Tina and Patricia. All members of the EGP, their lives were in danger because of the capture of Father Pellecer, and the political situation offered the three little alternative but to hide in the indigenous mountain community of Chupul. Devoutly Catholic, yet committed to the Revolution, Pérez did not see leaving the country as an option. Likewise, Tina and Patricia - also committed Catholics - thought it better to stay in Guatemala then follow their *companeros* to Mexico.

Patricia had not always been a revolutionary. She grew up a "holy week Catholic," and it wasn't until the earthquake of 1976 that she realized that so many of her compatriots lived in conditions radically different than what she was used to. "Until then, Guatemala to me was my neighbors, my family."[42] After her social awakening, she studied to be a nun, but left after two years to join the guerrillas. "That, to me, was being Christian: participating in the struggle for the dignity of people, for the construction of the kingdom, for the making of a dignified life for

[39]Comite Pro-Justicia Y Paz. 1980. "El Padre José Maria Gran Cirera es Testimonio de un Sacerdote que ha Optado y Dado La Vida por los Pobres." *La Nacion*. Guatemala. 7 Jun. CIRMA.

[40]Saxon, p. 113

[41]Pérez

[42]Patrica (last name withheld). 2007. Interview by the author. 30 July.

all." Through EGP comrades Tina and Pérez, Patricia met her future husband Pablo - also a guerrillero, and also a Catholic - and when the war ended, the four would make up the central group for planning and organizing many of Ciudad Quetzal's Catholic social initiatives.

Coming to Ciudad Quetzal and the Continuation of the Liberation Theology Experiment

This core group - Pérez, Patricia, Pablo, and Tina - certainly brought their experience of revolutionary warfare to their social work when they left the EGP and came to Ciudad Quetzal in 1990. "We tried arms, and it doesn't work," notes Pérez. "Violence generates violence."

When the killing of the 1980s died down, these Catholics sought alternative means for the radical structural change for which their Liberation Theology called. In 1991, Pablo and Pérez opened the *Instituto Experimental de Ciudad Quetzal*, an elementary and middle school aimed at educating people "that can make a commitment in the future and work towards change in society." Through "sponsorships," with other Catholic parishes in Houston, Texas and Gainesville, Florida, the Parish of Jesus Nipalakin (one of two Catholic Parishes in Ciudad Quetzal) is able to fund the education for more than half of their students who would otherwise be enrolled in Guatemala's dilapidated public school system.

The *Instituto* is a good example of one of the many differences between the Catholic and Protestant approaches to social change. Catholics, who view the "Church" as an undividable body encompassing just about everyone, make no distinction based on religion as to who gets in to the school. Likewise, the *Instituto*, though Catholic-funded, does not teach religion and strives to "respect different religious traditions." This "respect," goes so far as to hiring Evangelical teachers, and even a Mayan spiritual leader who often comes to talk about Mayan religion in "Spiritual Workshops." As unorthodox and uncatholic as this might seem, such ecumenicalism is characteristic of Ciudad Quetzal's Catholic population's approach to spirituality and social relations and is not atypical or Guatemalan Liberation Theology in general.

In 1991, Pérez invited a French priest living in El Salvador to visit Ciudad Quetzal and see the work they were doing their with Liberation Theology. Father Juan-Luis made several subsequent visits before

arriving permanently in 2001. Though from another country and with a different experience (he was never in Guatemala during the years of civil conflict), Juan-Luis's Liberation Theology-oriented style melded well with the community he was coming into. "From my knowledge of the struggle of the Algerian people against French imperialism, I already had my social and political vision."

Nuns and Politicians: The Current Catholic Character in Ciudad Quetzal

Though Pérez was instrumental in implementing the reforms of Vatican II and Medellin in Ciudad Quetzal, the Catholic community was already well-established long before his arrival. Despite the growing Protestant population, Ciudad Quetzal - like the rest of Guatemala - kept its Catholic majority well into the 2000s. José, a young Kaqchiquel Mayan bus driver, grew up Catholic in the nearby hamlet of Chillani. And when his family moved to the San Juaneritos community of Ciudad Quetzal in his late youth, they were received by Catholics who for generations had venerated their patron saint John the Baptist, prayed the rosary, involved themselves in politics, and regularly attended mass.

Sister Ellen Capperty and the Base Communities

When Ellen Capperty came to the Las Margaritas hamlet of Ciudad Quetzal in 1991, she also encountered a close-knit Catholic community that was just beginning to cope with the aftershocks of the war. Lar Margaritas, a primarily *ladina* area, is home to a large concentration of Evangelical churches, and Catholics were looking for a way to build community in the face of religious competition.[43] Anthony J. Gill correlates the emergence of Liberation Theology with the rise of Evangelical Churches; in order to remain relevant and attract congregants, the Catholic Church had to "adopt membership retention strategies that are antithetical to the military's goal of suppressing subversive organizations."[44] Capperty, called "Hermana Mary," by the parishoners, brought her own experience with Liberation Theology after having worked 21 years in Chiapas, Mexico. In a move that might be considered "antithetical to the... goal of suppressing subversive

[43] *Ladina* is a Guatemalan term referring to people of mixed Spanish-Mayan descent. Surveys show Guatemala's population to be 50% indigenous, 50% ladino.

[44] Gill, Anothony J. 1994. "Rendering Unto Caesar: Religious Competition and Catholic Political Strategy, 1962-1979" *American Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 38, No. 2. p. 405

organizations," Mary moved quickly to establish Ecclesiastical Base Communities.

Central to the Medellin conference and Liberation Theology are the CEBS - Comunidades Eclesiales de Base (Ecclesiastical Base Communities). At the most basic level, these were "small communities trying to promote social justice and the reading of the bible."[45] Like during the years of conflict, the CEBs in Ciudad Quetzal were central to the social organization of the Catholic community, and those that participated often became local political leaders. The CEBS, and the conciousness-raising that accompanied them, were meant to "unmask institutionalized violence and strip away its seeming naturalness."[46]

Marvin and the Casas Interculturales

The CEBs are not the only social initiative of the Parishes of Jesus and Maria Nipalakin. On August 14, 2006, the parishes - with financial support from Houston and Gainesville - purchased four buildings to become "Intercultural Houses." The idea was to create a safe space in which men, women, children, indigenous, and ladinos could come together to share and learn from one another. In its first year, the Catholics with whom we spoke consider the Intercultural Houses to have been successful. Though supported by the Church, they are organized and run at the grassroots level, and each House has its own core community.

In the Quetzal community, for example, 22-year-old Marvin and his girlfriend Rosa have taken up core leadership roles, and the priests, nuns, and catechists that initiated the project are standing aside. Though Catholic in orientation, House activities like guitar lessons, painting workshops, and weaving classes attract Catholics and Protestants. Their bottom-up organizational style, and the lack of emphasis on religion itself, is considered by the priests and nuns of Ciudad Quetzal to their theology. By putting leadership into local hands and by not imposing "people can discover the strength that *they* have, and they can change society. People like Marvin... they discover that *they* can do something, that it's affecting other people, it's kind of like a chain reaction."[47]

[45]Vasquez. 2007.
[46]Chasteen, p. 276
[47]Pérez. 2007.

The Church and Political Parties

Brenda, the youth coordinator for the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca), a radical leftist political party that emerged from the guerrilla organizations, attributes her political orientation to her experience with the Catholic Church, particularly the CEBs. "My mother and father involved me in community organization, all through the CEBs. From there, I began to participate in the URNG." Like for Pérez, Juan-Luis, Tina, Pablo, Patricia, and Mary, Brenda sees her religious convictions as central to her political opinion, and vice versa. "I am Catholic, and I walk within the values of community, of the people supporting the people."[48] Socially, the CEBs provided a space for Brenda's parents (and later her) to organize, discuss, and build community. Politically, the CEBs pushed Brenda to be active, and connected the dots between what she sees as the sister beliefs of socialism and Christianity.

Brenda is not the only practicing Catholic involved in leftist politics. In fact, most members of the URNG in Ciudad Quetzal seem to have at least nominal connections with the Catholic Church. Amadeo Leal, a URNG candidate for a seat in the national senate, was raised Catholic and attributes his left-leaning political stance to that upbringing.[49] At a political rally in the Ciudad Quetzal plaza, Leal told supporters "the Parish of Jesus Nipalakin, and the Parish of Maria Nipalakin are with *us*, the poor, the left, the URNG."

Sometimes the connections between the Catholic Church and the political left are even more apparent. In a brochure issued by the Diocese of San Marcos and widely distributed in the Parishes of Jesus and Maria Nipalakin, the political right is described as the "socio-political, economic, and ideological project based on the defense of the capitalist and neoliberal system, which divides men and women into exploiters and exploited." In the same brochure, the left "defends the interests of the poor and excluded." In its description of political parties, the rightist FRG (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco) is responsible for "genocide,"the PP (Partido Patriota) candidate is a "king of massacres," and the VIVA party does not "confront the structural causes," of

[48]Brenda (last name withheld). 2007. Interview by William Harper.

[49]Leal, Amadeo. 2007. Interview by the author. 1 Aug.

injustice. Meanwhile, the only criticism of the leftist ANN (Alianza Nueva Nacion) is that presidential candidate Pablo Monsanto does not "show a disposition to political alliances." The URNG receives no criticism in the pamphlet and its leader, Miguel Angel Sandoval, is portrayed as a man "distinguished for his fight in defense of human rights, social justice, and the demands of peasants and disadvantaged sectors."[50]

Clearly, politics is central to Catholic Liberation Theology in Ciudad Quetzal. In a world view in which the "Kingdom of Heaven" is constructed here on earth ("where else?" asks Juan-Luis), political change necessarily takes on an important role, especially after the failure of revolutionary violence in the 80s. "The only way can change this world is through politics," Pérez said in an interview. "Faith has to do with this life; if not, it doesn't have any value."

III. Evangelicals and Catholic Charismatics in Ciudad Quetzal

"It's estimated that 8,000 to 9,000 people a day across Latin America convert to charismatic or Pentecostal Christianity."[51]
Manuel Vasquez, Professor of Religion at the University of Florida

How is the Catholic Church addressing emergent religious movements in which Faith does not "[have] to do with this life?" The Ciudad Quetzal clergy are nearly unanimous in their condemnation of Evangelical political outlooks: "They want to have a deep relationship with God without any commitment," explains Pérez. "People get lost in the idea of Christ as savior - someone to save *me* - and they lose the concept of the word of God trying to save a people, not persons." Sister Capperty accuses "conservative religion," of having a "lack of interest in any social action." In one instance, the CEBs members she was organized asked a group of Catholic Charismatics to help with a trash collection project; the Charismatics declined but said that they'd pray for them. Brenda, the URNG youth leader charges fundamentalists with "making us believe that we're poor because God made us poor, and it's not true."

[50]"Que Hacer Frente a las Elecciones? Ano 2007." 2007. *Pastoral Social*. Diocesis de San Marcos

[51]Vasquez, Manuel. 2007. "Latino Migrations: The Changing Face of Religion in the Americas." *Speaking of Faith*. NPR. Transcript accessed through www.speakingoffaith.org on 22 Aug. 2007

The 1969 United States government report issued by Secretary of State Rockefeller left a deep mark in the minds of many Catholics, who saw its accusations against the Catholic Church as "vulnerable to 'subversive penetration'" as proof that the CIA was set to end Catholic political influence in Latin America.[52] "They attacked the church from the outside and from within," explains Juan-Luis. "From the outside with the evangelicals, and from the inside with the charismatics."

Though little evidence exists to support the claim that the CIA was responsible for the evangelical and charismatic explosion in Guatemala, there is much to be said for the rapidity of these movements' growth, and the extent to which they have remodeled Guatemala's religious profile. By Capperty's estimate, evangelicals make up "at least 50%" of the Ciudad Quetzal population, and Pérez believes that half of Ciudad Quetzal's Catholics are charismatic. "They're very persistent... it's kind of a family away from a family," says Capperty. Pérez points to Evangelical Churches and their Catholic Charismatic counterparts as analogous to Guatemala's gangs in that they are "closed communities." In the Evangelical Churches "you're a part of something... they will do anything for one another, but they will harm so many other people trying to respond to the needs they have." Brenda says that Evangelicals "don't let people think about the reality of being poor... their church doesn't allow them to mobilize, it thinks only about itself."

Though Ciudad Quetzal (and Guatemala in general) are often characterized by a Protestant/Catholic dualism, things are not so black and white. The Charismatic sector of the parish is large and growing, and despite Catholic accusations to the contrary, many Evangelical Churches are deeply involved in social and political projects. As Orlander, the pastor at the Evangelical and socially-active "Chosen Line" Church points out, "Both churches are good... I know good admirable Catholics, and there are good Evangelicals too."[53] Just as Protestant churches have splintered into numerous sub-groups - Pentecostals, Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc. - so too is the Catholic Church divided between its traditional and progressive wings, as well as its Charismatic minority and Mayan-infused

[52]Revista Envio. 1982. "The Ideological Struggle Within the Catholic Church in Nicaragua" *Revista Envio*. Accessed through http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3097 on 21 Aug. 2007

[53]Orlander (last name withheld). 2007. Interview by the author.

Catholicism popular in the indigenous sectors of Ciudad Quetzal.

IV. IS LIBERATION THEOLOGY WORKING? THE EFFECTS OF CATHOLIC SOCIOPOLITICAL ACTIVITY

> *"What happens when the destitute in Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, wherever, are moved by a rereading of the Gospels to stand up for what is theirs, to reclaim what was theirs and was taken away, to ask only that they enjoy decent poverty rather than the misery...? We know the answer to that question, because we are digging up their bodies in Guatemala."*[54]
>
> *Dr. Paul Farmer*

> *"I don't see any other way... This is the religion of the people... Maybe we won't be able to attain the fulness of this vision, but the idea is the effort; it gives meaning to life."*
>
> *JosePérez, "Maria Nipalakin" Parish Priest*

Liberation Theology has been a mixed blessing for the people it was meant to serve. To critics like David Stoll, the consciousness-raising of the seventies and eighties was little more than a "cover for transforming cathechists into guerrilla organizers."[55] These guerrilla organizers went on to incite government repression against a largely apolitical indigenous population by projecting a false image of popular support for their movement. Even Liberation Theology and EGP protagonists like Pérez now admit that the guerrilla movement in Guatemala was almost entirely a failure.

Though guerrilla warfare failed for Guatemala, Liberation Theology has not in Ciudad Quetzal. The parish-funded institute educates over 300 students through the 8th-grade level in a country where only one quarter of students even make it to middle school.[56] The Intercultural Houses project, though only in its second year of existence,

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[54]Kidder, Tracy. 2003. *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer*. Random House, p. 194

[55]Stoll, David. 1999. *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans.* Boulder: Westview Press. p. 103

[56]Unesco; World Bank. 2007. "Education Statistics on Central America and the Carribean" Accessed through www.nationamaster.com on 22 Aug. 2007.

is training women in making handicrafts, which they can then sell in the tourist centers of Antigua and Guatemala City. Though many have "dismissed Liberation Theology as irrelevant," in Central America's post-conflict years, Sister Capperty's efforts with the CEBs have led the construction of a basketball court, a soccer field, and a children's playground in the impoverished neighborhood of Las Margaritas.[57] Though generally perceived as not as successful as Evangelicals in rehabilitating former gang members, the Catholic Church's efforts at gang prevention are noteworthy; free basketball clinics and music lessons are offered to Ciudad Quetzal's youth for free. Culturally, the Church is struggling to preserve Mayan heritage by promoting (and financially supporting) kaqchikel language lessons in the community of Lo de Castillo, by hosting Marimba dances, and by investing in costumes for the traditional "Moors and Spaniards" Mayan dance performed on feast days.

Politically, the parishes in Ciudad Quetzal are recognizably allied with the left. Though it is unclear to what extent this alliances permeates into the political opinions of everyday congregants (one parishioner told me "if I vote, it'll be for Pérez Molina," a right-wing candidate), it is certain that contemporary CEBs meetings in Ciudad Quetzal are every bit as political as they would have been 30 years ago during the heyday of Liberation Theology. Though Juan-Luis claims to not trust any parties, and Sister Maria Consolacion (a Mexican nun working in the parish) calls all politicians "hopeless," political action through primarily leftist parties and organizations remains central to the Parishes' social plan. With the explosion of Evangelical Christianity as well as a rightward swing in the government, it seems that the Catholic Church's anti-establishment rhetoric is here to stay. As long as the problems central to Liberation Theology exist – poverty, inequality, violence – the Parishes are likely to continue to organize and agitate politically for what they see as a more just society. Catholic politics (or political Catholicism) is a fact of life in Ciudad Quetzal, and only time will tell if Liberation Theology can succeed in bringing people together, or if it will fail by driving them apart.

[57]Riccards, Michael. 1998. "P. 2007. *Vicars of Christ: Popes, Power, and Politics in the Modern World.* New York: Crossroads Books. p. 292

Heart of the Sky

The Evangelical Churches in Ciudad Quetzal

Will Harper

"I can't change you by giving you material things… You have to have a spiritual conversion before you can have a material conversion."[58]

Alejandro, Parishoner, Familia de Dios Church

"The attraction of the evangelical churches is their ability to give a sense of value and identity to people and to provide them with comfort and support in dealing with their suffering and pain."[59]

Rigoberto Galvez, Pastor, Familia de Dios Church

[58] Alejandro (last name withheld), interview by author, August 1, 2007.

[59] The Protestant Church's Impact. The News Hour with Jim Leher. PBS. 14 June 2005. 27 Aug. 2007 <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/jan-june05/protestant_6-14.html>.

Although the Catholic Church has been the dominant western religious force in Guatemala for almost a half a millennium, the rise of the Evangelical[60] churches over the past 30 years has dramatically altered the spiritual, political and social landscape of the nation. Since the earthquake in 1976, which both scholars and Guatemalans cite as the beginning of the Evangelical explosion, Guatemala has become the most Protestant country in all of Latin America. Though most figures estimate that up to 40% of the population is Evangelical, newer sources suggest that the number is over 50% and growing by up to 10% per year.[61] No matter the exact figure, it is clear that this new breed of Christianity has tremendous clout within the nation. In May of 2007, at the inauguration of *Fraternidad Cristiana*, a mega-church with a 12,000 seat auditorium in San Cristóbal, the presidents of the nation, the legislature and the judicial branch were all in attendance, proving the need to cater to an increasingly protestant populace[62].

What, then, are the effects of such a large and growing group of Evangelicals? How is this shift reflective of societal strains such as the Civil War, urbanization, globalization and gang violence? To what extent is the shift itself a strain on the fabric of Guatemalan society? In order to answer these questions, I analyze typical Evangelical theology and their effects on broader society and politics, followed by a brief review of the history of Evangelicals in Guatemala and their political and social action (and inaction). The paper is punctuated by accounts and examples from Ciudad Quetzal in order to better illustrate trends and beliefs.

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[60] This paper uses the term "Evangelical" loosely, as do Guatemalans, to encompass Evangelical, Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal and other denominations that are not Roman Catholic. The term is problematic, however, as Evangelicalism is hardly monolithic, encompassing a broad range of theological perspectives and backgrounds and, most importantly, opinions regarding the issues addressed by this work. Therefore, it is important to take note of the fact that I make extensive use of generalization, thereby attempting to give the gist of "Evangelical" religion in Guatemala to an unfamiliar reader.

[61] Krista Tippet on *Speaking of Faith*. Transcript available at http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/latinomigrations/transcript.shtml. Accessed 25 August, 2007.

Chozick, Amy. "Born Again in Guatemala: The Politics of Protestantization." Common Dreams 15 Aug. 2002. 27 Aug. 2007 <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0815-05.htm>.

[62] Rodriguez, Martín. "Lleno total en Mega Fráter ." La Prensa Libre 28 May 2007 [Guatemala] . 3 Aug. 2007 <http://www.prensalibre.com/pl/2007/mayo/28/172251.html>.

I. The Theological Foundations of Guatemalan Evangelicalism

The foundation of Guatemalan Evangelical faith is a belief in a unique, personal, afterlife-focused salvation from a fallen and dying worldly regime of sin. Thus, one's beliefs about, or acceptance of, Jesus Christ as savior are of utmost importance. One's actions, then, are significant to the extent that they reflect said acceptance; the consumption of alcohol, dancing, involvement in crime and a host of other activities would indicate an insincere conversion, but Evangelicals strive to differentiate themselves from Catholics who believe in salvation through works, rather than by faith. Therefore, Evangelicals see themselves as apart from the world, with little role to play other than to spread the good news and wait for the LORD to call them home.

"Don't you want to know where you will go when you die?" is a typical refrain, invoked by Evangelicals such as Marta from *Kairos*, a small Evangelical Church in Colinas, a neighborhood in the hills overlooking Ciudad Quetzal. Marta's question was prompted by my answer to her previous question: "Are you Catholic or Evangelical?" to which I had to confess that I was neither.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" she asked. My relationships with many Evangelicals were moderated by my evasive responses to such questions. Over and over again, I heard the Good News: that Jesus Christ had died for my sins, which would be forgiven if only I would accept him. All that was required was a simple prayer and I would live forever in paradise with Jehovia, as Evangelicals frequently refer to God. Not to pray meant an eternity of suffering and remorse. The frequency with which I heard the message speaks to its central importance in the lives of believers. Many understand their life in two stages: before their conversion and since.

Evangelicals await the Second Coming of Christ and the final days. When will this happen? "No one knows that day or hour," explains Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, but many evangelicals, including Pastor Edgar of *Kairos*, interpret Jesus's explanation to his disciples about the end times to mean that the event will be sooner rather than later.[63] "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom," Jesus

[63] Mark 13:32, New International Version

explains.[64] Pastor Edgar cites the Iraq war as an example. “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed,” says Jesus.[65] “Who has heard of rumors of a war with Iran?” Pastor Edgar asks his congregation. “Brother will betray brother to death,” Christ warns.[66] “The Civil War, the [gang] violence;” Pastor Edgar has an example for every sign Jesus gives to his disciples. Even the success of Evangelical Christianity in Ciudad Quetzal is an indicator of the Second Coming. “Many will come in my name claiming, 'I am he,' and will deceive many,” thus, the explosion of small churches in the city.[67] Pastor Edgar frequently turns to apocalyptic passages in his sermons, and conversations with me, in order to illustrate both the pressing need for conversion and the truthfulness of the Bible. His voice fills *Karios*’s small temple with passion, but also satisfaction, as he explains these things. Both he and his parishioners find it easy to believe in the perfection of the Holy Scriptures when such wild claims by Jesus can be understood by examining current events.

But what effect does their end times focus have on their lives? The result is twofold. First, the need to evangelize is pressing. As Marta shared the Gospel with me, there was genuine concern in her eyes for the state of my soul. Second, it creates a dichotomy between believers and the fallen world. “They are not of the world anymore than I am of the world,” explains Jesus in Luke’s Gospel.[68] Evangelicals see themselves as separate from the broader community. Problems such as domestic abuse, alcoholism and gang violence are the result of sin, which controls the unwashed and the world at large. This marked division results in what is labeled “apolitical” behavior by Evangelicals, as well as a lack of social work of the type undertaken by Catholics in Guatemala, or American Evangelicals in the United States.

“Human beings don’t have the solutions,” explained Alejandro, a parishioner of *Familia de Dios*, a mega church in the Capital. “Only God can fix the violence.”[69] This theme runs through the theology of most Evangelicals. Pastor Edgar, once a gang member himself, believes that

[64] Mark 13:8, New International Version
[65] Mark 13:7, New International Version
[66] Mark 13:12, New International Version
[67] Mark 13:6, New International Version
[68] Luke 17:14, New International Version
[69] Alejandro (last name withheld), interview by author, August 1, 2007.

the only solution to the gang violence that plagues Ciudad Quetzal is evangelism. Gang members will only change their ways as a result of accepting Jesus, just as he did. The programs of the socially minded Catholic Church, such as *El Instituto Experimental de Ciudad Quetzal*[70], a school for underprivileged children, "aren't bad…but it has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God," says Alejandro.[71] Thus, as a result of the belief that the world is fallen and falling, and of the belief that God is in control and changes the lives of those who turn to him, Evangelicals largely refrain from social action. There are few attempts to arrest or alleviate poverty nor to counter the tremendous violence that plagues the city.

These beliefs tend to limit political action as well and Evangelicals often claim, "We are apolitical."[72] Their reasoning extends along the same lines that yield social inaction: fallen humans are incapable of combating the regime of sin through their own volition. Only God is capable of changing the world for the better. Furthermore, Romans chapter 13 reads:

> "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."[73]

Therefore, by acknowledging the perfection of the Bible and the omnipotence of God, Evangelicalism in Guatemala encourages an acceptance of both the government in power and its actions.

It must be underscored, however, that although the Evangelicals cite this behavior as "apolitical," the description is hardly accurate. Passive inaction is, in itself, a highly political action, especially in a nation whose history is marred by corruption and repression, most appallingly the genocide of the Mayan Indians and the "disappearing" of thousands of political dissidents during the 36-year civil war.

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[70] I say that it is a program of the Catholic Church because in the context of the interview with Alejandro, we discussed it as one of the main works of Father José Pérez, one of the two parish priests in Ciudad Quetzal. However, while Pérez is a founder of the school and involved in the administration, it is not officially related to the Catholic Church.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Alejandro (last name withheld), interview by author, August 1, 2007.

[73] Romans 13:1, New International Version

The aforementioned view of apartness - of being in the world, but not of the world - has further ramifications for community life in Guatemala. A main critique of the Evangelicals is that their small "closed communities," as Catholic Priest Father JosePérez refers to them, create divisions within the nation.[74] Believers, as a result of their conversion, socialize almost exclusively with the parishioners of their own congregation. Furthermore, the churches tend to have multiple services per week (*Kairos,* for example, has services four days a week), further limiting congregant contact with non-believers or even members of other churches. Thus Evangelicals remove themselves from political and social action, but also from the larger community.

It is unfair, unfair, to view Evangelicalism as destructive of community life. Rather, the faith must be viewed in regards to the type of community it encourages. While broader society may suffer from the creation of these "closed communities," there are substantial benefits to believers, of which two stand out. First, along with the conversion experience often comes a drastic change in lifestyle. Alcoholics give up drinking;[75] domestic abusers reform their behavior; the shiftless get and hold jobs. Thus, the creation of small communities of like-minded individuals enables converts to avoid temptations to fall back into previous destructive lifestyle choices. The community provides a further buffer against such behavior through mutual encouragement and regular meetings, which in the case of substance abuse particularly, ease the transition from a life of "worldliness" to one of apartness.

Second, in a nation battered by war, gang violence, political repression and poverty, which at the same time faces the changes accrued to globalization and the shrinking of cultural and geographic distances both within the country and without, Evangelical communities give meaning to and provide support in face of such stresses. Even though he is critical of the effects on the community at large, Father

[74] José Pérez, interview by author, August 1, 2007.

[75] Alejandro was an alcoholic who gave up drinking as part of his conversion process ad also views alcoholism as one of the factors that brought him to Christ.

"When I was drinking a lot, I felt so alone and I didn't have anyone to talk to. I went to Church like that…drunk. One day, there was a very lovely sermon that called me to accept Jesus."

Alejandro (last name withheld), interview by author, August 1, 2007.

Pérez still acknowledges the merit of the small evangelical groups: "They do create a spirit of community. There's a lot of value in the efforts."[76]

Thus, Evangelicalism in Guatemala is having drastic effects on the small Central American nation. At the level of the individual, as a result of its claims about a personal God and personal salvation, it creates powerful incentives for individual responsibility and leads many to turn away from destructive behaviors towards industriousness and productivity. At the community level, it tends to break apart what were once more cohesive social webs, putting in place numerous, smaller groups. At the national level, it results in a passivity regarding the status quo and stands in the way of many reformist political actions. Finally, in a nation of many cultures, be they *ladino*, Mayan or Western, Evangelicalism bridges many of these divisions, creating new cultural impulses geared at the interests and taste of Guatemalan believers.

II. The Historical Foundations of Guatemalan Evangelicalism

Protestantism first arrived in Guatemala following Independence from Spain, as European Protestants, particularly Germans, entered the country looking to do business or run coffee *fincas*. However, it was not until the regime of Justo Rufino Barrios in the late nineteenth century that an effort was made to convert nationals to Protestantism. Barrios, a Liberal, overthrew a longstanding Conservative government, which had been supported by the Catholic Church. As a result of continued Catholic backing for the overthrown regime and polity, Barrios took measures to secularize the society, including the seizure of Catholic lands, the abolition of ecclesiastical courts and the establishment of religious freedom. In 1873, in order to further combat his Catholic opposition, he extended a special invitation to the Presbyterians, Guatemala's first Protestant missionaries, to come and evangelize. Methodists, Baptists and other mainline denominations followed suit.

The first group to seriously take up the charge of bringing Protestantism to Central America was Cyrus Scofield's Central American Mission (CAM). Arriving in Guatemala in 1894, a key component of the group was the salvation of every creature in

[76] José Pérez, interview by author, August 1, 2007.

Guatemala" from the "utterly debased and idolatrous" Catholic Church.[77] The CAM's doctrine was different than the socially conscious Protestantism of the United States, from whence it came, and set the stage for later forms of Evangelicalism that would take root. As the world awaited the second coming of Christ, it would fall further and further into sin; the "woeful state of the world was the necessary and predestined result of humankind's alienation from God."[78] Therefore, rather than bearing the cross of abolition, urban poverty issues or prison reform, as had American Evangelicals, the CAM taught that the only work of a true Christian was evangelism. Thus, from its early days, Protestant religion in Guatemala was both anti-Catholic and anti-activist.

Evangelicalism grew modestly, though steadily, through the beginning of the 20th century. After the expulsion of foreigners from China in the 1940s, both Catholics and Protestants turned their focus toward Latin America and sent their newfound surplus of missionaries there.[79] Particularly after the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, Evangelicalism began to be viewed as a weapon against the communist threat, thereby deepening the division between Protestants and Catholics (who were turning increasingly toward progressive, leftist political action as a result of Vatican II and the rise of Liberation Theology) and encouraging further support from American missionaries and, some argue, the American government.

Evangelicalism truly exploded in the 1970s throughout Central America. Guatemalans themselves, and many scholars, cite the earthquake of 1976, which resulted in increased aid from and presence of American Protestants. Furthermore, such a catastrophic event, combined with intense, violent, government-sanctioned murder and massacre throughout the nation as a means of defeating the rebel guerilla army resulted in tremendous migration from the countryside. Such internal movement had the effect of "globalizing" Guatemala. In other words, different demographic groups, be they economic, social or racial, began to have contact with other groups which had previously been irrelevant to their lives. All of this called into question foundational

[77] Huntington, Deborah. "The Prophet Motive." NACLA Report on the Americans. p. 5.
[78] Ibid. 6.
[79] Ellen Capperty, interview by author, August 1, 2007.

beliefs and values of ordinary Guatemalans, creating the need for a new way of making meaning. For some, that way was the Evangelical faith.

In relatively little time, Evangelicalism began to wield a startling amount of political clout in such a historically Catholic nation. In 1982, General Efrain Ríos Montt took power of the government after an army-led coup and, during his regime, combined intense violent repression[80] against actual and supposed guerilla supporters with frequent discourses about the need to reform the morality of the nation. Through Christian values, Guatemala would be saved. Despite Ríos Montt's deplorable human rights record, he has continued to wield political power. Two other Evangelicals have served as president, and Jorge Serrano Elías from 1991 to 1993 and Alfonso Portillo from 200-2004, both of whom had served as advisors to Ríos Montt. Significantly, both were democratically elected, indicating both the power of an Evangelical electorate, but also a shift in viewpoints whereby some Catholics are willing to accept and vote for an Evangelical candidate.

Another key point to be made about Evangelical political clout during the civil war involves the "apolitical" tendencies of believers. Their acceptance of the authorities of the day and mentality that sufferings in this life led to rewards in the next, further undermined a failing revolutionary movement and served to bolster the environment of impunity that has largely shrouded many of the abuses committed by political and military leaders. Furthermore, such leaders were often aided and supported by American Evangelicals, including Pat Robertson and Ronald Reagan, which gave them legitimacy in the eyes of Guatemalan Protestants.

Today, Evangelicals account for somewhere around half of the population. However, according to Father Pérez, there are far fewer non-practicing Evangelicals than there are non-practicing Catholics. Thus, as far as religion is concerned, an argument can be made that Evangelicalism is now the dominant force in Guatemalan life (though the importance of Catholicism should not be understated). There are mega-churches that run radio and television stations and cater to over ten thousand congregants per service. There are also churches that have very

[80] The Ríos Montt regime is accused of killing about 70,000 Mayan peasants and political dissidents.

José Efraín Ríos Montt." Heroes and Killers of the 20th Century. 3 Sep. 2007 <http://www.moreorless.au.com/killers/montt.html>.

few members and meet in bakeries as they cannot afford to build or rent a more appropriate space. Whatever the scope or influence of particular churches, Evangelicalism has dramatically altered the Guatemalan religious, social and political landscape and is growing tremendously, showing no signs of slowing down. Guatemalan life cannot be understood without a grasp of the outlook, beliefs and desires of the body of believers.

Conclusion

Religion Division and Its Sociopolitical Consequences in Ciudad Quetzal

Will Harper

¨The divisions run deep, but, if we were all united, we could do great things."

Pastor Orlander, Linage Escogido

If one were to go looking, as we did, for the effects of religious division in Guatemala, it would be difficult not to find fissures amidst every issue, every event and every history. However, as we got to know a wide range of Guatemalans, from the poorest, widowed indigenous woman to a wealthy, former Guatemalan Beauty Queen, we realized that while religion colors many issues, it is not the only color. So it is with religious division: an important story is to be told following that narrative, but it is not the whole story. Nor are the lines as clear-cut as a researcher would hope. Ironically, we found our best analysis of the division, and our best critique of the divisive nature of Evangelical closed communities from Pastor Orlander, who we met at the very end of our stay.

Orlander is relatively young, in his early forties, and in good health. He is an excellent Goalie and proves his talents in weekend soccer games he organizes between his Church, *Linaje Escogido*[81], and other Churches in the area. Since moving to Ciudad Quetzal six years ago, and becoming the Pastor of *Linaje Escogido* the next year, he has fought to reach out to the community, particularly children, and to mend the cracks formed by splintering religious groups. He is a liberation theologian's evangelist who speaks softly, but with great excitement, and prays with a bellowing voice of fire and brimstone. With the language of salvation *from* this world and a desire to fight for salvation

[81] *Chosen Lineage* in Spanish

in this world, he provided an excellent close to our time in Guatemala and our research, and further reminded us that to focus on our theoretical model of religious division was to ignore the reality of vibrancy and complexity found in a small city of only 90,000 where neighborhoods have their own accents and typical meals.

Orlander, though a converted Catholic, holds no qualms about Catholicism. "Both churches are good... I know good admirable Catholics, and there are good Evangelicals too."[82] What is important is not the type of Church one attends, since "the focus of the Evangelical Churches and the Catholic Church should be the same - to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ," and "to have a social outlook." Examining both groups, he has criticism for each. In his view, and in the eyes of most Evangelicals, *the Heart of the Earth* (The Catholic Church) often overlooks the first point, lacking theological precision as well as a commitment to religious life that attracts many to evangelicalism. *The Heart of the Sky* (Evangelical Churches), overlooks the second, ignoring the problems of this world. "You can't hear the Gospel if you're hungry," says Orlander.

Part of our theoretical model of the religious divide between Catholics and Evangelicals is the nature of their views on sin. Liberation Theology Catholics tend to view sin as structural. Thus, the endemic violence in "No Man's Land" - as Ciudad Quetzal was referred to by *La Prensa Libre*[83] - is a result of exterior factors such as poverty, illiteracy, global politics, and Guatemalan history. Evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to view sin as personal. Violence, as well as poverty, illiteracy, and all the problems of this world, is a result of the personal decisions of individuals. Orlander, as with most perceptive people with whom we spoke, acknowledged that the nature of the problems in Ciudad Quetzal and the world at large is a combination of the two. While there may be disagreement about the proportion that each plays in shaping our world, the solution, for Churches, should be the same: a social focus to shape the community and religious teaching and discussion to aid the formation of the individual.

"There are gangs because we don't focus on the children," says Orlander, and that focus should have two elements: the provision of

[82]Orlander (last name withheld). 2007. Interview by the author.

[83] *The Free Press* in Spanish.

needs, such as clothing and food, and the teaching of scripture. In order to do so, Orlander is working to bring the Churches together, both Catholics and Protestants as well as individual denominations; "there is a competition [for congregants] at the level of the Evangelical Churches," he explains. Thus, his church sponsors inter-denominational community programs, such as the San Juan Half Marathon and a camp for teenagers in order to serve both foci of what he views as the church's mission: the Kingdom of Heaven above, and the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. *The Heart of the Sky, The Heart of the Earth.*

* * * *

Religious division does indeed run deep in Ciudad Quetzal. Catholics argue that Evangelicals are tearing apart the community and forgetting about social responsibility. Evangelicals reply that the Catholics have forgotten the LORD. At the level of politics, religious views do not seem to have as much of a left-right impulse as expected. However, the Evangelical belief that this world cannot be saved through structural work such as public policy, but by God alone, does have a significant impact on society: many Evangelicals are de facto non-participants in the electoral process. Furthermore, the belief that one's responsibility to one's fellow man is to evangelize rather than clothe, weakens community initiatives such as The March for Peace, a yearly protest against gang violence. Thus, by removing Evangelicals from this world, evangelical theology debilitates collective social action and the democratic system. As Catholics tend to focus on such issues, they rarely give their counterparts credit for the sense of personal responsibility and the stability offered by Evangelical life and, thus, the divide deepens.

"If we all united, it is certain that we would affect this city," says Orlander. With a newfound but powerful view of the tremendous impact of religion on life in Guatemala, we cannot but agree. While religious division may not be the source of Guatemala's problems, solidarity and unity among citizens will go a long away to fix them.