

DE GRUYTER

Andrea Althoff

DIVIDED BY FAITH AND ETHNICITY

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF
RACE IN GUATEMALA

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

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Andrea Althoff

Divided by Faith and Ethnicity

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Andrea Althoff

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Religious Pluralism and the Problem of Race
in Guatemala

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Contents

Acknowledgements — XI

Preface — XV

Part I — 1

Religious Pluralism and Ethnicity in Guatemala: An Introduction — 3

The Religious Players — 6

Part I: Catholicism — 7

Part II: The Maya Movement — 8

Part III: Enthusiastic Christianity: Protestant and Catholic
Pentecostalism — 10

Ethnicity and Pentecostal Christianity — 11

The Guatemalan Social Structure: Ethnicity and Ethnic Identities in
Guatemala — 16

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations — 19

Existing Theories — 19

Globalization Theories — 24

Religion as a Supermarket? Rational-Choice and Microeconomic
Theories — 25

Methodology and Methods of this Study — 28

Book Structure and Overview — 34

Part II — 37

Catholicism, Religious Pluralism, and the Ethnic Divide — 39

Introduction to Catholicism and Ethnicity — 39

The Catholic Bureaucracy: Structure and Features of Guatemalan
Catholicism — 46

Catholicism in Guatemala: Looking Back at the History of Religious Pluralism
and the Ethnic Divide (1524–1944) — 52

The Conquest and Colonialism (1524–1824) — 52

The Post-Independence Period: The Fall of Catholicism and the Rise of
Protestantism — 57

Mayan Catholicism: The Cofradías — 59

The Decline of the Cofradías — 65

Revival of the Cofradías? — 68

The Formation of an Indigenous Activism and the Role of Catholic Networks
and Ideologies: From the 1950s to the 1970s — 70

Catholicism and the Political Environment of the 1950s and 1960s	70
Catholicism, Catholic Action and the Mayas	72
Cultural and Educational Initiatives	78
Political Initiatives	81
Agricultural Initiatives: Cooperatives, Ligas Campesinas, and the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC)	82
Catholicism, Indigenous Activism, and the Insurgency: 1978 Onward	85
Ideological Factors and Mayan Exclusion	89
Catholic Networks and the Armed Confrontation	98
The Catholic Church in the mid-1980s and 1990s	102
The Popular Front, the Human Rights Agenda of the Catholic Church, and the Emergence of the Maya Movement	103
The Catholic Church and the Ethnic Agenda	109
Theory and Practice	109
The Popol Vuh: Myth and Revitalization of the Indigenous Culture within the Catholic Church	112
Mayan Culture and Spirituality and the Training of Catechists Today	114
The Pastoral Indígena	118
The Pastoral Indígena in San Marcos	121
The Maya Movement and the Pastoral Indígena	122
Diversification of Catholicism: The Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Guatemala	125
The Historic Roots of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal	126
The Guatemalan Catholic Charismatic Renewal	128
The Contemporary Presence of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Guatemala	131
The Catholic Charismatic Renewal and Religious Pluralism	132
The Catholic Charismatic Renewal and Mayan Culture	134
Theological Profile and Religious Empowerment	138
Healing, Exorcism, and Popular Religion	141
The Guatemalan Church Hierarchy and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal	144
The Charismatic Renewal in Concepción Tutuapa	151
History and Religious Characteristics of the Municipality and the Parish	151
The Situation in the Parish Today	154
From Rejection to Acceptance: The Relationship between the Parish, Charismatic Catholics, Catechists, and the Diocese	156

Summary — 162

Part III — 173

The Guatemalan Maya Movement: Ethnicity and the Transformation of the Religious Sphere — 175

Introduction — 176

Factors that Contributed to a New Ethnic-Religious Agenda: Rigoberta Menchú and the Peace Process — 180

The Maya Movement and Its Religious Discourse — 185

Syncretism, Hybrid Identities, and Resistance within the Indigenous Mayan Culture — 193

The New Mayan Priests — 198

Mayan Spirituality in Comitancillo — 205

The Decline of Traditional Mayan Spirituality in Comitancillo — 206

The Social Effects of Essentialism: Conflicts over Meaning at the Local Level — 213

The New Mayan Ceremonies — 217

Summary — 220

Part IV — 223

Protestantism, Religious Pluralism, and the Ethnic Divide: An

Introduction — 225

Explaining Religious Pluralism and Protestant Growth in Guatemala: An Overview — 232

The Distribution of Protestantism in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Population — 241

Overlapping Terms and Doctrines: Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, Charismatic Movement, Evangelicalism, and Fundamentalism — 248

Pentecostalism in Guatemala — 255

Doctrine and Historical Origins of Pentecostalism — 256

Pentecostalism and the Rejection of Mayan Spirituality and Culture — 258

Racial Exclusion and Pentecostalism — 263

Organizational Structures: Kin and Family — 266

Pentecostalism and Ethnic Homogeneity — 269

The Case of Fermín Cuyuch: Conversion and Ethnic Mobility — 272

Conversion of Mayans to Pentecostalism: A Religious and Ethnic Empowerment? — 275

Symbolic and Real Power: Conversion and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit —	277
Neo-Pentecostalism in Guatemala —	279
Doctrinal and Historical Roots of Neo-Pentecostalism —	279
Iglesias de Fufurufus? – Churches of the Rich? Class and Ethnicity in neo-Pentecostal Congregations —	282
Spiritual Army, Religious Enterprise, and Charismatic Apostles: Organizational Features of neo-Pentecostalism —	287
The New Apostles and Ethnicity —	291
Spiritual Warfare and the Negation of Mayan Culture in neo-Pentecostal Doctrine —	296
A Side Note on Neo-Pentecostalism and Political Activism —	303
Civil War, Democratization, Reconciliation, and neo-Pentecostal Doctrine —	315
The Development of Religious Pluralism in an Indigenous Municipio: The Case of Comitancillo —	318
Religious Pluralism and Ethnicity in Comitancillo —	319
Religious Pluralism from an Individual Perspective: The Biography of Cidiaco Temaj (Iglesia del Nazareno) —	322
Summary —	326
Part V —	333
Conclusion Divided by Faith and Ethnicity: The Relational Dynamic of Religious Pluralism and the Ethnic Status Quo —	335
Catholicism and Ethnicity in Guatemala —	336
Colonialism, Catholicism, and the Maya —	338
Guatemalan Twentieth-Century Catholicism and the Maya —	339
The Catholic Hierarchy and the Ethnic Agenda at the End of the Twentieth Century —	341
Pastoral Indígena, Popul Vuh, and Training of the Laity —	341
The Catholic Charismatic Renewal —	343
Mayan Catechists and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) —	344
Catholic Charismatic Renewal Doctrine and Mayan Culture —	348
The Maya Movement —	349
Protestantism and Ethnicity in Guatemala —	360
Mayan Pentecostalism and Ethnicity —	362
Neo-Pentecostalism and Ethnicity —	367

Bibliography — 373

Primary Sources — 373

Secondary Sources — 380

Index — 396

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¹ Almost all of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, with the exception of some conducted in Mam, a native, pre-colonial Guatemalan language. Whenever I conducted interviews in Mam I had a translator with me. Later, the content of the interviews and the translation on the tape were double-checked by a second native speaker who had not been present during the interview.

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Preface

The following study is part of a longstanding personal and professional endeavor to explore the religions, politics, and people of Guatemala. It began in 1989 with volunteering for Amnesty International and later for another international human rights organization called Peace Brigades International. During my undergraduate studies, I was able to incorporate my volunteer work into my academic research. I finished my undergraduate studies with a fellowship provided by the Evangelisches Studienwerk, which enabled me to write my final thesis (Diplomarbeit) about a Guatemalan peasant association called Comité de Unidad Campesina. This study considerably broadened my knowledge of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, the civil war, and organized groups within the population (e. g., the guerrillas and non-violent actors). This knowledge was not only essential to understanding the relevant history and social facts; it also provided cultural experiences that helped me to better comprehend indigenous and non-indigenous relationships in Guatemala. Moreover, it helped in undertaking my doctoral research, for instance in conducting interviews, performing participant observation, and negotiating the ethics of a qualitative study. In addition, I gained experience in processing and evaluating large sets of data for scientific analysis.

Furthermore, I benefited greatly from a long-term stay in the United States after completing my Ph.D. in Germany in 2005. Although the situation in Guatemala varies in many respects, it also constitutes an ethnically and religiously divided society, leading finally to the title (inspired by the work of Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith) *Divided by Faith and Ethnicity: Religious Pluralism and the Problem of Race in Guatemala*. In sum, the dissertation and post-doctoral research enabled me to become familiar with contemporary religious phenomena in Latin America, particularly Guatemala, and also in the United States and – as the following paragraph will recount – my native country, Germany.

As I am now working on a new study that examines the relationship between religion and immigration among Latinos in the U.S. and Muslims in Germany, I realize that ethical contemplation is a never-ending process. One aspect that made and makes this research particularly challenging is the fact that it has to do with members of marginalized sectors of society. The little anecdotes that follow show that there are contradictions one faces when dealing with this kind of work. One also encounters doubts about whether someone who belongs to the privileged parts of society, thus partly earning a privileged status precisely by examining the marginalized other, has the right to do such research. I think there is no final answer to this question, but I agree with William Foote Whyte that we

should not exclude personal experiences, including foolish errors and serious mistakes, from our fieldwork.²

Doing Fieldwork on Religion and Ethnicity

Ethnicity and religion cause highly charged debates within society. It is because of this that I feel I owe the reader some information about my background to forestall speculation about it. Maybe most importantly, I am not an Evangelical, Pentecostal, or neo-Pentecostal Christian. In other words, I am not a ‘born-again’ Christian, nor am I a fervent believer in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I was raised in rural North West Germany as a Protestant, with a leaning that in the United States one might call ‘progressive Lutheran.’ In sociological terms, I can see myself in José Casanova’s description of secularized European Christians. He wrote, following Danièle Hervieu-Léger, that European Christians possess “an implicit, diffused, and submerged Christian cultural identity.”³ Having said that, if I were to choose between Hervieu-Léger’s “belonging without believing,”⁴ or Grace Davies’s “believing without belonging,”⁵ I am much more inclined to view myself through the lens of the French scholar.

I have to confess that my background, which is so different from Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism, folk-Catholicism, and traditional Mayan spirituality (if one is able to differentiate between the latter two), is one of the very reasons I was compelled to carry on with this intellectual enterprise.⁶ In other words, I find religions and worldviews that are very different from my own fascinating. It is like entering a world of meaning and symbols that has very little to do with the rationality and matter-of-fact Protestantism in which I grew up. Put differently, I can identify with German sociologist Max Weber’s description of him-

² William Foote Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 358–359.

³ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62.

⁴ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Religion und sozialer Zusammenhalt,” in *Transit: Europäische Review* 26 (Winter 2003/2004): 101–119.

⁵ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ I hope that this motivation and my background do not disqualify me in the eyes of the Evangelical reader.

self as “religiously unmusical.”⁷ Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism are full of spirits, hidden forces, and demons, but also blessings, joy, and drama. The comparison to learning a new language is probably the best way to explain the combination of fascination and hard work. In the beginning it is a riddle, and one can only understand bits and pieces here and there. I felt it was necessary to quite literally learn a new religious vocabulary and inventory. In the end, however, a new scenario unfolded. In sum, this project was for me never about belief proper, but rather about religion in the way Max Weber understood it, that is, how other people make sense of the world around them. I have been enthralled by a kind of ‘making sense’ that is so entirely different from how I see and interpret the world.

To enter this new world and to better prepare myself for field research in Guatemala, I sought contacts with Protestant churches, workers in non-governmental organizations, people from religious communities, and friends and acquaintances who are part of the solidarity movement for Guatemala.⁸ One woman who lived in Guatemala for several years working for a German development agency told me to contact a woman who, in her view, was a member of an Evangelical church in Quetzaltenango. The former German development worker told me that she knew this woman very well and had been invited to her wedding. The wedding was typically Evangelical, she said, in that no alcohol was served and no dancing permitted. However, when I contacted this woman later in Guatemala, it turned out that she was not a member of a Protestant-Evangelical church, but rather a passionate, staunch Catholic who belonged to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. I mention this anecdote to illustrate what I very often experienced in Guatemala and elsewhere: many people, including those with close ties to Guatemala, never set foot in an Evangelical church or a Charismatic service, but have settled opinions about so-called Protestant sects and their political and social implications. Later, while traveling in the countryside, I learned that many Catholic Charismatic prayer groups that meet in private houses are virtually indistinguishable from Evangelical home prayer groups. Both use loudspeakers and practice clapping, speaking in tongues, and laying on of hands in their meetings.

That said, there is another ‘confession’ I have to make. Despite my own religious and ideological background, through the work in Guatemala I developed

7 Max Weber [1864–1920] in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, dated February 19, 1909. Quoted in Max Weber, *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe, Volume II/6, Briefe 1909–1910*, eds. M. Rainer Lepsius and Wolfgang J. Mommsen (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 1994), 63–66.

8 Fieldwork for this study – interviews and participant observation – was undertaken from March 2001 to February 2002.

a stronger sympathy with Guatemalan indigenous Pentecostals than with members of the Maya movement. This might sound astonishing because, in the ‘human rights scene,’ of which I consider myself to be a part, it is not only that people usually have no sympathy for Pentecostals at all, but that they detest them and often see them as the cause of social divisions in the Guatemalan Mayan communities. A strong Marxist perspective which interprets religion as the ‘opium of the people,’ prevails – a perspective that I myself shared for a long time, in particular with regard to Latin American ‘evangélicos.’⁹ In other words, researchers and activists with a leftist agenda often used arguments that denied agency to Pentecostal groups, because they considered Pentecostals to be focused on spiritual instead of social issues.¹⁰

I want to explain a little bit more where my sympathy with Mayan Pentecostals and my ‘trouble’ with the Mayan movement stem from. The first issue deals with the class status of Mayan Pentecostals and Mayan activists. Mayan Pentecostals usually live in great poverty, while the Mayan intellectual elite occupies ‘nice’ offices in the capital. It was, moreover, the combination of living a life in deep poverty but nevertheless with great dignity, and sharing literally their last morsels of food with the German Canche,¹¹ which impressed me deeply.

Yet there is more to it, particularly regarding my German background and how it intersects with the Maya movement. The goal of the Maya movement is to seek recognition of cultural diversity within the nation-state (including Mayan spirituality), a greater role for indigenous politics in national culture, a reconsideration of economic inequities based on ethnicity, and a wider distribution of cultural resources such as education and literacy in indigenous languages.¹² When I returned to Germany from fieldwork in Guatemala, this description of the civil engagement of the Maya movement turned rather bleak. Back in Germany, I continued to interview Guatemalans whenever I could. One afternoon I

9 Generally, Latin American religious scholars, demographers, and the wider public use ‘evangélico’ as an umbrella term that includes mainstream Protestants, classical Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals, non-denominational Protestants, and, in some cases, Seventh-Day Adventists and Mormons. See Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary, eds., *Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 7. In the United States, the term evangelical has a more narrow meaning. There, the emphasis is more on conversion (being ‘born again’), the corresponding call to evangelize, and Bible reading. The later usually implies a more literalist interpretation of the Bible.

10 I use the term Pentecostal here, because the majority of Latin American Protestants are Pentecostal Christians. See Timothy J. Steigenga and Edward L. Cleary 2007.

11 Canche is a Guatemalan colloquialism for a ‘blond’ person, usually used for women.

12 Kay B. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 166.

had the chance to speak with a young indigenous lawyer who is part of this revitalization movement and tries to push the issues of Mayan culture in the political arena.¹³ His family had suffered under government repression; his uncle was killed in an incredibly cruel act of what was obviously political violence. In the interview he explained his ideas about the ways the Mayan population should revitalize their culture. One of his ideas was to prevent interracial mixing by forbidding marriages between indigenous and non-indigenous couples. He used terminology that to me resembled the horrible German past, e. g., he emphasized the importance of using this measure to keep genes pure. The Nazis used exactly the same argument: cultural differences parallel an immutable biological heritage. In the German case the goal was to eliminate another ethnic group, the Jews.¹⁴

Ultimately, there are two issues that made his argument particularly disturbing for me. First is the fact that the Mayan population itself, such as his uncle, was the victim of a state policy and government repression that carried the devaluation of human existence to an extreme: genocide. Second are his suggestions and also the language that this lawyer and some of the leaders of the Maya movement propose and use.

It is a fact that state policies and military repression caused the death of approximately 200,000 people, 83 percent of them indigenous Mayans, between 1960 and 1996.¹⁵ Without doubt, racial and ethnic discrimination prepared the ground for the violence and massacres, even though the official explanation and justification was to eliminate the insurgency. At the same time, and this leads to the second part of the Guatemalan 'race' issue, there are no phenotypic or genotypic differences in Guatemala, but rather settlement patterns and cultural ascriptions and self-ascriptions that divide society into indigenous and non-indigenous. Overall, differences are cultural, which makes it possible for indigenous people to pass through ethnic boundaries and become non-indigenous,

13 In fact, he later became a member of the Guatemalan Congress.

14 I should add here that the Maya movement constantly uses 'blood' as a metaphor when referring to Mayan culture. See Víctor Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation, and Leadership* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 7, 62.

15 The Truth Commission of the United Nations (CEH, Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico) was able to identify 42,275 dead. 83 percent of the victims were Mayas. See the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala memoria del silencio: informe de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico. Tomo I: mandato y procedimiento de trabajo: causas y orígenes del enfrentamiento armado interno* (Guatemala: CEH, 1999a), 21. The conflict left behind 75,000 orphans and 56,000 widows. Edgar Gutiérrez, "Un nuevo tejido social para Guatemala. Dinámica Maya en los años noventa," in *Polémica. Revista Centroamericana de Ciencias Sociales* 3 (Enero-Junio 1995): 7–20, 12.