

Religion in Mesoamerica

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Abstract

This article explores the historical roots of the concepts and practices that constitute religious culture in the Mesoamerican cultural area. The author proposes a historical perspective to reveal the different social processes, institutions and historical events that have shaped popular religiosity in Mesoamerica. In summary, the article examines the most salient issues of the Mesoamerican religious experience, such as: Maya religion, the Catholic Church during the conquest, the colony and independence, religious syncretism, shamanism, the "cofradía", theology of liberation and the recent influence of the protestant churches.



Introduction

For the purpose of this study, I will use the concept of Mesoamerica following Paul Kirchhoff, who defined Mesoamerica as a cultural area occupied by "High Cultures" and "superior cultivators" as a contiguous whole. Kirchhoff understands for high cultures and superior cultivators the Maya and Nahuacultures, that had achieved by the time of the conquest a complex and stratified social system. Kirchhoff clearly establishes the importance and particularity of the Mesoamerican cultural area at the time of the conquest and since several centuries before. In geographical terms, Kirchhoff refers to central highland in central and southern Mexico, to the southern highland in south Mexico and to the southeast highland in Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. It has been argued that this cultural area has maintain throughout the historical process a common cultural horizon (Kirchhoff, 1943, 92)

In general terms, Religion is a system of beliefs, rites, forms of organization and ethical norms. One believes in God, in its intermediaries and in the personifications of evil and this faith is expressed frequently in beautiful myths, that explain the origin and the aim of the world and the human being and his location in the universe.

People celebrate festive rites in honor to God and, mainly, of its intermediaries or it goes away in peregrination to the venerated places of cult; rites of transition or passage in the occasion of the most important moments of the human existence are also celebrated, like birth, adolescence, marriage or death, in order to assure the divine protection at those moments crisis and to make evident before their own group the change of status; finally one resorts to the powers of the sacred world by means of multiple rites (prayers, dances, offerings, sacrifices, etc.) to make sure of his benevolence in the multiple necessities of life. (Marzal, 1985:17)

In this study we will understand religion as a dialectical process of (re)production of religious representations and practices, in which the actor (re)produces his or her natural and social surroundings as well as himself or herself. These representations and practices are religious because they refer to a world of God, gods and spirits or any form of transcendence. In short we are talking about a religious praxis. (Droogers and Siebers, 1991: 2)

Religion -said Durkheim- is not constituted only by a system of ideas, but mainly a system of forces. Its true function is not to make us think or enrich our knowledge, but to launch us into action and to help us live. On the other hand, this system of representations is always regulated by symbolic institutions, whose manifest function is the production and/or reproduction of meanings. (Giménez, 1978: 30)

Religion as the environment or political power shapes social order. Through their religious cosmo vision Mesoamerican men and women transform in cosmos the existential chaos that threatens them every day, that is, those things that don't have an explanation, suffering and evil.

Religion, then should be seen as part of the cultural system of a society, understanding culture as the diverse modes of perceiving and living the world, which are implicated in the social practices and material or intellectual products of humans in society.



Pre Hispanic Religion



In general terms, Pre-Columbian religious ideas and practices can be said to be closely connected to a cosmo vision diametrically opposed to our own: intuitive, open to nature and the cosmos rather than shut up in the ego, communitarian rather than individualistic, seeing everything visible as a symbol of something greater, on which they depended. (Schobinger, 1992: 23)

The Mayan civilization was at its height in the Classic Maya period, from 300 to 900 A.D. Its splendors are best seen in the city-states of the low-lying Chiapas and Peten area of Guatemala: Palenque, Tikal, Copan and others. These were governed by a priestly elite in the name and under the inspiration of the divinities. This elite was headed by the HalachHuinic ("True Man"); the office was hereditary, though changes in dynasty did occur. The system was respected by the lower classes (craftsmen, traders and peasants). (Schobinger, 1992: 31)

Religious culture divided into popular religiosity, which in some form or another survived in folklore, and the "official" religion of the upper classes, reflected in architecture and associated arts. As in most American high cultures, there was also one form of external cult, ceremonial and rich symbolism, associated with feast days, agricultural cycles and the like, and an esoteric form, with initiation rites to which the high priest and HalachHuinic had to submit. (Schobinger, 1992: 32)

The stepped pyramids represented a symbolic form of coming closer to heaven, to the cosmic world. Pyramids that have been excavated prove to have been frequently rebuilt, refinished, and enlarged. Associated with each rebuilding was a burial, usually placed in a pit or small chamber beneath the central stairway. This pattern, which is mirrored on a much more grandiose scale in temple tomb burials, marks the ceremonies associated with the death of one local leader and the ascension of a successor. The new person in charge evidently oversaw the internment of his predecessor with appropriate pomp and circumstance and then repaired the damage caused by opening a burial shaft and establishes his claim to public works by building a new structure. (Culvert, 1974: 61)

Thus, as kings built and rebuilt temples in the same spot over centuries, the sanctums within them became ever more sacred. The devotion and ecstasy of successive divine ahaub (kings) sacrificing within those sanctums rendered the membrane between this world and the other world ever more thin. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 72)

As kings and nobles built temples to consolidate their power, and as a king and commoner buried their dead in the houses they built, human action both added to and shifted the great magnetic centers of supernatural power that dotted the landscape. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990:73)

The sculptural record also shows the shamanistic nature of Maya kingship, central to the classic conception of the cosmos, by depicting the divine ahau (king) as a conductor of ritual. From the very beginning, royal monuments have depicted kings as manipulators of the supernatural domain. These sculptures show a king with the supernaturals he has materialized by the ritual of shedding his blood. This ritual was most likely a public affirmation of his ability to open a portal to the supernatural realm. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 87)

Throughout the Classic period, Maya public art remained focused on the ritual performances of the king, whether these rituals were part of the regular festivals that punctuated Mayan life, such as the calendrically timed ritual of period endings, or special celebrations triggered by dynastic events, such as marriages, births or deaths. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 88)

The temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairs is one of the premier monuments of the New World and a unique expression of the supernatural path of kings. Inscribed upon this stairway of carved risers is the longest Pre-Columbian text known in the New World, comprising over twenty-two hundred glyphs. This elegant text records the accessions and deaths of each of the high kings of the "Yax-Kuk-Mo" dynasty. This record of Copan divine history rises out of the mouth of an inverted Vision Serpent, pouring like a prophetic revelation of the Cosmos, compelling the ancestors of Smoke-shell to return through the sacred portal he had activated for them. Flowing upward in the midst of this chronicle sit the last five successors of the dynasty, Smoke-Monkey, 18 Rabbit, Smoke-I mix God K, Butz-Chan, and Moon Jaguar, carved in life size portraits. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 319)

The ancient Maya religion can be supposed to have been fundamentally a cult of the stars, without excluding a naturalist or earthly counterpart. Hence the importance given to astronomy and the computation of time. Cosmogony was another aspect, which survived in late stories such as the PopolVuh. The basic idea was that there had been four ages prior to the one they were then living in, each brought to an end by a great cataclysm, ordained by the gods who were dissatisfied with the imperfections of their earlier creations. (Schobinger, 1992: 31)

A number of symbols appear repeatedly in art and architecture throughout the course of Mayan history. The earth dragon or crocodile, screech owl, snail, butterfly, the bloodthirsty bat and other forms of animal life served the common folk as **naguales**, or guardian spirits, and took their places in the sacred calendar as names of gods of the days. Of importance to the priesthood was the jaguar, the key symbol of the Olmec.

The most notable representation is the gorgeous throne of the high priest discovered in the sanctuary of a sealed chamber within the pyramid-temple of Kukulcan in Chichen Itza, Yucatán. (Waters, 1975: 46) Their cosmo vision was expressed as a universe made up of thirteen superimposed heavens; our earth was the lowest heaven below it 9 subterranean worlds, the deepest of which belonged to the Lord of death. The Maya pantheon was numerous and complex, and, like the Aztec, contained a dualism: divinities such as those of rain, thunder and lightning were well disposed toward human beings and opposed to another series of harmful gods of drought, tempest, war, which were harmful to human beings. (Schobinger, 1992: 32) The creator of the world was Hunab; his son Itzamma, lord of the Heavens, was also the civilization hero, since it was he who had given the Mayas writing and their calendar; he was invoked at propitiatory New Year ceremonies so as to avoid public disasters. His cult was often associated with that of KinchAhau, god of the sun. Chaak, god of rain, played an important role because of the climate. He was associated with Kukulcan, the Plumed Serpent. (Schobinger, 1992: 32)

Eric Thompson, a foremost authority on ancient Maya religion, has pointed out several features of Maya gods. In the first place, most gods, and perhaps all of them appeared in four forms, which were associated with the four world directions. Second, gods were dualistic in that they had both benevolent and malevolent aspects. Finally, gods tended to have aspects that were associated with diametrically opposed groups; the sun god, for example was associated with gods of the day, but since he also traveled through the underworld at night, he was also ranked among the gods of the night. (Culvert, 1974: 79)

For Spindle, Quetzalcoatl is the greatest figure in the history of the New World, his image, the plumed serpent, had for Pre-Columbian peoples the same evocative force as has the Crucifix for Christianity. Quetzal feathers were a symbol of something precious and coatl means serpent and also “twin brothers”, so that Quetzalcoatl may also be translated as the “Precious Twin”, another of his names which may also allude to the fact that the morning and evening stars are the same planet Venus. His names were legion. Among the Nahuas he was known as Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, Lord of the land of the dead, Ehecatl, the god of wind and personification of the planet Venus, the Lord of Dawn. To the Mayans of Yucatan he was known as Kukulcan, closely associated with Itzamma and Gucumatz. (Waters, 1975: 122)

The Mayan parallel to the Nahuatl myths of Quetzalcoatl and the creation of the fifth sun is recorded in the PopolVuh, the sacred book of the Quiche Mayas, the oldest book in America, who was found in 1701 in the town of Chichicastenango, Guatemala.

From the myth of the hero Twins came three great axioms that appear repeatedly in the imagery of classic Maya religion and politics. First the hero of the Maya vision did not overpower his enemies. He outwitted them. In the myth, the twins tricked the Lords of death into submitting to sacrifice. Secondly, resurrection and rebirth came through sacrifice—specially death by decapitation. The hero Twins were conceived when the severed head of their father spit into the hand of their mother. They defeated death by submitting to decapitation and sacrifice. Finally the place of confrontation was the ball court. The ball game was the arena in which life and death, victory and defeat, rebirth and triumph played out their consequences. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 76)

Each of these gods was the object of a very complex cult, whose ritual was strictly observed. Ceremonies were preceded by fasts or strict abstinence. Sacrifices played an important part: one of them consisted in making one's own blood flood by piercing the lobe of one's ear or one's tongue with a thin silica blade or fishbone. Sacrifices portrayed in the classic period were nearly always peaceful: offerings of food, animals and precious objects. Human sacrifices particularly in the Yucatan appear later: examples are found in the Temple of the jaguars associated with the ball game and in the temple of the warriors at Chichen Itza. (Schobinger, 1992: 34)

Self sacrifice through bloodshed was very common to the time of the conquest. Several scenes represented in the sculpture of the classic period seem to include ritual of spilling of blood. Spines of cactus or blanket thorns rays were used during the period of the conquest to spill blood and the existence of blanket thorns borders on graves of the classic period provides evidence with self sacrifice practices. (Culvert, 1974, 83)

During the classic period, the heart of Maya life was the ritual of bloodletting. Giving the gift of blood from the body was an act of piety used in all their rituals, from the births of children to the burial of the dead. This act could be as simple as an offering of a few drops of one's blood, or as extreme as the mutilation of the different parts of the body to generate large flows of this precious fluid. Blood could be drawn from any part of the body, but the most sacred sources were the tongue for males or females, and the penis for males.

Representations of the act carved on *Stella* depict participants drawing finger tick ropes through the wounds to guide the flow of blood down onto paper. The aim of these cathartic rituals was the vision quest, the opening of a portal into the other world through which gods and the ancestors could be enticed so that the beings of process as giving “birth” to the god or ancestor, enabling it to take physical form in this plane of existence. The vision quest was the central act of the Maya world. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 89)

All indications are that the Maya were a deeply religious people, extremely interested in the supernatural and convinced that gods and stars and planets brought good or ill fortune into their lives. A firm belief that placating supernatural powers can bring rewards reinforces further efforts- the gods can be an investment, particularly when they are inextricable interwoven with the powers that also control the economy. (Culbert, 1974, 65) Maya achievements in astronomy, calendrics and mathematics were most vividly triumphantly demonstrated in contexts that are clearly ceremonial. (Culbert, 1974, 84)

Mesoamerica, particularly in its high cultures, represents a notable conservation of the magic-mythical mentality that forms one of the great steps in the cultural evolution of the human race. It points to basic conservation of a mentality in which intuition predominates over rationalization, and a sense of community over individualism. So the collision that occurred in the sixteenth century was not just between opposite cultures, or between races, or between different historical products; it was not between “more advanced” and “backward” cultures, or “civilized” people and “barbarians”. It was essentially, between two states of consciousness, and this is perhaps why it was so painful. (Schobinger,1992, 23)



Conquest and Colony



Setting out from Havana. Hernán Cortés embarked on the conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1519. He took as chaplain, the Mercedarian friar Bartolomé de Olmedo. When he was confirmed as governor of New Spain in October 1522, he petitioned the Spanish king to send clergy for the work of evangelization. The first church in Mexico was built at Tlaxcala in the same year. Cortés himself always showed great interest in the conversion of the Indians, declaring that “the aim of his expedition was the extirpation of idolatry and the conversion of the native people to the Christian faith”. (Rodríguez León, 1992: 47)

The systematic evangelization of Mexico began with the arrival of the first twelve Franciscan friars in 1524. These Franciscan missionaries were given apostolic authority in all regions where there was no bishop. (Rodríguez León, 1992: 47) The propagation of Christianity among the Mexican Indians was given a great boost by the legendary appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the Indian Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac in 1531. (Rodríguez León, 1992: 47,48)

The devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, acquired truly national status. This iconic representation became a religious symbol that provided a solution to the cultural conflict between Spain and New Spain. It is likewise a symbol of cultural resistance that has become the focus of unity among Mexicans at crucial moments in their country's history. It is also, of course, a symbol that lends itself to manipulation, and has been used in such a way. Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe has been evident through great moments of Mexican history: Independence, the Zapata uprising, the Cristero conflict, and equally on the daily lives of workers in factories, peasants on their small holdings, women in their villages and families. (Puente, 1992: 221)

In Central America, the imposition of Christianity was carried out by the Dominicans, who laid the foundations of their first convent in 1529. Bartolomé de las Casas succeeded in attracting the Indians of the region that became known as Vera Paz by pacific means. (Rodríguez León, 1992: 48) The Dominicans were firmest in their opposition to the enslavement of the natives and to the encomienda system, and firmest among them was Bartolomé de las Casas. Thanks to his denunciations and diplomatic representations, they succeeded temporarily in calling a halt to the activities of the conquistadors and early settlers. In 1542 they obtained the passage of the "New Laws" condemning slavery and the encomienda and allowing the establishment of Indian townships, whose inhabitants were to be considered the subjects of the crown and therefore not obliged to work for the colonists. (Cardenal, 1992, 243)

The passing of the LeyesNuevas (New Laws) in 1542, which partly suppressed the encomienda system and prohibited the enslavement of Indians led to intense conflicts between civil and religious authorities when they were applied to Central America. The Dominican bishop of Nicaragua, Antonio de Valdivieso, who maintained close links with Bartolomé de las Casas, then bishop of Chiapas, found himself in a major dispute with those encomenderos who were not prepared to comply with the stipulations of the New Laws. Bishop Valdivieso earned the enmity of the governor, Rodrigo de Contreras, who persisted in exploiting the Indians, and his ardent defense of the native peoples led to his assassination, stabbed to death by a gang of Contreras's supporters on 26 February 1550. (Rodríguez León, 1992: 48)



Independence



In the first part of the nineteenth century, the most important question for the life of the church was the participation of the clergy in struggles for independence and their contribution to the setting up of nation states. Neither process could have come about without the clergy. (Cardenal,1992: 248)

Many of the leaders of the independence movement were criollo priests. The clergy took an active part in the Cortés of Cadiz, in conspiracies, and uprisings, in ideological struggles, in university debates and in the political process that led to the emergence of nation states. (Cardenal,1992: 248)

In El Salvador, priests took part in the four major conspiracies preceding independence proper. The first of these took place in San Salvador in 1811-1812. Among the leaders of the uprising were the priests José Matías, Miguel Delgado and Nicolás, Manuel and Vicente Aguilar.

After a series of advances and setbacks in the search for a form of religious tolerance that would facilitate immigration from various European countries, the Reform Laws promulgated by Benito Juárez from Veracruz in 1859 and 1860 legislated on freedom of worship, separation of church and state, nationalization of church property, establishment of a civil register, and the secularization of cemeteries. (Puente, 1992: 222)

The triumph of the Mexican revolution brought with it an anti-ecclesiastical tone explained as much by the posture of the Hierarchy during the dictatorship of PorfirioDíaz (1876-1910) as by the support they gave to Victoriano Huerta, who seized power and assassinated President elect and acting President Madero, the instigator of the revolution with his cry of “effective suffrage not re-election”. So the church went from recuperation to siege and then persecution. (Puente, 1992: 223)



Religious Syncretism



Even today the Maya inhabitants of Guatemala visit famous stelae to burn incense and make offerings to gods whose ancient names they still remember. The presence of a stela at a Mayan site implies that the leaders of the site had access to esoteric and perhaps magical knowledge of priests, scribes and astronomers. (Culbert, 1974)

In the third conference of Puebla (1979), when treating in their final document the evangelization of the culture, the bishops affirmed that "Latin America has its origin in the encounter of the Hispanic and Portuguese race with the pre-Columbian and African cultures and that racial and cultural mestizaje has fundamentally marked this process and that between the XVI and XVIII centuries, the bases of Latin American culture and its real Catholic substrate were laid . They argued that their evangelization was sufficiently deep so that the Catholic faith became constitutive of their being and Identity." (Marzal, 1985: 13)

According to Vogt, under the influence of the Spanish catholicism, the zinacantencos associate the sun with God and the moon with the Virgin Mary, association that has served to reinforce the old Mayan beliefs on the sun and the moon like contrast symbols of the masculinity and the feminity of the universe. The ancestral Gods are represented with the appearance and behavior of old zinacantencos, that live eternally in their houses in the hills, where they meet and deliberate, take care of of the issues of their live descendants and wait for the offerings of black chickens, candles, incense and liquor, with which they are sustained, and in addition they are the jealous guardians of culture. (Marzal, 1985: 41)



Shamanism



The utilization of “vital forces” for curing or evil purposes has been common before as well as after the conquest in Latin America. The Spanish terms for these phenomena, such as “brujería” and “hechicería” have been interpreted as a form of shamanism. Many forms of magic, witchcraft, sorcery, healing and other shamanic practices existed among the various Native American people. After the conquest these phenomena have however been influenced considerably by the European practices and ideas brought by the Spaniards and Catholic priests. (Huizer, 1992: 31)

Shamans also fulfil an important role in the public domain. They cure disease and carry out a wide range of rituals in the fields and in the homes of a village, and they too have responsibilities in the public festivals. Through their prayers to age-old divinities of their people, the shamans maintain the link with the past and help modern villagers preserve their language and their most cherished understanding of the world in the face of pressing alternatives from national cultures.(Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 44)

Although in the ancient world the pressures were different, the shamanistic function has always been to conserve tradition within the community. The shamans were and are public explainers, repositories of the stories and morals of thousands of years of village experience. Their power is intimate and personal, and in the ecstasy of prayer their charisma is unquestionable. They are the keepers of a very complicated world view encoded in an especial poetic language. We call such knowledge oral history, but in fact is more than history. It is an ongoing interpretation of daily life. An example of this way of thinking can be seen in the shaman's attitude toward disease. Instead of seeing illness as an isolated purely physical phenomenon, the shaman treats it within the context of tensions and anxieties of inter-familiar and social relationships. The curing of an individual is more than a healing of the physical being; it's a healing of the emotional being, and the social web holding the community together. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 44)

The public rituals of the shamans are occasions for the affirmation of the overarching experience of existence, the cycles of life and death and of agricultural year, and of the community as the true center of everything important. The poetic form of the shaman's expression allows him not only to learn and remember encyclopedias of communal knowledge but to express himself effectively in ecstatic states, when he is within the daily understanding of the world. (Schele and Dreidel, 1990: 44)

The Mexican Anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán observed:

“The Court of the Holy Inquisition was established by the Catholic hierarchy to protect Christian orthodoxy from contamination by the magical religious beliefs of the subordinate population. The Court was an agency of counter acculturation that judged and condemned to corporal punishment and deprivation of liberty an undetermined, but considerable number of curers, soothsayers, heretics, renegades and other types of rebels who, clandestinely, kept alive the beliefs and practices of folk medicine”. (Aguirre Beltran, 1972: 31-32)



The Cofradía



Traditionally it is hard to distinguish Indian Religion from community life. Indian religious practices and representations used to be and to a large extent still are community matters. Religious practices and representations are mainly ‘produced’ involving the whole community and Indians usually identify them with their community structure. (Siebers, 1992: 81-82)

The cofradías represent a strong religious power not only because of the fact that they fulfil important religious functions, but also because they are the main economic, social and political institution in the Indian villages..

As it operates today, the cargo system of the cofradía consists of a series of political and religious offices (cargos) that are filled with volunteers who serve one year terms. The officers are ranked, and an individual must begin by serving in a low level position before he is eligible to move to more important posts. (Culbert, 1974: 65)

A cargo system then could have been a useful tool for social integration in the Classic period, and the present system may, indeed, be a survival from far earlier times. (Culbert, 1974: 66)

Within the indigenous communities, the patron saint always constitutes the base of the social organization and symbolic consensus of the, since he is considered not only their protector and local lawyer, but center of convergence of all social relations, vital principle of the community and key element of their identity. Like the "Gods lawyers" of the pre-Hispanic past, the patron saint is the "heart of the town" and summarizes in itself their historical identity, their present reality and their destiny. Therefore there is no worse offense for a community than an attack - under anyone of its possible forms - against the image of the patron saint. An emblematic example of this is what happened to the Governor of Oaxaca, Felix Diaz - according to what they recount in Juchitán, who in order to repress the rebellion of the juchitecos, not only set afire the town, but also took with himself like war trophy the image of San Vicente Ferrer. to that cut the feet to him to be able to put it in a box. Two years later, a contingent of juchitecos and blaseños hunted and executed him. But before, they sliced the plant of his feet and forced him to walk on the ardent dirt at noon, shouting: Long Live San Vicente Ferrer, patron of Juchitán! (Giménez, 1998)



Liberation Theology



The churches of Central America have now introduced a new element, relative in scale, but nonetheless authentic and sealed with persecution and martyrdom. This new element is the introduction of the notion of salvation in history into evangelization. Theology of Liberation has preached the kingdom of God for the poor and the closeness of God as Father to the hearts of the poor and oppressed. Major consequences have stemmed from this concept: first evangelization has been extended to cover all that makes the goodness of God present in words and deeds to the poor; second, evangelizing means denouncing social as well as personal sin; third, this proclamation requires specific credibility on the part of the evangelizers. (Cardenal, 1992: 256)

This "preferential option for the poor" as Archbishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador said, consists in defending the minimum which is God's maximum: life itself. This perspective has made the church exert a positive influence on society: that is, the Church has introduced the Christian leaven into struggles for justice and peace. (Cardenal, 1992: 256-7)

In the 1980's the Catholic Church in Guatemala experienced at first hand the repression unleashed on the population as a whole. Hundreds of pastoral agents and some ten priests felt victim to the "death squads" and the army. The church's action has been distinguished by defense of human rights, a quest for deep social change and efforts to achieve peace. Meanwhile, the spread of the sects led to the election of Latin America's first evangelical president, Jorge Serrano, in 1990. (Cardenal, 1992: 262)

In El Salvador, Pastoral work prepared the way for peasant organization; once established, the peasants used parish structures to spread and consolidate, which meant that it became difficult to see where the church ended and the organization began. Peasant organization originally had a basically Christian mystique: This became Christian-revolutionary, and the revolutionary-Christian. Gospel and mystique led to organizational growth; organizational euphoria and euphoria and mystique grew as the organization made its power felt against the ruling classes. Peasants went through a sort of political conversion process as they moved out of parish structures and into organizational ones. Archbishop Romero became the Christian conscience of the nation, criticizing the injustice and violence produced by the ruling structures and giving hope and strength to the poor masses. (Cardenal, 1992: 264)

The second wave of persecution came to a head on 16 November 1989, when the army murdered the Jesuit community that ran the SimeónCañas University of Central America, together with their housekeeper and her adolescent daughter. This massacre horrified the international community with its brutality and on account of the impunity of the Salvadorian army. The Rector, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, and his companions were killed for their academic commitment to the cause of the poor, because they always thought and worked as university personnel in the interest of the masses, because they were constantly asking for a negotiated settlement to the civil war and because they always spoke the truth in a society dominated by cover-ups and lies. In 1991-1992 the first fruits of this struggle and sacrifice began to appear, when a "cease fire" agreement was finally signed in New York and a process of pacification and national reconstruction was undertaken. (Cardenal, 1992: 265)



Protestantism



The growth of the Protestantism in the countries of Central America in the last years has been very impressive, although they already were a significant minority throughout the XX century .PrudencioDamboriena locates the entrance of the Protestantism in Central America in 1849 in Nicaragua by way of the Moravian churches. (Escobar, 2004)

The arrival from evangelicals to Guatemala is located around 1882. Apparently the same president Rufino Barrios of Guatemala sent for them so that they would implant in his country their educational system. The liberal parties of Latin America felt a great admiration for the United States and thought that protestant religion was part of their political and economic success. The growth of Protestantism in Guatemala throughout the XIX century was small and until the 1970's did not jump in quantity. At the moment, Protestants are 25% of the population. Possibly, Guatemala is the country with the higher index of Protestants in Latin America. The liberal revolution of 1871 facilitated the entrance of the protestant missionaries in El Salvador. The first missionaries to arrive were the Mission of Central America in 1896. Already in XX century, around 1961 the Assemblies of God of Pentecostals was the most important denomination. At the present time, the Evangelicals surpass 20% of the population. The case of Honduras is similar to Guatemala and El Salvador, although the number of Protestants is smaller, around 12% of the population. Nicaragua has a higher index with 18%. (Escobar, 2004)

Escobar indicates that the noticeable separation of the material and the spiritual, the sacredness of priesthood and the little value given to manual labor, made Catholic society to take a dualistic attitude. Identifying material as bad and spiritual as good. However, the protestant societies fostered the priesthood of all believers, alphabetization (to be able to read the Sacred Scriptures), democratization of believers and the value of work as service to God. This change broke down that stratified and static Catholic society. (Escobar, 2004)

Dow provides two explanations that reveal certain evidence on the success that has had Protestantism in Mesoamerica. The first is that the success of Protestantism in Mesoamerica is tied somehow to its compatibility with the native culture. The fastest growth of the Protestantism has happened in rural areas with large native population. The second is that the turn to Protestantism is tied to the market economy. Weber (1958) indicated that Protestantism appealed to an emerging middle class, however in Latin America is appealing to the poor classes and we need to understand this connection. (Dow)

Martin has argued that Protestantism had a role to play in the expansion of the market economy in Europe and that is that now in Mesoamerica Protestantism is playing the same role among the poor rather than among the wealthy middle-classes. (Martin 1990). Max Weber (1958) was the first to examine the connection between Protestantism and economic change; however, the conditions that he looked at in Europe during the Protestant Reformation are not duplicated in most areas of Latin America today. The rural Indian peasants and the lower urban classes of Latin America are in different economic circumstances than the middle classes of Europe who took to Protestantism as a way of integrating their social life with capitalism.

Weber's theories need some upgrading to make them applicable to Protestantism in 20th century Mesoamerica. Something was necessary to provide the capitalist entrepreneur with a holy mandate that could overcome religious strictures against wealth accumulation. Protestantism portrayed the traditional idea of working only to satisfy one's needs as a distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life (Weber, 1958:157). Thus, Protestantism motivated the individual to produce wealth as a calling and not to squander or enjoy it. This supported the necessary mandate that a successful capitalist should reinvest his profit.

In another work, *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1946), Weber looks at the way in which Protestantism in the United States supported bourgeois capitalism. He sees this as a continuation of the asceticism of European sects, which could portray economic success as a sign of grace. This relationship to bourgeois capitalism solidified the dominant school of Weberian thought in sociology, which came to define the link between capitalism and Protestantism as primarily psychological. In this psychological model, Protestantism is seen as an ethic that morally legitimizes new wealth by giving the hardworking middle-class businessman a feeling that he is following a holy calling. This model does not consider political factors and is particularly applicable to the United States with few political barriers to capitalism. In this psychological model, entrepreneurial activity is affected primarily by one's attitude toward life and not by the political and legal apparatus in which one lives. The psychological model has also been the source of theorizing about how Protestantism overcomes barriers to development in underdeveloped countries (McClelland 1961).

Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958) explains how Protestant theology provided a new morality for entrepreneurial behavior in Europe after the Reformation. The enemy of capitalism was a traditional economic system in which people worked for their own comfort and for other ideals often given to them by the Catholic morals of the times. The idea of moneymaking as an end in itself to which people were bound as a calling was not included in these morals (Weber 1958:63).

According to Dow, Protestantism in Mesoamerica is empowering people to loosen their ideological fastenings of civil and religious hierarchies. This makes possible the institutionalization of compatible economic behaviors with the market economy. For example, the Fiestas of the Patron Saints can be supported by multiple contributions or abolished totally and the people can use the money they earn to improve their quality of life. Many peasants in Mesoamerica are acting like mini capitalists trying to improve their standard of life through the accumulation of wealth. Their ability to accumulate and to manipulate that wealth is important for them (Dow)

Meyer, when observing the religious situation in Chiapas, recognizes Protestantism own merits, which was:

"... able to reproduce by division, advantage of a body of married, instantaneously formed pastors, organized in small communities (a pastor for each three hundred persons, that is to say, thirty families); an organization who rests in a popular leadership coming from the same communities. The entrance in a protestant church implies a radical change of life, the abandonment of alcohol, tobacco, etc., which causes a true revolution in the life and economy of the family. The immediate benefit is visible and verified, the criticism against the religious celebrations with its expenses and wastefulness, in part the radical attack against "la costumbre". In this sense, Protestantism is very attractive in indigenous zones and also in culturally different zones, but with the same socioeconomic problems. Conversion is a factor of social promotion and economic improvement "(Meyer, 2000:55-56). Protestantism is also successful in the Indigenous communities because it is clearly anti-catholic. This anti-catholicism is assimilated by the same natives because it gives them a more independent identity. Also identifies them with a powerful group inside and outside the country, the North Americans, and it protects them of accusations that they have become involved in radical movements supported by the Catholics against the Government. (Dow:11)

On the other hand, it is being recognized that certain Pentecostals churches and fundamentalist protestants preaching a message that emphasizes a spiritualist and evasive Christianity and not a Christianity that would emancipate them. (Huizer, 1992, 48)



Conclusion

We can conclude that religion in Mesoamerica has been a social and cultural institution that has modeled and recreated the world vision of Mesoamerican societies during pre-Hispanic time, conquest, colony and independence and also during contemporary times. It is in this sense, that we defined religion as a dialectic process of (re)-production of the practices and representations, in which the social actors reproduce their natural and social surroundings and at the same time reproduce themselves. That is to say, religion is the cultural mechanism par excellence able to recreate the values, norms and premises that constitute the world vision of Mesoamerican societies.

By definition, religious representations are modeling systems that propose models of the world .These models function structures that constitute a world vision. In this sense, society creates always in some way its own gods, but also the gods create in some way society (Giménez, 1978: 42)

All religion - Gramsci said -, also the Catholic (very specially the Catholic, indeed by its efforts to stay unitary "superficially" and not dissolve in national churches and social stratifications), is in fact one multiplicity of different and often contradictory religions. There is a Catholicism of the peasants, a Catholicism of the small bourgeois and workers of the city, a Catholicism of the women and a Catholicism of the intellectuals. (Portelli: 27,28, 1974)

It is clear that potentialities of spiritual nature can be manipulated by all kinds of holders and seekers of power, who have discovered the hidden potential of spiritual resistance (or escape). Thus a number of protestant sects in Central America appear to be supported directly or indirectly by funds from U.S. circles of power so as to channel these potentialities toward resignation and other-worldly salvation (NACLA: 48, 1984) **Popular religiosity**, as opposed to **official religion** is often related to class differences.

In Mesoamerica factors of gender, ethnic and cultural identity also need to be considered for amore dynamic and deep study of religion as a modeling institution of world vision and culture.



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