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Evangelization and Religious Conflict in Chiapas: In Search of Common Ground

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Evangelization and Religious Conflict in Chiapas:
In Search of Common Ground

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Fall 2005
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“If you be radical Mennonites, and we be radical Catholics, we’ll meet on the road to peace.”

-Bishop Samuel Ruiz

Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of researching and writing this paper, I have been repeatedly impressed and gratified by the kindness I received from everyone involved. I think this unexpected generosity was partly thanks to a Mexican, and specifically Chiapaneco, culture of hospitality. I also attribute the warmth I received to my interviewees' level of spiritual health; many of the actively religious people I met exuded human compassion that seemed to reflect a genuine relationship with God, or at least a sense of earthly peace. I was reminded of why studying religion can be so rewarding: the people I have met have been inspirational, both in the energy with which they devote themselves to their social action, and in the spiritual warmth that they radiate.

Especially,

To my project advisor, Dr. Raymundo Sanchez, for the contacts and the advice, and for drawing me a diagram that took the primordial chaos of ideas in my head and established the rock upon which I built my paper,

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“It is the creative potential itself in
human beings that is the image of God.”
-Mary Daly

Introduction

The religious conflict in Chiapas can hardly be called religious; politics, poverty, and indigenous identity issues are a few of the many factors that have shaped the cultural climate here, and have contributed to the violence and tensions. The deeply divided communities, thousands of people displaced from their towns, and the gruesome murders of the past 40 years have all been attributed to the Catholic-Protestant rivalry. But the reality of political power struggles, US and Mexican government involvement, economic need, and the influence of indigenous community organizing/uprising are all informing the current religious climate. The culture wars are as much Protestant-Catholic as they are indigenous-Western, or government-Zapatista. This situation is too complex for four weeks and a short paper.

Thus, this is not a paper about conflict in Chiapas. It is more of an exploration of the spaces created within religious communities for dialogue, intercultural understanding, and peace-making. I came to Chiapas hoping to see how Protestant evangelization efforts are eroding indigenous cultures and causing conflict, and ended up finding out how evangelization can uphold these cultures and work for peace. The most promising path to conflict transformation, if anything can solve these social problems, is inter-religious understanding. I have found that ecumenical understanding is two-fold: Catholic-Protestant (and Protestant inter-denominational), and Western-indigenous.

I have first included background religious history on the leftist Catholic movement and its Protestant response in Chiapas. I go on to explain, to the best of my ability, the nature of the religious conflict, and lastly I describe the work of two organizations that are simultaneously evangelizing and working for dialogue. What

distinguishes these faith-based organizations, Instituto de Estudios e Investigacion Intercultural (INESIN)¹ and the Centro Intercultural Mayanse², is their emphasis on retaining the Mayan, the indigenous, in their approach to faith formation. I believe that this is crucial to creating an ecumenical dialogue; a shared understanding of, and respect for, the synthesis of Western and indigenous cultures within all the religions in Chiapas provides a platform for discussion, a common ground.

¹ The Institute for Intercultural Studies and Research.

² Mayan Intercultural Center.

Methodology

The main sources of information that I used in my research were interviews and written materials like books and articles. The use of books and articles was crucial to my work because of the complexity of the issues I studied; only after I started interviews and my research questions began to change did I realize that I knew very little about the religious conflict in Chiapas. Of course, I gathered my most important and original data from interviewees. Dr. Raymundo Sanchez, my project advisor, put me in contact with two inspiring and gracious people, Marina Pagés of Servicio Internacional para la Paz (SIPAZ)³, and Ricardo Mayol of the Centro Intercultural Mayanse, who helped me establish other contacts in addition to allowing me to interview them.

I was also lucky enough to attend three conferences during my stay in Chiapas, which informed my understanding of the way people are currently assessing and dealing with religion in their lives. The first, an indigenous land rights conference sponsored by Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolome de las Casas (Fray Ba)⁴ and Centro Indigena de Capacitacion Integral (CIDECI)⁵, did not seem to be directly related to religious issues, but I quickly learned that, as Marina of SIPAZ told me, “In Chiapas, there are no secular struggles.” The other conferences, a state-sponsored discussion on Inter-religious Dialogue, and a two-day Baptist celebration in the indigenous *ejido*, La Ceiba, with the Centro Intercultural Mayanse, gave me two very different and interesting perspectives on Catholic-Protestant and Protestant-indigenous relations.

³ International Service for Peace.

⁴ Fray Bartolome de las Casas Center for Human Rights.

⁵ Center for Holistic Indigenous Training.

Finally, my time spent with INESIN was incredibly useful to hear their insightful commentary on the current problems in Chiapas. INESIN is a truly inspirational place, and I was so glad to witness conflict transformation in action.

I had trouble keeping my research on a straight and narrow path. My research questions were ever-evolving based on the information I received from interviewees. While this is a sign of a dynamic research process that enriched my experience as a researcher, it did inhibit me from really fully developing one small question. However, the issues of religious conflict and inter-religious dialogue were much too interesting to ignore, and I do not regret my choice to expand my research topics, perhaps at the expense of the more compact and simple question with which I arrived in Chiapas.

I expected to have problems maintaining an unbiased perspective throughout the interviewing and writing of my paper, because I came to Chiapas with the assumption that Protestant evangelization is eroding the social fabric of indigenous communities. However, my discussions with very culturally conscious Protestant ministers allayed such biases, and I think I have successfully looked at the issues with impartiality.

Historical Background

The Catholic Church in Mexico

The on-going religious conflict in Chiapas must be understood within the context of the Catholic Church's recent radicalization that has occurred not only in Chiapas, but in much of Latin America. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in Rome institutionalized some modernizations within the Church, such as a switch from use of Latin to the vernacular during Masses and some limited incorporation of national or cultural customs into worship services. In Latin America, these structural changes, coupled with growing popularity of Socialism and anti-development thought, created a ripe environment for the development of popular Catholicism with the aim of social conscientization of the masses (Berryman).

Spearheaded by Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez and a number of other radical priests, this movement of liberation theology had its organizational inauguration in 1968. To these theologians, the Church mandated a "preferential option for the poor" that could best be lived out through a liturgy that catered to the most destitute: the poor and, in many cases in Latin America, the indigenous (Berryman). They specifically called for the creation of ecclesial base communities, groups of Catholics who would gather to study the Bible and apply it to their own experiences and lives, with an emphasis on the social and political implications of the Bible's teachings. Catechists trained and educated by such radical priests returned to their home communities to begin discussion/worship services. In these base communities, the liturgical emphasis shifted from the priest-centric worship so characteristic of the hierarchical Catholic Church to a more grassroots practice that allowed a political/social conscience to develop among the indigenous. It is

important to note that the shift to a more Bible-centric liturgy de-emphasized the traditional indigenous Catholicism characterized by rituals and saint worship; the new base communities could even represent a shift towards more Protestant-like practice of the faith (Schroeder).

Though ecclesial base communities took root more in South America than in Mexico, Chiapas became a site of such radical Catholicism because of Samuel Ruiz, a liberation theologian and bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal from 1959-1999. In the spirit of his forebear Fray Bartolome de las Casas, Chiapas's first bishop and indigenous rights activist, he advocated on behalf of, and in conjunction with, the indigenous. He accomplished this both through his support of base communities and through his organization of the Indigenous Congress (1974), an event that networked grassroots indigenous groups that they might work collectively for change. This was a potent combination because the discussion in base communities often led to organization and action. By the end of the 1990s, 10,000 catechists were working in the indigenous areas of Chiapas (Rivera 17).

The greatest advantage of this system of popular Biblical/political analysis is the flexibility of interpretation it allows. Two contemporary outgrowths of liberation theology and the religious and secular focus on indigenous issues in Mexico are Exodus Theology and Indian Theology. Exodus Theology compares current indigenous issues, especially those related to government-imposed *desplazados*,⁶ and migration into the jungle for lack of land, to the plight of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and their passage to the Promised Land (Pagés). Indian Theology integrates liberation theology with the

⁶ Displaced people, forced to leave their communities, often for political reasons.

currently prominent notions of the protection of and respect for the traditions and rituals of indigenous cultures.

Ruiz's successful alignment of the diocese with a controversially leftist stance angered and worried certain groups of Mexicans and the international community alike. One particularly outspoken group of conservative-minded Catholics, the *auténticos coletos*,⁷ middle and upper class mestizos, even defaced the San Cristóbal cathedral in protest. Bishop Ruiz was pressured into removing his sanction of the ecclesial base community in San Cristóbal (Schroeder), and some Catholics chose to start new, less radical churches like the Independent Apostolic Orthodox Catholic Church in Chamula (Rivera 17). However, some of the strongest voices in opposition to liberation theology were Protestant evangelizers.

Protestant Evangelization

Protestants have maintained a presence in Chiapas since the 19th century. The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico was founded in 1872 (Schroeder). Their influence was further consolidated in 1914 when the Cincinnati Missionary Conference divided up Latin America into regions to be evangelized by different Protestant faiths, and southern Mexico was given to Presbyterians, though other evangelizers did arrive later (SIPAZ). This presence was reinforced by Benito Juárez and the revolutionary Mexican government in an effort to weaken the Catholic Church's influence (Hernández 17).

Despite their general avoidance of involvement in political issues, Protestant efforts intensified in the second half of the twentieth century in response to the onslaught

⁷ "Residents of San Cristóbal...that consider themselves direct descendants of the Spanish crown. 'Coletos', literally braid or pig-tail, refers to the braided hairstyle favored by their Spanish ancestors (SIPAZ).

of radical Catholicism. Both the Mexican and United States governments supported evangelization as a means of counter-insurgency, especially in the context of the Cold War paranoia of Communism. Many Protestant communities became strongly aligned with the government's political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and there have been cases of Protestant involvement with paramilitary organizations in the area. They found Biblical justification for such governmental support in Romans 13:1-2 (Pagés): "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" (New International Version).

Just as the radicalization of the Catholic Church was a natural result of the reforms in Rome and the social climate in Latin America, the trend of Protestant conservatism was a product of social conservatism in the United States as well. Baptist minister Ricardo Mayol refers to this as the legacy of manifest destiny, the *norteamericano* notion of the ever-expanding *frontera*⁸ and the desire for conquest. Do-gooder Protestant evangelizers who showed up with no paramilitary ambitions did still bring a Western understanding of the world that subtly devalued the Mayan worldview. This lack of cultural respect, coupled with growing religious fundamentalism in the States and thus among missionaries, created an atmosphere conducive to a Protestant alignment with conservative politics, or at least an adamant avoidance of politics, as an answer to the Catholic movement.

Evangelization Success

⁸ Border.

It seems surprising that Protestantism could have any success in a country with such a strong Catholic identity and in indigenous communities whose social structure is built, in part, around religious events like festivals for the adoration of a saint or a Virgin Mary. Possibly the most effective tactic that proselytizers and ministers used to convert people was the use of the vernacular language. It is much more common for Protestant ministers to speak the native language than Catholic priests, who often only speak *castilla*, Spanish. Both of the Protestant pastors whom I interviewed speak at least some of the language native to the indigenous area in which they work; Presbyterian Alonso Schroeder lived in a community for eight years to learn Tsotsil. Speaking the language allows the proselytizer to “enter the heart of the community” (Pagés), especially given the large number of indigenous people in Mexico who do not speak Spanish. In the early days of evangelization, Protestantism was particularly appealing to communities that felt threatened by the government’s “Mexicanization” campaigns, which valued the *mestizo* (the “*raza cosmica*,” the mix of Spanish and indigenous color and culture) in the construction of a post-revolutionary Mexican identity. These campaigns included forced burning of the traditional clothing and schooling in Spanish, and a religion that reaffirmed the value of their native tongue was a form of cultural defense mechanism (Hernández 27).

Another selling point of many Protestant creeds, while also one of their most controversial tenets, was the prohibition of alcohol. Though this served as grounds to reject Protestant evangelists in some communities, others welcomed the opportunity to confront the rampant alcoholism that had become a grave social ill in many areas.

Women in particular were partial to this rule because of the financial strain that alcohol places on the family, and because of alcohol-induced domestic violence (Pagés).

Furthermore, the lack the Catholic-style hierarchy in many Protestant faiths can allow for a ministry more specifically catered to the community needs. This often allowed women and the uneducated to take more leadership roles in the church organization than they could in most Catholic parishes. The stringency of the Catholic hierarchy also created a lack of qualified priests to minister to the many indigenous areas of Chiapas, and thus a void that Protestant ministers were able to fill. Perhaps the training of indigenous Catholic catechists to teach in their own communities was a means of addressing the need for trained church leaders, decentralized authority, and vernacular religious discussion.

Religious Conflict

Religious Plurality

The success of Protestant evangelization efforts in the past 30 years is evident in the numbers. The following census figures give a sense of the shift in the religious composition of Chiapas. Note that the “Non-evangelical Christians” category did not exist in the 1970 census.

Year	Catholics	Protestant/evangelicals	Non-evangelical Christians
1970	91.2%	4.8%	n/a
2000	63.8%	13.91%	7.95%

Source: Rivera 39

Religious plurality in Chiapas has manifested itself in two ways: a whole community that chooses to change to a Protestant religion and communities in which Protestants and Catholics co-exist. I visited one such community, the *ejido*⁹ La Ceiba, which houses five different churches, two Baptist, one Catholic, one Presbyterian, and one Pentecostal. The different religious communities seem to co-exist peacefully, but they do keep to themselves. The pueblo of Acteal is a more extreme example of religious plurality, because of the town's three different, and very polarized, communities: a Protestant, PRI-affiliated area, a Catholic leftist area, and a Zapatista area.

This polarization is a manner of dealing with a concept that has long characterized indigenous communities: “unity in uniformity” (Pagés). The cohesion of a community was held, in part, by its common religion and religious traditions, its affiliation with the PRI, its native language, and its system of *cargos and tequios*.¹⁰ Religion is such an integral part of this communal identity because of what Alonso Schroeder calls the “unified nature of the Tsotsil cosmovision” (Schroeder). The pastor acts not only as a religious counselor, but also as a legal and social advisor because of the way Mayan cultures integrate religion into every other aspect of their lives. Even at the seemingly secular seminar I attended on indigenous land rights, I witnessed this integration when an indigenous woman explained that “God gave us rights.”¹¹ In the middle of the room where the seminar took place, the organizers had assembled an altar that represented land

⁹ A plot of communal, indigenous-owned land expropriated from the private sector specifically for indigenous use by the Mexican government based on the mandates of constitutional reforms.

¹⁰ The system that ensures that every member of a community will contribute unpaid labor to the well-being of the community. Cargos can be strictly social, such as service at a health clinic, or religious, such as the organization of a saint-day festival.

¹¹ Dios nos dio derechos.

and community, around which everyone gathered for a prayer service at the beginning and end of the seminar. As Marina Pagés told me, “There are no secular struggles.”

This integration of religion into indigenous people’s everyday lives polarizes Protestant and Catholic interactions, not only because of the “unity in uniformity” that they feel, but because of the “unity in uniformity” imposed by leaders. Catholicism and its interrelation with the *cargo* structure has been encouraged and enforced by the local *caciques*¹², who benefit from the sale of liquor and the maintenance of the social status quo (Pagés).

This desire of the Catholic caciques to maintain their power resulted in the beginning of expulsions of Protestants from communities. The most extreme example is the municipality of Chamula, whose cacique imposed incredibly strict and violent expulsions, not only of Protestants but also of radical Catholics, starting in 1974. The exclusion of Protestants was legitimized with a, not completely unfounded, discourse of the deterioration of indigenous culture caused by Protestantism. However, it is clear that the motive was more political than social: The mayor of Chamula once said, “In Chamula, you are born a member of the PRI” (“Chiapas...”). There have been over 30,000 expulsions from Chamula since 1974, as well as murders of Protestant families. These expulsions resulted in the development of Protestant neighborhoods on the outskirts of San Cristóbal, full of *desplazados*, whose social organization was, not surprisingly, taken up by Protestant churches (Mayol), segregating and fostering further mistrust between the Protestants and Catholics of the region.

¹² Political bosses of ejidos who often maintain close ties to the government.

Religious Intolerance

Thus religious intolerance has been both enforced by caciques and self-imposed. Some argue that the Mexican government fanned the flames of intolerance to justify its military presence in Chiapas that is supposedly keeping the peace (Bahnson). And there has been a history of Protestant-Catholic incidents of conflict, aside from (though probably fostered by) the expulsions. These incidents run from fist fights, as Mariano Perez Taratol of the indigenous community of Maravilla described, to rude exchanges of words, to, perhaps, the massacre of Acteal in 1997. The actors in, and motivations behind, the Acteal massacre remain debated, but it is commonly believed that the 45 Catholics, mostly women and children, who were murdered while praying in their church, were killed by predominantly Protestant paramilitaries. The politics of the incident further complicates it, because the Catholics killed were members of Las Abejas, leftist indigenous rights activists who support the Zapatistas' objectives, if not their violent means. Regardless of the real motivations behind the event, the effect was a further polarization between Catholics and Protestants, and the creation of a deep-seated mistrust of the other.

The religious intolerance also has cultural roots. Protestant evangelists and Western-style Roman Catholics view with disdain the so-called "Christo-paganism" (Schroeder) of indigenous Catholicism. It is true that any Catholic who visits the church of San Juan Chamula would not recognize it as Catholic; pine needles line the floor of this pew-less sanctuary, and families gather by the figure of their saint of choice to light candles and perform rituals involving Coca-Cola, and sometimes a sacrificed animal.

This *catolicismo indigena tradicionalista*¹³ is sometimes imbued with an indigenous pride that is as suspicious of Protestant beliefs as Protestants are of theirs.

Inter-religious Dialogue

Given the contentious nature of Protestant-Catholic relations in Chiapas, it is easy to blame the conflict on Protestant evangelizers, for the stereotypes of fundamentalism, paramilitary ties, and lack of respect for indigenous cultures. Certainly much of the left-leaning academic discourse has a history of this kind of thought, especially in the 1980s as Protestants were having more and more proselytizing success (Rivera 47). But does enriching and strengthening the faith (Catholic or Protestant) necessarily entail further polarization? Is evangelism of Western-based religions always Western-centric and therefore devaluing of indigenous traditions? Just as Chiapan Catholicism is not always imbued with social/political consciousness-raising, Protestantism is not always government-sponsored and paramilitary-aligned. As Mennonite Jairo Arce Mairena told me, the role of churches in society should not be to cause social problems, but to resolve them. In fact, his organization, Instituto de Estudios e Investigacion Intercultural (INESIN), suggests that the religious conflict here is partly due to people's lack of religious convictions; people's "superficial doctrines" allow them to be easily swayed by the government or other forces of manipulation (Arce, et al.).

Two organizations, INESIN and the Centro Intercultural Mayanese, are both working in Chiapas to simultaneously build the Christian faith and ease the social tensions that religions are causing. This is an interesting and difficult path to take

¹³ Traditionalist indigenous Catholicism

because of the social implications that a strengthened appreciation for one's own faith can have on one's relation to other religions. They have found, however, that the basis for inter-religious peace can be found in the pages of the Bible itself, and that the road to peace can and should include religious formation.

INESIN

The Instituto de Estudios e Investigacion Intercultural (INESIN) is an ecumenical religious organization committed to religious conflict resolution and dialogue. The organization, originally called the Escuela Bíblica, or Bible School, was founded in 1997 in the wake of the Acteal murders. Initially formed to address the specific issues of religious polarization and violence, INESIN now also runs programs in indigenous communities related to more seemingly secular issues like community health and recycling. These workshops are run both onsite at their campus in San Cristóbal, which has a dormitory for visiting participants, and in indigenous communities themselves. The organization currently has four departments that run such workshops:

1. Gender Studies
2. Ecumenical Studies
3. Social Development (with a current emphasis on ecological issues)
4. Indian Theology

The names of these departments suggest a lack of one unified focus, but the organization is really quite cohesive. All of the different departments work with indigenous communities in a religious context to address different social issues. Ernesto Martín Guerrero, for example, runs a program on environmental issues and recycling, which he relates directly to the Old Testament's teachings of the human responsibility to care for God's creations. The gender studies department focuses on the alleviation of gender inequalities in indigenous communities in a culturally sensitive way. Given the

aforementioned positive influences that Protestant teachings can have on women's role in the social structure, religion has proved a viable means of opening the dialogue on these issues. At INESIN, religious teaching, respect and support for the indigenous, and struggles for social change are all integrated, as they are in the Mayan cosmovision.

In conjunction with the discussions and workshops that INESIN runs, the organization also maintains a theoretical, academic focus. They are currently seeking to enlarge their library because they are in the process of creating a more formal school at their offices in San Cristobal. This program, which will provide a bachelor degree in its different departments, will take a serious academic focus and is aimed at high school graduates or people with higher qualifications.

Though the degree program is still in its initial stages of creation, the leaders at INESIN have already created a space for intellectual theological discussion; they are working to create an ecumenical theology, religious thought that diverges from the fundamentalist, conflict-creating doctrines so common in modern-day Chiapas. This is what they call a "theology of inclusion," an inter-religious approach that celebrates difference and teaches tolerance. This theology opposes the "exclusive theology" currently prevalent in both indigenous and mestizo religious communities. Protestants are taught that acceptance of Jesus Christ into one's life is the only path to salvation; Catholics are taught that heaven can only be reached through participation in the sacraments. What Jairo Arce Mairena and INESIN's other leaders seek is a theology that celebrates difference and recognizes the different ways God has manifested Him/Her/Itself in people's lives. The religious dialogue, according to them, should not be based in Catholicism or Protestantism; it should not even be "Christ-centric," but

rather “God-centric;” it should encourage the involvement of Hindus and Muslims in Mexico as much as Christians. Thus a nascent “inclusive theology” informs INESIN’s workshops and courses, and informs the way religion is perceived.

I witnessed these ideas in action at a conference on Inter-religious Dialogue co-sponsored by INESIN and the state government of Chiapas. Eduardo Rodriguez Mendoza, Chiapas’ sub-secretary of religious affairs, was the main speaker, along with Jairo Arce Mairena and Reynau Oman Santiago Marroquin of INESIN. Mr. Rodriguez focused his discussion on the need for individual inter-religious understanding. He elaborated at length the principle that God is revealed to different people in different ways. As he put it, the word of God is not one truth but something different for every individual, and is found at the intersection of four varying factors: revelation to the individual, the reality of everyday life, community/social factors, and the sacred text. This notion of varying factors emphasizes that the sacred text, the Bible in Christianity for example, is only a part of the experience of religion, and that it is reliant upon individual interpretation. It also highlights that everyone’s experience of religion is different, whether two believers belong to the same or different faiths.

This concept has two potentially positive effects on intercultural/inter-religious dialogue. Firstly, once people are aware that individuals within their own religion interpret the faith in different ways, an understanding among people of different religions is more feasible. Also, the awareness that everyone views religion through their own cultural lens creates a space for a mestizo-indigenous understanding; a difference in religious practices between mestizos and indigenous can be seen as a natural outgrowth of cultural differences.

Centro Intercultural Mayanse

The Centro Intercultural Mayanse's mission is perhaps an even more unexpected avenue towards intercultural/inter-religious dialogue. This Baptist evangelist group functions as a Chiapan branch of a national organization, el Consejo Indigena Campesino Evangelico de Mexico.¹⁴ This interdenominational Protestant organization provides financial and organizational support to different churches around the country, with the intention of reinforcing evangelist movements, expanding Biblical education programs, and channeling the financial resources of wealthier churches in the US and Mexico to areas in need (Garcia). Despite this affiliation, the Centro is rather autonomous, and runs programs as it sees appropriate.

Specifically, they run a Baptist missionary program in indigenous communities with the goal of strengthening the churches' ability to function on their own. They have organized a four-semester program; individuals in participating communities who complete all four semesters receive a degree in Theology and Pastoral Work. They simultaneously train individuals to act as church leaders and Bible school teachers, and educate the whole Baptist community. The organizers, Ricardo Mayol and Doris Garcia, have developed a basic framework for the program, but the community itself decides some of the specific issues dealt with in the program to cater it to their own needs. For instance, one of the Baptist communities in La Ceiba, which is working with the Centro, has chosen women's issues, domestic violence, and intra-*ejido* religious dialogue as their foci (Garcia). These issues will be addressed throughout the four semesters.

¹⁴ The Evangelical Indigenous and Worker Council of Mexico.

The basic curriculum that Mayol and Garcia have developed begins with a semester of basic Christian education, with a concentration on family values and Biblical study. The second semester focuses on Christian worship, to “find the Mayan in the practice of religion (Mayol).” The third semester furthers the Baptist evangelization with the beginning of a development of a social consciousness among the indigenous, like the Catholic ecclesial base communities. The final semester deals with conflict transformation and inter-religious dialogue.

Each semester of the program involves a weekend of class and worship once a month or so for six months. I participated in one such weekend in La Ceiba, six hours from San Cristóbal. This community is in the first semester of the program, so the focus of the weekend was on basic Biblical education. The men and women separated into different Bible study groups, both of which studied one passage from the Bible to find its significance in their lives. The weekend also included two music-filled worship services and, in the spirit of training the indigenous people to lead their own churches, pastor Ricardo Mayol acted as the moral supporter as La Ceiba’s own indigenous pastor performed his first baptisms.

When possible, the Centro Intercultural Mayanse also helps the participating communities with economic projects. Ms. Garcia helped the women of Pueblo Nuevo start an artisans’ cooperative, and they are currently looking for means to create a women’s *papelaria*¹⁵ in La Ceiba. Because economic opportunities are so scarce in these rural areas, especially for women, the Centro wants to use its connection to urban resources to help their participants help themselves.

¹⁵ Paper store common in Mexico that sell notebooks, pens, and the like.

The Centro Intercultural Mayanse is an example of Protestant evangelization that not only works to effect positive change in indigenous communities, but also respects their way of life. Their mission is not about proselytizing or securing souls for their sect's heaven, but rather building a pre-existent Baptist community from the bottom up. They encourage the kind of Biblical interpretation common in Catholics' ecclesial base communities: the search for the Bible's relevance in the context of the community's or the individual's experiences. But unlike liberation theologians, the Centro's Mayol and Garcia are not trying to build a radical mobilization through theology; they focus instead on a few communities and attempt to build their faith, religious leadership within the community, economic opportunities, and a collective social consciousness. This holistic approach suits what Mayol calls the total or all-encompassing nature of Evangelical faiths; the Baptist faith informs every aspect of his life and work. This religious-secular integration may be a commonality between some Protestants' faith and the Mayan cosmovision, and could provide a basis for further Protestant-indigenous dialogue and understanding.

Indigenous Protestantism

The Protestant-indigenous dialogue is considerably less understood than the intersection of Catholicism and indigenous cultures. Mexican Catholics' fervent reverence for the Virgin of Guadalupe, who may be a Catholic manifestation of the Aztec goddess *Coatlalopeah*, attest to the ability of Catholicism and indigenous religions to co-exist and even mutually affirm each other (Anzuldua 51). In Chiapas, churches like San Juan Chamula's maintain very culturally specific traditions that provide a visible

manifestation of the synthesis. Meanwhile, the aforementioned anti-Protestant academic discourse emphasizes the Western influence that the religion brings to indigenous communities and the ways Protestant tenets can erode the social fabric of a community.

Certain Protestant teachings do have the potential to cause conflict in indigenous communities. Protestantism, at least in the United States, emphasizes the personal relationship between the individual and God, a notion that specifically suits the Western, individualistic worldview. INESIN's Natanael Navarro, a Baptist pastor, agrees that there is a cultural disconnect on this point. It is this kind of thinking that has the potential to divide communities, especially when it is approached with the cultural insensitivity that INESIN says continues to be common among many Protestants (“Construyendo...”).

However, both INESIN and the Centro Intercultural Mayanse are developing indigenous Christianities, an ecumenical Indian Theology and an indigenous Baptist faith, respectively. INESIN's department of Indian Theology may use the concepts developed by Christian base communities and leftist Catholicism as the basis for discussion, but the goal of the department's upcoming work is interdenominational in scope. Their goal is to “stimulate in indigenous communities of different faiths...the work of indigenous pastoral work and cultural regeneration (“Construyendo...”).”¹⁶ They are achieving these goals through workshops, both in indigenous communities and onsite, and through the development of an interdisciplinary degree program in ecumenical studies, gender studies, social development, and Indian Theology. I think that Centro Intercultural Mayanse's work is a living embodiment of the theology that INESIN is creating.

¹⁶ “Los objetivos específicos del Departamento es impulsar en las comunidades indígenas de diferentes espiritualidades...el trabajo de pastoral indígena, [y] de regeneración cultural.”

Case Study: Centro Intercultural Mayanse in La Ceiba

At Centro Intercultural Mayanse's conference that I attended in La Ceiba, it quickly became clear that the organization was approaching Baptist evangelization with a sense of respect for the indigenous culture of the area. The whole structure of the program is built around the community system of decision-making through discussion and consensus. Before beginning the program, the organizers and the Baptists of La Ceiba discussed the plan to ensure that it fit their needs; nothing was finalized until a consensus was reached (Mayol). For one important event during the conference I attended, all the leaders and other interested individuals in the Baptist community from La Ceiba and the other visiting churches were asked to attend an organizational meeting to discuss the future of the program. During this meeting, Ricardo Mayol asked the twenty-five or so participants to evaluate how the semester had gone and what changes they would like to see. Though he spoke in a combination of Tseltal and Spanish that was translated by a bilingual Ceiban, the ensuing discussion was in pure Tseltal; only the final decisions were reported to Mayol and Garcia. The initial discussion was mostly positive, but some criticisms came out after a bit of prodding, and the discussion in Tseltal continued for well over half an hour. After every person in the room who wanted to share something had shared, the decisions were presented to Mayol and Garcia in Spanish. This kind of respect for a decision-making process used in *assembleas*¹⁷ is important both because it allows the church to function in a culturally appropriate way and it ensures that the community actually wants the services that the Centro is providing.

¹⁷ Assembly. The governing body in Mayan indigenous pueblos.

The two worship services during the weekend also shed light on the Baptist-indigenous dialogue. When Doris Garcia or Ricardo Mayol spoke in Spanish, their words were always translated in Tseltal. In Garcia's sermon about the Holy Supper, she emphasized the way in which the Holy Supper is a gathering of the community of believers, who are celebrating over a meal. This was a particularly clear and fitting image for the people of La Ceiba and neighboring communities; at each meal throughout the weekend, a group of forty people or so would gather around the big table, say a communal grace, and eat together. However, the Holy Supper is commonly described in this way, even in churches in the United States. Thus, Garcia's sermon served as a common ground between Western-style and indigenous-style Protestantism, a subtle dialogue and a platform for mutual understanding.

The most visibly and distinctly indigenous aspect of the worship service was the prayer. At the beginning and end of the service, one church leader led a prayer, his microphone-projected voice reverberating throughout the small space, but instead of listening and contemplating as I expected them to, the members of the congregation each proceeded to speak their own prayers and intentions. The room was thus full of voices in prayer, as one louder prayer resounded through the speaker system. This, I found out later, is an indigenous custom in this area of Chiapas, and is practiced in both Catholic and Protestant churches who are not headed by overbearing missionaries.

In addition to the worship services, many people participated in a Bible study in which people could, and did, apply the Bible to their own lives. The passage discussed, Genesis 2: 18-25, describes God's creation of a companion for Adam; animals do not provide sufficient company for him, so (Thank God!) He created woman from Adam's

rib. Men and women split into two different groups to discuss the passage, and then the groups converged to present their discussions to each other. This was very clearly the beginning of their study; the conversation was elementary, but enlightening. First, the discussion leader and guest at the event, INESIN's Natanael Navarro, expressed the importance of Bible study in their faith by calling it a "tool" for the cultivation of a healthy Christian life, like a machete or seeds in the fields. In discussion, one man offered his interpretation of the text: God created woman to help man with the "hard work" of caring for the land, because it is easier when men and women work together, *juntos*. Navarro suggested that the text opposes domestic violence because of the caring relationship that Adam and Eve seem to have for each other. When the women returned for a shared discussion, they had found that the passage implied male-female equality, because they come from the same body, and because the two became "one flesh." This kind of discussion is not particularly political in nature, nor is it very original, but it is a promising introduction to looking at the Bible in a critical, personal light. And of course, it is proof of the way that indigenous people can approach a text that is most often interpreted through a Western cultural lens, and make it their own.

I do not think that Centro Intercultural Mayanse is causing an indigenous Protestantism to emerge; people always interpret religion in terms of their own experiences, and indigenous Protestantism has surely existed as long as missionaries have navigated the windy backroads of Chiapas. However, the creation of a space within the Protestant church that actively affirms this cultural fusion is unusual, and provides hope for the future of ecumenical dialogue and, perhaps, opens an avenue for the alleviation of Chiapas' inter-religious tension.

Conclusions

I have found that Protestant evangelization can, contrary to common belief, act as an agent for positive change in the religious conflict in Chiapas. It certainly does not always; the same Bible that affirms the indigenous struggle also legitimizes cacique rule. The text is interpreted and manipulated by every individual, every community, in a different way. As Alonso Schroeder told me, “We all come with our own baggage.”

But regardless of the history of Protestant social conservatism and ties to paramilitaries, the structure of these churches does lend itself to the ecumenical, culturally sensitive theology that is beginning to develop in Chiapas. The Protestant emphasis on the native language encourages the maintenance of an indigenous identity in the face of “Mexicanization” and the growing global monoculture. The lack of a rigid hierarchical structure of many Protestant churches allows for more indigenous people to take leadership roles in their own congregations, that the indigenous believers might cultivate the faith on their own terms. As Rosalva Aída Hernández describes in *Histories and Stories from Chiapas*, and Ricardo Mayol agrees, a Protestant identity does not negate an indigenous identity.

This dialogue is important, not only for the empowerment of indigenous Protestants and the preservation of their culture, but also for the tense inter-religious relations in Chiapas. The Catholic liberation theology movement profoundly affected the religious climate and the role that indigenous people can play in their own struggles for land and cultural preservation, but it also exacerbated religious tensions. The development of a Protestant, and an ecumenical, theology of inclusion is an important step in the direction of conflict transformation.

I believe that this path should involve faith formation and Bible study for the Christians in Chiapas, mestizo and indigenous. The Catholic ecclesial base communities bear resemblance to the kind of Bible study fostered by the Centro Intercultural Mayanese and INESIN. This similarity should provide the grounds for deeper reflection between Protestants and Catholics on why the religious tensions exist in the first place. This kind of ecumenical dialogue, based in the Bible, the appreciation for indigenous cultures, and the mutual desire to pinpoint the roots of the conflict, has the potential to unify Catholics and Protestants in pursuit of the common goal of peace. And the development of an ecumenical social consciousness could prove invaluable in further uniting indigenous communities in the struggle for cultural recognition and autonomy.

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*The quotation in the table of contents is taken from Fred Bahnson's article.

*The quotation in the acknowledgments section is from Mary Daly's book, *Beyond God the Father*.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon, 1985.

Appendix: Resources for Future Study

These organizations/articles could prove useful for further study on these issues. Please consult their websites for more information!

SIPAZ – Servicio Internacional para la Paz: <http://www.sipaz.org>

A human rights organization based in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, that monitors human rights issues, in Chiapas as a whole as well as in Zapatista communities, works for conflict resolution and dialogue, and informs the public of human rights violations and social problems in the area. Their website is incredibly informative, and they issue a widely circulated newsletter. Note: You can read the website in English or Spanish!

INESIN – Instituto de Estudios e Investigacion Intercultural:
<http://personales.com/mexico/tuxlagutierrez/unodostres/>

An inter-denominational faith-based organization that facilitates ecumenical dialogue for conflict resolution, as well as lead workshops to alleviate social ills in indigenous communities. Their social action focuses on women’s issues, environmental education, and “Indian Theology.”

Centro Intercultural Mayanse:

A Baptist organization based in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, that runs religious enrichment and education programs in Baptist indigenous communities. Their four-semester program builds understanding of their own faith and trains indigenous people to be religious educators in their own communities. The fourth semester of the program focuses on inter-religious dialogue and conflict resolution. The organization maintains respect for indigenous culture within its ministry and focuses on social issues that the community itself wants to discuss.

Berryman, Phillip. “Church and Revolution: Reflections on Liberation Theology.”
NACLA Report on the Americas 30 March-April 1997: 10-15.

This article provides a really good explanation of the basic history of liberation theology in Latin America. While the article does not focus on Mexico, Mr. Berryman presents a good (as far as I can tell) introduction to a complicated issue.