

*Roberto Domingo Toledo*

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# BIBLICAL LITERACY AND TRANS-NATIONAL MAYAN LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

## ABSTRACT

The Zapatista and other Mayan movements in Mexico and Guatemala are demanding autonomy and respect for indigenous cultures. Still struggling for land-rights lost during colonialism and now suffering from neo-liberal trade policies, Mayan communities have creatively appropriated Christian doctrine to deal with their suffering. This paper examines the central role of the Bible in the mobilisation of Mayan communities where the majority of members identify themselves as Christian as well as Mayan. Revisiting the period of Yoruba identity formation and the Yoruba anti-slavery struggle in the 1800s will help illuminate the role of Christianity in contemporary liberation movements. In both cases, Christianity primarily impacted marginalised populations suffering the effects of colonialism. The scriptures have helped undermine colonial relationships as well as internal hierarchies within indigenous societies. Specifically, Biblical literacy has led to broader identifications across multiple dialects and has given women and lower classes greater access to religious doctrine.

## 1. BIBLICAL LITERACY AND TRANSNATIONAL MAYAN LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

Neo-liberalism has led to greater corporate power and to the collapse of social-benefits across Latin America. For many Latin-American thinkers, structural adjustment policies and the terms of free trade agreements make neo-liberalism synonymous with neo-colonialism. These same theorists often interpret the recent increase in Christian conversions within indigenous communities as an additional feature of neo-colonial relations. The current situation is seen as analogous to the attempted elimination of indigenous identities through Christianisation during seventeenth-century colonialism. At the same time, the recent emergence of transnational movements in Latin America for indigenous rights is challenging current neo-liberal arrangements, transforming the internal politics of Latin American nations, and demanding respect for non-European cultures.

*Mr. R.D. Toledo, Doctorate Candidate in Philosophy, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, New York, USA. E-mail: rotoledo@gmail.com*

The ongoing indigenous rebellion in Mexico and Guatemala complicates the preceding perspective on Christianity. Aspects of contemporary Christian movements suggest links between some Christian conversions and indigenous liberation projects. Protestant Evangelicalism and Catholic liberation theology have attracted a significant following within the Mayan communities of southern Mexico and Guatemala. Indigenous rights activists often argue that Catholic liberation theology, which emerged from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, promotes the unfettered liberation and expression of indigenous culture. Conversely, they argue that Protestantism is an oppressive force, demanding the burning of cultural relics and instilling a fear of divine punishment to reinforce labour discipline in a privatised economy.

The preceding account provides too narrow a view of the impact of Protestantism to explain the large base of Protestant converts within indigenous rights movements and within the infamous Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) of Mexico. Moreover, despite liberation theology's explicit anti-colonial intentions, this Catholic-dominated movement cannot claim a completely unproblematic relation to indigenous communities either. Fernando Ortiz's analysis of the process of *transculturation* allows for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of Christianity on Mayan culture. Ortiz defines *transculturation* as the simultaneous process of "deculturation" and "neoculturation." Both Protestantism and Catholic liberation theology inflict a certain degree of social disruption on indigenous cultures, or what Ortiz calls "deculturation" (Ortiz & De Onis 1995:102). At the same time, indigenous communities have creatively appropriated and transformed Christian doctrine and practice, an example of what Ortiz calls "neoculturation" (Ortiz & De Onis 1995:103).

This paper examines the *transculturation* that has taken place in recent transnational indigenous rights movements in respect to the Christianisation of indigenous communities. Current proselytising of Mayan communities suggests several historical parallels with nineteenth-century Christianisation of the Yoruba in Nigeria. These parallels suggest that the current *transculturation* at work in indigenous movements results more from the unique relation of Christianity to the Bible and its translations instead of from any particular feature of Catholic liberation theology or Protestantism.

## 2. PROTESTANT CONVERSION AS ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Though many Protestant missionaries do mandate the destruction of primitive "idols", understanding conversions to Protestantism as nothing more than passive assimilation is reductive and condescending. Protestant conversions often involve an active rebellion against the traditional position of indigenous groups

within the Mexican Nation. Following the Mexican Revolution, the anti-clerical Liberals — representing Freemasonry, business, and modernisation — ousted the Conservatives who represented Catholicism, big landowners, and reaction (MacEoin 1996:58). The Catholic Church was no longer allowed to own land, open monasteries, run schools, or participate in public debates and elections. Whereas the Catholic Church was openly dominated, the Liberals were forced to co-opt the popular base of the revolution in order to gain power. The popular base included the original Zapatistas whose main demands were communal land rights through a return to the indigenous *ejido* system. The co-option led to Article 17 of the Mexican Constitution that redistributed land to the peasants. However, the liberal government made sure that *ejidos* were highly monitored by integrating them into a bureaucratic form of state capitalism called “corporativism.”

Despite the anti-clerical stance of the Liberals, the Catholic Church played a central role in Mexican corporativism in the south where the Conservatives retained power. The Church promoted hierarchical arrangements in corporatist townships as well as in the poorest areas of Chiapas where land rights were never granted, where indigenous communities never received government aid, and where the highest concentration of human rights abuses on the part of land-owners and paramilitaries have occurred whenever communities have made attempts to assert their constitutional rights.

The rebellious nature of recent Protestant conversions in Latin America is analogous to that of Christian conversions in British-controlled India where Christianity was often viewed as a potential escape from hierarchy. In many respects, the secular post-revolutionary government in Mexico has used Catholicism in the South for similar ends as those of the secular bureaucracy in British-colonised India who reinforced hierarchical and patriarchal tendencies in Hindu law under the guise of religious “tolerance” (Viswanathan 1998:108). Catholicism played an important role after the Mexican Revolution in the thousands of townships that divided up indigenous communities in Post-revolutionary Mexico according to distinct rituals, costumes, languages, and councils of elders. The structure of the townships was put in place by Spanish colonialism and later perpetuated through post-revolutionary corporatism when the townships became isolated and easily governable *ejidos* (communally worked lands). As Cultural Theorist María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo explains:

Spanish colonial subjection engineered a lasting Indian difference through [the] simultaneous process of universalizing and particularizing Indian identity. It reproduced a racialized labor force that spanned two continents, not by applying military force, but by relying on the disciplining power of thousands of atomized “Indian” towns for the production and *containment* of Indian difference. These towns, however, also proliferated ethnic differences among Indians through their fragmentation of identity. Spanish colonialism transformed every aspect of indigenous cultural life and political

territoriality through the townships while at the same time (re)producing the grounds for Indian difference at a safe but accessible distance (Saldaña-Portillo 2003:201).

Corporativism's manipulation of Indian difference was two-fold. The reinforcement of stereotypical Indigenous traditions within the townships was used to feed the image of the post-revolutionary Mexican Nation as representing an indigenous revolt against the Spanish. At the same time, indigenous communities were maintained as a second-class labour force to be exploited.

The Catholic Church in the South buttressed the township structure by assigning each town an individual Saint cult, promoting hierarchies and patriarchal relations within the communities, and permitting indigenous religious practices within the Church as a form of assimilation. Because of language barriers, Spanish-speaking priests and Latin mass did little to integrate indigenous cultures into a Christian world-view. Catholic institutions primarily served as a space for traditional indigenous festivities, which land owners who monopolised local business and the sale of alcohol used to reacquire wages in an ongoing cycle of labour exploitation. For this reason, indigenous groups who identify as "traditional" Catholics are the most socially conservative in their support for internal hierarchies as well as acquiescence to external authorities. At the same time, they most resemble the stereotypical image of the "Indian" within the national imaginary as intended by the corporatist structures put in place (Lorentzen 2001:91).

In 1991, president Carlos Salinas de Gortari eliminated article 17 from the Mexican Constitution, allowing the privatisation of communal lands (*ejidos*) in preparation for the North American Free Trade Agreement. In the same year, the government and the Catholic Church reached an agreement that reinstated partial land rights, voting rights, and Catholic schools as long as the elite branches of the Church agreed to support the neo-liberal government and to denounce the activities of liberation theologians (MacEoin 1996:33). Critics argue that the concessions were intended to guarantee that the Church, through internal censure, would turn a blind-eye to the violence in the South that increased as land rights were confiscated (MacEoin 1996:68). In short, the conservative role that the Church had played in the South was reinforced in exchange for official recognition of the Church's authority.

The legal changes in 1991 moved Mexico even more in the direction of British-colonised India, with its secular State that incorporated an official programme of religious "tolerance" as long as the Church serves the interests of the government. In his book *Outside the Fold, Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Gauri Viswanathan argues that official recognition of Hinduism in India was used by British authorities to perpetuate colonial relations. The British denied full-protection under English law even to Anglican converts from Hinduism (Viswanathan 1998:108). That the neo-liberal government in Mexico

intends a similar role for conservative Catholic institutions would explain the repression that Protestant converts have suffered and the lack of response on the part of the elite Catholic Church and the government.

The Protestant anti-alcohol ethic and communal support networks threaten southern Mexico's labour structure where wealthy *caciques* rely on expensive Catholic festivals and their monopoly on the alcohol trade to recycle workers wages and to keep them in a state of dependency. Indeed, Protestant converts have suffered violent repression and exile from these communities for their lack of compliance (MacEoin 1995:125). In this context, Protestant conversions are a form of resistance to the conservative role of the Church in Mexico that has been reinforced in the current neo-liberal State through the 1991 legal changes.

### 3. TRANSNATIONAL MAYAN CHRISTIANITY AND REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

In the Mayan regions of Mexico and Guatemala, Protestant evangelicals were the first Christians to translate the Bible into Mayan languages under the guidance of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Before more ambitious translation projects by the Catholics began in the 1960s, Protestants began integrating themselves more with local culture than the Catholics who followed the tradition of holding mass in Latin. That negotiating conflicting world views in a period of neo-liberal crisis would involve conversions to Protestantism among the indigenous is therefore not surprising.

The history of Protestant missionary work in connection to the creation of Yoruba identity in nineteenth-century Nigeria offers insight into the current impact of Protestantism and Catholic liberation theology on Mayan communities. Placing contemporary indigenous movements within a historical context suggests that the unique impact of Christianity on the communities in Mexico and Guatemala began when Protestant evangelicals decided to translate the Gospel into Mayan dialects. J.D.Y. Peel's analysis of Christianisation in *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* draws on Lamin Sanneh's argument that "it is the compulsion to translate its Word which has most distinguished the cultural path of Christianity in West Africa from Islam" (Peel 2000:189). Earlier Islamic conversion in West Africa had had a similar effect as Catholicism in the Mayan region where mass was originally in Latin, reinforcing an elite religious class among Spanish and Mestizo Catholic officials as well as among indigenous leaders. In Africa, religious authority had also remained in the hands of Arabic-speaking elites as well as African religious leaders who used the Qu'ran instrumentally as a source for chants and a tool for the types of esoteric divination that characterised West African religious practices (Peel 2000:192).

By contrast, Protestant missionaries actively encouraged translations of the Bible as a means to come *closer* to the Word of God. Sanneh (2001:111) explains:

Bible translation has marked the history of Christianity from its very origins: the Gospels are a translated version of the preaching and message of Jesus, and the Epistles a further interpretation and application of that preaching and message. Christianity is unique in being promoted outside the language of the founder of the religion. Having abandoned the mother tongue of Jesus, Christians were freed to promote a Gentile religion, the religion of the uncircumcised and the non-Chosen People.

Missionaries studied the languages and religions of Africans to find suitable analogies among African divinities for Biblical figures. However, Christians noted crucial places, regarding subjects such as sin, idolatry, and redemption, where the divine message of Christianity departed from local religions.

The disruption of African subjectivity through proselytising coincided with the trauma and dislocation from the colonial invasion itself. In this violent context, dislocated Africans took part in *transcultural* negotiation with Christian missionaries. Facing a world-shattering historical event, many were drawn to Christian concepts of sin and redemption to make sense of their situation. However, Africans often resisted the scriptural interpretations of missionaries by insisting that Christian salvation and healing deal not only with their souls and the after-life, but also with their bodies and the material suffering they were undergoing. Analogously, one of the first questions that suffering Mayan communities asked Catholic liberation theologians when they entered into dialogue with them was whether the Catholic faith was concerned with saving bodies, and not only souls (MacEoin 1996:151). The Mayans share the same pragmatic approach to religion as the Africans who looked for solutions to colonial violence and actively sought healing of their bodies, not just their souls, when they turned to Islam or Christianity as possible sites of refuge (Peel 2000:223).

Christianity in Africa primarily drew upon migrant workers, the dispossessed, and former slaves who did not benefit from local religious structures. Consequently, African Christians sometimes interpreted the Bible as justifying collective redemption for the oppressed, as occurred in the Yoruba anti-slavery movement, in opposition to the conservative interpretations of missionaries. Proselytising led to a limited forum for cultural dialogue in a context where conversations usually ended at the barrel of the coloniser's gun. Intense oral debates with missionaries who insisted on their interpretation of Christian text often forced the missionaries to question their own world-views and intentions, leading to existential doubts (Peel 2000:159).

Nevertheless, the translation of the Christian Gospel and the incorporation of the Christian message into indigenous world-views, one of the primary goals of contemporary liberation theology and of the Protestant missionaries discussed

here, is not necessarily a liberating process. Protestant missionaries often motivated Africans to interpret their material suffering as self-inflicted through the sin of idolatry (Peel 2000:231). Many contemporary Protestant converts in Latin America, or the “believers” as the Honduran *campesina*, Elvia Alvarado calls them, have also been motivated by missionaries to interpret their poverty in terms of personal sin and to view any attempt to use material means to overcome their poverty as against the Gospels. Alvarado explains:

Some campesinos I know became believers and then decided to leave the campesino groups they were working with. When I asked them why, they said, ‘we can’t do this any more because now we’re believers. The pastor says it’s a sin to be involved in campesino groups (Alvarado 1989:32).

However, the significant participation of Protestant refugees and exiles in the Zapatista movement indicates that Protestant concerns are not necessarily limited to personal sin and individual transformation. Protestants have also felt called upon to address broader social conditions as well.

Catholic liberation theologians in Mexico and Guatemala, who have followed the Protestant example of translating the Bible into local languages, explicitly declare their respect for indigenous cultures and their aim of helping them in material struggles against the effects of colonialism. Bishop Samuel Ruiz in Mexico found numerous errors in the first Protestant translation of the Bible into Tzotzil, the dominant Mayan dialect in the Chiapas regions, due to a lack of integration of the translators. In contrast, the Ruiz’s translation involved groups selected from indigenous communities who bore the responsibility for what counted as an adequate translation within the values and concepts of the community for the Christian message. The process of translation initiated by the Catholic liberation theologians under the guidance of Bishop Samuel Ruiz and in collaboration with Protestant missionaries, led to an ongoing cultural dialogue.

Nevertheless, the introduction of Christian interpretations of the experiences of indigenous communities, even when framed in terms of a liberationist project, can also involve a certain degree of social disruption as well. The proselytising program of liberation theology introduced by Vatican II is similar in many respects to the Pauline approach of converting Greek pagans by finding anticipations of Christ in Greek culture. By declaring that the seeds of the Gospel are already present in non-European cultures, liberation theologians claim they are respecting indigenous values. At the same time, many theologians believe that indigenous religions merely anticipate a need for a Christ figure, which, according to Bishop Raul Vera, is liberation theology’s mission to bring to the Mayan community.<sup>1</sup>

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1 From an interview with Bishop Raul Vera, the last “officially” recognised Bishop in the Mexican liberation theology movement. Saltillo, Mexico, Summer 2005.

Through the figure of Jesus, Christian missionaries of both denominations introduce a Judeo-Christian notion of teleological history and progress into Mayan communities. By addressing Mayans as pagan communities needing Jesus for salvation, liberation theology risks subsuming indigeneity under the same developmentalist paradigm reflected in the “messianism” of revolutionaries like Che Guevara where indigeneity is seen as a state of primitive backwardness to be overcome through social revolution (Saldaña-Portillo 2003:167).

On the other hand, narratives from Mayan converts themselves suggest that the Christian concept of resurrection can be made continuous with indigenous notions of cyclical temporality. In 1994, Mayan religious leaders from five major language groups in Mexico climbed the Temple of Inscriptions to welcome the Sixth Sun, an era of dawning hope and unity for indigenous peoples, replacing the Fifth sun that was identified with an age of hunger and disease (MacEoin 1995:19). Another example is the Guatemalan *campesina*, Rigoberta Menchú’s description of Mayan marriage ceremonies where the ritual is intended to signify a revival of the ancestral glory before the dark age of colonialism (Saldaña-Portillo 2003:179). Theorist Lois Ann Lorentzen poses the situation as a paradox. On the one hand, “authentic” Mayans are not to be found in southern Mexico because of extensive Christian syncretism. On the other hand, this syncretism itself is central to Mayan religious practice. She notes the “power of Maya-derived cyclical time-reckoning to absorb otherness in an ever-evolving historical matrix that consistently yields new end points and renewed identities” (Lorentzen 2001:89).

#### 4. CONCLUSION: BIBLICAL LITERACY AND TRANSNATIONAL LIBERATION

The emergence of transnational Mayan liberation movements involved more than the translation of the Christian message of redemption into Mayan world views. In many respects, the introduction of the Bible as a *written* text has been the catalyst for transnational Mayan liberation movements. Again, there are illuminating parallels between the Mayan situation and the construction of Yoruba identity in nineteenth-century Africa. Just as Christianity drew many displaced Africans into its fold, leading to the breakdown of social hierarchies and the creation of new communities, the Zapatista and other indigenous rights movements gathered together displaced Mayans from various linguistic and religious backgrounds, including Protestant converts and followers of Catholic liberation theology.

In both cases, the Bible was instrumental in creating new horizontal relations and expanding identities. In Nigeria, Christians were distinguished from other missionaries primarily by their common name, *Onibuku*, or the “people of the book.” The Yoruba reading primer *Iwe ABD* (“*The Book of ABC*”) that

accompanied the Bible was the book that “the inquirer came to first and [that] opened the path of conversion” (Peel 2000:223). The literacy of converts led to broader identifications across local religions and fostered an indigenous literati that contributed to the construction of the Yoruba identity and the Nigerian nation (Peel 2000:11).

In southern Mexico, the translation of the Bible contributed to a similar process of democratisation. Saldaña-Portillo explains that:

The Catholic Church was especially instrumental in training women to assume more positions of authority in the communities as they began recruiting lay catechists during this period of colonization, improving reading, writing, and orating skills among the women they trained (Saldaña-Portillo 2003:240).

Literacy, direct access to the Bible, and a personal relationship to God removed church and social authority out of the exclusive control of community elites. As noted above, diverse members from indigenous communities were actively involved in the process of translation. This cultural dialogue influenced the birth of multilingual conferences among indigenous communities concerning indigenous rights. According to Ruiz,<sup>2</sup> indigenous translators of the Bible also participated in the making of collaborative multi-lingual periodicals to document the discussions.

Catholic linguists attempted to facilitate communication between language groups by taking a pragmatic approach to translation with specific educational goals in mind. They simplified the codification of Mayan dialects compared to previous translations so that those interested could learn to read the Bible with less difficulty, which has even occurred in the absence of formal teaching. Moreover, Bishop Ruiz’s group of translators abandoned the technical phonetic alphabet of linguistics and drew from the conventions of the Spanish alphabet to transcribe the sounds of Mayan dialects so that indigenous communities could learn how to read Spanish words at the same time (Ruiz interview 2006). The Mayan alphabet that resulted is now the standard in the bilingual educational system sponsored by the Zapatista army in Chiapas.

A shared connection with the universal message of the Bible as well as a similar written language has contributed to transnational Mayan identity. Similar mobilisations of indigenous communities that led to Zapatismo in Mexico have also developed in Guatemala after the spread of Bible courses in the 1970s (Wilson 1995:12). Don Samuel, the former Bishop of Chiapas, argues that just as the German Bible helped unify multiple dialects of German, the same

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2 From an interview with Don Samuel Ruiz, former Bishop of Chiapas. Querétaro, Mexico, Summer 2006.

phenomena is occurring as a result of the current shared alphabet for Mayan dialects (Ruiz interview 2006). The Mayan Nation lost its alphabet with the onset of colonialism and was divided across new national boundaries. The introduction of a shared alphabet for Mayan dialects has led to a revalorisation of Mayan languages and culture and has been an important means of reunification. Consequently, a shared access to the Bible has been fundamental to the development of transnational Mayan liberation movements, transcending national borders and more superficial distinctions between Catholic and Protestant denominations.

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*Keywords*

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