

The Growth of Protestant Religions in Mexico and Central America

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Introduction

In the last half of the twentieth century, many people in Mexico and Central America turned to Protestantism as a new religion. In this paper, I examine the scope of the turn and look at some of the theories that explain why it happened. The scope of the increase in Protestantism was wide, involving both urban and rural cultures. The available statistics show that it was dramatic and made even more dramatic by the common idea that Latin America was solidly Catholic.

Protestantism is often seen as opposing Catholicism; however, there are many types of Catholicism in Mexico and Central America. When examined closely, traditional Indian Folk Catholicism usually has little resemblance to modern Roman Catholicism. Arguments have been made that these traditional religions are derived from pre-Columbian beliefs (Van Zantwijk 1967) and conversely that they are derived from Hispanic, non-pre-Columbian, traditions (Carrasco 1970, 1976). There is a bit of truth in both points of view. Folk Catholicism has origins in both the pre-Columbian and the Catholic Colonial Periods, but it is clear that it is not modern post-Vatican-II Catholicism. Most of these Indian religions have

achieved a comfortable accommodation with the Roman Catholic Church. One might call them “Catholic affiliates” rather than Catholic in the modern sense. When looked at closely, the Catholic elements seem somewhat superficial, and modern Catholic doctrine is conspicuous in its absence. Yet Protestantism opposes folk Catholicism as well. Thus Protestantism is opposing many different types of Catholicism, some of which aren’t very Catholic at all.

Actually the Roman Catholic influence on rural Indian religion has been rather weak since the conquest, but the change to Protestantism has been recent, indicating that Protestantism is less a reaction to Catholicism than a new religious phenomenon. During the Reformation, Protestantism was a theological reaction to Catholicism, but today in Mexico and Central America, Protestantism no longer opposes Catholicism in the same way as it did in Europe when it first started. It represents a new religious awakening, much of it Evangelical, that is in competition with all religions, including sects within Protestantism itself.

In many cases, what seems to be happening is: (1) There is a local need for religious change that manifests itself in a number of ways. (2) A Protestant organization that is sensitive to such manifestations supplies Bibles and other materials that allow a group of local religious thinkers to organize themselves. (3) The local Protestant group grows. (4) The Roman Catholic hierarchy perceives a loss of affiliation and may organize a competing group to recapture lost affiliation. Thus, Protestantism is not opposing Catholicism as much as it is catalyzing needed religious and social change. To understand what drives the movement toward Protestantism we need to understand that need for religious change, a need that may ultimately be met by an organized Protestant religious group, a new modernized Catholic group, some other Christian or non-Christian sect, or even a revitalized native religious group.

Many explanations have been put forward to explain this growth. There seem to be almost as many as there are people writing about the phenomenon. Religious workers, particularly Evangelicals, tend to see it as the working of the Holy Spirit, which is at times mightily aided by the Bible (Cox 1994). Some see Protestantism as an imported religion. However, others have noted its local popular quality (Bastian 1993). It is difficult to synthesize these and other explanations; therefore I will examine only two explanations that have appeared over and over again and for which there is some objective evidence. The first is that the success of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America is linked in some way to its compatibility with native cultures. The second is that the turn toward Protestantism is linked to the rise of the market economy.

Measuring the Growth of Protestantism

Although the growth of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America is undeniable, there is still some difficulty in quantifying it. For example, Everett Wilson (1997), a historian, estimates that there were 835,000 Evangelical Protestants in Guatemala in 1993; whereas, Clifton Holland (1997), an Evangelical social scientist, estimates that there were 2.8 million there in 1995. These figures are barely compatible, because the addition of 2 million Protestants in two years is difficult to imagine. In another example, Holland estimates that there were 5.5 million Protestants in Mexico in 1995; whereas the Mexican national census (INEGI 1992:96–97) recorded only 3.4 million in 1990. These estimates imply an annual growth rate of 10%, which is also hard to imagine. Some smaller Protestant denominations such as the Mormons have shown phenomenal growth rates for short periods. For example, the Mormon growth rates shown in Table 1 are impressive during the five years between 1985 and 1990, but, before and after this, the growth rates were much smaller.¹

Table 1: Mormon Growth in Mexico

Year	Adherents	Growth	Annual growth rate
1980	241,521		
1985	302,000	60,479	4.57%
1990	615,000	313,000	15.29%
1995	735,000	120,000	3.63%
1999	783,000	48,000	1.59%

Yet, the Mormons account for only around 1% of the Protestants in Mexico. Their growth between 1985 and 1990 was the result of an energetic proselytizing

¹Sources: Stark (1998:17), Table: 1.3, “Two Years of Mormon Growth, 1978–80” as compiled by Hunter (2000); Deseret News (1996:188–408) “Year-end 1995: Est. population” as compiled by Hunter (2000); Deseret News (1998:114) Graphic: “Church growth: selected countries” as compiled by Hunter (2000); 1999 figures recorded by Hunter (2000) from news sources. The average annual growth rate was calculated from a model of exponential growth at a constant rate between the intervening years. The rate of exponential growth from X_1 to X_2 over n years is calculated as the constant growth rate gr that would produce the change. $gr(n) = -1 + \left(\frac{p_2}{p_1}\right)^{\left(\frac{1}{n}\right)}$

campaign directed by their headquarters in Utah and aimed primarily at lower-class urban areas (Shepherd and Shepherd 1998; Knowlton 1996). Although somewhat phenomenal in terms of growth rate, the Mormon sudden advance contributes only a small amount to the overall increase of Protestantism in Mexico and is confined mostly to urban areas. It shows that a church group can produce a short-term phenomenal growth rate by committing resources to missionary activity. As the numbers of any Protestant group increase, growth rates subside to form a less erratic pattern.

Clifton Holland is concerned with a larger group of Protestants, the Evangelicals. His estimates are sponsored by, and published for the benefit of Evangelical missionaries, and the numbers in this case seem to be somewhat inflated.² David Stoll explains how he and other Evangelical advisers have made their estimates.

To arrive at their figures, church-growth experts first added up the memberships reported by all the denominations in a country. Then they multiplied that figure by another number, to account for unbaptized children, converts attending services but not yet baptized, and so forth. The multiplier was usually 2.5, 3, or 4, depending on “sociological factors,” whatever those were construed to be. The result was supposed to be the total Evangelical community (Stoll 1990:125).

Although inflated somewhat toward the high end of possibility, the estimates published by Holland and other church-growth people are still worth looking at to understand the growth pattern and the percentage of the population that is Protestant. Table 2 shows Holland’s estimates for the year 1995 along with Stoll’s church-growth (1990:333) data for 1985, which he took from other Evangelical researchers.

This table shows that Guatemala had the largest percentage of Protestants. Next came the other Central American countries and, finally, Mexico. However, Mexico, being the largest country, still had the largest number of Protestants. The table also shows that Guatemala had the fastest growing Protestant population. This was probably due to the evangelization efforts noted by Stoll (1990:10–217) and a new Protestant identity for Indians suppressed by Catholic Ladinos for many years. Although some of this growth was in urban areas, the bulk of it was in the rural parts of Guatemala.

²Clifton Holland is Professor of Missiology for the IMDELA/School of World Mission in San Jose, Costa Rica and Director of Church Growth Studies Program for IDEA Ministries. He headed a number of projects to gather information on church growth in Latin America.

Table 2: Estimates of the Number of Protestants in Mexico and Central America
(The population figures are given in millions)

Country	Percent Protestant 1985 ^a	Percent Protestant 1995	Change in Percent 1985–1995	Total Population 1995 ^b	Protestant Population 1995 ^b
Mexico	4.0%	5.9%	+ 1.9	93.7	5.50
Guatemala	20.4%	26.4%	+ 6.0	10.6	2.80
El Salvador	14.0%	15.9%	+ 1.9	5.9	0.94
Honduras	9.9%	16.9%	+ 7.0	5.5	0.93
Nicaragua	9.3%	10.0%	+ 0.7	4.4	0.44
Costa Rica	7.7%	12.1%	+ 4.4	3.3	0.40
Panama	11.8%	15.2%	+ 3.4	2.7	0.41

^a Source: Stoll (1990:333) from Johnstone (1986:498–499)

^b Source: Holland (1997)

One fact is clear from Table 2: The growth of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America has been impressive. No matter how you look at the statistics, from an evangelist's point of view or from an anthropologist's point of view, you see clear evidence that Protestantism has grown rapidly there since 1970.

Growth from 1970 to 1990 in Mexico

The advance of Protestantism in Mexico has been more objectively documented by the Mexican national census. Table 3 shows the number of Protestants in the various Mexican states in 1970 and 1990 as tabulated by the Mexican national census for those years, and Table 4 shows the same data as percentages of the population five years old or older. Unfortunately complete 1980 census data on religion was not published because of computer problems. These two tables also show that over this 20 year period there was an impressive growth of Protestantism in Mexico. The growth continued through the next decade as shown in Table 5.

Tables 3 and 4 also pinpoint the states in which the growth occurred between 1970 and 1990. The six states in which the number of Protestants grew the most were Chiapas (by 365,142), Veracruz (by 316,576), México (by 248,987), Oaxaca (by 160,282), Tabasco (by 129,761), and the Distrito Federal (by 114,393). The percentage growth looks different. The six states which had the largest percentage growth in Protestants were Querétaro (763.0%), Quintana Roo (639.2%), Colima (602.7%), Baja California Sur (542.3%), Oaxaca (531.1%), and Chiapas

Table 3: Protestants in Mexico in 1970 and 1990

State	1970		1990	
	Population 5 and over ^a	Protestant Population ^a	Population 5 and over ^b	Protestant Population ^b
Aguascalientes	278,196	1,358	619,401	6,198
Baja California	725,015	20,406	1,425,801	74,873
Baja California Sur	106,071	1,106	275,985	7,104
Campeche	210,511	13,914	456,452	61,725
Coahuila	928,930	25,255	1,730,829	107,149
Colima	200,016	1,021	371,876	7,175
Chiapas	1,301,140	75,378	2,710,283	440,520
Chihuahua	1,339,479	41,811	2,118,557	117,593
Distrito Federal	5,820,042	111,957	7,373,239	226,350
Durango	770,043	10,805	1,169,332	38,935
Guanajuato	1,868,869	6,797	3,396,283	33,845
Guerrero	1,322,091	19,471	2,228,077	91,637
Hidalgo	991,009	18,544	1,628,542	75,661
Jalisco	2,725,357	19,082	4,584,728	61,066
México (state)	3,127,508	54,193	8,563,538	303,180
Michoacán	1,923,182	14,982	3,037,340	52,291
Morelos	514,052	22,685	1,048,065	76,624
Nayarit	450,015	5,516	711,691	13,897
Nuevo Leon	1,407,536	47,714	2,750,624	161,858
Oaxaca	1,688,160	30,177	2,602,479	190,459
Puebla	2,093,224	43,030	3,565,924	153,439
Querétaro	397,402	1,447	898,199	12,487
Quintana Roo	71,502	6,822	412,868	50,428
San Luis Potosí	1,058,668	23,431	1,723,605	75,967
Sinaloa	1,045,167	14,148	1,923,515	45,681
Sonora	918,682	16,188	1,596,063	59,788
Tabasco	628,721	63,732	1,288,222	193,493
Tamaulipas	1,212,412	41,911	1,974,755	152,644
Tlaxcala	349,361	8,160	662,426	21,689
Veracruz	3,171,856	88,031	5,424,172	404,607
Yucatan	643,432	21,610	1,188,433	110,377
Zacatecas	770,079	6,197	1,100,898	18,767
Mexico (nation)	40,057,728	876,879	70,562,202	3,447,507

^a Source: Mexico (1972) Cuadro 17 Pp. 259–270

^b Source: INEGI (1992) Cuadro 26 Pp. 299–315

Table 4: Percentage of Population 5 Years Old or Older Who Are Protestants

State	Protestant Percentage of Population age 5 or older		Change in Percentage
	1970	1990	1970 to 1990
Aguascalientes	0.5%	1.0%	+0.5
Baja California	2.8%	5.3%	+2.4
Baja California Sur	1.0%	2.6%	+1.5
Campeche	6.6%	13.5%	+6.9
Coahuila	2.7%	6.2%	+3.5
Colima	0.5%	1.9%	+1.4
Chiapas	5.8%	16.3%	+10.5
Chihuahua	3.1%	5.6%	+2.4
Distrito Federal	1.9%	3.1%	+1.1
Durango	1.4%	3.3%	+1.9
Guanajuato	0.4%	1.0%	+0.6
Guerrero	1.5%	4.1%	+2.6
Hidalgo	1.9%	4.6%	+2.8
Jalisco	0.7%	1.3%	+0.6
México (state)	1.7%	3.5%	+1.8
Michoacán	0.8%	1.7%	+0.9
Morelos	4.4%	7.3%	+2.9
Nayarit	1.2%	2.0%	+0.7
Nuevo Leon	3.4%	5.9%	+2.5
Oaxaca	1.8%	7.3%	+5.5
Puebla	2.1%	4.3%	+2.2
Querétaro	0.4%	1.4%	+1.0
Quintana Roo	9.5%	12.2%	+2.7
San Luis Potosí	2.2%	4.4%	+2.2
Sinaloa	1.4%	2.4%	+1.0
Sonora	1.8%	3.7%	+2.0
Tabasco	10.1%	15.0%	+4.9
Tamaulipas	3.5%	7.7%	+4.3
Tlaxcala	2.3%	3.3%	+0.9
Veracruz	2.8%	7.5%	+4.7
Yucatan	3.4%	9.3%	+5.9
Zacatecas	0.8%	1.7%	+0.9
Mexico (nation)	2.2%	4.9%	+2.7

Table 5: Mexican Population 5 Years Old or Older Who Are Protestants from 1960 to 2000

Year ^a	Population 5+	Protestants	Percentage	Change in %
1960	34,923,129	578,515	1.66%	
1970	40,057,728	876,879	2.19%	0.53
1990	70,562,202	3,447,507	4.89%	2.70
2000	84,794,454	6,160,069	7.26%	2.37

^a Source: Rabell and Uribe (2002)

(484.4%). The lowest percentage change in the number of Protestants was in the Distrito Federal (102.2%), which still doubled the number.

Two states with large Indian populations, Chiapas (22.1% Indian in 1970) and Oaxaca (40.1% Indian in 1970), appear in both of these lists of the highest quantity and percentage increases. Protestantism has been particularly appealing to native people. The data from the states show a Pearson correlation of +0.404 between the percentage growth of Protestantism from 1970 to 1990 and the proportion of persons speaking an Indian language in 1970.³

The relationship of the growth of Protestantism to poverty is another interesting phenomenon. Martin (1990:275–277) sees Protestantism as a religion of the poor and Latin America as an extension of southern poverty in the United States. Poverty in Mexico in 2000, measured by the percent of working persons in each state earning the minimum wage or less, is positively correlated (+0.462) with percentages of Protestants in 2000.⁴

The correlation between the change in percent of Protestants from 1970 to 1990 and poverty in 1990 was +0.626, and it looked at that time that poverty was stimulating the growth of Protestantism (Dow 2001). During those years the change in Protestantism was also correlated with economic change. There was a correlation of +0.225 between the change in the percentage of Protestants with the change in the percentage of economically active males.⁵ A correlation was

³The data from which these calculations were made come from Mexico (1972), Cuadros 11 and 17, and INEGI (2004), Cuadros 2.26 and 2.27.

⁴The data from which these calculations were made come from Mexico (1972), Cuadros 11 and 17, and INEGI (2003), Sheet 11, Población ocupada por municipio, sexo y ocupación principal, y su distribución según ingreso por trabajo en salario mínimo.

⁵Data for men between 20 and 24 years old were used to estimate the degree of economic change. The percents were computed from data in Cuadro 32, Pp. 569–586 in Mexico (1972) and

calculated a second time using absolute values of the economic change in order to see if any kind of change, positive or negative, would be correlated with a change in the percentage of Protestants. The resulting correlation (+0.041) was so low that it appears that economic change alone does not go with Protestantism only a positive economic change works in its favor.

Growth from 1990 to 2000 in Mexico

These calculations were done before the data from the 2000 census was available. When the 2000 census data became available it was apparent that things were different between 1990 and 2000. A measure of the annual growth rate of Protestantism during both periods, 1970 to 1990 and 1990 to 2000, was estimated with a steady exponential growth model. The results are shown in Table 6. The annual growth rate from 1970 to 1990 showed a positive correlation (+0.162) with the poverty in 2000.⁶ However, the annual growth rate from 1990 to 2000 showed a strong negative correlation (-0.541) with the poverty in 2000. Also the acceleration in growth was negatively (-0.587) correlated with with poverty in 2000.⁷

These figures indicate that during the first period, 1970 to 1990, Protestantism grew most rapidly in the states with the most poverty, but that during the next period, 1990 to 2000, the situation reversed and Protestantism grew most rapidly in the states with the least poverty.

Annis (1987) and Smith (1977) have suggested that Protestantism is stimulated by the stresses of economic change. Between 1970 and 1990 Protestantism was most appealing in the states with the most poverty but it did not correlate with economic change either positively or negatively. In the Distrito Federal, for example, there was great economic growth but the lowest percentage of Protestant growth. Apparently the extension of capitalism to the urban lower and middle classes between 1970 and 1990 stimulated less Protestantism than its extension to the rural poor. These states retained the highest percentage of Protestants in the next period, but the growth pattern reversed, and Protestantism began to grow in

in Cuadro 26, Pp. 299–315 in INEGI (1992).

⁶The rate of exponential growth from X_1 to X_2 over n years is calculated as the constant growth rate gr that produces the change. $gr(n) = -1 + \left(\frac{p_2}{p_1}\right)^{\left(\frac{1}{n}\right)}$

⁷In the original version of this paper the growth rate of the percentages of Protestants was calculated. This has been changed to the growth in the number of Protestants, a more intuitive measure. The measure here is the average annual growth rate of Protestants in each state. The acceleration of growth was measured by the rate from 1990 to 2000 minus the rate from 1970 to 1990.

the other group of states with the least poverty. Although the following hypothesis requires more examination, it seems that Protestantism made its debut in the more impoverished Indian areas and then began to spread to the more prosperous areas. Protestantism seems to be following capitalism not through the front door with the wealthy bourgeoisie but through the back door with the poorest of the poor. Thus, Protestantism is not functioning the same way as it did in Europe and the United States in previous centuries, when, according to Max Weber (1958), it offered a moral justification for the accumulation of middle-class wealth during periods of economic change.

The 2000 Mexican census confirmed that Protestantism continued its growth in the last decade of the twentieth century. However there was a distinct change in the growth pattern. The growth slowed in the states with large Indian populations. The correlation between Indianness and percentage Protestants in 1970 was +.473. In 1990 this rose to +.564, but in in 2000 it fell to +498.⁸ By 2000, the largest percentage of Protestants was still found in these states of traditional Protestantism. Figure 1 shows the states with ten or more percent of Protestants in 2000.

Some states showed an increased growth rate of Protestants. A state had an accelerated Protestant growth rate if the annual growth rate between 1990 and 2000 was greater than the annual growth rate between 1970 and 1990. Figure 2 shows the states with this accelerated growth. A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows that these are very different groups. The states with an accelerated Protestant growth tend to be less Indian and more actively involved in the economic modernization. The degree of acceleration of Protestant growth is negatively correlated with Indianness in 1990 (-.665).⁹ Protestantism between 1990 and 2000 grew at a faster rate in the non-Indian states. The growth rate between 1990 and 2000 was negatively correlated with poverty in 2000 (-.569).¹⁰ The data are presented in Table 6.

The growth of Protestantism in Mexico is a fluid phenomena. Between 1970 and 1990, Protestantism picked up many adherents in the poorer rural states of Mexico. These states are still the leaders in the highest percentage of Protestants;

⁸Indianness is measured by the percentage of persons 5 years of age or over who speak an Indian language. The percentage of Protestants is measured by the percentage of persons 5 years of age or over who are declared to be Protestants.

⁹The degree of acceleration is measured by the difference in the modeled growth rates during the two periods, 1970 to 1990 and 1990 to 2000.

¹⁰Poverty was estimated by the percent of persons earning below the minimum wage calculated from INEGI (2003) archivo 00em11.pdf.

Figure 1: Mexican States with 10% or More Protestants

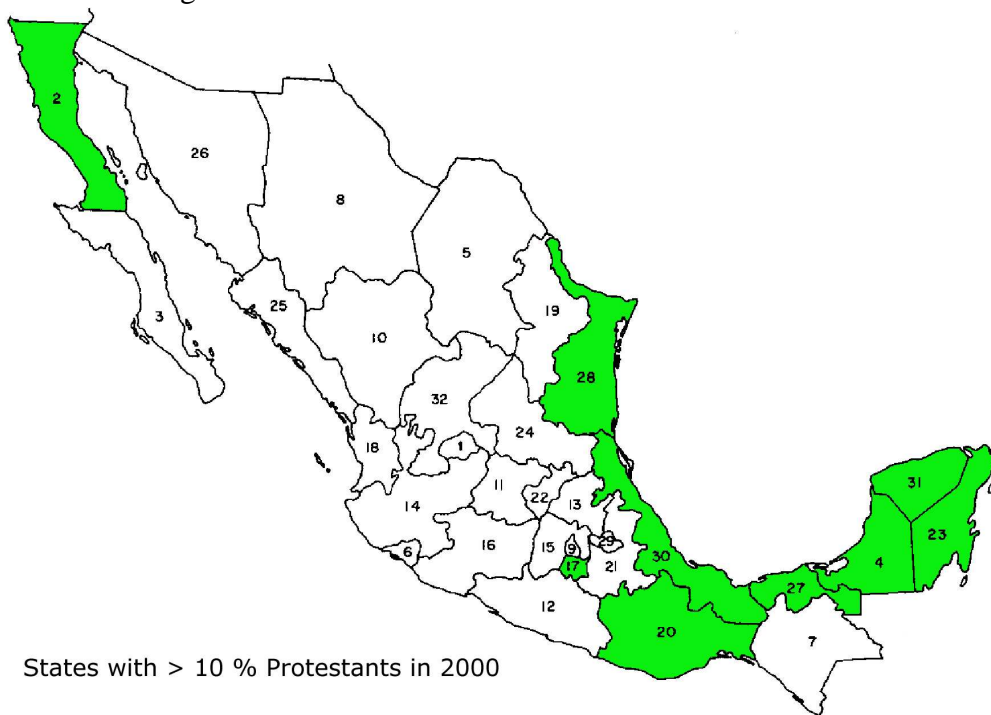


Figure 2: Mexican States with an Accelerated Growth Rate of Protestants



Table 6: Change in Percentage of Protestants in Mexico

State Code	State Name	Percentage Protestants			Annual Growth Rate	
		1970	1990 ^a	2000 ^b	1970 to 1990	1990 to 2000
0	Mexico (nation)	2.2	4.9	7.3	7.08%	5.98%
1	Aguascalientes	0.5	1.0	2.7	7.89%	13.51%
2	Baja California	2.8	5.3	10.6	6.72%	11.04%
3	Baja California Sur	1.0	2.6	6.0	9.75%	12.15%
4	Campeche	6.6	13.5	17.9	7.73%	5.79%
5	Coahuila	2.7	6.2	8.6	7.49%	4.89%
6	Colima	0.5	1.9	4.3	10.24%	10.66%
7	Chiapas	5.8	16.3	21.9	9.23%	5.03%
8	Chihuahua	3.1	5.6	9.1	5.31%	7.28%
9	Distrito Federal	1.9	3.1	4.9	3.58%	5.35%
10	Durango	1.4	3.2	5.7	6.34%	6.92%
11	Guanajuato	0.4	1.0	2.0	8.36%	9.23%
12	Guerrero	1.5	4.1	6.4	8.05%	6.35%
13	Hidalgo	1.9	4.6	6.5	7.28%	5.46%
14	Jalisco	0.7	1.3	2.9	5.99%	10.08%
15	México (state)	1.7	3.5	5.4	8.99%	6.98%
16	Michoacán	0.8	1.7	2.9	6.45%	6.85%
17	Morelos	4.4	7.3	10.4	6.28%	6.15%
18	Nayarit	1.2	2.0	4.3	4.73%	9.63%
19	Nuevo Leon	3.4	5.9	8.2	6.30%	5.58%
20	Oaxaca	1.8	7.3	10.1	9.65%	4.78%
21	Puebla	2.1	4.3	5.8	6.56%	5.06%
22	Querétaro	0.4	1.4	2.8	11.38%	10.65%
23	Quintana Roo	9.5	12.2	15.7	10.52%	8.96%
24	San Luis Potosí	2.2	4.4	5.6	6.06%	4.08%
25	Sinaloa	1.4	2.4	4.9	6.04%	9.26%
26	Sonora	1.8	3.7	6.6	6.75%	8.07%
27	Tabasco	10.1	15.0	18.6	5.71%	4.82%
28	Tamaulipas	3.5	7.7	11.0	6.68%	5.78%
29	Tlaxcala	2.3	3.3	4.3	5.01%	5.29%
30	Veracruz	2.8	7.5	10.2	7.92%	4.43%
31	Yucatan	3.4	9.3	11.4	8.50%	4.24%
32	Zacatecas	0.8	1.7	2.9	5.70%	6.29%

^a Source: INEGI 1992

^b Source: INEGI 2002

however growth patterns have shifted. Now Protestantism in the modernizing states is growing more rapidly.

There is one state on the border with the United States, Baja California, in which the Protestant growth is not easily explained by the foregoing analysis. Apparently it has something to do with its nearness to the United States. In another border state, Coahuila, The average percentage Protestants in the six border municipios is 12.39 whereas in the remainder of the state it is 8.74. This seems to indicate that there is a local southward filtering of Protestantism in the regions immediately adjacent to the United States.

Protestantism and Native Religions

Most of the Protestantism that flourished in the native areas of Mexico and Central America from 1970 to 1990 was Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity that emphasizes holiness climaxed by a spiritual endowment in which the recipient speaks in an “unknown tongue.” A number of observers such as Garma believe that Protestantism appeals because it is closer to native spiritual healing traditions than Catholicism. He writes: “As I have shown in Garma (1987) and in Garma (1998), many Indians have understood the similarity between Pentecostal spiritual healing and traditional supernatural curing that invokes the aid of divine elements or entities.” The Pentecostal ecstatic experience has parallels in native culture. Worship in traditional native religions often leads the participant, sometimes with the aid of hallucinogenic drugs, to experience a normally unseen vital reality. Garma and others draw a parallel between this and the Pentecostal experience.

For example, Ñähñu people in the Sierra of Hidalgo perform rituals which they call *costumbres* or “flower ceremonies” (Dow 1986). Organized by shamans, these rites are encounters between supernaturals and humans. A *costumbre* begins with offerings of flowers and food. Later, according to them, the supernaturals arrive to partake of the food and to participate in the festivities. Within a *costumbre*, the faithful cross a frontier between the normal and the extra normal. They sense the presence of the supernaturals.

This experience may appear to be similar to speaking in unknown tongues; however there are significant differences. During the *costumbres* Ñähñu shamans, and other adepts called *zidani*, “flower women,” eat the sacred plant Santa Rosa, have visions, and speak in a trance state; however their speech is very intelligible. They speak about the lives of the people who are there. Their speech is a type of counseling that treats tensions within the community. These soliloquies are

comments on the lives of the villagers who attend the ceremonies. The comments reveal tensions and behaviors that may be causing problems. The atmosphere in the costumbre is relaxed and non-threatening. It is open to emotions that often cannot be revealed in ordinary circumstances. As does speaking in tongues, the gift to see into the “true” lives of people gives the visionary a special sacred status.

The parallel between speaking in tongues and native visionary counseling is not perfect. One kind of speech is ecstatic and unintelligible, the other is visionary and meaningful. Both occur in religious ritual and during an altered state of consciousness. One involves personal contact with the supernatural while the other involves channeling supernatural vision to others. Both involve a belief in the accessibility of the supernatural through ritual. There are common features and there are differences.

Protestantism is also successful in native communities because it is anti-Catholic. This anti-Catholicism appeals to the natives themselves because it gives them a more independent identity. It also identifies them with a powerful group, the Americans, and it protects them from accusations that they have become involved in radical Catholic-supported anti-government movements.

Protestantism and the Expanding Market Economy

It is clear that the advance of Protestantism coincides with a late period in the arrival of the industrialized market economy to Mexico and Central America. I use the term *market economy* as Karl Polanyi (1975) defined it, as an economy in which the social mechanisms necessary to maintain the flow goods are dominated by market exchange. Buying and selling creates all wealth in a market economy (Polanyi 1975). Everything necessary to maintain human beings is available on markets, and most people sell something, primarily their labor, in a market to survive. Market economies are important foundations of social life in Europe and the United States, and they are spreading throughout the world.

Market economies gave rise to the industrial revolution. Markets made production for profit possible. Inputs could be bought and products sold on markets. This allowed the difference between the cost of production and the sale of the products to be returned to the owner of an industry. Industrialists discovered that they could reduce the cost of production and increase their profits by developing machine technology, which eventually began to tap large fossil fuel resources. With these new energy sources industrial cultures were able to create much more wealth per capita than paleotechnic peasant economies such as those found today

in the rural regions of Mexico and Central America. Products produced in the industrial system encapsulate larger expenditures of energy than products produced in the peasant economy. To acquire the new valuable products a peasant needs to participate in the industrial sector of the economy where his or her productivity measured in market value is greater. Rural people in Latin America do this is through wage labor migration.

Capitalism is just one way of organizing a market economy. Most modern economies mix this form with varying degrees of socialism. However in Latin America, and in many colonized parts of the world, other less marketized economic systems also exist. Today, the rural economies of Latin America are being reinstitutionalized to put them in closer contact with the powerful market economies. Values, customs, and institutions are being brought into line with a total commitment to markets as means of survival. Much of the pressure to reinstitutionalize is coming from the United States and Europe, where the extension of capitalism to the underdeveloped world is regarded as beneficial to everyone. Although Euro-American ideology proclaims that the “free market,” a euphemism for capitalism, is a benefit to all, there are many persons left out of, and suffering from, the reinstitutionalizing process.

Mexico and Central America is culturally diverse, and economic reinstitutionalization produces different effects in different parts of the region (Otero 1996:3). The imposition of a market economy on poor people can be brutal, *yet the poor themselves can also benefit from the new economy*. It gives them access to products that they do not have the energy to produce themselves. The massive migrations of laborers from Mexico to the United States shows that they have something to gain. Apparently Protestantism is playing a role the expansion of the market economy. The interesting thing is that it is now playing its role among the poor rather than among the wealthy middle-classes as it once did in Europe (Martin 1990). Today peasant religions are responding to the arrival of capitalism in dynamic ways. In the rural and poor areas of Latin America, Protestantism is prying loose economic and religious traditionalism and sending it downstream into the river of history.

Max Weber (1958) was the first person to examine seriously the connection between Protestantism and economic change; however, the conditions that he looked at in Europe during the Protestant Reformation are not precisely duplicated in most areas of Latin America today. The rural Indian peasants and the lower urban classes of Latin America now 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 Mexico and Central America.

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). Something was necessary to provide the capitalist entrepreneur with a holy mandate that could overcome religious strictures against wealth accumulation. Protestantism was against work just to satisfy one's desires (1958:157). Work should be a holy calling. Wealth accumulated under a capitalistic system of production could be a sign of godly grace.

In another work, *The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber (1946) looks at the way in which Protestantism in the United States supported its variety of 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 hard-working 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 was not a great admirer of peasants. He was interested in urban, merchant, bureaucratic, and noble classes and left peasants out of his discussion of religion and economics. In his time, Europe's peasants lived outside the centers of economic development. Weber's view of the peasantry was rather distant, romantic, and based primarily on the historical sources of his time. He referred to historical, and even biblical, accounts of peasant religions and saw them as tied to nature and concerned primarily with magical ritual.

The lot of peasants is so strongly tied to nature, so dependent on organic processes and natural events, and economically so little oriented to rational systematization that in general the peasantry will be-

come the carrier of religion only when it is threatened by enslavement or proletarianization, either by domestic forces (financial, agrarian, or seignorial) or by some external political power. (Weber 1963:80)

In other words, he saw them as far removed from the dynamics of the moral, religious messages of Protestantism. Although I stand in awe of Weber's scholarship, I must disagree with his relegation of the peasantry to the undynamic religious status of traditionalists interested only in magical earth rituals. This view is out of line with what we now know about peasant societies.

The century that has passed since Weber wrote his treatises has seen more insight into the nature of peasant cultures. Much more is known today about peasants and, in particular, about those of Latin America (Wolf 1955, 1966; Redfield 1956; Foster 1967; Cancian 1972; Halperin and Dow 1977; Ellis 1988). Modern peasants are still subsistence farmers, and many live in tight-knit communities which encapsulate their social life. However, peasants have participated in religious movements not recognized by Weber, such as the Taiping rebellion in China, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao movements in Viet Nam, and the Dukabours and Raskolniks in Russia. Even during the Protestant Reformation there was a peasant revolt in Swabia, Germany, that took its humanistic philosophy from Protestant religious ideas. Weber's attitude toward peasants is difficult to explain. He was simply not interested in them and did not consider them capable of responding to religious change. He put them outside of his theoretical thinking although, as evidence now indicates, their cultures do respond to religious messages in a very dynamic way.

In *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber (1963) also points out that a religion can be strongly attached to a political system. He calls the Hebrew god Yahweh a god of federation. Yahweh brought the tribes of Israel together and unified them (1963:16). Here, Weber was thinking in sociological terms that included both the psychology of the individual and the social institutions in which the individual lived. He recognized that religion can restrain institutions, particularly when the rights of an individual as a member of a polity are determined by the god he or she worships. Peasant people are strongly allied to political groups by their religions. This is particularly true in the Mediterranean region where the first civilizations arose and where "gods" led them in political conflicts. It was also true in the New World. Long before the first Europeans arrived, religious ritual strengthened allegiances to the village and nation in Mexico and Central America.

Religion has an important relationship to the political system. Religion can establish the means by which a person can use wealth to gain political power. If a

religion says that gods want people to be generous, the most generous person will be most respected and most politically powerful in the community. If religion says that entrepreneurship is a holy calling, the person who uses wealth most creatively to create a new business will be a political leader. The political establishment of a society can rest on the moral injunctions of religion. The leaders' commitment to the religion commits the followers to their authority (Irons 2001). Thus, political change may require new gods toward which these commitments can be made.

Protestantism can be a means to free people from a political system. Such freedom may be necessary for economic change. During the Reformation, Catholics did not have the same political freedom as Protestants. Their actions were constrained by papal injunctions. The clergy controlled their behavior, but Protestants were free from these restrictions (Weber 1963:251). Protestantism allowed people to pursue economic gain without ecclesiastical interference. Protestantism was a declaration of independence from church control of economic decision making. The Protestant desire for freedom is echoed in the theologies of many Protestant churches today.

The history of the Reformation included many political upheavals, the disestablishment of the Pope, and the peasant revolt in 1525 in Swabia and the Rhineland, all of which should be recognized by anyone looking at more modern appeals of Protestantism. There was a large humanistic element in the Protestant Reformation. For example, the peasants of Swabia demanded the reexamination of their god-given rights (*Göttliche Recht*) in the light of new Protestant interpretations of the holy writings. At that time, many humanistic thinkers attacked the feudal order supported by the Catholic Church, and they expressed their ideas in Protestant religious terms. Yet, the modern psychological Weberian point of view focuses more on the role that Protestantism plays in liberating individuals from guilt rather than on the way that it liberates them from institutional control, although the two processes go hand in hand.

Protestantism can have political impacts without appearing overtly political. David Martin, who looks at Protestantism in Latin America with an eye to institutional changes, notes this characteristic of Protestantism:

Methodism and Pentecostalism are sociologically consonant with democratic polities and provide part of the popular cultural base on which such polities might rest. But they are not themselves basically political, even though Wesley, for example might well produce projects for communitarian reform. (Martin 1990:22)

Protestant movements always have had sophisticated interactions with political powers. By the time Methodism and Pentecostalism reached Latin America, they had developed a political style that was non-militant and politically apolitical. In other words, they had, and sought to have, political impacts, but they avoided confrontation with the state. This nonviolent, nonconfrontational approach can be seen in the George Fox's encounter with Oliver Cromwell, the Protestant ruler of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1653 to 1658. Fox was the prophet leading the Protestant Quaker movement. He was a rabid preacher possessed by the Holy Spirit, but he promised a nervous Cromwell, the dictator of England at a time of considerable Protestant excitation, that he and his followers would never take up arms. Fox writes: "I did, in the presence of the Lord God, declare that I denied the wearing or drawing of a carnal sword, or any other outward weapon, against him or any man; and that I was sent of God to stand a witness against all violence, and against the works of darkness"(Fox 1903). Since then the Quakers have been pertinacious pacifists politically active in resisting all forms of warfare.

Martin (1990) divides Protestantism into three waves. The first wave was Calvinist Protestantism in the 16th and 17th centuries. The second was Methodist Protestantism in the 19th century, and the third was Pentecostal Protestantism in the 20th century. He is particularly cognizant of the way that Protestantism manifested itself in different parts of the globe, particularly in Europe. He notes that Evangelical Protestantism started in cultural centers and then moved to peripheral areas. It rebels against the center more than other types of Protestantism. In the United States, Evangelical Protestantism moved into the economically underdeveloped South and continues to move into Latin America, which can be seen as an extension of this continental underdeveloped region southward beyond the United States (Martin 1990:275–277).

Two segments of this Latin American periphery are the rural poor and the urban migrants, who are in fact mostly the uprooted rural poor. Martin writes that they are vulnerable to Protestantism when the depth of Catholic coverage is shallow (1990:284). However, I have noted that the Catholic coverage has always been shallow there. What is new and what explains the movement of Protestantism into this region is that the institutionalization of the market economy is not yet complete there. In rural and impoverished areas, non-market reciprocal economic exchanges are often important, and ideologically supported political structures often restrict market freedom. Thus, economic factors can also explain the geographical movement of Evangelical Protestantism into the Latin American periphery, where it seems to be needed as a rebellious theology.

Rural Protestantism in Mexico and Central America looks like a peasant movement rebelling against a central authority. It breaks allegiances and asserts its independence in nonviolent forms. The central authority against which it reacts is sometimes state-supported, but it often reacts against locally supported authorities many of which are civil-religious hierarchies. For example, Jean Pierre Bastian notes that Protestantism in Mexico and Central America is a means of offering political resistance to a “Catholic” system (1985). However, the systems to which he is referring, for example Chamula in Chiapas, are not Catholic in any doctrinal sense, as I have noted above. They are actually powerful civil-religious hierarchies, theological political structures that dominate Indian communities. They are Catholic only in the sense that their rituals include images of Catholic saints.

In all *cargo* systems, of which civil-religious hierarchies are one type, families sponsor religious celebrations, usually for local deities represented by images located in village churches or oratories (Carrasco 1963; Cancian 1965; Dow 1974; DeWalt 1975; Chance and Taylor 1985). Sponsorship can be quite expensive. The religious obligations taken on by the sponsors are typically called *cargos*, burdens. They are normally taken on for a year or two years at a time. Between these expensive years a family may rest and accumulate more wealth to spend on the next *cargo*. A family can spend over a year’s income on a celebration. In the less onerous *cargo* systems, the sponsors may be aided by contributions from other people. Taking and successfully carrying out the obligations of a *cargo* brings the family much status and prestige in the community. This status and prestige is easily translated into political influence. By committing themselves to the saints, the sponsors commit the people to their leadership. The commitments and the political power created thereby vary in strength. The most onerous *cargo* systems, the civil-religious hierarchies, create a formal hierarchy of power.

Once a family has completed a number of significant *cargos* in a civil-religious hierarchy, the male head of the family receives official posts in the village government and eventually becomes an elder who makes important decisions for the village. Civil-religious hierarchies generate political power for wealthier members of a community who have the resources to spend on the celebrations. They allow the wealthier citizens to achieve high status and political power by redistributing their wealth during the religious festivals. The *cargo* holders then rule the community in various political offices to which only they are appointed by the most senior members of their group, the elders.

A civil-religious hierarchy is anathema to capitalistic entrepreneurship. It focuses attention on the redistribution of wealth rather than on its productive investment. It allows families that have wealth, mainly in the form of land, to boost

their political influence. It suppresses the accumulation of wealth by hard-working entrepreneurs and pushes them into redistributing what they manage to save. A civil-religious hierarchy blocks the local expansion of the market economy. The poorer members of a village cannot use markets to create and reorganize wealth. This would not be a problem if the economy remained subsistence-oriented, for then there would be no alternative investments of wealth; however, when markets do become available the problems created by a civil-religious hierarchy may become serious. The greatest problem is that the system is maintained by the political power it creates. It can perpetuate itself through political coercion. The best way to block its perpetuation is to attack the religious foundation of its political authority. A Protestant theological attack undermines the system and allows economic change.

There are other political systems that interfere with the institutionalization of the market economy such as state-imposed one-party political structures, state-sponsored bureaucracies, and undemocratic unions and cooperatives. These systems do not have links to religion as clear as those of the civil-religious hierarchies; however, they are yielding to Protestantism as well.

There have been cases, such as that of the truckers in Zinacantan, Chiapas, (Cancian 1992:199), in which entrepreneurs have successfully participated in a cargo system for a while. It is possible for them to use it to co-opt political power in a community. However, the stratification necessary for such a co-optation can break down under the pressures of the new market economy. Others in the community see the capitalistic accumulation of wealth and will not continue to act as peasants in a redistributive economy. In Zinacantan, Protestantism was not used to unseat the co-opted hierarchy. Instead the people turned to modern political parties, which provided adequate ideological support (Cancian 1992). However, in nearby Chamula at the same time, Protestantism was used, as an ideological tool to attack the hierarchy there.

In rural areas of Mexico and Central America, Protestants can support opposition to political authorities. When this is against a municipal or state government, the level of violence is limited, and the Protestants often point to religious grounds for their protests. At a municipal level, where there is some independence from higher authorities, localized violence can be greater. When Protestantism is used to overthrow very civil-religious hierarchies, violent confrontations can occur, especially when the elders of a village have been in power for a long time.

Often new Protestant ideas are brought back to a village by a person who has migrated to another area because he or she has been frustrated by changing economic conditions in the village or personal problems with other villagers. While

away from the village, the person's dilemmas are resolved by a new Protestant doctrine learned from other expatriates like himself or herself. The person acquires a new identity and finds a new understanding of his or her struggles. The individual is not only saved by the new wisdom, but believes that the whole village can be saved as well. When such a person returns, he or she often becomes a catalyst for Protestant religious change.

Conclusion

The political power of Protestantism comes from its ability to break links with oppressive political ideologies. Firm in its conviction that the Bible provides the true source of moral wisdom, Protestantism opposes authority. This is one of its most traditional functions. The irrational commitment to a new religion puts the converts into a better bargaining position when political changes are in contention (Frank 1988). Over time, Protestantism has adapted to prevailing power structures in ways that avoid the most violent confrontations. Protestantism in Mexico and Central America is enabling people to release the ideological hold of civil-religious hierarchies and other ideologically supported political structures. This allows the institutionalization of economic behaviors compatible with the new market economy. For example, fiestas can be supported by multiple contributions or abolished altogether, and people can use the money they gain from migrant labor on improving their standard of living. Everyone can accumulate some capital to make their lives secure and perhaps to invest it in some small way. Most peasants of Mexico and Central America act as mini capitalists trying to improve their standard of living through the accumulation of small amounts wealth, an ox, a better house, etc. The ability to accumulate and manipulate that wealth is important to them.

At the time of the Reformation, Protestantism opposed the Catholic Church in Europe and the power hierarchies it supported. But today in Mexico and Central America, the Catholic Church is no longer such a powerful political force. In Mexico, a doorway to Protestantism was opened by the anti-Catholic attitudes of the Reformation in the 19th century and the Revolution in the 20th. Now Protestantism in Mexico and Central America is a tool that facilitates local political change. It enables people to overcome political barriers to the market economy, particularly in those peripheral areas where the market economy is not fully institutionalized.

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