CHAPTER SEVEN

NEW LANDSCAPES OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN MEXICO

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Though it has been and mainly still is a Roman Catholic country, over the last decades Mexico has experienced a continual decline in the percentage of Catholic citizens coupled with an exponential growth of non-Catholic religions (especially of other Christian bodies: Historical Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals). The country has also seen a corresponding increase in the number of those claiming to have no religion. While diversity has started to prevail quickly and without pause, pluralism, understood as a desirable political and cultural condition that allows a certain degree of acceptance and public recognition of the presence of other denominations (Beckford 2003: 743), is developing more slowly due to the historical hegemony of Catholicism and its continued majority status, which allows the hierarchy to keep its privileges. Although it is one of the secular states that contemplate a separation between State and Church in their constitutions, for historical reasons there is also in Mexico a strong link that is maintained between nationalism and Catholicism. Further, at local and regional levels of traditional and popular culture, linked to feast days, nationalism is deeply rooted in popular Catholicism, which sometimes provokes local conflicts between dissident and traditionalist Catholics, as has happened in the territories of indigenous pueblos (Rivera Farfán et al. 2005).

Berryman (1995) called religious diversity one of the transformations with the greatest impact that Latin America has been undergoing since the last decades of the twentieth century, referring as it does to the change from a Catholic society to a multi-religious society. Referring again to Beckford, pluralism as an ideology implies support for the moral and political value of amplifying public acceptance of religions. To achieve this goal, state and public information on the facts of religious diversification are indispensable. In this regard Mexico is one of the few countries on the American continent that includes in its national census a question on religious affiliation. It has done this since 1985, but it was only with the census for the year 2000 that the list of religions was redesigned so as to make the existing diversity
apparent. For 2010 this instrument was redesigned again, in consultation with academics and statisticians. In spite of negative reactions, including threats of a boycott by the Catholic hierarchy who saw in this instrument a policy to diminish their hegemony, the census is currently an important resource for making religious diversity apparent, and it is being taken into account more and more by leaders wishing to establish conditions of tolerance and peaceful co-existence—that is, of pluralism.

In 1992 the state recognized the juridical existence of religious associations, and an office of religious affairs was set up for the associations to register and to create conditions for dialogue. Currently departments of religious affairs have been established in several states and municipalities, with the task of observing that the associations do not interfere in the political arena, to give permits for public activities, and if necessary, to intervene as mediators in conflicts among different religious groups.

In Mexico, although this transformation is still that of a minority at the national level, it is relevant all the same, because of the role that Catholicism has traditionally played in the articulation of the territory and the formation of the nation. At the national level, in 2010 we detected 70 municipalities where Catholicism occupies the position of a religious minority. Most of these are concentrated in the South-East of Mexico, mainly in the states of Chiapas (43) and Oaxaca (16).

These figures tell us that the true significance and impact of this change can be appreciated only once we realize that the increase in religious diversity is not evenly spread over the territory of the nation, but reaches a much higher rate at regional, state, municipal and local levels. For example, in the state of Chiapas non-Catholics have come to represent a third of the population of the state, and it is in this part of the national territory that we find several municipalities where Catholicism has ceased to be the majority religion.

Our study aims to make the new tendencies of religious change in Mexico comprehensible, and to do this we made use of statistical analysis of information in the national censuses of INEGI, the National Institute of Statistics,

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1 We have participated in proposals for the national classification of religions (cf. De la Torre and Gutiérrez 2007b). We consider that the information provided by the census is very important, and on those occasions when there was pressure to remove the question on religion from the census forms, we published open letters, signed by dozens of academics in the country, in which we argued that it was valuable for the formation of a plural culture and as an instrument of evaluation and for planning public policies.