
What does it mean to be both Maya and Protestant in Guatemala? C. Mathews Samson sets out to answer this question in this highly readable book, using Presbyterian case studies from two indigenous groups. On the surface, the Mam represent a more traditional evangelical Christian presence as opposed to the activist and politicized practice of the Kackchikel. In neither case, however, do Maya evangelicals reject their cultural identity when participating in an evangelical community (pp. 5-6). This assumption is contested by literature suggesting that evangelical religion often tends to turn Indians into Ladinos. Samson does not engage this debate, although he quotes a source showing that ‘the Academy of Mayan Languages promotes revitalization in terms of indigenous religious practice (*costum-bre*)’ (p. 50). This stance of a prominent institution in the pan-Maya movement, of course, goes directly against Maya conversion to either orthodox Catholicism or Protestantism.

Samson does mention ‘the standard line that evangelical religion is a disempowering and culturally destructive force within Maya communities’ (p. 50), but only remarks that ‘it does little to help in understanding the implications of the tremendous growth of evangelical religion since the 1960s’ (p. 50). Samson’s view is summarized as: ‘From my perspective, religion plays a largely auxiliary role in the Maya movement in contemporary Guatemala. This is not to say religion is unimportant, but it is often used for purposes of identity formation in the context of larger social and political agendas’ (p. 52).

Samson considers Maya Protestantism to be ‘an aspect of a globalized “re-enchantment of the world”’ (p. 10) in the context of a resurgence of religious practices that challenge what has often been referred to as a “disenchantment of the world”’. Samson closely follows Brian Morris’s (1987: 69) reading of Weber here. In the end, rationalization would result not only in more systematized versions of religion but also in ‘the growth of ethical rationalism, and the progressive decline of ritual and “magical” elements in religion’. Samson correctly notes that ‘variations of theories of modernization and secularization (…) had by the end of the twentieth century begun to be called into question along with the failure of modernity’ (p. 11). I have elsewhere criticized the ‘resurgence of religion’ debate for showing too narrow a reading of Max Weber and Peter Berger. We now have ‘multiple modernities’ all over the world, most of which do not include the disenchantment along the lines Weber described for Europe. Without disenchantment, there is no re-enchantment either.


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Samson spent almost a year conducting anthropological fieldwork in Chimaltenango and San Juan Ostuncalco, ‘involving participant observation and interviews’ (p. 30). Having ‘only six weeks of Mam language study’ (p. 30), the research was conducted primarily in Spanish. Since Samson interviewed mostly pastors, activists, and the more socially and religiously committed members in both groups, this probably did not affect his findings too much. However, I cannot gauge if his findings are representative of the Presbyterian churches among the Mam and Kakchiquel — or how representative they are of Mayan Protestants in Guatemala.

Before analyzing two illuminating Maya conversion stories, Samson seems to reverse his earlier position: ‘being evangelical does mark a definitive break with Maya religious practice embodied in costumbre, a break signified by conversion itself and manifested in both the material culture and the liturgical practices employed by the congregations to announce their presence in the communities’ (p. 77). Samson documents how ‘Pentecostalized’ Mam Presbyterians have become, adopting Pentecostal prayer forms, worship styles, and music (pp. 90-91). Adult baptism by full immersion is the rite of passage marking entrance to the church community. Samson notes that baptism is celebrated much like a fiesta and concludes: ‘If not in the act of Baptism itself, it is in this sense of communitarianism that one can see Maya costumbre at work in the lives of Maya Protestants’ (pp. 92-93). I think he may be confusing form and content here.

The first conversion story, by the anonymous ‘oldest living Mam Presbyterian minister’ (p. 96), shows a break with the past. After converting, his father threw him out of the house (p. 98), but eventually other relatives and friends also converted. The second conversion story came from ‘a middle-aged Mam Presbyterian minister’ (p. 98) who stressed cultural continuity. He mentioned the spirituality of his great-great-grandmother to show that ‘among the people here before, there was a concept, a more clear [sic] concept of God… A lot of what she said, I found in the Bible’ (p. 100). Samson correctly calls this ‘a personal mytho-history’ (p. 100). For him, it shows ‘the creative aspects of integrating personal and group identity’. However, the two conversion stories are short and the criteria for their selection unclear; hence, we cannot gauge how representative they are of Mam Presbyterian pastors — let alone of the members.

There is somewhat ambiguous information on Mayan evangelical Protestant churches and Mayan evangelical political organizations. The churches are doing well, although I wonder if they are still growing as strongly as in the 1980s. The two major Maya evangelical organizations — Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas de Guatemala (CIEDEG) and Hermandad de Presbiterios Mayas (HPM) — were both ‘in much weaker conditions’ (74) in 2006, ten years after the final Peace Accord. Samson suggests this is due to changes in leadership, partly because of political activities by CIEDEG founder and leader Vitalino Similox. But other factors could be involved and I wonder how relevant these organizations are to the social and religious life of most Maya Protestants anyway. Another minor criticism: the book often contains statements like ‘some 65-80 percent of evangelicals in all Latin American countries are now believed to be Pentecostal’ (p. 17) and ‘[evangelical] growth rates have tended to be higher among indigenous and rural populations in Mesoamerica’ (p. 50) without providing sources.