Abstract
This case study addresses the growth of Protestantism in predominantly Catholic Mexico and the resulting sectarian hostilities from the 1960s through the 1990s, with particular attention paid to the Chiapas locality of San Juan Chamula, where the worst violence and anti-Protestant oppression occurred. The case study answers four overarching questions: What are the historical origins of religious difference in Chiapas? What caused violence between religious groups in the 1960s through the 1990s? Were international religious and political forces important? What role did socioeconomic factors play? Along with the core text, the case study also includes a list of recommended readings for further information on Catholic-Protestant dynamics in Mexico and Latin America.

About this Case Study
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## Resources

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Although nearly 90 percent of Mexico’s population identifies as Catholic, the Mexican constitution has long protected freedom of worship for religious minorities and officially maintains separation of church and state. Nevertheless, the growth of Protestantism has caused local tensions and hostilities between Catholics and Protestant converts, particularly in the rural towns of southern Mexico, where evangelical Protestant churches have grown at the fastest rate. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the federal government largely turned a blind eye to religious persecution in this region. The government’s weak enforcement of religious freedoms allowed the indigenous population and local authorities in the South to discriminate against Protestants, culminating in violence by both sides. This study will focus on issues of conversion, communal identity, religious competition, and the reach of effective government in San Juan Chamula, a locality in Chiapas where religious tensions led to some of the worst outbreaks of sectarian violence. By 2000, this had led to hundreds of deaths and the displacement of approximately 30,000 Protestants. In the late 1990s, the local government began to have some success in alleviating the situation, but tensions persist that continue to contribute to discrimination and religious hostility.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Catholic Church in Mexico has historically been among the most powerful and politically conservative institutions in Latin America. Colonial Mexico was characterized by a close relationship between Spanish military power and the Catholic Church’s social prestige, in part because Catholic conversion was considered necessary to subjugate the large indigenous population. The Church was given vast estates to control, exempted from taxation, and left to govern its affairs with limited state interference. After independence from Spain in 1821, liberals and conservatives engaged in an ongoing struggle over the role of the Church in Mexico. However, despite various often-dramatic efforts at reform, the Catholic Church retained significant economic resources and its status as the dominant religion in the country. Deeply embedded in Mexican society and culture, the Church fiercely defended its effective monopoly over religious practice—particularly as a bulwark against Yankee Protestantism.

The situation of the Church was fundamentally challenged by the Mexican Revolution’s (1910-1920) intense anticlericalism. The Church’s great wealth and long association with the Mexican elite made its lands and assets a natural target for seizure and redistribution to the peasants whose clamor for land had largely fuelled the revolution. Over the following decade, the Church lost its privileged political status and much of its economic superstructure, especially Church lands. Priests and other religious figures were prohibited from taking public political positions or participating in politics (including voting), while the state largely replaced the system of Catholic education with a free, state-provided, and secular public education system. Despite the virtual expulsion of the Church from the public square, the Mexican people remained heavily Catholic, continuing to this day to be among the most active parishioners in Latin America. Protestantism was not unheard of, but for various reasons—including pro-Catholic immigration laws in the 1800s and the continued use of Catholic symbols like the Virgin of Guadalupe in the construction of Mexican nationalism—it was slow to take root. In fact, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that evangelical (including Pentecostal) Protestantism grew significantly throughout Mexico, replicating a trend in many other areas of Latin America, albeit at a slower pace.

Conversion to evangelical Protestantism in Mexico can be attributed to several factors. Catholic evangelization was weak in the more remote areas of Mexico during the colonial era and therefore Protestantism has grown most strongly in the historically marginalized South. Moreover, Protestant converts were usually citizens from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who may have felt excluded from economic, political, and social power. In some cases, conversion occurred in the context of domestic abuse and poverty and may have been expected to promote improved outcomes at home and financially. Because evangelical congregations tend to prohibit some behaviors like drinking and gambling that often contributed to domestic strife, conversion was often seen as a remedy for these problems. As one Protestant minister in Mexico City asserted, “For five centuries the Catholic Church has told Latin Americans it would save their soul, but we tell them of a faith that saves their bodies and their souls and improves their lives today, and they come.”

Still others attribute evangelical growth to the material incentives for conversion (such as development assistance) offered by American missionaries. Whatever the reason for these conversions, Mexican Protestantism grew steadily in the second half of the twentieth century. While the total
In 1970, the evangelical population in Mexico was relatively low at just over five percent; it is regionally concentrated, with the fastest rates of conversion found disproportionately in the South. In 1970, the evangelical population in the southern state of Chiapas was less than five percent, but by 2000, it had soared to over 21 percent. However, there is evidence that many who convert revert to Catholicism or fall away from faith altogether.

For many Catholics, evangelicals represent a threat to the country’s unity and national religious character. One can find, for example, stickers and placards in the windows of Mexican houses warning would-be missionaries “This home is Catholic. Protestant propaganda not accepted.” Catholic clergy and government officials often echo these sentiments, and thus fuel the hostility. For the Mexican government, the primary concern is the connection between the evangelical movement and foreign missionaries, raising questions not only about foreign influence, but even suspicions of deliberate attempts by the United States government to infiltrate the country. In fact, one Protestant missionary organization, known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, was charged by the Mexican government with having the goals of “control, cultural genocide, and pacification of Mexico’s indigenous peoples so as to insure security of access for the US to the vast oilfields of the South…” During the Cold War, some, including Catholic clerics, accused evangelicals of being tools of the CIA and acting to advance American interests in the region. To date, however, there is no evidence of such a connection. Of the Protestant population in Mexico, only about 20 percent report affiliating with Pentecostal denominations with headquarters in the United States.

Amid the accusations against foreign Protestants, local Protestants have tried to practice their religion. The violence caused by tensions between Catholics and Protestants was most prominent in the highlands of Chiapas, which are isolated politically and economically from the populous urban centers and were home to multiple anti-government and pro-indigenous armed groups in the 1980s and 1990s. The Catholics in this conflict were often indigenous peasants who practiced a syncretistic form of Catholicism infused with ancient Mayan practices and social customs. Religious and social practices in the region are so intermingled that rejection of this syncretistic Catholicism meant not only rejection of particular religious doctrines, but refusal to participate in the social rituals of the indigenous communities. For example, sponsorship of (and paying for) a religious festival like the “saint’s day” of a town’s patron saint was frequently a required step to climb the social ladder. Men could demonstrate their commitment to the community and their ability to provide for the community’s needs by holding in succession the prescribed series of cargos (literally “charges,” or positions), such as financially underwriting a religious festival. Sociologists suggest that the redistribution of wealth that occurred as wealthier members of the community spent from their savings to provide free food and drink during a festival also reduced tensions within the community that might have resulted from economic inequality.

The copious drinking typically expected of participants during these festivals was a major reason for Protestant abstention. Many Protestants also objected in principle to the celebration of Catholic saints’ days, not only because the practice of praying to saints is generally frowned upon in Protestant churches, but also because in the case of indigenous communities like San Juan Chamula, many of these saints were thinly disguised versions of pre-Christian gods and goddesses. The refusal of Protestants to take part in such ceremonies, however, implied a refusal to recognize the authority of traditional leaders or to respect the social norms of the community. The result was a strong reaction on the part of Catholic authorities and efforts to bring recalcitrant Protestants back into line or expel them from the community. For nearly three decades (1960s-1990s), religious tensions in the area caused great suffering but received little recognition from the Mexican government or the international community.

An example was the conflict in San Juan Chamula, one of the more extreme and violent cases of religious strife. Starting in 1974, when open conflict began, hundreds of Protestant Chamulans were killed and as many as 30,000 were expelled from their homes. Others were beaten or raped and businesses were burned to the ground. One
Protestant from the area reported that his house had been fired on nine different times over the course of five years, resulting in 75 bullet holes. Catholic residents claimed “we are just trying to defend our culture... The evangelicals want to wipe it out.” Another resident noted, “We know how to pray and we know how to drink... If the evangelists try to return here, they’ll be met with bullets.”

The sources of conflict in San Juan Chamula were very similar to those of other communities in the region. Throughout Chiapas, reports about the persecution of evangelicals abounded. In one municipality, 24 families of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church were deprived of their access to government social programs; local officials also fined them 3,000 pesos if they failed to make financial contributions to the community’s Catholic festivals.

Such physical and emotional violence took a substantial toll on the non-Catholic residents of these communities. Over the course of three decades, tens of thousands fled or were forcibly removed from lands their ancestors had inhabited for centuries.

Protestants expelled from San Juan Chamula fled to nearby San Cristóbal, one of the largest cities in Chiapas and a major tourist destination. Just outside the city, Protestants populated new slums and gave them names such as Paradise and New Jerusalem. These makeshift neighborhoods offered poor living conditions, were often overrun by rats, and had limited access to clean drinking water.

Juan Carlos Bonifaz Trujillo, president of the Chiapas state legislature, created a reconciliation commission to address issues on both sides of the conflict. The stated goals of this commission were to protect local traditions and customs while also preserving the rights of each individual. As a result of the commission, mass expulsions stopped, killings and kidnappings were reduced, reparations were paid for some lost property, and nearly 4,000 expelled evangelicals returned to their homes. Even Abdias Tovilla Jaime, director of the State Committee for the Defense of Evangelicals in Chiapas, said that “there has been much progress” as a result of the commission’s activity.

One sign of this progress was the construction of a new Protestant church in San Juan Chamula—the first to be built in the community. As a symbol of an historic advance in tolerance in one of the most violently divided communities, the Prince of Peace Temple was viewed by evangelical leaders as “the most important new church in the country,” and was funded in part by donations from evangelical churches across Mexico.

Despite these signs of progress, tensions remained. In the late 1990s, Chamula Mayor Florencio Collazo Gómez confirmed that Protestant children were being kept out of public schools. He noted that evangelicals “carry ideas that are bad,” and that “the community doesn’t want them.” The situation persists in neighboring Mexican states as well. Officials often cite a constitutional provision protecting the “uses and customs” of indigenous communities, although their application directly contradicts constitutional freedom of religion guarantees. Reports dated around 2006 still show evangelical families being forced from their homes, subjected to fines for uncooperativeness with Catholic traditions, and even deprived of local services such as water and electricity.
Domestic Factors

The tension between indigenous Catholics and evangelicals in San Juan Chamula is at least in part the result of a unique identification between Catholic religious practices and Mayan social practices. In southern Mexico, indigenous populations adapted Catholicism to preexisting customs, which has created longstanding theological and organizational controversy within the Catholic Church. For instance, there are no pews in San Juan Chamula’s main Catholic Church, and worshippers can be found kneeling on a carpet of fresh pine needles. Some rituals can include the lighting of candles and firecrackers to release evil spirits, sacrificing chickens in healing ceremonies, and making offerings of cigarettes and home-brewed liquor called posh, which the faithful drink from used soda bottles.

The official Catholic priest is welcomed once a year to baptize all babies and formalize marriages, but the religious hierarchy of the Catholic Church is not prominent. Indeed, the most famous example of the internal cleavage between indigenous Catholics and orthodox Catholics in Chiapas was the barring of renowned Bishop of Chiapas Samuel Ruiz from visiting San Juan Chamula due to his objections against the expulsion of Protestants from the village.

Nevertheless, religious festivals are seen as crucial to maintaining social bonds and, as such, all residents are expected to participate in and make financial contributions to the local fiestas. Evangelicals view such practices as superstitious and idolatrous and abstain from the drinking and dancing usually involved, creating a perceived threat to the social integrity of the community.

Many Protestants also attribute religious harassment to the economic interests of social and political leaders in the country’s South. Political bosses in the region have control over many facets of the area’s economy, including the production and sale of items associated with religious festivals and worship practices, such as alcohol, candles, and soda. Local leaders (caciques) opposed evangelical intrusion in part out of fear that it would disrupt the region’s traditions and character. Yet critics are quick to point out that caciques benefit directly from these rituals. As one resident noted, “Everyone is obliged to buy posh from the caciques. They make it, they sell it. They say it’s a tradition.”

In urban areas, the lack of evangelical involvement in religious festivals is a source of far less tension than in the rural areas of the South, as the festivals themselves are less central to community life. Nevertheless, evangelicals are also reluctant to involve themselves in many of the other religious and cultural traditions of Catholics—including first communions, baptisms, and weddings—ceremonies that even the least religious Mexican Catholics typically attend in order to please their families. Evangelicals, however, disapproved of the drinking, smoking, and dancing prominent at such events.

Many converts blame alcoholism for their desire to leave Catholicism, as drinking often led to domestic and child abuse. Such incompatibility between beliefs and cultural values strained family ties, sometimes to the breaking point. In many cases, rejecting Catholicism was tantamount to rejecting family. According to one study, announcing conversion to one’s family can have negative repercussions ranging from ridicule to beatings to ejection from the home. Consequences are typically much less drastic, and approximately 35 percent of converts reported that their family was tolerant or indifferent, with many others reporting a reduction of tension with time.
International Factors

Tension between evangelicals and Catholics has been fuelled by allegations that the US government funds and supports the growth of Protestantism. During the 1980s, there was a widespread belief in southern Mexico that the Reagan administration was using the CIA to promote Protestantism in Mexico in order to gain influence over the country. In the mid-1990s, perhaps reacting to perceptions of increased US influence resulting from the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, similar accusations were made. One Catholic denunciation, posted in a major state newspaper, stated that Protestants were a direct manifestation of the American government, “from which they receive monthly money to cover the salaries of the evangelists and compensation for those who are co-opted.” None of these allegations have been proven, but the vulnerability of Mexico to unilateral US decisions on issues ranging from trade to immigration as well as the power disparities between the two nations have led Mexicans historically to understandable suspicion of interference by their northern neighbor. Thus, mainstream Catholics are prone to believe accusations that the evangelical movement is the result of material and financial aid from the United States and to treat Protestant traditions as a hostile foreign influence, even though the majority of Protestants in Mexico do not belong to US-based denominations.

Because of these historical sensitivities, actions to defend the interests of evangelicals in Mexico by international nongovernmental organizations—especially those based in the United States—often have contradictory or even negative effects. In October 1993, the US-based Rutherford Institute filed complaints to multiple international organizations regarding the situation in Chiapas. These organizations included the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Organization of American States, and also the Mexican Commission on Human Rights. However, the Mexican government rejected intervention, arguing that the government had not yet exhausted all of its local and national options in solving the problem. More direct attempts by denominational headquarters to demand better treatment would likely only confirm fears of US influence. Thus, defenders of religious freedom in Mexico have generally preferred to work through Mexican organizations rather than acting on an international level.
Religion and Socioeconomic Factors

Overall, Mexico remains a Catholic stronghold, with most of its bishops generally aligned with the conservative and centralizing efforts of recent popes. In the early 2000s, Catholics made up nearly 89 percent of the total population, with 44 percent reporting church attendance at least once a week. The problems associated with the growth of Protestantism have been concentrated in areas with higher conversion rates, where evangelicals pose a more serious cultural threat to Catholicism. Southern and rural Mexico (the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and the Yucatan, for example) have been fertile ground for the advance of the evangelical movement, while the Catholic Church has kept its dominant position in the major urban population centers like Mexico City. The South's proclivity for Protestantism can be seen as the result of historic isolation from the social and political norms of greater Mexico, as the traditional independence of indigenous Mexicans has left them twice as likely to identify as Protestant as their fellow countrymen.

Not coincidentally, areas of rapid Protestant growth have also witnessed the emergence of more politically progressive and reformist versions of Catholicism. In Chiapas, for example, local bishop Samuel Ruiz became an open advocate of liberation theology, which supports greater local and lay control over Church programs, defense of human rights against state abuses, and promotion of self-organization by parishioners, especially through social movements. For his efforts, he was vilified by the state as “the Red [communist] Bishop” and forced into early retirement by the Catholic hierarchy. Nevertheless, his active championing of peasant rights and peasant organizations in Chiapas was imitated by other local Catholic priests who similarly faced competition from Protestant sects.

In conclusion, the religious violence in southern Mexico has resulted in thousands of deaths, an untold number of rapes, and the destruction of millions of dollars worth of property. Tens of thousands of Protestants were expelled from their homes, with little intervention from Mexico City or external governments. The source of this persecution was religious and cultural, although it was not sanctioned by the Catholic Church’s hierarchy. More specifically, in the largely independent, rural, Mayan-infused, syncretistic culture of southern Mexico, Protestants were seen as rejecting longstanding traditions within the community, such as providing financial support for feasts honoring Catholic and indigenous saints. Thus, the changes that Protestant conversion represented included not only religious and spiritual challenges to the status quo, but also challenges to the socioeconomic environment. Furthermore, at times, Protestants were falsely labeled as agents of American interests. By the early 2000s, much of this violence had abated although religious ostracism continues in many rural parts of the region.
**KEY EVENTS**

1910-1920  Mexican Revolution. Revolutionaries seek to curtail the power of the Catholic Church in Mexico and eventually prevail.

*February 5, 1917*  Constitutional Congress approves a new constitution of Mexico, which includes numerous anticlerical measures to diminish the political power of the Catholic Church and restrict the rights of Catholic priests.

1926-1929  The enforcement of anticlerical laws, known as the Calles Laws for President Plutarco Elías Calles, spurs a violent popular rebellion that drew support from the Church. Some state concessions led the Church to withdraw its support for the rebels in 1929, and the rebellion gradually died.

1960s  Protestant missionaries begin significant efforts to evangelize across Mexico, leading to a steady increase in the country’s Protestant population ever since.

1970  Protestants make up less than five percent of the population of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

1974  Violent hostilities break out in the municipality of San Juan Chamula in the state of Chiapas between Catholics (whose Catholicism includes elements of traditional Mayan practices) and evangelical Protestant converts. Hundreds of Protestants are killed and thousands are displaced over the next few decades.

1994  A generally nonreligious uprising by the indigenous Zapatista Army in Chiapas exacerbates simmering sectarian tensions in the region, drawing government attention to the religious conflict.

1996  Government-backed peace talks begin between Catholics and Protestants in Chiapas. The situation improves as violence largely ceases, displaced families return to Chamula, and a Protestant church is built in the town, though the community remains religiously divided in many ways.

2000  Protestants make up over 21 percent of the population of Chiapas.
Further Readings


1. What are the historical origins of religious difference in Chiapas?
2. What caused violence between religious groups in the 1960s through the 1990s?
3. Were international religious and political forces important?
4. What role did socioeconomic factors play?

1 For example, liberation theology—the progressive ideology in some parts of the Catholic Church that advocates Church support of human rights and the poor against the state and wealthy elites—never made much headway in the hierarchy of the Mexican Catholic Church, although it did considerably better where Catholic bishops faced strong competition from emerging Protestant sects.
3 “Visiting Pope Will Find Rising Tide Of Protestantism in Latin America.” Christian Science Monitor, (Boston: 1 February, 1996); see also Chesnutt’s Born Again in Brazil (1997) on the association between Protestant conversion and family economic outcomes.
4 Refers to population aged five or more, according to the 2000 Mexican Census. All official census data can be found at http://inegi.org.mx/default.aspx, consulted July 15, 2013.
6 Bowen, Evangelism and Apostasy.
7 Roderic Ai Camp, Crossing Swords, 95.
8 Ibid.
9 Eric Patterson, Latin America’s Neo Reformation: Religion’s Influence on Contemporary Politics (New York: Routledge, 2005), 121.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 115.
14 The Washington Post, “Religions Collide In Mexico’s South; Protestants Pose Challenge to 500 Years of Catholicism Molly Moore” (February 6, 1996).
17 Molly Moore, “Religions Collide in Mexico’s South; Protestants Pose Challenge to 500 Years of Catholicism,” The Washington Post, (February 6, 1996).
21 Diego Ribadeneira, “In Mexico’s South, a Religious Divide,” The Boston Globe, (February 2, 1994).
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Molly Moore, “Religions Collide in Mexico’s South; Protestants Pose Challenge to 500 Years of Catholicism,” The Washington Post, (February 6, 1996).
33 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Eric Patterson. Latin America’s Neo Reformation: Religion’s Influence on Contemporary Politics, 121.
40 Bowen, Evangelism and Apostasy, 164.
41 Patterson, 115.
44 Patterson, 115.
45 Patterson, 124.