

The Role of Protestant Missionaries in Mexico's Indigenous Awakening

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Protestantism has grown rapidly among Latin America's indigenous population since the 1980s. Despite Protestantism's attractiveness to indigenous people, the literature has historically regarded it as incompatible with indigenous culture. Recent scholarship has moved beyond this assertion, focusing instead on the complexities of conversion and the paradoxes associated with it. Most scholars now argue that Protestantism can be compatible with indigenous culture. It is unclear, however, how Protestant institutions came to have a compatible relationship with indigenous culture. Indeed, Protestant churches/clergy continue to eschew many of the practices associated with indigenous culture. In this paper I address this question by examining the work of Protestant missionaries. I choose missionaries as my point of analysis because they were crucial in establishing Protestantism in the region, and thus the base point from which it is defined, practiced, and altered. As a case study I examine mission work in Oaxaca, Mexico. I argue that missionaries have changed both their conversion strategies and tactics for dealing with indigenous traditions. These changes make it easier for indigenous people to convert to Protestantism without rejecting key parts of their culture, and in a few cases by even embracing it. I examine two conversion strategies—group targeting and church planting. I also analyze three tactics missionaries use to negotiate indigenous customs considered 'pagan.' I choose *tequio*, village fiestas, and language politics because they have historically been sources of conflict between converts and their Catholic neighbours.

Keywords: Mexico, Oaxaca, Protestantism, missionaries, church planting, indigenous peoples

Protestantism grew rapidly in Latin America over the last two decades. Growth was particularly high among the region's indigenous populations (Parker Gumucio, 2002; Dow, 2005). Despite its apparent attractiveness to indigenous people, Protestantism has widely been regarded as incompatible with, and destructive of, indigenous cultures. This assumption even under-girds one of the formative debates in the literature

between those who view Protestantism as an imperialist force (Dominguez and Huntington, 1984; Bastian, 1990) and those who see it as a harbinger of development (Butler Flora, 1976; Harrison, 1997). Indeed, both sides agree that Protestantism undermines indigenous culture, with the debate hinging on whether the attendant change is beneficial or detrimental for indigenous people.

Recent scholarship on Protestant evangelism has moved beyond this debate, focusing instead on the complexities of conversion and the paradoxes associated with it (Gill, 1993; Green, 1993; Levine and Stoll, 1997). One of its key assertions is that Protestantism can be compatible with indigenous culture. In Mexico, the focus of this paper, for example, quantitative analysis suggests a strong positive correlation between Protestant growth rates and the percentage of indigenous in the population (Dow, 2001). Qualitative studies also demonstrate that conversion occurs on indigenous terms (Dodson, 1997; Sullivan, 1998; Adams, 2001). Indeed, some scholars even claim that Protestantism is contributing to a 'recovery of ethnic identity' in Latin America (Parker Gumucio, 2002: 67).

Scholarly efforts to explain how Protestantism supports the renewal of indigenous cultures are relatively new, and thus partial. Most studies situate the rapid conversion of indigenous peoples in the context of globalisation (Gill, 1993; Levine and Stoll, 1997; Dow, 2001; Parker Gumucio, 2002). These scholars argue that indigenous communities have been particularly battered by globalisation, and that Protestantism provides them with a new identity for making sense of, and blending, their new and old places in the world. Other studies emphasise the compatibility of indigenous world views with those of Protestantism, particularly its Pentecostal variants (Garma, 1998; Adams, 2001).

It is unclear, however, how Protestant institutions came to have a compatible relationship with indigenous culture. Indeed, numerous studies indicate that for much of the twentieth century Protestant missionaries aided government campaigns to '*mestizoise*' (or '*deindianise*') the indigenous population (Stoll, 1982; Richards, 1989). Cameron Townsend, who founded the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL),¹ gained permission to work in Mexico by selling his work as amenable to acculturation. Townsend persuaded President Lázaro Cárdenas that Indians would become fluent in Spanish (and thus *mestizoise* more quickly) if they first learned to read their own languages (Rus and Wasserstrom, 1981). Protestantism has also been indirectly linked with the destruction of indigenous culture. By supporting individualism missionaries facilitate capitalist penetration and the disruption of traditional social and economic organisation that attends it (Vickers, 1981). Compatibility is also surprising given that Protestant clergy continue to denounce syncretism, an obvious outlet for expressing indigenous culture through Protestantism. In short, it is unclear why or how Protestant *institutions* came to tolerate, even buttress, something they once refused to accept.

1 The Summer Institute of Linguistics is a Protestant organisation that produces indigenous language Bibles. Most indigenous languages are not written, so SIL linguists create a language orthography before beginning Bible translation work. SIL's linguists are not missionaries in a traditional sense (i.e. they do no direct proselytism), but their organisational purpose is to 'aid' the mission process.

In this paper I address this question by examining the work of Protestant missionaries. I choose missionaries as my point of analysis because they were crucial in establishing Protestantism in the region, and thus the base point from which it is defined, practised, and altered. Indeed, missionaries are more than well-informed bystanders to the Protestant turn in Latin America: they are active agents in the process. Their successes in the last twenty years, as well as their failures in prior decades, are crucial parts of the story. Highlighting their role does not diminish the recognition that converts make Protestantism their own. Rather, it demonstrates that Protestant success in Mexico was always contingent on evangelism occurring on indigenous terms. As a case study I examine mission work in Oaxaca, Mexico. I argue that missionaries have changed both their conversion *strategies* and *tactics* for dealing with indigenous traditions. These changes make it easier for indigenous people to convert to Protestantism without rejecting key parts of their culture, and in a few cases even by embracing it. To make my argument I examine two relatively new conversion strategies: the targeting of groups (rather than individuals) and church planting. I also analyse three tactics missionaries now use to negotiate indigenous customs that are considered pagan/unchristian. I choose these customs – *tequio*, village fiestas, and language use – because they have historically been sources of conflict between converts and their Catholic neighbours.

This paper is organised in the following manner. I begin by outlining the assumption of incompatibility that underlines early debates on Protestantism in indigenous communities. In the second section I review more recent scholarship that links Protestantism with indigenous renewal in Mexico. Renewal is generally defined in terms of identity, so in the third section I situate my use of that term theoretically and outline my method for assessing how Protestant institutions have developed a compatible relationship with indigenous culture. In the fourth section I detail a shift in both the strategies and tactics missionaries employ to proselytise indigenous communities. I then conclude by offering tentative arguments about the role of Protestantism in Mexico's indigenous awakening.

The Incompatibility Assumption

A formative debate in the literature on Protestantism in Latin America centred on whether Protestantism was an imperialist force in the region or a source of empowerment. It is relevant here because many of its participants have made their arguments with reference to indigenous communities. As I will demonstrate below, despite their differences, both sides posit Protestantism as incompatible with indigenous culture.

The pioneers of this debate were Christian Lalive d'Epinay and Emilio Willems. Focusing on Pentecostalism, both scholars agreed that Pentecostalism was attractive to the poor and that it represented a challenge to the existing social order. They disagreed, however, on the nature of that challenge. Lalive d'Epinay (1969) argued that while Pentecostalism challenged the extant power structures that governed the lives of the poor, it ultimately replicated them. He noted that Pentecostalism's 'quasi-military hierarchy', headed by a Pastor, mimicked the unequal power relations of the hacienda system. He concluded that Protestantism would not help the poor challenge the social

relations that led to their material deprivation. In contrast, Willems (1967) emphasised the egalitarian nature of Pentecostalism. He argued that because Pentecostal theology holds that *all* converts receive the Holy Spirit, parishioners are on equal footing with their pastors and can and do replace them with frequency. Willems theorised that spiritual equality would spill over into wider society, and would help constitute the foundations for democracy in the region. This debate takes on important nuances when considered in relation to indigenous communities.

Those who argue that Protestantism is a negative force in indigenous communities do so on varied grounds. Some argue that Protestantism facilitates the penetration of capitalism into the region, thereby undermining collective land tenure and social relations of reciprocity (Vickers, 1981). Others argue that Protestantism buttresses state corporatism, and the system of patronage that stems from it. In Mexico's indigenous communities, corporatism is usually associated with *caciques* – local strongmen who owe their political power to patronage from the state. Rus and Wasserstrom (1981) found in their study in Chiapas that while conversion served as an outlet for people dissatisfied with *caciquismo*, pastors stymied real challenges to the system by encouraging congregants to leave the fate of *caciques* in God's hands. Similarly, scholars working in Guatemala (Davis, 1983; Dominguez and Huntington, 1984) found that dictator and evangelical Rios Montt invited US evangelicals into his country to thwart the radicalisation of Mayan peasants by Catholic Liberation Theologists.

Those who view Protestantism as a positive force in indigenous communities focus on varied factors to make their point. Some argue that Protestantism undermines traditional gender norms in indigenous communities, which are viewed as repressive to women. They cite Protestantism's prohibition on alcohol as especially transformative because it legitimates women's efforts to keep husbands from squandering family income on alcohol (Brusco, 1993; Green, 1993). Protestantism also provides alternative visions of masculinity, telling men that providing for the family, rather than the macho standard of acquiring multiple sexual partners, is the penultimate marker of masculinity (Brusco, 1993). Others argue that Protestantism provides a venue for the indigenous and poor to resist political and economic arrangements that keep them at the bottom of the social ladder. Burdick (1993) notes, for example, that Pentecostals in Brazil use biblical parables to criticise free market capitalism.

This debate, though dated, is instructive here because of a key assumption underlying both sides of it – namely that Protestantism undermines indigenous culture. For those who view Protestantism negatively, conversion prevents indigenous people from challenging colonial relations that distort their culture. For those who view it positively, the cultural destruction that attends conversion is considered beneficial on the grounds that indigenous culture traps people in poverty and ignorance. Recently, however, scholars have argued that Protestantism is not incompatible with indigenous culture. I turn now to this emerging literature.

Protestantism and Indigenous Renewal in Mexico and Central America

Over the last decade studies on Protestantism in Latin America have begun to emphasise the identity aspects of conversion to, and affiliation with, Protestantism. Studies

hail from various disciplines, including history, anthropology, and political science. As such, there is no uniform approach to the topic. Endeavours run the gamut from political economy to constructivist perspectives, with the requisite tweaking by discipline. What holds these otherwise disparate theoretical positions together is an agreement that Protestantism allows converts to hold onto and even embrace their customs in the face of change. Indeed, in this new approach, the focus on how Protestantism changes indigenous cultures (and the related concern to evaluate that change) has largely been dropped. After 30 years of globalisation dislocation in indigenous communities is considered to be well advanced. In this context, Protestantism has come to be seen not as an agent of change but as a bulwark around which identity can be reconstituted on indigenous grounds, albeit in new ways.²

One of the best studies is Annis' ethnography of Protestantism in Guatemala. Protestants came to Guatemala in the early 1800s, but Annis argues that Protestantism only experienced growth with the rise of 'anti-milpa forces' (1999: 10). Milpa agriculture, as a system of production, emerged during colonialism. It is inward looking, self-protective, and imbued with the logic of resistance. The primacy of corn is illustrative. When compared to viable cash crops, corn has the lowest price per acre of yield. Many scholars explain its primacy on the milpa by noting corn's mystical place in Mayan culture. Annis argues, however, that attachment to corn is based on resistance, not mysticism. Growing corn absorbs a family's 'spare inputs' (idle time, excess labour) and converts them into something of high value – a nutritious diet. Furthermore, by creating a surplus that is consumed, extraction by the colonial outsider is impeded.

Milpa logic is also deeply intertwined with Catholicism. The Catholic *cofradía* system legitimises milpa logic by mirroring and buttressing it in the social realm. The *cofradía* consists of a series of civil-religious cargos in which all village families are expected to participate. Cargos usually entail payments for the celebration of key religious fiestas, such as those associated with Easter and the patron saint of the village. The function of the *cofradía*, then, mimicks that of the milpa – it absorbs surplus by consuming it internally (here in celebrations shared by the whole village). Extraction of surplus by the outside is thus avoided, while wealth is kept roughly level within the village (Annis, 1999: 61).

As the twentieth century progressed the stability of the milpa came under pressure – from land consolidation, modern agriculture inputs, tourism and literacy campaigns. These forces have undermined the internal consistency of the milpa, introducing a class system into village life that had not previously existed. It is at the margins of this class system – at the upper and lower echelons – that Protestantism takes hold. The margins include families lucky enough to acquire large chunks of land suitable for extensive cash cropping, as well as families whose access to land has declined, requiring off-farm labour. Though at opposite ends of the spectrum, both groups no longer have a place

2 It is important to note that liberation theologians were also interested in accommodating indigenous culture, but the Vatican rejected such proposals. See Meyer (2000) on the suppression of then Bishop Samuel Ruiz' efforts to 'indianise' Catholicism in Chiapas.

in the milpa system, and their vision has turned by necessity away from the milpa, to the outside.

Protestantism does not, however, represent a rejection of Indianness *per se*. Rather, it provides a belief system through which indigenous people can define themselves as indigenous outside of the milpa logic which no longer provides space for them. Indeed, in Guatemala's intensely stratified society, the *ladino* overclass continues to regard indigenous people as 'indios' whether they work on a milpa or not. As such, the new identity of Protestant converts takes form around discourses that value non-milpa forms of production rather than discourses that reject or denigrate Indianness.

Other studies note the link between Protestantism and indigenous renewal by reference to the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico (Collier, 1994; Bowen, 1996; Freston, 2001). Both Freston (2001) and Collier (1994) note, for example, that the initial rebellion emerged in *municipios* with high levels of evangelicals. While neither suggests that Protestant leaders sanctioned the rebellion, both note that in Chiapas Protestantism is often a vehicle for resisting corruption, and thus has cross-fertilisation with the movement.

In particular, Protestantism has become a vehicle for breaking *cacique* (and by extension PRI) control in indigenous villages – an aim that coincides with Zapatista goals (Limón and Clemente, 1996; Sullivan, 1998; Cahn, 2003). In some villages converts band together to circumvent economic dealings with *caciques*. In others they opt out of village fiestas to avoid not only drinking, but also funnelling money to *caciques* that monopolise the market for fiesta-related goods and services. Gross (2001, 2003) and Dow (2005) found similar links between Protestantism and resistance to *cacique* control in Oaxaca and eastern Mexico respectively. Sullivan (1998) suggests that such opt-outs allow converts to embrace indigenous traditions uncontaminated by *cacique* exploitation. Decisions like these have, however, led to the expulsion of evangelicals from their villages. Limón and Clemente (1996) suggest that there have been as many as 30,000 such expulsions and note that many expellees embraced the Zapatista movement because it rejected the PRI hierarchy, which was reproduced at the village level by *caciques*.

Protestantism has also influenced the nature of Zapatista politics in terms of its gender dynamics (Collier, 1994). Unlike a typical Catholic mass, Protestant churches encourage women to perform public roles during religious services, including reading before a congregation or offering public testimony. These changes have helped loosen rigid gender norms in indigenous communities, and have also given women positions of authority from which to enact further change. These changes are reflected in the Zapatista movement, where women serve in both the Zapatista Army (EZLN) and governing councils, and have recognised rights in the movement's 'Women's Revolutionary Law'.

Other scholars explain Protestantism's role in indigenous renewal by citing its use of indigenous languages as a medium of conversion and worship. In Protestant sects reading the Bible is central to worship, so pastors use indigenous language Bibles to reach potential converts, and to preach to existing ones. Given low rates of literacy among the indigenous, pastors also tend to do literacy work with their congregations. These linguistic acts carry great symbolic weight. By using native languages to deliver

sermons indigenous people receive the message that their language is as important as Spanish. This is especially significant in southern Mexico where the indigenous have long had to 'suffer the indignity of being treated as second-class citizens even in church, where the Catholic priests administered the sacraments only in Spanish' (Collier: 58). Likewise, learning to read a mother tongue allows indigenous people to take pride in something government has long denigrated. Todd Hartch's study (2000) on the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Hidalgo reaches a similar conclusion. He found that SIL's presence in Otomi villages revived an interest in native beliefs. Even among converts, Hartch found that conversion compelled people to revisit traditions, even discarded ones, and to consider how to incorporate them into their new faith.

Attempts to understand Protestantism in the context of identity formation represent an important step forward in the literature on Protestantism in Latin America. They move beyond overarching narratives found in earlier literature that posited Protestantism starkly as either an agent of imperialism or a harbinger of progress. This literature also demonstrates in an analytic way what those on the ground have long known – that indigenous Protestants have in many ways made the religion their own.

There are gaps, however, in our understanding of how Protestant *institutions* came to tolerate cultures they once tried to change, and in some cases destroy. Indeed, Protestant complicity in acculturation campaigns, as well as its continued rejection of syncretism, are difficult to reconcile with the argument that Protestantism is contributing to an indigenous revival. In this paper I argue that missionaries played a role in this process. Unfortunately, attributing even some of the growth of Protestantism to missionaries is usually met with contempt, viewed as the result of blind structuralism, or worse paternalism/racism. Bowen (1996), argues, for example, that assigning a role for foreign missionaries belies 'a naïve contempt for indigenous peoples that assumes they were and are unthinking pawns, duped into betrayal of their traditional culture by a few "gringos"' (171). As I demonstrate in this paper, however, missionaries have played a role, and that role can be interpreted outside of the prescribed missionary-cum-imperialist formula. Indeed, my findings indicate that missionaries only gained success in the region when they approached evangelism on indigenous terms – thus laying important groundwork for identity (re)construction.

Levine and Stoll (1997) also provide an argument for taking the role of religious agents like missionaries into account. It is, they argue, an antidote to the unwarranted optimism of the literature which often assumes that because Protestantism is a form of resistance it will 'build impetus for structural change' (93). As they counter, while Protestantism may empower converts, it has not translated into substantial power for them:

Scholars and activists alike were also misled (and misled themselves) by the clamor to 'reread history from below'. Looking at history as experienced by ordinary people is of course important, if for no other reason than to underscore the importance of popular actions and to avoid the assumption that history is only what elites do and institutions mandate. But, more is at stake than rereading history from below, because it is precisely in the fusion of history as experienced from below with power

and culture as projected by elites and their institutions that keys to the future are found (93).

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Protestant 'religious agents' are contributing to an indigenous awakening. In doing so, I do not intend to minimise the agency of individual converts. My goal is to illuminate how Protestant institutions, which have historically been at odds with indigenous culture, have come to facilitate and in some cases empower it.

A Note on Method and Identity

Across the disciplinary divides, scholars tend to view 'renewal' and 'compatibility' in terms of identity. In an effort to be exact about my own use of the term, in this section I outline my definition of identity, and the method I use to analyse how changes in conversion strategies and tactics allow indigenous people to convert without rejecting important parts of their culture. This paper uses a constructivist approach to identity, and is based on three axioms.

First, identities are not primordial in nature, but are crafted in an ever-changing social and economic milieu. In the case of indigenous identity, it is often assumed that indigenous identity has remained unchanged through the centuries. Scholarship on indigenous identity in Mexico, however, demonstrates a considerable amount of flux (Rees, 1996; Stavenhagen, 2000). In Mexico, indigenous people are beginning to define themselves in 'ethnic' terms (Rees, 1996; Stavenhagen, 2000). This represents a fundamental break with the past. Historically the Mexican state defined indigenous people in class-based terms. Corporatist structures such as the National Confederation of Peasants brought Indians and peasants together under the *campesino* label. These policies were reinforced by the state's official policy of *mestizaje* – turning Indians into *mestizos* (Bonfil Batalla, 1996). Indeed, when 'indianidad' was deployed by the state, it was usually done to reinforce Indians' place in the class system (Rees, 1996). For their part, the indigenous defined themselves at the macro level as *campesinos* and at the micro level by village of origin. Recent scholarship suggests, however, that indigenous people in Oaxaca are beginning to define themselves in 'ethnic' terms, such as Zapotec, although such invocations take myriad forms, and are not usually applied in cross-community settings (Nader, 1990; Stephen, 1991; Rees, 1996). As I demonstrate in the next section, Protestants buttress this trend by approaching indigenous people on ethnic terms, using language to organise their categories of proselytism.

Second, religious agents are important actors in the process of identity construction. The literature has tended to treat Protestantism as a social movement, and has thus focused on its adherents – the converts. As I noted previously, however, Protestantism's past makes it an unlikely vehicle for a revival of indigenous culture. To understand this apparent contradiction, this paper examines the efforts of missionaries working during the last twenty years when Protestantism was making strong inroads into the region. In so doing I illustrate how missionaries transformed Protestant institutions in such a way that conversion is no longer seen as antithetical to indigenous culture. In doing so, however, I am not suggesting that converts were uninvolved in the process to

change conversion strategies. Clearly, they were integrally involved. I focus on foreign missionaries because they were in the best position to communicate problems with the old strategies and tactics back to Protestant sending agencies in the US and to suggest solutions to them. Indeed, as I document below, the new conversion strategies were premised on the idea that native missionaries would replace their foreign counterparts.

Third, identity is generally manifested around cultural practices. In Latin America the differences between Catholics and Protestants are not, in practice, about theology. Rather, Protestants are largely definable by the traditional cultural practices they reject after conversion, such as *tequio*, participation in fiestas, and *compadrazgo* (Annis, 1999). In this paper I examine two practices that have been sources of conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Oaxaca – *tequio* and village fiestas – in order to assess how missionaries have changed their approach to allow indigenous people to convert without rejecting such important customs outright. I also examine the tactics involved in Protestant language work. Although such work has not caused the same level of conflict, I examine it because many scholars view it as fundamental to indigenous revival (Garma, 1998).

In the following section I begin by analysing the new strategies that sending agencies have adopted in Latin America in the last ten to fifteen years. I then explore the tactics missionaries employ in negotiating *tequio*, village fiestas and language work. The sample for this project includes in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 missionaries,³ conducted during three summer research visits between 1999 and 2001.⁴ This sample consists of evangelical, fundamentalist and Pentecostal missionaries since these groups are the driving force behind the high conversion rates of the past twenty years. Five sending agencies are represented in the sample – the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the International Mission Board, the Mexican Assemblies of God, Campus Crusade, and Fellowship International. Other missionaries in my sample were employed by individual churches, or had started their own mission organisations. One missionary was a self-funded Pentecostal missionary. All of the missionaries in the sample were American-born. Two-thirds had been missionaries in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America for ten or more years at the time of interview, allowing for a longitudinal perspective on institutional changes.

Missionaries and Indigenous-Friendly Tactics

Historically, individual churches or denominations sponsored missionaries working in Latin America, but during the late seventies the mission field changed dramatically. Mainline denominations began to trim funding for overseas mission work. Evangelical sects took their place. Historically on the fringes of Protestantism, evangelicals were in the midst of a resurgence. Leaders on the Christian Right were not only entering

3 The names of the missionaries quoted in this paper are pseudonyms.

4 In any interview pool some respondents are more articulate than others. Given space constraints I quote these respondents. Missionaries not quoted follow the same patterns as those quoted in the paper.

politics, they were attempting to make their operations mainstream and professional as well (Fitzgerald, 1986; Gallaher, 1997). They did so with a business ethos in mind (Diamond, 1989).

In Latin America, this meant the introduction of two broad strategies. First, evangelicals decided to *target* their missions at places and peoples that would secure a higher 'rate of return'. Karen, a missionary with the International Mission Board (IMB), described the new strategy as 'impacting lostness'. It was called for, she explained, because even after 100 years of evangelism, 'probably 90%, if not more of the whole population – not only here in Oaxaca, but all over Mexico – are lost'. Indeed, while the Summer Institute of Linguistics had taken this approach since its inception in the 1930s, most mainline churches had not. In Mexico, these new target groups include the urban poor, people in disaster regions, and the indigenous.

The missionaries in my sample all utilised 'targeting' to organise their work. Harry, who directs a Mexican Assemblies of God training centre in Oaxaca, provides a good example. His mission school trains student pastors to work with indigenous people. In our interview he described his students to me:

our first year students are young people between the ages of 20 and 25 that have never pastored before, but they feel a call to work on a specific ethnic group ... Our next year's group of students, which we can already tell are going to be more married families, and pastors that have been established, but feel the call to work a different ethnic group.

Another missionary, Helen, who formed her own mission organisation *La Palabra*, also told me that her organisation targets indigenous peoples. As she explained:

That's all we do, we don't target Spanish speakers at all. See, for Spanish speakers there's radio, there's TV, there's tracts, there's churches on every street corner.

Protestant missionaries are open about such targeting. Indeed, most volunteered to me that targeting indigenous people made sense because they were 'more spiritual' than the rest of Mexican society. Uriah, the Field Coordinator for the International Mission Board's Mexican southeast division, explained it to me this way:

In indigenous culture, too, there's a lot more sensitivity to spiritual things because when you go to a culture that's less material, there's always going to be that heightened sensitivity to spiritual things. In our culture, we are so materialistic that we're not even aware of the spiritual realm. Yet, they're very aware of the spiritual realm. It's a daily part of their life.

Critics argue that claims of heightened indigenous spirituality amount to stereotyping. They note that such declarations mask a more mundane reality – that entrenched poverty among the indigenous makes them more susceptible to Protestant overtures of material help and spiritual gain. When I raised this critique with missionaries,

however, none saw the distinction between spiritual openness and susceptibility as meaningful. The prevailing attitude was that targeting resulted in higher rates of salvation, so it had to be good.

A second and related strategy that evangelicals developed is 'church planting'. The International Mission Board formalised this method in their 'New Directions' directive in 1998. Karen described the new directive to me this way:

Basically what they're wanting us to do now is to be a part of a church planting movement. Not just to work with churches, individual churches, and not even just to work with regional conventions that all of the states of Mexico have, but to extend out further than that, to be a catalyst in a church planting movement. But, those [new] churches then have to not just be new church starts, but those churches then have to be trained and so forth so that they then reproduce. Reproducible churches! Because as it is, things are not moving fast, you know? [...]. Now, we're looking at the broad picture.

The church planting strategy is designed to avoid the failure of earlier waves of missionaries to win many converts. Indeed, missionaries in my sample described the former approach to reaching converts – in which missionaries proselytised individual by individual – as a failure. Uriah explained IMB's new strategy this way to me:

Our approach is to gather a group of people that aren't evangelised, rather than individuals, and to try to group them and come up with a church that way [...]. So, rather than picking individuals, or getting individuals to form a church, we try to evangelise a group of people.

When I asked Uriah to elaborate on how missionaries can successfully proselytise a group all at once, he responded that missionaries had to begin by gaining the support and confidence of a large number of people on non-religious grounds. He explained:

Well, what the approach is, if you go into a village where you don't have contact, or don't have an open door already, what you do is, we usually try to enter in offering some kind of help to the community. Not even mentioning the gospel, and try to do some kind of community development project that's going to help the whole community [...] and through the community development project a relationship is built with the leaders of the community. And, then you earn the hearing.

The church planting strategy is also based on the recognition that the cultural difference between foreign missionaries and their indigenous targets has been an obstacle to wide-spread conversions. Indeed, church planting is based on the idea that native missionaries, rather than foreign ones, should plant churches. In the case of indigenous villages, this means using indigenous rather than *mestizo* preachers because the cultural divide between them is often as great as that between foreigners and the indigenous.

Uriah explained to me, for example, that IMB assigned Mexican (rather than) foreign missionaries to villages, but required them to train locals for extended proselytising:

They [the Mexican Missionaries] are going to be in one strategic location. And, they have their family there and that strategic location, that's their base. And, what we're trying to get them to do in different ways is to set up their own training programme, with their own indigenous workers that are from the [ethnic] group they are trying to reach. And they will train them in evangelism, discipleship, community development, and the things that are going to reach people.

This new strategy means that foreign missionaries now have a different role in the mission process. They largely do the administrative work of mission projects, such as running training programmes, teaching at seminaries, raising money for new churches, and producing materials for church planters, e.g. indigenous language Bibles, taped sermons, tracts. This shifting role is important to highlight because it reveals that the growth in indigenous conversion rates was not an entirely organic, unplanned process. Rather, sending agencies actively changed their strategy, facilitating an increase in indigenous conversion rates. This new, two-pronged strategy also helps explain how Protestantism, with its well documented links to deindianisation campaigns, could facilitate indigenous renewal. I now turn to specific tactics missionaries employ regarding three indigenous cultural practices.

Tequio

Tequio is a common practice in indigenous villages in Oaxaca. While the specifics vary by region and indigenous group, *tequio* usually refers to unpaid labour that males do in the village. Such labour can include cleaning the village square after a fiesta, clearing a road after a mudslide, or pitching in to build a community basketball court. In indigenous villages all adult, able-bodied men are expected to do *tequio*. While women do not usually perform it, they often participate by preparing communal meals for *tequio* assignments with large numbers of participants. *Tequio* is often highly ritualised in Oaxacan villages. It tends to be linked to both the Catholic *cofradía* system and to the village cargo system. Cleaning up the village square after a fiesta, for example, benefits the Catholic Church. Likewise, when a village member accepts burdensome *tequio* assignments, he signals that he is ready for leadership because he will accept arduous assignments that benefit the village as a whole.

Tequio has historically been a point of conflict between Protestants and Catholics. When Oaxacan expert Laura Nader first visited *Talea de Castro* in 1957, for example, she found the village recovering from a violent clash between Protestants and Catholics (1990). Tension arose because Protestants had stopped doing their *tequio*, arguing that it was connected to the Catholic Church. Catholic villagers responded by torching Protestant homes. The military was eventually called in to quell the conflict.

When I began interviewing Protestant missionaries, however, I found that missionaries were no longer encouraging converts to reject *tequio* assignments. Specifically,

missionaries now employ two tactics for negotiating *tequio* in an effort to avoid conflict. The first approach concerns the behaviour of missionaries working and living in villages. When male missionaries are living in indigenous villages, they are now generally expected to participate in at least some *tequio* assignments. Ellen, a linguist/missionary with SIL, told me how her husband fulfilled his *tequio* obligations:

When we're in town he asks sometimes what he should do, and sometimes he's participated in helping the road projects – laying the cement or repairing wire [but] my husband had a back operation so he can't really lift stuff. So, he's told them that, and so they said, 'well if you can't do your *tequio* [then] you can just contribute money – a day's labour or something'.

Some, like Michael, an SIL linguist who lived in a Choapan Zapotec village for many years, told me he participated in *all tequio* assignments:

In our situation, I went every time they had a *tequio*. I was there whatever it was. Even if it was helping to repair the Catholic Church. Whatever. I went. And, I tried to set an example for later years, that the believer should too, no matter what it was, well, up to some point anyhow, at least. But anyhow, that they should participate in their *tequios* because that's a very important institution in the town, those *tequios*.

Because most foreign missionaries no longer live for long periods of time in villages, however, their influence regarding *tequio* is often through institutional channels, where they instruct church planters how to approach the issue. Some missionaries, like Michael, advocated doing all forms of *tequio*, even those associated with the Catholic Church. Other missionaries disapproved of converts doing *tequio* assignments directly related to the Catholic Church, but these missionaries told me that they encouraged converts to proffer alternative work when refusing Church related *tequio* so that the rest of the village did not view Protestants as lazy or stingy. Uriah told me, for example, that IMB now encourages its church planters to work within the *tequio* system rather than rejecting it outright.

In the past, you know, there was a separatist mentality. It was like, we can't have anything to do with this [*tequio*] anymore, we've converted up, and anything to do with the traditions of the community, we can't do it. But now what we encourage is participation with the community as long as your convictions, your new convictions are not compromised. So again, going back to the example of the [IMB] missionary in the Mazoteco village, through all these community development projects, and helping that way, that was his *tequio*.

Similarly, Eric, a missionary with SIL explained how Protestants in his language area were working around the problem of Catholic Church related *tequio*:

I've heard that in places they [Protestants] will do their *tequio* to help clean up the [Catholic] church stuff. And, sometimes I've heard of them [Protestants] saying, well, we'll do that, but then you should be doing *tequio* to help clean up our churches too. But, you know, I don't think that that really works very much [...] I think that what tends to happen is they try to push the town hall to keep the separation between church activities and town activities [*tequio*].

Protestant missionaries' new approach to *tequio*, though not radical, is noteworthy because it allows indigenous people to convert without rejecting outright a key custom in their culture. This is not to imply, of course, that the ultimate goal of missionaries is to preserve indigenous traditions. Indeed, while Michael, whose comments are excerpted above, viewed *tequio* as an important tradition in and of itself, most of the missionaries I interviewed saw *tequio* as a tradition that had to be negotiated in such a way as to ease the attainment of their ultimate goal – conversion. Nancy, who worked as a support staff member for SIL, explained it this way to me:

I just know that they [converts] need to do the *tequio* if they want to be respected in their towns and they want to be respected because their work with scriptures will not be recognised if they are not respected.

Nonetheless, the flexibility that missionaries have regarding *tequio* (doing it themselves while in villages or encouraging converts to continue doing it to remain on good terms with the rest of the village) facilitates conversions that no longer entail abandoning key traditions.

Mayodomos and Fiestas

Another historic point of contention for indigenous converts has been the tradition of yearly fiestas. While most Oaxacan villages have several celebrations a year, the most important is the yearly fiesta commemorating the patron saint of the village. These fiestas can last a week, and it is common for relatives from other villages, migrants working in the US, and invited guests to attend. Not surprisingly, hosting a fiesta is an expensive undertaking. Villages normally select a *mayodomo* to organise the event and pay for the majority of expenses, with the remaining costs distributed equally among the town's other residents.

Fiestas have long been a point of controversy for Protestant denominations. SIL founder Cameron Townsend, for example, was virulently opposed to the tradition. He thought the *mayodomo* process punished villagers who did well by burdening them with a financially draining 'honour'. He also argued that in the context of widespread poverty, scarce resources should not be squandered on celebrations. That the yearly fiestas celebrated Catholic Saints and involved alcohol consumption also led Townsend to denounce the tradition as both 'papist' and 'pagan' (Annis, 1999).

The majority of the missionaries I interviewed saw the institution of fiestas and *mayodomos* in the same light as Townsend, albeit with variations of emphasis and

degree. Some missionaries, like Nancy, emphasised drinking in their critique of the fiestas:

Sometimes the village requires that they [converts] pay for some of these festivals that they have. And some of them [the converts] don't want to do that. They don't want to put their money into that kind of thing because they're not drinking anymore. And that makes it hard on them.

Helen, co-director of *La Palabra*, also frowned on the fiesta system, although she emphasised a different problem. She argued that the fiesta system had become an extortion racket for village commercial people (who are often *caciques*):

You have to remember there are vested interests in keeping everybody in the Catholic system. And one is the fiestas. Because these fiestas are a huge economic drain. If you're a *mayordomo*, a lot of times you lose everything you have. And, why do they do these [fiestas]? Who makes the profit on those? Well, the towns-keepers, the commercial people. They're selling the fire-wire, they're selling the firecrackers, they're selling all these things.

She also argued that *caciques* use the fiesta system to exploit their poorer neighbours:

For a wedding or a fiesta or things like this, you have to put out a huge outlay. So, you borrow money from the *caciques*, and you blow it all on their stores, and you can't repay your debts and so then they take your land.

Other missionaries criticised the tradition of fiestas by highlighting the links most fiestas have to the Catholic Church. Eric argued, for example:

Even though there's supposed to be separation of church and state, in the communities it's all together in terms of the fiestas. The Catholic Church calendar and everything that is done in the Catholic church, and what's done in the town hall, tends to get mixed together. That's one of the reasons that they [a village in Eric's translation area] struggle with having a Protestant Church come in, because then people [converts] don't want to serve, to be a *mayordomo* for a fiesta. They don't want to participate in the different activities that are part of the Catholic Church.

Even though the missionaries in my sample were opposed to fiestas, they recognised the trouble that non-participation in fiestas created for converts, and the negative impact it had on future conversions. And, like their approach to *tequio*, missionaries have developed tactics that allow converts to negotiate their participation in fiestas and by extension their contribution to village life, thereby avoiding separation from the village (and the identity that comes with it). Harry told me how he explained the issue to his pastors in training:

The normal Assembly of God person in the mountain villages tries to find a way that they don't have to give their money to the annual festival for the Catholic Saint. But, the council of our leaders, which has been wise, says this: 'How many are there of you [Pentecostals] in that town? Oh, just a few? Well, you just better pay the thing and don't say nothing. Once you get to be so many, then say, "we don't want to pay this, but we're willing to give money for a social project, like to build a road, or fix a sidewalk – something to help. But, we don't want the money to go for drinking and partying"'. So, once you get to be enough, you will probably get your way. And that happens. When the church gets big enough, what we've seen is that politically, the community starts to put them into power because they don't think they're gonna steal the money and rob it to drink. So, most of our workers come in and the first thing they teach their small groups is to quit doing it the old way. It just doesn't work to start with [ending participation]. It's better to gradually pull out of it.

Michael and Sarah, who are married, take a similar approach to fiesta participation. Because they work with SIL, and are not in a position to directly instruct pastors or converts, they try to influence converts by the example they set in their own lives. As Sarah explained:

Even here, we struggle with it too. Like here they have the town fiesta in January every year. And, there's loads of drinking and all this stuff, uh, bullfights, and like we don't like cruelty to bulls and stuff ... But, we figure there's lots more to the fiesta than those things. There's the firecrackers and there's the rides, and so we donate. Because we don't feel like we're necessarily giving to make anybody do anything bad.

Michael and Sarah also supported (and thus tacitly encouraged) converts to bargain with town leaders, in effect replacing participation in the fiesta with a payment or a task that does not offend the convert's new faith but gives something back to the village as well. Sarah explained such a bargaining scenario:

They might say, I'm not going to go to that [the fiesta] because there's a lot of drinking, but I will help with this instead. You know, I'll buy a basketball for the school or something like that.

While none of the missionaries quoted above approved of the fiestas and the tradition of selecting *mayordomos* to host them, the above comments do indicate that missionaries are much more flexible towards this practice than their predecessors were. Indeed, the tactics they espouse allow converts to continue to contribute to the communal good of the village, albeit in different ways.

In terms of the key question of this paper – how has Protestantism in light of its past become a vehicle for indigenous awakening? – the flexibility towards fiestas demonstrates in a concrete way how Protestantist institutional actors undertook actions

designed to ease the cultural shock of conversion. It is important to caution, however, that flexibility is not a guarantee against future conflict. Indeed, as Harry's comments above indicate, the ultimate goal of many Protestants is the eventual elimination of fiestas as village wide events. Nonetheless, bargaining and consensus are crucial elements of decision making in most indigenous villages, and by embracing them, missionaries allow new converts to be able to continue to function as part of the village rather than stand in opposition to it.

The Politics of Language Use

Some of the earliest critiques against Protestantism in Latin America focused on Protestant language work. Criticism was especially strong against the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Some scholars accused SIL linguists of breaking standard rules of translation in an effort to 'prop up well-defined political interests' (Pereira, 1981: 109). Others accused SIL of dishonesty in its dealings with both governments in the region and indigenous villages where they worked. They note that SIL linguists refuse to call themselves missionaries even though the US wing of SIL is called Wycliff Bible translators and its linguists present themselves as missionaries while raising money in the US (Hvalkof and Aaby, 1981). In short, much of the scholarship viewed SIL's translation work as a means to an end, and therefore rejected it as cynical. As I note earlier, however, recent scholarship has taken a largely positive view of Protestant language work, noting that it has contributed to an indigenous awakening, even by those who do not convert (Collier, 1994; Adams, 2001; Hartch, 2000).

None of the missionaries in my sample saw their language work merely in terms of its use value, i.e. saving more souls. Many saw their work as having dual worth – at once useful for conversion and indigenous survival. Michael, who has lived in Oaxaca for over 30 years, seemed genuinely excited, for example, by the renewal of indigenous cultures in Mexico. He likened the renewal to the civil rights movement in the United States:

I think it's kind of like the resurgence in black pride in the United States. It wasn't too long ago that being black was really bad. But now there's been a big movement, you know, in black pride and black history, black traditions and so on and so forth. And, that's kind of similar to what's happened here in Mexico, where the indigenous people felt like they were very lower class and looked down upon, and [that] anything indigenous was bad. But, there's been a great increase in indigenous pride in the last twenty years.

And, when I asked Michael if his missionary work fit into this indigenous renewal, he responded by noting:

Well, I think all over the world there's a resurgence of indigenous cultures and things, and we like to say that we're part of that movement in respect to languages.

Nancy also posited a cultural role for SIL, although as her comment below indicates, the religious goals remain prevalent. SIL's linguists, she told me 'Don't come to change the culture of the people, but to enhance it by giving them a written language. So, they can read the Bible. Karen, the Associate Director of Oaxaca's SIL was more qualified in her assessment of SIL's role in cultural survival and renewal. She did not, for example, posit SIL language work as causing an indigenous awakening. However, she did assert that SIL's work had probably contributed to the survival of some dialects:

Well, there's kind of a movement back, but I don't think it [the movement] is because of anything we've done. I mean, there is a movement back to the Indian languages, just like in the [United] States, because now there are kids who are wanting to go to school to learn the Indian languages. We've seen that a little bit more in bilingual areas. But yeah, I think writing a language down in some areas has helped keep it alive.

None of these comments indicate, of course, that missionaries are motivated primarily to save indigenous cultures, but it does demonstrate that they see their work as useful in that regard. And, while these efforts should not be overstated, they do demonstrate that conversion can occur alongside a positive view of an important part of indigenous cultures – the use of native languages.

While the literature has primarily focused on Protestant contributions to indigenous language literacy by examining their Bible translation work, less noted but equally important are the ancillary materials missionaries produce. In addition to Bibles, missionaries produce small booklets and pamphlets in indigenous languages to promote literacy (and thus Bible readers). Karen, for example, told me about some of the literacy materials she had produced with her indigenous co-translators:⁵

We brought a family, actually two families out [to Mitla], and through a workshop, and through us working together, they started writing little stories, and we made little books of those. That's how we start. They [the indigenous co-translators] learn to read and write, doing maybe longer stories during later stages of literacy. And then, we do a primer.

Ellen of SIL had a similar story:

Especially at the beginning we try to do a lot of the writing, even as we are digging into learning the language ourselves. We start out by putting out real simple stories, things that came from their culture [...] because stories are easier for them to read because they already know the stories.

5 SIL linguists/missionaries usually work with indigenous aides. This arrangement allows SIL linguists to phrase text in a way that has meaning in the language.

Ellen and her language translators also created a primer specifically for bi-lingual residents who have some reading ability in Spanish. 'Quite a few people have used that', she told me.

Other missionaries I interviewed were also producing audio/visual materials in indigenous languages. While these materials are almost always religiously oriented (unlike SIL's primers and storybooks), their production is important because it extends indigenous languages into other media dominated by Spanish, and in so doing elevates/equates them with Spanish. Indeed, some of the missionaries I interviewed expressed frustration with SIL's slow pace and its limited efforts at distribution. Helen, who grew up in Oaxaca as the child of SIL missionaries, put it this way:

Well, as a Wycliff child, for years I criticised them ... Wycliff are like highly trained people who make swords. OK? The Bible is the sword. They are beautiful swords, jewel encrusted. It takes 20 years of your life to make this sword. OK? So, they make these swords, and have this huge armory with all the swords and all the weapons. But, they're not a church, they're not the army. They make swords. So, the church has to come along and take the weapons. The problem is that Wycliff has never interacted with the Mexican church. They didn't want to be targeted as evangelicals. So, the army's out here fighting, and the swords are over here, and the two have never connected.

Helen told me that her frustration led her, along with her Mexican-born husband, to form *La Palabra*, which produces and distributes gospel recordings in indigenous languages. As she explained it, these materials were designed to cover gaps in the period between initial translation work and a fully translated book of the Bible:

See, this is where gospel recordings come in. We don't take twenty years to produce something. You go out in a month and you record, without the people having to read, and you make a cassette, and you start distributing. And, that's the point of it – to get the word of God into people's hands, well, into their hearts and ears. You give out cassettes, thousands of cassettes, and you develop a Christian public that wants more. So, after five or ten years when Wycliff people started to get a portion of Luke or Mark [completed] there are people there ready to accept it.

Helen also noted that by focusing on cassettes, a larger number of indigenous groups can be reached. Pointing to a map of Mexico's indigenous communities, she noted:

You notice that there's 265 groups in Mexico, ethnic groups, and if you look at these lists [of ethnic groups], everybody has cassettes. Actually, we have recordings in 260 out of the 265 [groups]. We are only lacking a couple of languages. You see these, everyone has a cassette, and there are a lot less that have New Testaments. There are 90 New Testaments, which

is tremendous when you think about it. But, there are still groups that don't have New Testaments, and there are a lot that will never have New Testaments. They're too small. But everybody can have a cassette.

As Helen's comments indicate, there is now an effort to forge links between church planters and those producing indigenous language materials. Indeed, several missionaries in my sample told me they used Helen's cassettes in their work. Moreover, while Helen was critical of SIL's 'aloofness', other missionaries in my sample indicated that they had developed links (formal and informal) with SIL. When I asked Harry, for example, if he worked with SIL, he responded:

I've invited SIL to come here to present their programmes so that if we have students who want to go into Bible translation they can whet their appetite. And, we contemplate that all of our missionaries, working in groups that have the scriptures translated [in their native language] will use them from SIL. So, there is a good partnership there.

Uriah of IMB also noted the links, explaining them this way to me:

SIL, their task is strictly translation. And, uh, so, it's very much on the front end of the whole process, and there are others in between who put it in recordings or whatever, in a kind of medium in which it can get used. And, then, our purpose is church planting, so we take those tools to help us plant churches.

While the goal of proselytising is ever-present in missionary language work, using and producing indigenous language materials allows potential converts to avoid seeing Protestantism as antithetical or in opposition to indigenous ways of life. Indeed, in the case of languages, Protestantism can actually become a vehicle for celebrating one's language in its own right. This certainly does not imply that every potential convert will see Protestantism as a means to indigenous survival. However, it does mean that conversion can occur in conjunction with embracing a fundamental part of indigenous culture – their languages.

Finally, it is worth noting that Protestant indigenous language work contributes not to only a localised pride in one's dialect, but also to a sense that indigenous people are connected across Mexico. This point became clear to me during a spring 2001 service I attended at the First Baptist church of Oaxaca. The service, which I happened upon in my effort to meet missionaries, was a 'missionary day'. The church pastor, Efraín, had invited missionaries working in Oaxaca to the church service. The invited missionaries were accompanied by groups of indigenous converts, who were slated to sing a hymn in their respective languages. As I listened to the hymns, I marvelled at the unfamiliar sounds. And, I realised that the converts probably felt a similar sense of unfamiliarity with each other's languages as well. Oaxaca is well known for its sixteen distinct indigenous language families, and for the host of dialects within each. While indigenous groups in Mexico have long been lumped

together at the bottom of the social ladder, differences between them are often acute on the ground. This service, however small, created a forum for indigenous groups to define themselves under a common category – not as Zapotec or Mazotec, but as *indígena*.

Some observers may celebrate these sorts of linkages, noting that indigenous people are more powerful when united across linguistic divides. Others may decry them as an attempt to turn a multi-faceted set of identities into a streamlined western style identity politics (built on an economy of scale). Regardless of how one views such interactions, Protestantism is clearly becoming a medium for some indigenous people to embrace their mother tongues.

Conclusion

During the last decade, scholars began to document a link between Protestantism and indigenous revival. While this literature is compelling, it remains unclear why or how Protestantism came to serve such a function. For much of their history Protestant missionaries worked with governments to *mestizoise* indigenous populations. In this paper I document how Protestant institutions have softened their approach to indigenous cultures, and in so doing allowed a more compatible relationship to develop between Protestantism and indigenous culture. In particular, I focus on both new conversion strategies and the specific tactics missionaries employ to negotiate indigenous customs.

Despite the complementary relationship these changes permit between Protestantism and indigenous culture, the relationship is not without problems, potential and real. My data suggests, for example, that while missionaries laud indigenous people for their presumed spirituality, many continue to hold disparaging views of indigenous culture. Helen provides a good example. The child of missionaries, Helen grew up in a Zapotec village. She has an in-depth knowledge of indigenous culture and its traditions, some of which she praised in our interview. Yet, Helen also expresses pejorative views of indigenous culture. When I asked her, for example, to comment on the critique that Protestantism undermines indigenous culture, she responded bluntly, arguing:

You are disrupting a monolithic society, but the monolithic society – what is it? Its alcoholism, idolatry, poverty, witchcraft. I mean, if that's the tradition of the Indians, then I don't feel called to respect that tradition.

Such antipathy has the potential to generate conflict, not only between Protestants and Catholics, but within Protestant circles as well. Indeed, as converts struggle to rearticulate indigenous customs, divergent views are likely to arise over the 'correct' balance between old and new. It is, therefore, worth considering the potential conflict that may arise around Protestants' new tactics (which are a manifestation of the wider strategy).

In the case of *tequio*, for example, missionaries' new approach may help converts avoid conflict with village leaders, but it does not preclude an eventual break from the tradition. As I note above, missionaries encourage converts to participate in *tequio* to avoid reprisals. If the sectarian balance shifts in Protestants' favour, however, it is clear that at least some missionaries would support abandoning the *tequio* tradition. Sectarian tensions could then arise.

Participation in village fiestas creates an even greater potential for conflict. While missionaries in this sample were largely ambivalent about the intrinsic value of *tequio*, they were clear cut in their disapproval of fiestas. They objected not only to the drinking that goes on at such affairs, but to the affront to free market individualism their funding presumably represents. As missionary comments excerpted above indicate, allowing fiesta participation is an expedient move. For missionaries, the goal is to eliminate fiestas as soon as the demographic or political balance permits. And, for converts in places where opting out of fiestas is a primary factor in conversion, admonitions to ease out of fiestas are likely to be ignored or not taken seriously (missionaries make no attempt to hide their view on fiestas). As with *tequio*, accommodation may simply delay conflict rather than avoid it altogether.

Unlike *tequio* and fiestas, most missionaries in my sample *were* appreciative of indigenous language. This was especially true for SIL workers, who devote sizable portions of their adult lives to creating indigenous orthographies. However, should language work remain concentrated around religiously oriented materials, it is possible that Catholics will avoid native language literacy because of its associations with Protestantism. It is also possible that as more Protestants become literate in native languages, some will choose to write down their oral tradition of stories, poetry and parables. Debates will surely emerge in which some converts reject such efforts as a resurrection of 'paganism' while others dismiss such concerns as overly strident.

Ultimately, the degree to which these new tactics help converts avoid conflict is contingent on *how* indigenous converts embrace their culture through Protestantism, and the context in which they do it. In Mexico new research provides evidence of harmonious and discordant conversions. Hartch (2000) documents, for example, how Protestant language work revives interest in indigenous tradition across sectarian lines. Likewise, Cahn (2003) demonstrates how Protestants engage in 'doctrinal disobedience' to maintain harmony with their Catholic neighbours, claiming 'all religions are good'. Other studies in Mexico suggest, however, that when conversion to Protestantism is a form of resistance to *caciques*, new tactics for 'getting along' are not sufficient to blunt reprisals (Gross, 2001). It is likely, however, that some friction is inevitable. Protestantism provides a mooring for indigenous people caught in uncertain times, and as it becomes more recognisably indigenous, its leaders increasingly compete with other groups to be *the* voice for reclaiming indigenous identity.

As these varied experiences demonstrate, indigenous converts make Protestantism their own, and in ways unique to their local circumstances. That Protestantism became a vehicle for indigenous renewal, however, was neither a one-sided process nor an accident of history. Indigenous attachment to Protestantism is due, at least in part, to the efforts of Protestant missionaries who after 200 years, finally made Protestantism amenable to potential indigenous converts.

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