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Guatemala: Religion and Policy Intertwined

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND BELIEFS PLAY especially significant roles for Guatemala's people. These roles are also unusually complex, intertwined with ethnic identities, social and economic divides, and Guatemala's fraught political landscape.

The population identifies overwhelmingly as Christian, but Christian denominations are diverse and divided so there is no common, respected and accepted religious "voice" at either an official or unofficial level; the Conference of Catholic Bishops comes closest to this role. The majority indigenous population (notably Mayan), encumbered by a long history of discrimination, cherishes deep cultural and spiritual roots that influence behavior and attitudes. Mayan spiritual traditions are reflected both in many Christian rituals and in distinctive beliefs and practices. Active mission involvement, notably from the United States, is a significant and not always positive influence.

When Guatemala's peace accords were signed in 1996, religious groups, that had been instrumental in peace negotiations, were expected to play significant roles in peacebuilding, notably in reconciliation and in setting Guatemala on a path to sustainable and equitable development. Tangible religious engagement over the past two decades has rarely fulfilled this hope and promise. Political will and consensus have eluded Guatemala and religious fragmentation and divisions have, if anything, increased.

The task of bridging Guatemala's deep divides, economic and social, cries out for stronger religious leadership. Numerous courageous and creative initiatives by diverse religious communities, scattered as they are, attest to their



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potential for stronger partnerships and active engagement on development and humanitarian agendas. With active popular stirrings and calls for change, religious institutions could potentially engage more actively on the many issues facing the nation. Areas of current and possible future involvement include: *gang violence, drug abuse, fighting corruption, addressing wide health disparities, combatting Guatemala's serious malnutrition problems, common efforts to protect the environment, supporting disrupted families and violence against children, consequences of migration, improving education quality, and addressing disputes over land tenure and mining enterprises.*

**Penance
Procession
of Jesus of
Nazareth from
Mercy in Antigua
Guatemala during
Holy Week 2009.**



Woman and children cross in front of iglesia de San Pedro in Antigua Guatemala.

Table 1: Historical religious demography in Guatemala

	Population	Christians	Catholics
1900	1.70	1.69	1.58
1970	5.20	5.20	4.34
1990	8.75	8.58	7.35
1995	9.98	9.77	8.40
2000	11.40	11.12	9.60

Source: World Christian Encyclopedia

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY

Data on the religious affiliations of Guatemala's population are poor and disputed, but the most salient facts are the large Christian majority, the historical importance of the Catholic Church, and the rapid growth since the 1970s especially of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which today may represent some 40 percent or more of the population. Catholics convert to Protestant denominations as they seek a more personal connection with God, enjoy the worship style at new churches, and appreciate the greater emphasis on morality.¹

Few Guatemalans profess atheist beliefs (9 percent); small denominations include a Mormon contingent (growing quite rapidly), the highest proportion of Eastern Orthodox in the Western Hemisphere, a small but influential Jewish community, and a very small Muslim community.²

Mayan spiritual traditions are widespread and influential. The Mayan polity disintegrated during the colonial era and many Mayans adopted Catholicism. Mayan spirituality today is expressed both as distinctive practices and as part of Catholic (and to a lesser degree Protestant) practice, visible, for example, in the religious practices of the lay associations known as *confradías*. Indigenous beliefs color approaches to farming, landholding, and environmental change, as well as mining ventures.

Guatemala's religious traditions veer towards conservatism. A 2014 Pew survey about religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices in 18 Latin American countries found that Guatemala has the highest rate (91 percent) of Christians--among Protestants and Catholics--saying that homosexuality is morally wrong³ and 92 percent of Christians stating that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases. Gender relations are conservative: 87 percent of Protestants and 75 percent of Catholics agree that wives are obligated to obey their husbands, including 78 percent of women surveyed.⁴

Catholic Church: The Catholic Church has less formal authority than in the past but dominates Guatemala's religious landscape. The Church was an integral part of the colonial system but over time its power and roles changed. During the 1870s, political upheavals turfed the Church out of power, its property was confiscated, and



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the government took over its educational institutions. The 1879 constitution eliminated the Church's official role; it was restored only in the 1930s. Guatemala's long, bitter conflict (essentially civil war) that ended in 1996 saw the Catholic Church deeply divided, with the urban centered official hierarchy supporting the military (allied with the United States) and many local priests and religious orders supporting rebels and popular movements. The scars endure. Today the Church operates with a quite classic structure, described as generally conservative, but still quite divided. "Charismatic Catholicism" influences parts of the Church, Opus Dei others. Several religious orders are active notably in education and community development. The Church runs several of Guatemala's leading universities.

Protestant Churches: The growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches is transforming Guatemala's religious landscape. Protestant denominations came to Guatemala in the nineteenth century but the surge in conversions dates from the 1980s (see table 1), as

missionaries and faith-linked development agencies flocked to Guatemala (initially often for disaster relief). Today an uncounted number of mission visits support wide-ranging development activities.⁵ Protestant denominations

The inside of La Merced Church in Antigua Guatemala.

Atiteco Beliefs

Atiteco beliefs are oriented to the Father/Mother, the original tree. This tree, if properly maintained, renews and regenerates the world. As "Flowering Mountain Earth," it is given graphic representation in the main altar of Santiago Atitlan's Catholic church. This altar, constructed when the church was without a resident priest and under full *cofradia* control, is dominated by a mountain carved in wood. To either side of the mountain are carvings of *cofradia* members, complete with their staffs of office and shown ascending the mountain. Atop the mountain is a World Tree in the form of a sprouting maize plant. Atitecos believe that as long as the primal ancestral element, as "Flowering Mountain Earth," is "fed," it will continue to provide sustenance. In Atiteco religion, this "feeding" can be literal. For example, some Atitecos will have an actual hole on their land through which offerings are given to the ancestor. In the Tzutujil dialect, this hole is called *r'muxux* (umbilicus).

“Communities don’t trust their political leaders very much. They confide much more in the pastor, the parish priest, the deacons, and the Sunday school teachers, than they do in politicians, who they see as liars and thieves. Creating these strategic alliances has worked and even exceeded expectations.”

—*Ramon Rixquiacche, Mayan Environmentalist*

include what are termed mainline Protestants (that would include Presbyterians and Episcopalians), distinguished, in self-identification and in organizational structures, from Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Many, but not all, have developed social service institutions, such as schools and hospitals, newspapers, credit unions, and anti-alcohol campaigns. Various American churches have affiliate churches in Guatemala today with thousands of followers; they continue to receive support from the American churches. The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assemblies of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church. Other Christian groups include Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons),

Episcopalians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Distinctions among the various traditions are complex with many overlaps, highlighting Guatemala as an intersection of religious fervor and dynamism; many theological strands play roles in a changing religious landscape. Some 72 percent of Guatemalan Protestants identify as Pentecostal.⁶ Pentecostal figures have played vital roles in recent history including in politics (President Rios Montt).⁷ Mission Pentecostal churches give people access to leadership within the church, offering historically excluded populations, especially women, a more egalitarian institutional religious space. The “prosperity gospel” is associated with many of these churches,

Mining Issues

The rights of indigenous communities and conflicts over land, and environmental issues, such as water contamination, are central to a complex series of disputes around mining ventures. Despite various commitments notably in the 1996 Peace Accords to protect indigenous land rights, Guatemala’s mining laws (notably that of 1997) and policy stance generally favor mining development. Consultation with communities on proposed and ongoing mining activities are generally limited and flawed. The Catholic Church as an institution and individual Catholic leaders are actively involved in the disputes.

“We learned about the plans for new mines too late, after all the authorizations had been given by the government. We began then to discuss with the people about the benefits and dangers of the extractive industries. We were a strong voice of opposition, and I personally have never agreed with the idea that extractive industries could lift us out of poverty. We have a mining law in Guatemala that is very favorable to transnational companies; they leave almost nothing for us in the country. They hurt the environment, although now there is more corporate social responsibility on the part of one of the mining companies. But we have not been able to bring about any changes in the law, despite efforts to change it. The Congress did not work with us, though we worked for many years on political, religious, and social training.”

—*Alvaro Ramazzini, Bishop of Huehuetenango*



Guatemala is divided into 22 departments, which are further divided into 334 municipalities.

promising rewards to entrepreneurial church members and fostering a spirit of competition—rivalries among churches and individuals are commonplace.

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

Both Catholic and Protestant churches are ubiquitous. They have access to urban and rural communities, often with long-standing, deep community roots and notably high levels of community trust. Faith actors are engaged in many sectors, sometimes as a continuation of historic roles (for example in education) but also responding to the crying needs of deep poverty that characterize many Guatemalan communities. However, activities are fragmented and there is no coherent, updated

source of information on their work and activities.

Catholic development engagement: The Church hierarchy, various religious orders, and faith-inspired organizations like Caritas and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) all have significant development programs. An example is the diverse Catholic involvement in Guatemala's patchwork, inadequate health services. Caritas was established in 1962, initially as a food program, then expanding to emergency relief, home construction, delivery of basic food-stuffs, and environmental protection. Current focal areas include gender, communication and civic participation, and political advocacy. CRS programs include agriculture, disease, safety,

A traditional Mayan ceremony performed at the Ximiche ruins.

and disaster response. The Salesian Missions encourage self-sufficiency through learning.

Protestant development engagement: Protestant development activities are still more diverse and center at the community level. The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) highlights community mobilization and engagement, capacity building and training, and gender equality. World Vision (WV), like many other NGOs, works primarily in the highlands areas and with indigenous communities. WV programs include furnishing schools with supplies and transportation, providing nutrition education, teaching women how to raise poultry, showing farmers how to improve their soil, and increasing economic development and HIV/AIDS awareness. Lutheran World Federation (LWF) focuses on food security and management of local natural resources. Various organizations, including the International Justice Mission (IJM), combine advocacy with direct support to communities in areas like land rights and dialogues involving agricultural workers and communities affected by mining. Norwegian Church Aid has worked in Guatemala since the 1976 earthquake, now focusing on economic justice in extractive industries, climate adaptation, disaster relief, and gender



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justice. Finn Church Aid (FCA) has three interlinking themes: right to education, right to livelihood, and right to peace. It develops the disaster preparedness of communities and their capability to prevent disasters. DanChurchAid (DCA) focuses on human rights, specifically that of indigenous women and indigenous communities.

LOOKING AHEAD

Five *national human development priorities* involve numerous religious actors who, however,

Guatemala's Nutrition Challenge

Notwithstanding improvements in several health indicators, Guatemala lags on many others. Chronic malnutrition is a central concern. Nationally, the percentage of children under five years of age with chronic malnutrition has declined but it remains high by global standards and in some regions is increasing. Childhood malnutrition follows ethnic lines, with malnutrition rates almost 30 percentage points higher among the indigenous (58.6 percent) compared to non-indigenous communities (30.6 percent).⁸ Nutrition is a priority within Guatemala's national health strategy, focused on the first 1,000 days (pregnancy plus the first two years of a child's life). Guatemala's government aims to reduce malnutrition by 25 percentage points by 2032, especially among indigenous and rural children.

Faith-inspired organizations are among many partners engaged in a wide variety programs (that notably focus on community based approaches) and policy advocacy. They include Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and Church World Service. A variety of locally based religious communities, some supported by visiting missions, also focus on nutrition and food security.

"Our food security program takes an integral approach to the issue of food security that includes working with families to improve their health access and knowledge. There's a tremendous amount of malnutrition in the country, particularly in rural or indigenous communities. We are working with those communities, in the western highlands specifically, to create a package of services and approaches that lead to reducing malnutrition"

—John Briggs, CRS

work in a highly fragmented fashion: *education* (where religious roles could be mapped and assessed), *health, nutrition and food security, sexual and gender-based violence, and care of vulnerable children*. In each area, dialogue and resulting action between religious actors, development partners, and the government, could enhance the impact of national programs.

Ecumenical and interfaith efforts have historical roots in Guatemala, but institutions need a boost. A loss of momentum highlights the need for fresh thinking and action. This is important both because religious divides contribute to broader social tensions and the wide experience of religious actors in peacebuilding efforts could strengthen programs.

The fight against *corruption* is widely understood as a make-or-break issue for Guatemala. Religious leaders and communities have critical roles in identifying patterns of behavior that fuel corruption and that can rein it in. They have the capacity (and duty) in many cases to “speak truth to power.” A bold interreligious approach to the topic would be demanding but is overdue.

Religious leadership in addressing the many issues facing *extractive industry ventures* should be examined with a view to amplifying conflict resolution impact. Religious engagement could have direct benefits at project and community levels and for national policy approaches.

Religious work to *address community-level violence, notably gang activity*, deserves rigorous



attention. Creative ongoing efforts point to constructive ways to engage youth and to address the complex factors that explain the rise of gang violence.

Out-migration from Guatemala reflects problems at home and religious actors are involved at every point along migration routes. Understanding these roles better, including in diaspora communities, could yield important findings. A small but useful start could be to work with diaspora communities in a region (metropolitan Washington D.C., for example) to understand religious links, visions for action, and the adaptation process.

The Guatemala 1996 Peace Accords were an inspirational landmark, and religious actors played significant, though not well documented, roles. Implementation has been disappointing. A specific review of the experience with a view to drawing lessons would be useful.

A prayer for the many who disappeared and died in the long years of violence in Guatemala in San Juan Comalapa.

Notes

1. Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region,” *Pew Research Center*. November 2014. <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>
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3. “Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region.”
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WORLD FAITHS DEVELOPMENT DIALOGUE

The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) is a not-for-profit organization working at the intersection of religion and global development. Housed within the Berkley Center in Washington, D.C., WFDD documents the work of faith inspired organizations and explores the importance of religious ideas and actors in development contexts. WFDD supports dialogue among religious and development communities and promotes innovative partnerships, at national and international levels, with the goal of contributing to positive and inclusive development outcomes.

This brief, authored by Katherine Marshall, Senior Fellow Berkley Center and WFDD Executive Director, with research assistance from Wakaha Sarah Sampei, is a continuation of WFDD's country mapping work. Additional information and publications can be found at <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/projects/religion-and-development-country-level-mapping>. Address questions to WFDD (info@wfdd.us).

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