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## Searching for the Spirit: Researching Spirit-Filled Religion in Guatemala

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## Searching for the Spirit: Researching Spirit-Filled Religion in Guatemala

*C. Mathews Samson*

There are two frames for making sense of the research on Pentecostal religious forms discussed in this essay.<sup>1</sup> First, there has been a significant change in the religious landscape of Latin America over the past 50 years. The most visible evidence of this change is the presence—manifested to the observing eye in the ubiquitous small church buildings (*templos*) in small towns and megacities throughout the region—of some 15 percent of the population in the ranks of religious communities considered to be Protestant, or *evangelical*, to use the more common term of self-identification among adherents in the region (Steigenga and Cleary 2007, 3).<sup>2</sup> This presence reflects a distinct religious pluralism and a move away from what some have called a monolithic or even a monopolistic Catholicism growing out of the colonial period and through the first 150 years of independence of most of the region from European colonialism (Chesnut 2003). The stages in the shift (both on the ground and in context of more complex academic explications of the culture of the region) have been well documented over last four decades: the advent of liberationist Catholicism, especially in the form of base ecclesial communities following Vatican II; an increasing recognition of the extant religious pluralism in the region, including Afro-Caribbean or Afro-Brazilian religious expressions; a clearer acknowledgment of a persistent indigenous religiosity that has been part of ethnic renewal

movements as indigenous peoples have organized for recognition and collective rights in the face of social political systems that have marginalized their voices in the wake of the often-referenced 500 years of conquest; and, most recently, a growing Protestant presence that is perhaps 75 to 80 percent Pentecostal on a continental scale. Moreover, the trajectories of these various movements sometimes embody uneven syncretisms between the traditions, and already in the late 1980s, we could find the publication of books such as that by the Mexican American priest, Virgil Elizondo (1988), which, regardless of shortcomings in a strict anthropological sense, proclaimed that in the Americas *The Future Is Mestizo*.

Second, while keeping this move toward religious pluralism in the Americas in view, it is also necessary to continue to reframe understandings of world Christianity as a movement and to consider how global changes are impinging upon particular cases such as Guatemala and the larger Mesoamerican region, where I have been working largely on historical Protestantism for nearly a decade and a half (Samson 2007). Primary in this regard is the shift in the center of gravity of Christianity from the global North and West to the global South (Jenkins 2002). The immediate implication of this change is that the majority of Christian adherents in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century were to be found in the former colonized lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In many ways, it is this shift that will guide the social scientific approaches to Christian pluralism—or even Christianities—in the future.

Less noted until the 1990s in an academic world still wrestling with the persistence of religion in light of the demise of the secularization thesis that has predicted the end of religion and the death of God in the face of the inexorable forces of modernity was the phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal and charismatic wings of the Christian movement.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes lumped together under the

category of “renewalists,” (Pew Forum 2006), Pentecostals and charismatics today account for some 25 percent of the roughly two billion Christians worldwide. Moreover, this is the fastest growing segment of Christianity, and perhaps the fastest growing religious movement in the world. Obviously, its influence will be marked at the global scale over at least the next several decades.

All this is background to the discussion of rather more concise questions. Although as an anthropologist my aim in the study of religious change is to focus on practice elucidated from an ethnographic perspective, here I am concerned initially with the questions of *who* Pentecostals are in Guatemala and *how* it is that they are being Pentecostal in the present moment. My frame for thinking about religion in general and Pentecostalism in particular resonates with the framework suggested by Bruce Lincoln (2003) in his work *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. For Lincoln, definitions of religion should be “polythetic and flexible” (4), even as they attend to the arenas of “discourse, practice, community and institution” (7).<sup>4</sup> While I will not deal with each of these aspects here, Lincoln’s concerns do provide the texture for a more holistic approach to the study of religion both through time and in particular places. For the purposes of my current research, practice is situated alongside theology and institutional structures in the effort to look at how Pentecostalism as a movement articulates with the larger Guatemalan social context even while projecting the Pentecostal experience into the cultural mainstream and simultaneously working to construct a less sectarian identity as Pentecostals themselves.

## FINDING A RESEARCH AGENDA—RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN GUATEMALA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Beyond the global scene, Guatemala remains a unique—and, in some ways, an astounding case study for considering the problems, pitfalls, and potentialities of applying ethnographic methods to movements such as Protestantism and Pentecostalism. By 1960, after some 80 years of formal missionary presence in the country, Protestantism accounted for what by missionary standards was a rather anemic five percent of the population (Gooren 2001, 183). Beginning in the latter part of the 1960s, the movement began to expand rather rapidly, spurred at times by natural disaster and later by the ongoing revolutionary conflict that began in 1960 and continued until a formal cease-fire was signed in 1996, following the death of some 200,000 and the displacement of a million to a million-and-a-half Guatemalans, either internally within the country or in exile beyond its borders. By the early 2000s, a colleague who has worked in Guatemala for some 30 years remarked that the growth of evangelical churches reflected “the amoeba school of church growth.” By the time the Pew Forum conducted its 2006 survey in Guatemala, the country was said to be 34 percent Protestant. This represented a sea change in growth, one that also saw adherence to Catholicism decrease to 48 percent and the rise in people claiming no affiliation to 15 percent. More stunning still, the report also claims that some 60 percent of the entire Guatemalan populace can potentially be categorized as renewalists: 62 percent of Catholics and 85 percent of the Protestants (Pew Forum 2006, 80).

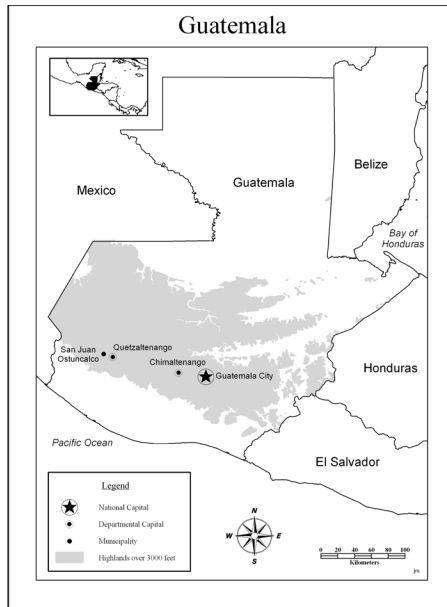


Figure 8.1. Highland Regions of Guatemala. Map by Dr. James Samson.

The implications of this change are only beginning to be understood, and one can argue despite considerable research in the area that we are still defining the questions. Research, to some degree, is not only targeted but also serendipitous, in the sense that “being there” is impacted by the events taking place at the moment one happens to be in the field, especially on short-term research trips. Religion makes news all the time in Guatemala, and I got a particular take on contrasting perspectives regarding how evangelical, specifically Pentecostal, preoccupations continue to make themselves known in the discourses of civil society in contemporary Guatemala.

The most prominent form of Pentecostal discourse is that of neo-Pentecostalism embodied in elite-based religion, such as that emanating from Guatemala City’s megachurches like the *Fraternidad Cristiana* with its new 12,500 seat sanctuary, the *Megafrater*, or the

El Shaddai congregation and its pastor Harold Caballeros, famous for his doctrine of spiritual warfare and the slogan “Jesús Es Señor de Guatemala” (“Jesus is Lord of Guatemala”). At the same time, there remains a tie in the discourse and the existence of these congregations to the presence of General Efraín Ríos Montt, dictator and president of the country during one of the bloodiest periods of the civil war. Embedded in the narratives constructed by these groups is an emphasis on God’s sovereignty and control over human affairs, as well as a notion that the evangelical vision is one that should be used for governance. An article that appeared in Guatemala’s leading daily newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, the day I went back into the field in 2009 took a look at the religious commitments of members of the Guatemalan congress. Several pieces of information were interesting and worthy of further reflection, but particularly striking was the notion that the party Ríos Montt founded, the *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG), continues to have the highest percentage of evangelicals in its ranks (*filas*). Beyond this density, one of the party leaders proudly proclaimed in the article that “the Bible is one of the manuals that [we] use and follow in order to govern” (Marroquín and Cardona 2009, 12).<sup>5</sup>

This language was striking enough, but a week later an op-ed appeared in the same paper; it was written by the Maya indigenous activist Sam Colop (2009) and reported on yet another effort to form an evangelical political party—or at least one founded on biblical principles, if not strictly evangelical in its definition. There Colop cites a report in another daily (*La Hora*, 27 May 2009) where a current leader of the FRG essentially put an exclamation point on the statement above by saying, “Christianity is always present in all the political and ideological aspects of the FRG.” The FRG leader in this case was identified as Nicolás de León, who “says that the Bible is the manual of his party.” After labeling de León a hypocrite because

of his connection with the FRG, Colop quotes him again, “If God gives us life, then man cannot take it away.” For those accustomed to the continuing debate over the separation of church and state in the United States, such language is jarring. Nevertheless, the ethnographic stance is first to make sense of what is going on, and when Colop, in the same opinion piece, turns directly to the issue of the new political party, he reports the following comment: “We are not forming a church; we are forming a political group that includes everyone that believes in Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Several days after this article appeared, I received a more circumspect response regarding how evangelicals might engage with the political arena from the director of an educational institution associated with the Iglesia de Dios del Evangelio Completo (IDEC, Full Gospel Church of God). He responded to a description of my research by making a strong statement that social science research was needed for his own denomination in Guatemala. It was a conversation setting up a further interview, so I only captured the sense of what he was saying: “The culture of violence is affecting us greatly. And what is the church doing?” After mentioning several problems, such as social exclusion and corruption, he then remarked on the necessity of understanding and interpreting such phenomena. He concluded by saying, “We greatly need social scientific study. The church in Guatemala is an experience-based church” (“*una iglesia empírica*”). In contrast to the neo-Pentecostal vision, he ended with a statement that it is a challenge (*reto*) to govern but that it is also a challenge for the evangel (*el evangelio*) to touch and transform social reality.

Coming from the interview context itself, these comments were the equivalent of being handed a research agenda on a silver platter. The framework that begins to take shape from out of the two perspectives recounted involves framing the tension involved in



evangelical, particularly Pentecostal, identity and the engagement of Pentecostalism with civil society in Guatemala, including notions of what one student of neo-Pentecostalism has called “Christian citizenship” (O’Neill 2007). Others have focused more broadly in Latin America and elsewhere on the contributions of evangelicals to processes of democratization (Freston 2001, 2008). Given the crisis of economy and what seems to be endemic violence in Guatemala in the post-conflict era, the Guatemalan case once again becomes one that applies beyond the borders of a relatively small nation-state in a region that is sometimes perceived as a backwater even in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Practice, Theology, and Full Gospel Roots*

Part of this examination of Pentecostalism requires a closer look at the intersections of religion and society in Guatemala from the religious vantage point. It seems clear that discourse within FRG as a political party and within the neo-Pentecostal community at large continues to promote what Manuela Cantón Delgado has referred to as “biblical-ideological discourse” (Cantón Delgado 1998, 265). This discourse is powerful; it links a kind of Biblical faith and political ideology in a single package; and it does influence the practice of other evangelical groups as well, in part through media influence and because its leaders are often sought out by the more traditional politicians who are trying to carve out space for their own agendas. Yet, the intent in my research at this juncture is to shift some of the attention away from the neo-Pentecostals and to look ethnographically at the Pentecostal tradition with all of its own contradictions. Much discourse in the evangelical community refers to how evangelicals can work to *incidir* (influence) or even transform social reality in the country. My sense is that among Pentecostals this has to do less

with transforming the political reality than with a grounded sense of connection with place and context. While specific discourses need to be examined on a case-by-case basis, there is also a fundamental difference in the scale of engagement with society at large in the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal communities. Some of this has to do with the relative wealth and power within the respective communities, but it is also related to the way in which Pentecostals assume their place in local community contexts throughout the nation.

At the same time, there continues to be a considerable divergence between urban and rural segments of the Guatemalan population, particularly in those rural areas of the western highlands inhabited primarily by the Maya peoples, who speak 22 languages and make up perhaps 55 percent of the nation's population. Within religious groups that have significant numbers of both mestizos and Maya in their ranks, practice varies widely from rural to urban contexts, and looking for commonality in practice is not always as easy as one might hope in trying to construct a linear argument.

The case I am using as the basis for this consideration of Pentecostalism is that of the Full Gospel Church of God (*Iglesia de Dios del Evangelio Completo*, IDEC), the second largest Pentecostal denomination in Guatemala (behind the Assemblies of God). Although the roots of Pentecostalism go as far back as 1910 and the work of Albert Hines in the K'iche' regions of the departments of Totonicapán and El Quiché, for the IDEC, the important early missionaries were Charles Furman and Thomas Pullin, who arrived under the auspices of the United Free Gospel and Missionary Society in 1916.<sup>8</sup> Furman affiliated with the Primitive Methodists in 1922, and left that denomination under duress in 1934 after an outpouring of the Spirit in communities in the area of the department of Totonicapán. The denomination celebrates 1932 as its year of origin in Guatemala in response to the advent of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> From that beginning, the recent

growth of the denomination by most forms of accounting has been phenomenal. Richard Waldrop's (1993, 56) dissertation records some 84,366 members and 1,508 churches in 1990. At the same time, there were 343 missions and 1,601 ministers.<sup>10</sup> By 2009, the numbers had increased to 204,190 members, 2,263 churches, 870 missions, and 3,179 ministers—in membership alone, an increase of approximately 142 percent in two decades.<sup>11</sup>

I can do little more than hint at some of the issues that the Iglesia de Dios responds to in seeking to carry out its mission in the Guatemalan context. In terms of institutional practice, the seminary director mentioned before went to some length to indicate that the denomination has worked with what he said were 22 of the 23 different ethnic groups in the country. Only the Garífuna of the Caribbean coastal region near the city of Livingston are excluded, and some attempts at evangelization had been made among that population. For him, this was evidence of a multicultural and multilingual church that began with cultural values as a fundamental. When I asked about the attitude of the church toward Maya customary ceremonies practiced in places on the natural landscape considered sacred by the Maya, in some ways he could have been giving a discourse on cultural relativism in a class in introductory cultural anthropology. He emphasized that the customary practices had their own meaning and that it was important to understand what their meaning was for the communities themselves. His discourse on syncretism was less amenable to my academic gaze, but he, nevertheless, acknowledged that as the evangelical churches broke with this syncretism (Maya-Catholic) in Maya communities that people were indeed changing the religious practices of their ancestors—on the basis of both Western culture and “the Gospel.” In addition, the denomination has tried to work cooperatively with local workers and has tried to resist missionary models of domination, and this has opened space for indigenous leadership within Guatemala.

Minimally, then, there seems to be an awareness in segments of the IDEC educational community that dialogue across cultures is essential in contemporary Guatemala. Investigating how that plays out in various local contexts is one direction for research. Beyond this, however, I had been puzzled in several visits to Pentecostal churches during summer field seasons in 2008 and 2009 at how sedate the services had appeared in contrast to one I attended several years ago when I was involved in a film project—no speaking in tongues, no dancing or falling out in the spirit, and certainly no exorcisms or miraculous healings. When I asked what had happened to the spirit, I received this answer:

There has been a great error in identifying Pentecostalism as synonymous with glossolalia. ...Pentecostalism has been analyzed in sociological instead of theological terms. As well it has been analyzed as a function of its liturgical phenomenology instead of on the basis of, let's say, its theological legacy. ...And I think that it was an error of appreciation that evolved into a prejudice against Pentecostals. ...Logically, we as Pentecostals have distinctive doctrinal features. ...As the Church of God, we belong to classical or historical Pentecostalism. ...And I think that the theological synthesis to be understood is that the sovereignty of God and human freedom are not in contradiction. Rather, the Christian faith is obligated, in a certain way, not to make a caricature of God, but neither to create a caricature of the human being. ... For us Pentecostals, baptism with the Holy Spirit doesn't have a soteriological root. We don't relate it to the work of salvation; instead we relate baptism, doctrine, and the experience of baptism with the Holy Spirit with the mission of the church. And that which is distinctive about baptism with the Holy Spirit, which logically cannot be

reduced to glossolalia, is fundamentally a life of obedience to God and a high commitment to the mission of God in the world.

I felt in the end that I had received a lesson in Wesleyan and Arminian theology as payment for that particular interview.

### *Beyond Pluralism in the Study of Guatemalan Religious Change*

Addressing the complex of issues related to inequality in Latin America alongside a parallel agenda directed toward understanding religious change requires a look beyond the phenomenon of evangelical growth and rupture of the religious monopoly of Catholicism in the region. One aspect of this is the need to continue the ethnographic approach to theory and practice to order to analyze how Pentecostals are actually responding to inequality and other forms of social injustice as their numbers continue to grow. As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, the framing of such an agenda points to both scholarly and practical realities in the study of religious change in Latin America. An explication of the use of the Bible as a guide for governance, regardless of which place one occupies on the political spectrum, within a political party that maintains its roots among the nation's elite is not most direct route to understanding Pentecostal attempts at citizenship and participation in society.

While it might be fair to suggest that issues of citizenship and democratization as such are not on the forefront of the minds of most evangelicals, perhaps especially Pentecostals, it is significant that some Pentecostals themselves are raising the question—not only of what it means to be a Pentecostal in a violent and unequal social milieu but of what the broader evangelical community has to contribute to the society writ large. Some of this can be seen in the emphasis on mission as opposed to soteriology, salvation, in the

seminary director's comments. Now two decades removed from the preoccupation about whether Latin America would turn Protestant (Stoll 1990), the question may now be how Protestants of all stripes are turning Latin American and responding to their own context by projecting their own reality outward toward their own societies. This is in many ways the perspective of grounded ethnography that seeks the "insider's point of view" in regard to "how" people are Pentecostal, but it is also an agenda that requires a continued interdisciplinary approach to understanding, including the incorporation of some understanding of how theological perspectives intersect with practical concerns in the process of defining the identity of self and community.

One aspect of such an approach is to consider both the theology and the institutionalization process of a denomination like the IDEC in Guatemala. As part of a larger ecclesial structure that transcends denominational definitions based on international boundaries, the church claims to be self-supporting within Guatemala, while some of the historical denominations, notably the Presbyterians, continue to depend on a shrinking largesse from a mother or sister denomination. Moreover, reflection on the historical trajectory of the denomination, despite its missionary past, reveals a preoccupation with a "cooperative" type of ministry from the beginning. This effort to establish an autochthonous identity is ingrained in the place of Guatemala. In turn, such rootedness provides a freedom of practice that allows particular congregations and individuals to embrace their own realities in radically different cultural contexts: urban, middle-class Mestizo or predominately rural Maya, as well as people moving between and beyond such static definitions of identity.

Here, the Pentecostal experience provides a point of reference that promises to relativize our understandings of evangelical reality throughout the Americas. Even among theologians, particularly

those of a more progressive persuasion, there is talk of an evangelical subculture that distinguishes itself by a limited discourse that can be seen, according to José Duque of the Latin American Biblical University, in events such as “the ‘Great march for the protection of marriage, the family, and social peace’” that was held in San José, Costa Rica, in July of 2008. Duque is not an anthropologist, so he combines a theological viewpoint that takes evangelicals and the evangelical community as an object, one in which he presumably has some investment. His views on the issues are not, I suspect, so different from those of many academics who continue to try to make sense of the sea change in Latin America’s religious landscape.

In this evangelical subculture, a centrist model has been constructed with authoritarian objectives—individualistic in order to massify and magical in order to mystify. ...“In this subculture, the community of believers has no other purpose than to provide financial resources to sustain the extravagant desires and habits of those privileged leaders. These are leaders who self-proclaim themselves ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets,’ and as such, they are converted into absolute masters because they have no other authority than that which they themselves establish. For them, the only problem that humanity has suffered since forever is that of finances. Following this premise, injustice, corruption, violence, exclusion, unemployment, and even poverty are magically resolved with healthy finances” (Duque 2008).

Duque continues by asking some pointed questions about how academic theologians and others with a preoccupation for the evangelical community will respond to the current situation: “What are the socio-economic and religious conditions of our regional context that make possible not only the protagonism of such an evangelical leadership but also the preoccupying existence of a massified religious base that consumes superficiality, emotionalism, individualism, and magical utilitarian automatism?” Beyond religion, the argument is

that other disciplines are needed to answer this question. He calls it a transdisciplinary concern because “utilitarian massification is also occurring in political contexts and show business (*farándula*).”

Anthropologically, the more important view might be one that begins with practice but also looks toward the way in which evangelical culture responds to contemporary concerns, including violence and injustice. Because of their apparent numerical superiority, it seems logical to say that the center of gravity within the evangelical community resides within the Pentecostal segment.<sup>12</sup> While diverse in and of itself, a concerted effort by social scientists directed toward understanding Pentecostal discourse and practice might lead to a clearer picture of the nature of the Pentecostal contribution to the communities where they are present. In the face of the profound social inequalities in Central America, in particular, it may be time to ask if evangelicals are really a subculture in greater Mesoamerica after all. Rather they are citizens seeking to make their mark on a world that is indeed filled with demons—poverty, violence, political insensitivity to the masses, racism, femicide.

Beyond, or perhaps beneath, the neo-Pentecostal discourse that speaks of governing with the Bible in hand, the Pentecostals present a different kind of vision; they may in the end not be as sectarian or otherworldly as those from other religious or academic traditions have assumed. While I am not quite ready to label either evangelicals or Pentecostals as harbingers of a social movement, there are certainly elements of social movement mobilization involved in their activities, and a more fruitful approach is to think of Pentecostals as mediators in social networks and potential creators of social capital that will bridge a narrow evangelical identity and inhere in society in ways that are yet to be determined. In the words of Daniel Chiquete, “By their very nature the Pentecostals are natural promoters of plurality and inter-cultural [sic] contact. They have the capacity to



build bridges between different cultural worlds. And their alternative vision and experience reject and restrict any ideology that sets out to be all-encompassing” (Chiquete 2002, 36).<sup>13</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: ENGAGING THE SPIRIT IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

I conclude with two other experiences and a propaganda piece from a regional conference of leaders I stumbled upon when I went to meet an IDEC pastor and travel with him to his community for an interview. He is a Mam Maya pastor who lives in the municipality of San Juan Ostuncalco in an *aldea* (village) that is 95 percent indigenous. I met him at a meeting in an urban church building that has occupied a prominent place in the regional commercial center of Quetzaltenango, traditionally considered Guatemala’s second city in both economic and cultural terms. When I arrived at the church, a meeting was in process that included both Maya and Mestizo leaders from throughout the district around Quetzaltenango, and I witnessed about an hour of the meeting as leaders, mostly ministers including a small number of women, were exhorted to preoccupy themselves with mission and to promote the unity of their church—*una sola iglesia*—because it is *la iglesia de dios*, *the Church of God*. Members were encouraged to take home posters with a large eye peering back at the viewer. The pupil in the eye was an image of the world with clouds above it, and the eye was placed over a statement that was simply titled “*Visión*”:

We desire to be a Church  
 full of the Holy Spirit, in constant growth,  
 of thousands and thousands of Christians that congregate  
 to worship God in spirit and in truth,  
 that has a profound passion for the lost

and a commitment with world missions,  
discipleship, the establishment of new churches,  
and that knows how to extend its hands to help those who suffer.

This is a vision of what they might call the full or complete Gospel, and it is rooted in a sense of community that extends to the ends of the earth. I had been struck a few days before by the Pentecostal sense of encompassing geography when I had attended a service led by the same Mam minister. He preached on what might be called the prologue to Pentecost, when the risen Jesus at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles directs the gathered apostles to wait for the Spirit, at which time they would become witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, and on into Samaria and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7-8). This was a service not like the one I had attended in the city the year before, when I had been handed a bulletin filled with congregational activity information on the way in, and where a praise band had opened the service with songs, pictures, and where even a video for the pastor's sermon was projected onto a screen so that everyone could participate. Here, at least on the evening I attended, the warm-up music, which is actually a large component of the service, was done a cappella, and the prayers (which I was assured were not speaking in tongues) had most of the congregation on their knees in front of plastic chairs while everyone prayed aloud in a manner so that a whistling tone pervaded the small *templo*.

Although singing and Bible reading are done in Spanish, most of the preaching was tied to Mam, with some Spanish interpolations thrown in. When the minister addressed the situation of the apostles in Acts, he painted for the congregation a cognitive geographic map that led from Jerusalem—the area of the local congregation—to Judea—Guatemala the nation—to Samaria. In his own way, he described as a transcultural space—a place where one had to interact

with ladinos, or mestizos, in a broader context on the way to the evangelization of the world. I had not felt the spirit, but it was powerful approach to a text about the presence of the Spirit being with the disciples even as they went out to the ends of the world. Of course, I could not be sure how the congregants heard this proclamation, but in the post-conflict situation where violence and discrimination are not experiences of the past, and in a place where continuing migratory patterns lead from mountain communities throughout Guatemala to El Norte, it was a powerful invocation of work and context. As the evangelical might say, it was a new Word, and a somewhat unexpected one, even after all these years, as I watched many of the women, without exception in the customary dress of the Mam, bring leaves for wrapping tamales and lay them on the raised chancel area as a *primicia* or first fruit offering, the leaves of the corn plant actually representing the first fruit rather than the maize itself.

I again experienced this sense of religiosity being projected beyond a particular place—or at least beyond a particular worldview, surely in part a function of the religious imaginary, a couple of weeks later when I accompanied one of the congregation members to a Maya altar or ceremonial site high on a hilltop overlooking the village and learned that it was place of special significance where sometimes all the Maya spiritual guides (shamans) in the community gathered for ceremonies, frequently to ask together for rain for the *milpa* (cornfields) at the beginning of May and to give thanks if the rains had already begun to fall. He then pointed to an adjacent space covered with leaves where the evangelicals sometimes climbed the mountain for fasting, vigils, and prayers—also to ask for blessing and to give thanks. The religious landscape in Guatemala today is one where sacred space is both shared and negotiated.



Photograph 8.1. Mayan ceremonial site.

In conducting this type of research, ethnographic distance is often challenged both by what people think and how they respond to the experience of the Spirit. When I conducted a focus group with some 20 ministers and lay people at the IDEC seminary in Guatemala City, my presence and interest in the lives of the group members was appreciated. At the same time, I was at one point put into a corner when I asked about experiences people had had with healings, and one minister decided to ask me if I believed the stories they were sharing. I remember thinking briefly that perhaps I had no business doing this kind of research, that in a strange sort of way I had gotten in over my head—not because I was about to go native by speaking in tongues, which in any case would go against my own rather stiff Presbyterian roots, but because I could only respond by saying that what I believed wasn't the issue. Rather what I was concerned with was the particular experiences of those who were willing to share.

These were stories of an encounter with the Spirit that seems not to be open to me in either an ethnographic or a spiritual sense. Nevertheless, I was moved when I asked participants to share something of the first time they experienced an encounter with the Spirit. One middle-aged man began to cry and then became speechless. Out of respect, no one in the room moved as he collected his thoughts and searched for words to describe what to the outsider is indescribable. I approached and put my hand on his shoulder until he finished his story—providing an ending I cannot even remember. Later I engaged one of my colleagues, herself a Pentecostal of the same denomination, with a comment about how meaningful it was to have people share their experiences with me and how moving it was to watch their reactions to the memory of these profound and personal encounters with the Spirit. She responded by saying that the experience “is so emotional that people guard it within themselves. They keep it like a death; it is never repeated.”

The ethnographic stance is one in which the ethnographic lens becomes a bridge between one culture and another, sometimes serving as a bridge for cross-cultural, and even intercultural understanding. And we can be sure that Pentecostals in Guatemala will continue to see the moving of the Spirit in places where some of us see only conflict and contradiction.

## NOTES

1. A version of this essay was first presented at the XVIII Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June of 2009. It was revised for presentation at the Southern Anthropological Society meeting in Savannah, Georgia, in February of 2010.

2. This figure should be taken as indication of the magnitude of the shift and not as a hard and fast number. In using such percentages for Protestant demographics, I try to maintain a position in the conservative to middle range of those currently available. Steigenga (2010) posits a reconceptualization of the significance of conversion, based on both experience and the literature about conversion in Latin America. Say the number is even higher.

3. Pentecostalism was not ignored by any stretch of the imagination, but its force was not widely acknowledged the way it is two decades later. See David Martin's *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (1990) and Harvey Cox's *Fire from Heaven* (1995).

4. For more on this ethnographic perspective and other directions for research in regard to Pentecostalism, see also Steigenga (2001, 152-155).

5. Translations from Spanish sources are my own.

6. The party was to be called Victoria, and it would be led by Abraham Rivera, the well-known former alcalde of Mixco, a contiguous suburb of Guatemala City and perhaps the country's second largest city in terms of actual population.

7. For O'Neill, it is a discourse that puts the "weight" of changing the nation on the individual believer. This clearly puts the concern on the believer and believer's community for taking responsibility for making changes in society, but it skirts the question of how neo-Pentecostal discourse seems limited in its ability to address issues of structural change in a society battered by violence and economic distress.

8. The details about Hines are from Smith (2006). Smith relies in part on a Spanish language document that I have not seen, written by Richard Waldrop, who was a Church of God missionary in Guatemala for a number of years and now teaches at the Church of God seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. For more details on this early history, see Garrard-Burnett (1998, 37-38, and 2001).

9. Waldrop (1993, 23-28) discusses Furman's relationship to the Primitive Methodists at length, emphasizing that Furman was always forthcoming about his Pentecostal identity throughout his relationship with them. Garrard-Burnett (1998, 39) provides a chart showing that by 1935, the IDEC counted some 17 congregations and that six of these were pastored by men with indigenous surnames. This reflects both the extent of the Pentecostal network in that time period as well as the way in which Pentecostalism became rooted in some indigenous communities from an early date.

10. The exact meaning of the latter category is unclear. There is a single ordination in the denomination, but various tasks are fulfilled by those ordained. The meaning of ordination and, therefore, hierarchy in leadership still needs to be clarified in this study.

11. These numbers come from the denomination's monthly report and are "actualized" as of 1 June 2009. I am using the figure listed for monthly membership. A category reporting past membership (*membresia pasada*) lists the membership for an earlier date at 223,404. The person who provided the numbers was not clear on the difference, but he said that there was a concern within the IDEC for membership inflation in the tracking provided in these statistics.

12. It is significant that the president of the Alianza Evangélica in 2009 was a member of the IDEC. While the Alianza has a reputation

for a conservative theological and political agenda, it was founded as a specifically ecumenical institution, largely by Guatemala's "historical" denominations. It will be interesting to note the trajectory in the future.

13. See Levine (2009) for a discussion of religious pluralism on a continental scale in Latin America. MacKenzie (2005) has significant discussions of both Catholic and Pentecostal practices in a K'iche' Maya community not far from where I conducted my research.

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