

# IS PROTESTANT GROWTH INEVITABLE? ASSESSING RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEXICO

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## ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen a rapid increase in membership of Protestant churches in most Latin American countries, including Mexico. The growth has been considered sustainable and linked to modernisation processes. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in southern Mexico since the late 1990s, most recently in 2008, this article seeks to challenge claims that Protestant growth in rural Latin America is inevitable, continuous and universal. Mapping and analysing changes in the religious composition of one particular Zapotec community in Oaxaca over the ten-year period, the article demonstrates that local level religious dynamics are multidirectional and considerably less predictable than aggregate statistics and general trends would suggest. Rather than presenting evidence of irrefutable Protestant growth, religious diversity in many Oaxacan communities has recently stabilised or actually decreased. Reasons for this can be sought in the internal dynamics of Protestant congregations, the high level of apostasy, national legislation, as well as in changes and revitalisation of Catholic practices.

Keywords: Mexico, Oaxaca, religious change, Protestantism, Catholic Church, indigenous communities

## *Introduction*

The growth of Protestantism in Latin America has become common knowledge. For the past four decades Evangelical Protestantism—and various Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in particular—have proliferated with a rate that has perplexed the Roman Catholic Church and social scientists alike. Individualism, emotional faith, success in ‘this’ life and many other ‘new’ values that Protestants preach are believed to be radically changing Latin America. Many researchers have argued that while conversion to Protestantism is transforming the lives of *individual* converts, the phenomenon is also having significant social, cultural and political impact on entire societies. Patterson (2005: 45), for example, talks of a “religious revolution” when discussing the processes through which the hegemonic Catholic Church in Latin America has been losing ground to Evangelical Protestantism, beginning with Brazil and Chile, spreading to Central America and trickling outwards to Argentina and Mexico. The results are not just increasing religious heterogeneity and changes in statistical figures. Throughout the five centuries since the beginning of colonisation,

Catholicism has become tightly entangled with Latin American culture as well as social and political identities; the changing face of religion in this relationship is deemed to unbalance the whole system—or so was the general claim made by many sociologists and anthropologists who scrutinised the phenomenon in the 1990s. David Martin's *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* and David Stoll's *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, both published in 1990, set the tone for numerous studies that followed in various Latin American contexts during that decade (e.g. Garrard-Burnett and Stoll 1993; Bastian 1994 and 1997; Miller 1994; Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1997; Prokopy and Smith 1999). Common to most of these analyses was the argument that Protestant growth and modernisation in Latin America are to a certain extent synonymous processes.

Although Protestant growth was considered surprising and revolutionary, very few studies in the 1990s, of which Kurt Bowen's (1996) account of apostasy in Mexico is a rare example, cast any doubt on the sustainability and inevitability of future Protestant growth. Furthermore, most macro-level studies on religious change in Latin America during that decade paid very little attention to the nuances of this process at the community level. Yet, as I intend to demonstrate, more ethnographically informed analysis at a local level can call into question some of the generalizations and bold predictions about the dynamics of religion in Latin America made in the 1990s.

This article will take a critical look at recent religious changes in rural Mexico, building on data collected during different stages of fieldwork in Zapotec villages of Oaxaca over a period of ten years, most recently in 2008. I first arrived in Oaxaca in the beginning of August 1998, as a visiting researcher at the Centre of Advanced Study and Research in Social Anthropology (*Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* or CIESAS). Eighteen months of continuous fieldwork in the Zapotec region known as the Sierra Juárez produced ethnographic data from thirty-nine communities, with one village—Capulálpam de Méndez—serving as the research base. The data included notes from participant observation in daily communal life, Catholic rituals and the activities of all major Protestant churches in the region; sixty-six unstructured interviews with individuals from various villages; and results from three surveys conducted among inhabitants in Capulálpam (125 respondents), with pupils of a regional high-school (126 respondents) and with the municipal presidents of twenty-seven regional communities. Archival materials were consulted in the State Archive of Oaxaca and content analysis performed on articles referencing religion in the 1988–2000 issues of *Noticias*, a major local newspaper. During the most recent field visit to Oaxaca in summer 2008, I observed religious activities of both Catholics and Protestants in Oaxaca, Capulálpam and two other communities in the Sierra Juárez, and conducted 12 unstructured interviews in Capulálpam and Oaxaca City with Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists. To follow up my earlier analysis of the articles of *Noticias*, I also surveyed the 2005–2008 issues of the same newspaper.

In the discussion that follows I seek to problematise the idea that Protestant success in rural Mexico is unstoppable. Although my long-term observations are obviously limited to a few rural communities in Oaxaca, they seem to be in accordance with arguments made by scholars studying other parts of Mexico as well as other Latin American countries (Bowen 1995; Cleary 2004; Steigenga and Cleary 2008). In my discussion I will be moving

from the general to the particular: first briefly reviewing the dynamics and alleged socio-cultural implications of Latin American and Mexican Protestantism before turning my gaze towards Oaxaca and the Sierra Juárez, calling into question some of the conventional arguments about Protestantism in rural Mexico. Relying on fieldwork experience in the region since the late 1990s, I will scrutinise the changes in the religious composition of one particular community over the period of ten years. Based on these observations, I will suggest that unlike in the 1980s and 1990s, unquestionably an era of exponential growth in Protestant churches, the last decade should rather be considered as a period of stabilisation and institutionalisation of religious heterogeneity in Mexico, and possibly Latin America as a whole. The growth seems to have slowed down, if not come to a standstill. Reasons for this are multiple. As I will demonstrate, re-conversion and apostasy are increasingly common in predominantly Catholic rural communities where being a religious dissident comes at a considerable social cost. In the Mexican context in particular, changes in the legislation regulating religious affairs have certainly affected the dynamics of conversion. I will suggest that the slump of Protestant growth in rural areas could also be explained by the renewed activity of the Catholic Church. In the late 1990s Catholic clergy were rather passive and distanced from the perspective of rural populations. However, various novel practices and 'this-worldly' discourses adopted recently by the Catholic Church have increased the appeal of Catholicism among certain segments of the population, especially the younger generation.

*Is Latin America turning Protestant?*

David Stoll's question, albeit provocative, was not entirely out of touch with reality when he posed it in 1990 in the title of his influential book. The exponential increase of non-Catholic believers during the two-plus previous decades was in striking contrast to the rather meagre increase in the Protestant population in Latin America prior to the 1960s. While the first Protestants probably arrived in Latin America in the early nineteenth century or even before that (Bastian 1994: 80; Mondragón González 2005: 47–49), increase in their numbers and a wider impact of Protestantism on Latin American societies remained negligible for a long time. The pace of growth and current levels of Protestants in the population are obviously not similar in different Latin American countries. According to the General Census of 2000, a mere 7.6 per cent of Mexico's population are non-Catholic believers (INEGI 2005: 6).<sup>1</sup> This puts Mexico among the most conservative Latin American countries in terms of 'Protestantisation'. Yet, the relatively low numbers of Protestants in Mexico compared to its Central American neighbours or Brazil and Chile should not be a reason for dismissing the phenomenon in the Mexican context. The pattern of religious change in Mexico and its socio-cultural implications have been very similar to those in more 'liberal' Latin American countries (see Table 1). Monsiváis (2002a) has provided various convincing reasons why studying Mexican Protestantism is worthwhile. Above all it means writing a "history of massive and significant cultural changes" (Monsiváis 2002a: 84). The case of Mexico also seems to prove that the vicinity of the United States does not play a decisive role—or at least not a simple one—in the 'Protestantisation' of Latin America. Despite being the immediate neighbour of the United States with a land border of approximately 3200 kilometres and despite active migration to and from the United States

since the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexico has nevertheless one of the lowest percentages of Protestant inhabitants among Latin American countries.

Explanations of recent Protestant growth in Latin America are numerous and none of them is exhaustive or sufficient on its own. As Bowen (1996: 13) suggests, “the questions of why people convert and why sects emerge are analytically separate, but in practice they tend to be fused”. He claims that the answers can be grouped into three broad categories that overlap to a certain extent: the change can be explained by theories of social disorganisation, modernisation and deprivation (Bowen 1996: 13–16). In a recent collection of case studies on religious conversion in various parts of Latin America, Steigenga and Cleary (2008: 14) distinguish—perhaps more usefully and clearly—between supply and demand-sided explanations of religious change in Latin America. Explanations that emphasise ‘supply’ focus primarily on historical and external factors; those emphasising issues concerned with ‘demand’, however, take the individual’s perspective, seeking to understand conversion as adaptive, practical or instrumental in the face of change or crisis.

It is not my aim here to present a comprehensive overview of suggested reasons for Protestant growth but two arguments that tend to recur, especially in the context of rural Mexico, and which are central to the point of view of this article are worth outlining. One is the relatively authoritarian and hierarchical nature of Catholicism. Protestant churches, contrary to the Catholic Church, have arguably much more horizontal and flexible organisation. This flexibility enables Protestantism to expand into regions relatively neglected not only by the Catholic Church, but also by the state (Hernández Hernández 2007: 64). If one agrees with this argument, it comes as no surprise that the percentage of Protestants among the indigenous populations of most Latin American countries is often considerably higher than the respective national average. If 7.6 per cent of Mexico’s population considered themselves non-Catholic believers in 2000, the equivalent figure for the indigenous population was as high as 12.9 per cent (Garma Navarro and Hernández Hernández 2007: 211).<sup>2</sup> The other alleged reason for the success of Protestant churches in rural Mexico, and also among urban migrants from rural communities, is the cultural and social disorganisation of local communities due to out-migration. New churches provide their members with intimacy and novel social networks which function as a substitute for kin relationships that migrants (or their relatives remaining in the villages) relinquish.

The contemporary religious ‘field’ in Latin America is also increasingly varied, occupied not only by Christian denominations. Ranging from New Age and neo-esoteric groups to Eastern movements like Soka Gakkai, the diversity of new religions practiced in Latin America is rapidly becoming comparable to that of Euro-American societies (e.g. De la Torre 2006a; Inoue 2006). It must be emphasised, however, that there is considerable variation in the success of different denominations despite the overall trend towards religious pluralism. Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches have been growing far more rapidly than most other faith groups, including the congregations of long-established Protestant churches. As Hernández Hernández (2007: 73) claims, possibly as many as 70 to 75 per cent of all non-Catholics in contemporary Latin America are Pentecostals. The key to Pentecostal growth lies in the fact that their version of Protestantism is flexible. It is emotional and simple in its practices, but at the same time innovative and dynamic in the formation of networks of mutual help. The prosperity gospel of some Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches is particularly appealing to Latin America’s vast ranks of the poor and downtrodden.

With these socio-economic particularities in mind, Escalante Betancourt (2007: 17) draws a clear distinction between the “rational Protestantism” of the beginning of the twentieth century and contemporary Pentecostalism. Whereas the former was adopted mainly by individuals belonging to the urban middle classes, the latter has penetrated the so-called ‘misery belts’ of big cities and indigenous rural areas with relative ease.

Various scholars have been rather generous in estimating the impact that the growth of Protestantism has had on Latin America. Stoll (1990) and Martin (1990), who considered Protestantism a “vehicle of modernity”, have not been the only ones to credit Protestantism with sweeping mobilising power.<sup>3</sup> Garrard-Burnett (1993), for example, calls the rise of Protestantism on the continent “Latin America’s Reformation”. Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2000) describes Mexican Protestant churches as “new social movements”. Patterson (2005) claims that Protestantism leads to a significant change in a society’s value-system and increases political activity. Protestants are more likely than Catholics to be involved in politics and to hold democratic attitudes because Protestantism fosters such values as individualism, tolerance, and equality, whereas Catholicism embodies hierarchy and conformity (Patterson 2005: 155). Mondragón González (2005), writing with a focus on Mexico, lists numerous important dimensions of Protestant social thought that have significant impact on Mexican values at large. These include, to list a few: freedom of conscience, disrupting the traditional link between national identity and the Catholic faith, rediscovery of the social message of Christianity, the questioning of both capitalism and communism.

Despite their recent success in spreading the faith, the relationship between Protestants and the state and Catholic majority in Latin America has generally been troublesome.<sup>4</sup> Converts to Protestantism have often been accused of turning against the ‘national religion’ and destroying the ‘natural’ symbiosis between Catholicism, the national culture and collective identity. Consequently, Protestants can be easily stigmatised as enemies of the state and the nation. Such a perception was general before the 1970s but it is still current in the present, especially in more conservative Catholic circles. In the Mexican context, such strong identification of popular Catholicism with national identity is often referred to as “*guadalupanismo*” (Mondragón González 2005: 39; see also Monsiváis 2002b). The exponential growth of religious ‘dissidence’ in Mexico has gone hand in hand with an increase in intolerance towards converts, especially in the indigenous southern part of the country.<sup>5</sup> This forced the Mexican Government to pass a new law on religious associations in 1992 (*La Ley de Asociaciones Religiosas y Culto Público*).<sup>6</sup> According to Ruiz Guerra (1998: 73), however, this law actually opened Pandora’s box: by giving religious pluralism a legal backing, it augmented the presence of Protestants and strengthened the impact of Protestant churches on Mexican society.

It would be futile to argue with macro-statistical data: the 1980s and 1990s were without doubt periods of rapid growth of Protestantism and Protestant churches across most of Latin America. Whether the growth will continue and be sustainable into the twenty-first century remains to be seen, however, and stating that further Protestantisation is inevitable and that the process is irreversible at all societal levels would be a crude simplification as Bowen (1996) demonstrated in his analysis of apostasy in Mexico back in the 1990s. Yet in-depth anthropological case-studies of religious change in Latin American communities have been surprisingly few. Various older accounts exist on Guatemala (e.g. Sexton 1998; Annis 1987; Garrard-Burnett 1998; Falla 2001) and some on Mexico (e.g. Garma Navar-

ro 1987; Sánchez Franco 1995) but they have been overshadowed by more macro-level analyses of dynamics of religion, Protestant growth and religious conversion. A longitudinal perspective on local contexts seems to be missing entirely.

One reason for this could be the perennial problem of the representativeness and external validity of anthropological case studies. It is obvious that conclusions drawn from the study of one particular community are not easily (if at all) generalisable to regional, national, let alone continental levels, but this does not mean that an in-depth, long-term perspective cannot contribute to an understanding of religious change in Mexico or in Latin America more generally. At the very least, anthropological attention to detail and scrutiny of context can reveal that the dynamics of religious affiliation at the local level are much more complex and multidirectional than macro-statistical trends tend to suggest. At most, such revelation may call into question altogether the usefulness of the existing models of conversion and religious change.

Conversion among rural and indigenous populations was the engine for Protestant growth in the late twentieth century, in Mexico as well as elsewhere. In the early twenty-first century, however, this is no longer the case in every context that previously experienced rapid religious change as I will demonstrate through my own research in the indigenous communities of Oaxaca. My discussion, based on observations made in a number of Zapotec villages over the last ten years and fine-grained analysis of changes in one particular community, obviously offers a very limited and specific snapshot of the topic. Still, a critical perspective on religious change in the region where Protestant growth and the level of religious intolerance were among the highest in Mexico in the late twentieth century can also offer valuable insight onto the dynamics of religious change beyond the immediate ethnographic context of discussion.

#### *Questioning the 'religious revolution' in Oaxaca*

Oaxaca is the most 'indigenous' state in Mexico and also among the poorest. As with the rest of indigenous Mexico, during the last three decades of the twentieth century Protestant growth in Oaxaca was considerably faster than in the nation as a whole (see Table 1).<sup>7</sup> This was particularly true of the Sierra Norte, a mountainous northern section of the state, of which the Sierra Juárez—my own fieldwork site—comprises a part. The majority of its population is indigenous—Zapotec or Chinantec, although in many villages indigenous languages are no longer spoken. The population of most communities ranges between 500 and 2,000 inhabitants; the socio-political organisation of the villages is based on customary law. Nearly all villages in the region face similar economic and social challenges. Traditional economic activities are in decline, socio-economic differentiation in the villages is rising and unemployment is rampant. Increasingly, many villagers, mainly young men, migrate to bigger cities or illegally to the United States in search of work. Rapid growth of the Protestant population was particularly marked in the 1990s, and the relative proportion of Protestants in the Sierra Juárez has been considerably higher than in the rest of Mexico or Oaxaca since the 1960s (see Table 1).

Table 1. Protestant growth in Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Sierra Juárez, 1940–2000.<sup>8</sup>

	Mexico	Oaxaca	Sierra Juárez
1940	1.1	0.4	0.3
1950	1.3	0.7	0.9
1960	1.7	1.1	2.3
1970	1.8	1.5	2.5
1980	3.3	4.4	7.6
1990	4.9	7.3	11.3
2000*	7.6	10.1	11.9

\* Until 1990 the Mexican general censuses distinguished between five religious categories—“Catholic”, “Protestant/Evangelical”, “Judaic”, “Other” and “Non-religious” (occasionally also “Atheist”). The category “Protestant/Evangelical” did not comprise non-Evangelical Christians (eg. Seventh Day Adventists, the Mormons, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses), who were included, together with various other religions, under the category “Other”. The General Census of 2000, however, listed these three groups for the first time as a separate category (“Biblical non-Evangelical”).

It has been claimed that the socio-cultural impact of Protestantism on communal life in Oaxaca is considerable. Marroquín Zaleta (1995) and Montes García (1995) underlined the link between Protestantism and capitalist development in rural Oaxaca in the 1990s. More recently, Barabas (2006) has suggested that the foremost challenges to the socio-cultural organisation of contemporary indigenous communities in Oaxaca are Protestantism and transnational migration. Due to these two phenomena, she argues, the traditional indigenous cosmologies are “discursively cancelled, prohibited, and demonised” (Barabas 2006: 127). This also applies, with reservations, to the Sierra Juárez. Although in most communities in the region Protestants are still in a minority, the social impact of Protestantism on communal life has been substantial. At least, such was the opinion of my Catholic informants in the late 1990s. Protestants are claimed to challenge collective communal practices rooted in (folk) Catholicism, most importantly the *fiestas* commemorating patron saints. Converts switch from collective to more individual lifestyles and turn away from religious practices that have traditionally served as communally unifying mechanisms. Their relationship with God is rooted in personal study of the Bible and not in collective worship of the patron saint. Protestant growth also affects participation in more neutral communal practices like the system of *cargos*<sup>9</sup> and *tequios*.<sup>10</sup> For converts, communal responsibilities are separate from, and hence less important than, responsibilities towards God. Their solidarity with other members of the community is secondary to solidarity with their religious ‘brothers’ (*hermanos*) and ‘sisters’ (*hermanas*).

I would, however, like to call into question some of the conventional arguments about Protestantism in the contemporary Mexican countryside. There are two main angles from which this can be done. Firstly, one can question the alleged socio-cultural impact of Protestantism as such, and secondly, one can query whether predictions of further Protestant expansion in Mexico hold water. Since the publication of Stoll’s (1990) and Martin’s (1990) studies it has been common to argue that Protestant growth has significant social and political implications for Latin America, but contrary arguments have also become frequent

in recent years. Some authors, Mondragón González (2005: 10) for example, go so far as to argue that Protestantism is foreign and culturally out of place for Mexico and all Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Such claims are probably too far-fetched, but revisionist arguments in studies focusing on the political mobilisation of the converts can be taken more seriously. It is, for example, usually suggested that Protestantism promotes a set of attitudes and behaviour that is congruent with democracy (e.g. Patterson 2005). Yet one can also present the opposite argument relatively easily, even suggesting that Protestantism leads to compliance with authoritarianism. Hernandez Hernández (2007: 77), for example, argues that Pentecostals, especially in Mexico, have been extremely passive politically. In his study of religious change in the State of Veracruz, Vázquez Palacios (2007) similarly concludes that evangelical faith does not constitute a strong basis for political mobilisation. Various researchers working in other Latin American contexts—Birman (2008) in Brazil, Wightman (2008) in Bolivia, and Steigenga (2008) in Guatemala, to name a few—have also shown that linking the spread of Protestantism to democratic change is problematic.

Since I have presented a critique of links between Protestantism and modernisation in Oaxacan rural communities elsewhere (see Gross 2003b), I will hereunder focus in detail only on the second angle from which to problematise the ‘Protestant revolution’, that of calling into question the inevitability of further Protestant expansion altogether. I suggest that rather than constituting a period of continuous Protestant growth reminiscent of the 1980s and 1990s, the first decade of the twenty-first century can rather be regarded as an era of stabilisation and institutionalisation of religious diversity in the region. I will illustrate my discussion with the concrete example of Capulálpam de Méndez, a Zapotec village of approximately 1,400 inhabitants that since 1998 has served as the base of my research in the Sierra Juárez. In terms of its size and religious and cultural composition, Capulálpam is a fairly ‘typical’ community in the region. Situated in the middle of the Sierra Juárez, its population predominantly comprises monolingual Spanish speakers with only a tiny minority also speaking Zapotec. The percentage of Protestants in the population in Capulálpam, approximately ten per cent, is close to the same figure for the rest of the Sierra Juárez.

#### *A decade of Protestant alternatives in Capulálpam*

At the end of the 1990s, when I first arrived in the area, the religious field in Capulálpam was split between Catholics comprising roughly 90 per cent of its population and three non-Catholic Christian denominations. The Seventh Day Adventists possessed a rather spacious and modern-looking church building close to the village centre (see Figure 1). The Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, in contrast, was a run-down adobe construction at the periphery of the community (see Figure 2).

These two groups were rather small, consisting of twenty to thirty members each, but both constituted a functioning and sustainable congregation. Importantly, however, the relationships of these groups with the Catholic majority were radically different and this significantly affected their economic and social status in the village. Whereas most Adventists were natives of Capulálpam, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were predominantly poor migrants from neighbouring communities and most of them inhabited a slum-like *Colonia Montserrat* at the periphery of the village. The different origins of the members of these two groups



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Figure 1. The Church of the Seventh Day Adventists in 1998.



Figure 2. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1998.

correlated with the Catholic majority's attitudes towards them. Due to their common birthplace, the religious dissidence of Adventists was tolerated much more readily than that of Jehovah's Witnesses (see also Gross 2003a: 28). As one Catholic woman commented back in 1999: "These Adventists are almost like us Catholics—they are respectful, salute the flag. They celebrate God on Saturdays just like we celebrate on Sundays."<sup>12</sup> Another Catholic woman claimed: "Only Catholics and Adventists are from here, were born here. One *has* to respect them because of that."

Some Adventists had even served as municipal presidents, the highest rank in the system of hierarchical *cargos*. The attitude of the Catholic majority towards the Jehovah's Witnesses was ironical at best. Occasionally they were stigmatised as enemies of the nation who respect neither Mexico nor local cultural traditions. Their status as migrants and not fully accepted members of the community was, and still is, a constant issue in the communal discourse about them. Such an attitude extends also to persons who might have lived in Capulálpam for many decades, and even to the migrants' offspring who were born in the village.

The third non-Catholic denomination besides Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses in the late 1990s in Capulálpam was the Church of God (*Iglesia de Dios*). Its adherents, approximately ten persons in total most of whom were elderly women, convened in a private house on the edge of the village. The group was rather new in Capulálpam—their meetings had begun only in the mid-1990s. The group's religious services were regularly attended by a preacher from Oaxaca City, and the congregation hoped to expand and construct its own prayer hall.

Some villagers also identified themselves as Pentecostals, but there was no Pentecostal church in Capulálpam. In the spring of 1998 a group of Pentecostals from a neighbouring



Figure 3. A service in the Church of God in 1998.

community had come to proselytise and establish a congregation in the village but they were quickly expelled, accused of holding noisy gatherings.

Examination of conversion narratives and reasons for changing faith in the 1980s and 1990s remain outside the focus of this article. Suffice it to say that common functionalist explanations of conversion, presenting it mainly as a response to deprivation or social disorganisation, did not match with my informants' own testimonies of changing faith in late 1990s. Of the twenty-nine respondents to my survey in Capulálpam who had changed their religion during their lifetime, only four claimed that they had converted because new religious groups resolved their personal problems, while more than half of the respondents had done so because the new religious group "explains the Bible better" or preaches "the truth". Contrary to the common arguments that Protestantism in Latin America is more appealing to women (e.g. Smilde 1994; Loreto Mariz and Das Dores Campos Machado 1997) the number of men and women in all three non-Catholic churches was nearly equal.

Ten years later, by the summer of 2008, religious diversity in Capulálpam had not increased. No new religious groups had managed to establish themselves in the village and the number of members in the existing non-Catholic congregations was in decline, except for the Seventh Day Adventists whose membership had remained roughly the same over the past ten years. The services of the Church of God had halted altogether as most of its rather aged members had died. The spacious meeting hall that had been constructed for them a few years earlier now stood deserted in the middle of a cornfield at the outskirts of the village (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. The abandoned meeting hall of the Church of God.

The number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Capulálpam had also decreased. A few families had moved away from the village to neighbouring Ixtlán and started a new congregation there. Although Jehovah's Witnesses had been proselytising actively in Capulálpam and the neighbouring villages for decades, their success in attracting new converts was quite limited. This was readily acknowledged by the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves. For example, Manuela, one of the most active members of the group, admitted that the natives of Capulálpam, contrary to migrants, were reluctant to convert or even listen to their "message". The situation was only slightly "better" in the more remote villages, where "people are simple and humble" (*la gente es sencilla y humilde*), as she argued. Proselytising in poor indigenous areas is increasingly a conscious strategy among the Jehovah's Witnesses in Oaxaca. Manuela's daughters regularly visited other Zapotec villages in the Sierra Juárez and her son had started proselytising in various Tzotzil-speaking villages in Chiapas.

The stagnation of growth in all three churches hints at various important and frequently overlooked aspects of religious conversion in rural Mexico. Changing faith in a society where religious affiliation is central to collective identity can have substantial social costs. Conversion is often not a matter of individual choice but something involving whole families. Furthermore, switching from one religion to another may not be a definite transition but rather a temporary phenomenon. As circumstances change, individuals often reconvert—they either actively switch back to their original religion or passively slide back into and merge with the dominant religious group, in this case the Catholics. Such was the conversion history of two sisters from Capulálpam who, interestingly, had converted and reconverted in almost opposite social circumstances. Leticia, a former Jehovah's Witness had decades ago moved to a medium-sized town on the border of the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. There she converted, although this considerably worsened the relationship with her numerous brothers and sisters in Capulálpam. However, a few years ago, as an aged woman without family and children, she moved back to her native village. Despite the fact that there was a group of Jehovah's Witnesses in Capulálpam, she stopped identifying herself with them and reverted to 'passive' Catholicism. On the other hand, her sister Maritza had joined the Seventh Day Adventists of Capulálpam in the 1980s. In the late 1990s, when I first met her, she was an active member of the congregation. Living in Capulálpam she maintained a relationship with her mainly Catholic siblings, but was perceived as an oddity because of her non-Catholic faith and the fact that she was unwed. In 2006, aged nearly fifty, she finally got married, moved away from the village and only then slid back to Catholicism.

Although the cases of these two women are not necessarily representative in all their details, comparable stories of reconversion were abundant in Capulálpam in 2008. The motives for reconversion were numerous, but certain reasons recurred. People tended to quit their religion mainly due to marriage, migration, changes in family circumstances or the decline of the congregation's activities in the community. Similar observations have been made by other anthropologists working in other parts of Mexico and also in Oaxaca in particular. Bowen (1996) showed as early as the 1990s that a high level of apostasy among Protestants, especially Pentecostals, slows down the growth of membership. Evangelicals married to Catholics were particularly prone to leave their church, often becoming non-affiliate as a result. Sault (2001), examining the impact of conversion on women's social relations, especially on god-parenthood in a Zapotec community in Oaxaca

Valley, has demonstrated that many Protestant women reconvert to Catholicism at some stage in their life. Their initial conversion to Protestantism is often due to the influence of their fathers or husbands; when these die, many women return to Catholicism and resume their god-parenting activities with enthusiasm. Likewise, young unmarried women from Protestant families sometimes choose to marry Catholic men and convert to Catholicism as a consequence (Sault 2001: 140).

The slump of Protestant growth may also be related to changes in the legal system. One possible reason for recent non-growth of Protestantism in indigenous communities is the effect of the Law of the Rights of Indigenous Villages and Communities in the State of Oaxaca (*Ley de Derechos de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas del Estado de Oaxaca*), passed in 1992. Due to its ethnic diversity, Oaxaca is characterised by legal pluralism. Parallel to federal and state laws, indigenous communities have their own customary laws that stipulate the principles of communal organisation and maintaining order.<sup>13</sup> The law of 1992 rendered local customary laws official and legal also in the face of the state constitution, aiming to incorporate indigenous villages into national and state legal structures without suffocating their cultural and legal practices. For this the law has been praised by many scholars. For example, Nahmad Sirton (1999), a leading Mexican anthropologist, calls the passing of this law an “internal decolonisation” of Mexico. On the other hand, the law of 1992 shifted the regulation of religious matters away from the control of the state, and gave the Catholic-dominated village authorities a legal framework and backing to repress any religious dissidence. Suppressing non-Catholic groups can now be justified in terms of protecting local customs and traditions that Protestants allegedly undermine (e.g. Martínez García 2002; Sandoval Forero *et al.* 2006). A blunt ban on founding non-Catholic congregations has been a rather effective means of keeping the numbers of Protestants down in many villages. Although the atmosphere in this respect has now become slightly more relaxed compared to the 1990s, there are still several villages in the Sierra Juárez, where banning Protestant congregations and churches is a conscious policy.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Renewal in the Catholic Church as a brake on Protestant growth*

Protestant non-growth in rural areas could also be explained in terms of changes within Catholicism and in Catholic practices. The hierarchical, formal and authoritarian nature of Catholicism and its detachment from the everyday concerns and problems of the people was either directly or indirectly one of the reasons why many people converted to Protestantism in the 1990s. As one of my informants back then recalled, the Catholic Church had failed her when she fell sick with cancer. She received no support from the Catholic clergy during her illness but suggested that she had been miraculously cured by the prayers of Pentecostals who visited her in her house. Another informant, by then a Jehovah's Witness, had distanced himself from the Catholic Church after being unjustly accused of stealing alms from the altar.

At its height, religious conversion in the Sierra was particularly common among the younger generation. The majority of active Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists in Capulálpam was relatively young—under forty—and religious services were always attended by children as well. Among Catholics, only the bigger Masses attracted the younger

population of the village and most participants in the regular morning prayers in the village church were elderly women. As suggested by Manuel Rios (personal communication)—a Zapotec anthropologist and himself a native of the Sierra Juárez—the conservative Catholic Church “abandoned the youth”, whereas Protestant churches, besides “saving souls”, offered the younger generation opportunities for recreation and entertainment. Rios also suggests that in the recent past the Catholic Church and its priests often failed to meet the needs and expectations of the local people. Priests frequently made high demands of the lay Catholics but did not always reciprocate with exemplary behaviour. In Zoogocho, for example, Catholic priests in the 1990s ordered that the church be open daily for sermons (*pláticas*) in both mornings and evenings, and that people attended these sermons regularly. Yet they themselves visited the village only for the bigger Masses, when they demanded large sums of money for their services. This led to a situation where many villagers started perceiving the activity of the Catholic clergy in Zoogocho primarily as a ‘commercial thing’ (*una cosa mercantil*).

Recently, however, the Catholic Church in Mexico has begun to put more emphasis on the revitalisation of its practices and the improvement of its public image (e.g. Castro Sánchez 2004; Wright-Rios 2004).<sup>15</sup> In Oaxaca this was to a certain extent already perceivable in the late 1990s with the Catholic clergy starting to acknowledge that, in order to effectively react to a situation where Catholicism was rapidly losing ground, the Church itself had to change.<sup>16</sup> In some villages of the Sierra Juárez that suffered from fierce religious competition, one could witness the re-enforcement of Catholic religious identity. As a number of my Catholic informants in religiously fragmented villages then claimed, they were constantly pressured to redefine and ‘purify’ their faith to create a solid Catholic group identity (Gross 2003a: 22).

Over the past ten years, the Catholic Church’s readiness to invest in visibility both at the state level and locally has significantly increased. The Church now has a much more direct presence in the local media. A telling sign of this is the fact that since 2006 the Catholic Church has had a weekly page of its own in the Sunday issue of *Noticias*, the leading Oaxacan newspaper. The Archbishop of Oaxaca and the rest of the higher clergy often use it as a convenient platform to convey their ideas. The majority of articles on that page during the period of 2006–2008 addressed social issues including education, crime, and poverty, and took a stance on the recent political crisis in Oaxaca.<sup>17</sup>

Changes in collective Catholic practices at the local level are also noticeable. One of the most remarkable and novel features of revitalisation in the villages of the Sierra Juárez has been the increasing appeal of Catholicism for the younger generation. Congregations in various communities have founded youth organisations which convene during religious and social occasions. An example of such an event during my recent fieldwork in the region was the ritual transfer of a painting of Virgin Guadalupe from Guelatao to Capulálpam. This picture of the patron saint of Mexico, a local embodiment of the Virgin Mary, has been circulating between the villages of the area for the past few years. It stays in a particular village for a month and is then ritually transferred to the next. For the local community, that month is a period of heightened religious activity and reverence. The painting is exhibited in the Catholic Church, although individual households are also permitted to express their religious devotion by hosting the painting temporarily in their homes.

The transfer of the painting from one village to another is a highly ritualised process (see Figure 5). From Capulálpam, a van decorated with flowers and balloons and a crowd of approximately eighty people travelled to Guelatao to collect the painting early in the morning. After a short church service, the painting was placed on the decorated vehicle, and transferred to Capulálpam in a procession that lasted for nearly an hour. The whole process culminated in a Mass. The remarkable aspect of the whole event was the fact that most of the participants were teenagers—members of the youth organisation of the local Catholic Church. On the way back to Capulálpam, children stood on trucks following the vehicle that was carrying the painting. Some girls had books with religious songs with them, and the whole procession was marked by joy, laughter and singing. Every now and then, one of the girls shouted out loud a popular Mexican children's pun adjusted for the occasion to which the crowd responded accordingly (indicated in brackets):

Dame M! (M!) Dame A! (A!) Dame R! (R!) Dame Í! (Í!) Dame A! (A!) (MARÍA!) Más alto!  
(M-A-R-Í-A!) Tres veces! (MARÍA! MARÍA! MARÍA!)<sup>18</sup>

Although these observations might seem somewhat inconsequential, they are nevertheless an indication of a significant change in the Catholic religious practices in the region. Such playfulness and joy, as well as the involvement of young people in the activities, were uncommon to analogous Catholic occasions in Capulálpam in the late 1990s. Beyond doubt, the recreational dimension of Catholic practices has increased.



Figure 5. Procession with the painting of Virgin Guadalupe from Guelatao to Capulálpam.

It must be emphasised, however, that such revitalisation of religious practices is not accepted in the same way by everyone. As De la Torre (2006b: 228) has also suggested, charismatic renovation within the Catholic Church can be regarded both as a movement of unification and as a divisive force. New practices, livelier and more entertainment-oriented expressions of Catholic faith, as well as the Church's more 'this-worldly' facelift engender different reactions from both lay believers and clergy. These changes split the Catholic population into 'innovators' and 'traditionalists', to put it very crudely. For example, a young priest from Mexico City had been visiting Capulálpam regularly for a year to organise Bible classes and occasionally preside over a Mass. His discourse was regarded as radically different from that of the priest residing in Ixtlán who otherwise was responsible for Masses in Capulálpam. "He is preaching differently, in a more modern manner" (*predica diferente, más moderna*), a Catholic man asserted. The priest from Mexico City often diverged during the sermons from strictly religious topics to broader questions related to social issues and psychology. Most radically, however, he had made it clear from the start that he was not critical of Protestants and Protestantism because "all Christians have the same aim". This was in stark contrast with the attitude of the priest from Ixtlán who was highly judgmental of any form of non-Catholic faith.

*Conclusions: A status quo achieved?*

Despite the apparent non-growth or even decrease in numbers, the first decade of the twenty-first century has not necessary been a period of stagnation for Protestantism in rural Oaxaca. Various denominations already extant in the 1990s have in recent years succeeded in further institutionalising their presence in the villages. Gradual improvements in the religious premises of both the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses in Capulálpam are proof of this. Over the past ten years, Adventists have considerably expanded their church complex while Jehovah's Witnesses have replaced the previous decrepit building with a new and modern Kingdom Hall that was completed in March 2008 (see Figure 6).

A tempting conclusion to be drawn from all these reflections is that the religious heterogeneity in various communities of the Sierra Juárez that previously experienced rapid Protestant growth, has reached a certain status quo in the percentage of Protestants in the population and the number of different denominations on offer. Such a conclusion is as yet hypothetical and its generalisability to the whole of rural Oaxaca or Mexico at this stage still questionable but, interestingly, the claim is in accordance with similar arguments made by various other scholars writing on Latin American Protestantism. Studies by Kurt Bowen, Edward Cleary and Timothy Steigenga in particular have suggested that relatively high levels of apostasy are slowing or even preventing the growth of Protestantism in many parts of Latin America. Bowen's (1996) study on Mexican Protestantism is a rare example of such argumentation from the 1990s. According to Bowen, forty-three per cent of those raised in Protestant (mainly Pentecostal) churches were no longer Protestants as adults. Moreover, many of these apostates became non-affiliates, not embracing any religion. Cleary (2004) has presented statistical evidence of Protestant non-growth, high rates of apostasy and growing numbers of non-affiliates in Guatemala and Chile. More recently, Steigenga





Figure 6. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses in 2008.

and Cleary (2008) have analysed surveys conducted in Guatemala and Costa Rica in the early 1990s to evaluate trends in conversions and apostasy. To their surprise, thirty-seven per cent of religiously non-affiliated people reported that they had, at some point, experienced a religious conversion. This, as Steigenga and Cleary (2008: 13) argue, is evidence that many individuals pass in and out of religious affiliation over the course of their lives. The authors conclude that an overview of the data on growth rates, on switching between religions, and apostasy within and between Protestant and Catholic groups, suggests that the Latin American religious market remains in a high state of flux. While certain religious groups in Latin America—Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Afro-diaspora religions in particular—have continued to grow rapidly, the rates of growth are uneven and may have reached a relatively steady state in some contexts, like in Guatemala (*ibid.*: 14).

Obviously, further longitudinal research, both quantitative and qualitative, is necessary to substantiate the argument that religious trends in Mexico or parts of Mexico are similar to other contexts of non-growth in Latin America. Quantitative evidence showing whether Protestant growth in Mexico and Oaxaca has slowed down, stopped or even taken a negative turn, is not yet available since the next general census in the country will be held in 2010 and the publication of official results will take a few years. Despite this predicament, qualitative scrutiny of religious dynamics in a narrowly defined milieu and over a sufficiently long period can also add to the more general understanding of these processes, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate in this article. The change and dynamics at the local level can

be considerably more complex and multidirectional than the aggregate national or regional statistics would suggest. The argument for the inevitable Protestant growth at all societal levels is too simplistic, overwriting the cultural and historical nuances of local contexts. Many previous studies, discussing mainly macro-level trends, have often overlooked the subtleties of religious participation, and causes and limits of conversion, jumping to conclusions both about the future growth and possible social impacts of Protestantism which close examination reveals to be highly problematic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, the census results apply to the population of five years and older. General censuses in Mexico are held every ten years. The next census will take place in 2010, hence, regrettably, the most recent official statistics available for this discussion are somewhat outdated.

<sup>2</sup> There are considerable differences between Mexican states in this respect. The share of Protestant population is relatively larger among the indigenous groups in the south of the country. For example, in Chiapas allegedly as many as 46.7 per cent of the indigenous population is non-Catholic (Hernández Hernández 2007: 62). Campeche, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Yucatán, and Oaxaca also have relatively high percentages of Protestants among the indigenous population.

<sup>3</sup> The idea that Protestantism serves as a means to inculcate new values in Latin America is, in fact, not novel. For example, Gibson (1959) in his early analysis describes Protestant churches as significant cultural mechanisms through which Latin Americans acquire “basic American values”.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the often problematic relationship of Mexican Protestantism with the state and the Catholic Church, see, for example, Bastian (1991), Ruiz Guerra (1998), Bonicelli (2002) or Metz (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Religious violence in Chiapas has been particularly well documented (eg. Escalante Betancourt 2001; Martínez García 2002a; Vallverdú 2005), and there are also numerous studies on religious conflicts in Oaxaca (Marroquin Zaleta 1995; Montes García 1995; Ramírez Gómez 1995; Gross 2003a).

<sup>6</sup> The implications of this law have been extensively studied (eg. Ruiz Guerra 1998; Saldaña 1999 and 2005; Gill 2002). In general, the law ameliorated the tense relations of the non-Catholic churches with the state and local communities, although this is not necessarily true for all denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses are the most often mentioned example of a group whose legal status has actually worsened since 1992 (eg. Garma Navarro 1999; Soto Obregón 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Although the share of Protestants in Oaxaca is smaller than in the neighbouring states of Chiapas, Tabasco and Veracruz, the growth itself has been one of the fastest in Mexico. Between 1970 and 2000, the percentage of non-Catholics in Oaxaca jumped from 1.5 to 10.1 per cent (see Table 1). Even more remarkable is the fast spread of Protestant population geographically within the state. In 1950, 339 of all 570 Oaxacan *municipios* (local equivalent of counties) were ‘Catholic-only’, but now there remain hardly any *municipios* without a Protestant population.

<sup>8</sup> The table is based on data from different Mexican and Oaxacan censuses.

<sup>9</sup> The system of *cargos* in rural Mexico stands for a body of communal responsibilities and positions that all male villagers have to fulfil. *Cargos* are non-remunerated and generally last for up to three years. The system is hierarchical; the most simple *cargos* like that of *topil* (messenger) or *policia* are for younger men. The highest *cargos*—*síndico* (village judge) and municipal president, for example, can be reached only by passing all the lower levels of the *cargo* system. Most *cargos* in contemporary villages are civil although some *cargos* are also linked to the Catholic Church and ceremonies.

<sup>10</sup> *Tequios* refer to collective labour obligatory to all male members of a community. *Tequios* are held periodically according to the decision of village authorities, and are usually concerned with works for public benefit like the paving of roads, construction of schools and so forth.

<sup>11</sup> This argument is strikingly in line with various claims against Protestantism in Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century (see Gross 2003a: 19). Manuel Gamio, one of the pioneers of Mexican

anthropology, for example, claimed in his *Forjando patria (Forging Fatherland)*, first published in 1916, that Protestantism was destined to be rejected by indigenous Mexico because of being “abstract, exotic, iconoclastic, and incomprehensible” (Gamio 1982: 87–88). Thirty years later a Catholic lawyer, Esquivel Obregón (1946: 66), suggested that “the Hispano-American soul is not adaptable to Protestantism”.

<sup>12</sup> The reference to the flag is made here because the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not honour patriotic symbols.

<sup>13</sup> On legal pluralism and indigenous communities in Oaxaca see, for example, Nahmad Sitton (1999), Leal (2006), and Martínez Martínez (2006).

<sup>14</sup> One such community is Zoogocho, for example. Its population is almost entirely Catholic and to date its authorities have not permitted the construction of any non-Catholic churches in the village (Manuel Rios, a Zapotec anthropologist, personal communication).

<sup>15</sup> In reality, Catholic revitalisation is not a new phenomenon, especially in the Latin American context. The Second Ecumenical Council of Vatican (or Vatican II) in 1962–1965 lamented the fragility of Catholicism and the advancement of Protestantism in Latin America, pointing to the urgent need to evangelise and indigenise Catholicism. This acknowledgement led to the establishment of Christian Base Communities (Barabas 2003: 23). The ‘Charismatic Renovation Movement’ within the Catholic Church that first emerged in 1967 in Pittsburgh was ‘imported’ to Mexico in the 1970s. This was a conscious attempt to strengthen the Catholic Church against the progress of non-Catholic religious movements (Díaz de la Serna 1985: 18).

<sup>16</sup> Starting from 1997, an increasing number of articles in the local newspaper *Noticias* reported on the Catholic Church’s willingness to change. The titles of the articles, mostly quotations from speeches by Hector González Martínez, then Archbishop of Oaxaca, stated, often in an imperative tone, that the Catholic Church had to get more involved in social issues. The following are just a few illustrative examples (italics added): “the Church is *obliged* to provide Indians with liberty and justice” (6 January, 1997), “the Church *should* make human life more humane” (13 January, 1997), “the Church *should* raise the dignity of the Indians” (30 March, 1997), “the Church *should* participate in resolving the problem of marginalisation” (27 April, 1997), “the Church and Catholics *must* fight unjust social structures” (19 June, 1997), “the Oaxacan Church is *obliged* to fight Neoliberalism” (17 April, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> The crisis started in May 2006 with a strike of the local teachers’ union in Oaxaca City and escalated into broad-based protests against Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the state’s governor, who was accused of corruption and acts of repression. The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), an organization founded in response to the political situation, temporarily took hold of various municipal buildings and television and radio stations. The seven-month conflict resulted in at least eighteen deaths.

<sup>18</sup> Give me M! (M!) Give me A! (A!) Give me R! (R!) Give me I! (I!) Give me A! (A!) (MARIA!) Louder! (M-A-R-I-A)

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