PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES:
DISCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MAYAN WOMEN AND THE ROMAN
CATHOLIC CHURCH

MANDY LEWIS
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ADVISOR: SUSAN M. ST. VILLE
Historically speaking, relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and its female members have been tenuous at best. Examples of the Church’s reinforcement of misogynistic beliefs and practices abound. References to women’s supposed inferiority to men are prominent in numerous essential Church documents, including Paul’s epistles, the writings of Aquinas and Augustine, and Paul VI’s encyclical *Inter Insignores*, just to name a few.¹ In recent decades Christian feminists have attempted to right these wrongs by highlighting the roles women like Mary Magdalene,² Teresa of Avila,³ and Catherine of Siena⁴ have played in Church history and by expounding the value of women’s participation in the modern church. Catholic feminist theologians have critiqued institutional practices and called for an end to women’s exclusion from “ecclesial creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological systems, liturgical worship, patterns of spirituality, visions of mission, Church order, leadership and discipline” in order to better reflect Christ’s equal call of men and women to holiness.⁵ Dialogues among lay and clerical men and women have ensued and points of convergence as well as enduring points of contention have been noted and discussed.

Despite the Church’s apparent efforts to recognize the value and struggles of women, such as Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatum* (On the Dignity of Women), the fact that patriarchal beliefs are maintained in the modern Catholic Church is all too evident. Gender inclusive language or discussions about ordaining women are still contested; too many people believe that a woman’s purpose and dignity stems from her ability to bear children rather than from her intrinsic human nature as *imago Dei*; and women’s ability to image Christ’s divinity is

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⁴ Ibid.
constantly called into question because of his human maleness and their human femaleness. Questions about women’s roles in the Catholic Church spur continuous debates, sometimes vicious battles, whose outcomes have yet to be determined. However, such debates are mostly chronicled as they occur in the privileged Western world. Is the situation similar for Catholic women in developing nations?

With all of this in mind, I traveled to the dioceses of Jalapa and Petén and the Archdiocese of Los Altos in Guatemala to carry out field research in several parish communities. I had been studying the area’s history and was unable to find any significant literature addressing the contemporary relationship between Guatemalan women and the Roman Catholic Church. This seemed odd given the prominence of the Church in Central America, and I felt called to explore the nuances of the situation in Guatemala. During July of 2008, I spent time in the three aforementioned dioceses interviewing men and women, clergy and lay people alike, about the dynamics of the relationship between the Guatemalan Church and its female adherents, paying particular attention to the experiences of Mayan women. Being a Catholic woman of faith as well as an ardent feminist, and with knowledge of the Church’s patriarchal past and present, I anticipated hearing expressions of desires to improve current conditions tinged with the ever-present machismo attitude that men are, at least in some ways, superior to women. I was pleasantly surprised when my expectations remained unfulfilled.

So-called women’s issues were in the forefront of many Guatemalan clergymen’s minds and, thus, were centrally located in several parish agendas as well. Nearly all of the parishes I visited had an active women’s ministry addressing the needs of women in the parish and advocating for their rights within the family, the Church community, and the greater society. Religious sisters run clinics, retreats, and job skills training sessions for women. Women are
encouraged to participate in Church life as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, catechists, and parish leaders. In the communities I visited, the Church is one of the most vocal advocates of equal education for women and men. Most importantly, women are embracing these ideas of equality; they are advocating and participating in society, all the while being spiritually reinforced by the knowledge that what they are doing is in accordance with Christ’s teachings.

What circumstances have led to the tremendously positive and unique gender dynamics in the parish communities I researched? Recent feminist works emphasize the importance of understanding context and utilizing interdisciplinary methods in order to explore gendered issues. Following this advice, I will turn to the disciplines of history, sociology, and theology in order to analyze my question. I will trace the historical, sociological, and theological trajectories of the relationship between Guatemalan women, particularly indigenous Mayan women, and the local Catholic Church in order to better understand the current social-spiritual phenomena occurring in the region. I will argue that, when taken in context, the current gender relations in the areas I studied make perfect sense. Because of historical, social, and theological forces, the Church has acted as a catalyst in advancing women’s rights; moreover, with this institutional support, individual women have reclaimed agency, embracing and re-imagining their beliefs and roles in their Church and communities. I will also demonstrate how the specific situation in Guatemala functions as an example of why feminist social analyses must be multidimensional if they are to provide useful insights into the lives of real women.
Why an interdisciplinary method?

Juxtaposing ideas and methods from both social science and humanities, specifically the disciplines of history, sociology, and theology, in one paper may seem odd or counterproductive to furthering knowledge in the respective fields. However, I argue that not only is such an interdisciplinary approach productive, it is absolutely necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the human condition in a specific context. This approach rests on the view that as human beings, we are all simultaneously productions of history, culture, and our own inner beliefs, including religious beliefs. Human beings are bodies and spirits; they are products of historical and material reality as well as actors motivated by physical, psychological, and spiritual cues in altering those realities. Evidence of the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach can be found both in feminist research and methodology as well as in theological works.

Feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty criticizes reductive social scientific analyses that ignore historical and material realities of specific women’s lives, especially when those analyses are conducted by privileged academics on less privileged women in the developing world. She argues that such an approach dismisses the meanings and significances individual women both imbue and derive from various cultural and religious practices and beliefs that are deemed oppressive, insignificant, or too traditional by Western standards. Mohanty argues for comprehensive, small-scale analyses that take into account the nuances of individual women’s historical and material realities over and against more universal and essentializing projects. As one of those privileged academics articulating my theories and beliefs about women in a situation radically different from my own, I must offer as comprehensive and respectful an

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analysis as I possibly can, one that is rooted in the words and beliefs of those I interviewed and that reflects their core values.

If Mohanty underscores the necessity of a contextual analysis drawing on social life and history, other theorists drive home the importance of respecting the role religion plays in women’s lives. Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, in their reflection on contemporary feminist theoretical and activist work in light of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, noted that many feminist works were dismissive of several important aspects of women’s identities, such as maintaining cultural traditions and the “centrality of religion” in their lives. Their concluding suggestions for remedying this shortcoming as well as others in feminist academic research include increased dialogue among activists and academics and among all those working on gender issues in different academic disciplines. The intricacies and interweaving of the various aspects of women’s lives, social and spiritual, are too prevalent to be discounted by the feminist agenda.

By incorporating a contextualized historical narrative I will be able to offer a more nuanced approach to analyzing the social realities lived by Guatemalan women; furthermore, by integrating a sociology of religion approach in order to examine the social changes in the Church in Guatemala, I will be able to explain how such changes created a social space for the current religious climate and liberating environment experienced by Guatemalan women within their Church communities. Still, something is missing from the explanation, and that is an understanding of what sustains the indigenous people of Guatemala – their faith lives. Theological faith is what has allowed Mayan women to endure and make sense of the cruel reality in which they live. Moreover, their faith has given them a wealth of resources from which they have

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8 Ibid., 21.
recognized their human dignity and, in turn, utilized their experiences to deepen and re-create traditional Church teachings, most importantly being those about Christ and the cross. The faith of my interviewees is more to them than just a social phenomena; it is a truth, a mystery that cannot be reduced purely to the physical realm. Out of respect for my interviewees immense faith, one which I share, I cannot begin to attempt a complete analysis of Guatemalan women’s realities without also considering the theological truths that might be at work in this situation.

Unlike the social scientific approach that perceives religious practices as mere symbols or expressions of social cohesion, a theological perspective is open to the claim that religious beliefs are actually embodiments of a transcendent truth that cannot be verified by evidence accepted by social scientific methods. In remaining open to the theological viewpoint in my analysis, I stand to gain greater insight into the resilience and creative agency of the Guatemalan women I interviewed. The particular theological perspective I am appropriating for my analysis is that of liberation theology, which has long articulated a relationship between theology and the social sciences. Liberation theology calls for an understanding of the human condition in which theological belief develops through the truth revealed in Scripture and Church teachings and in conversation with the truth revealed in the everyday experiences of people marked by the Holy Spirit, especially the poor and marginalized in society. This latter kind of truth is better assessed by the social sciences. In light of this information, I contend that the social sciences are not necessarily antagonistic to theological pursuits; rather, they complement and enhance one another.

Gustavo Gutiérrez eloquently argues the need for theology and the social sciences to work together in order to more fully understand the challenges to proclaiming the Gospel, particularly in the developing world. He says, “It is at this stage that recourse to the social
sciences become relevant, for these sciences are a means for a more accurate knowledge of society as it really is and so to articulate with greater precision the challenges it poses for the proclamation of the gospel and thus for theological reflection as well”.

In the same piece, Gutiérrez goes on to argue that a theological perspective, with its basis in the experiences of men and women, helps avoid losing a comprehensive vision of historical processes and of the freedom of the human person. Understanding the power of social processes and inequalities only furthers appreciation of the gospel message and understanding of how it applies to life in specific areas; correspondingly, the gospel illumines the fullness of the human experience, which cannot be fully captured by the social scientific method.

Based on the above insights, this paper will analyze the current situation for Catholic women in Guatemala from three angles: historical, sociological, and theological. A detailed history will be offered first so as to situate the current gender relations and power dynamics within the country in their proper context. Once the historical foundations have been laid, I will then summarize what I encountered on my trip to the beautiful yet conflicted country of Guatemala and the accounts related to me in interviews, because at the heart of this analysis are the words, beliefs, and experiences of the individuals with whom I interacted. Lastly, I will analyze my ethnographic findings from both a sociological perspective and then from a theological standpoint in an effort to understand more fully the relevant truths in these women’s lives.

Historical Background

Early Mayan History

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10 Ibid., 47-48.
Like all parts of the Americas, long before the Europeans “discovered” Guatemala, it first belonged to its indigenous peoples, namely the Maya. Evidence suggests that the Maya in Guatemala originated from a small North American Indian tribe, possibly affiliated with peoples closely tied to the Totonacan and Zoquean speakers of Mexico, and that those people settled in the highlands of Western Guatemala around the middle of the third millennium B.C.\textsuperscript{11} Descendants of these and other migrating groups have been labeled as the Classic Maya, who were dominant from A.D. 250 – 900. They erected the great Mayan city-states and were unequalled in their progress in politics, science, architecture, and art.\textsuperscript{12} The Classic Maya are most famous for their incredibly accurate and elaborate calendar system. Like other indigenous groups in the Americas, Mayan men and women had distinct roles and tasks in their families and communities, yet it appears their relations exemplified a certain level of egalitarianism and mutual respect.\textsuperscript{13}

The Mayan culture, consisting not of one uniform group of people but of several different tribes, flourished until about 900 A.D., when an increasing population and overproduction of crops and goods resulted in both environmental damage and increasing political tension among the various Mayan groups. As a result, cities began to “collapse” in a domino effect.\textsuperscript{14} In the following years, the Maya experienced invasions and wars with groups from Mexico and with the Toltecs; these encounters, despite their violent nature, had significant cultural impacts on Mayan society, including religious customs and ceremonies, and augmented the cultural diversity already present.


\textsuperscript{13} Matthew Restall, \textit{The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550-1850} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 123.

\textsuperscript{14} Fischer and Brown, 6.
By A.D. 1250, the highland Maya were organized into five main groups: the K’iche’, Poqomam, Tz’utujil, Mam, and Kaqchikel.\textsuperscript{15} Descendants of these groups still reside in Guatemala and can be distinguished by their differing customs, languages, and \textit{traje}, that is, traditional Mayan dress. To this day, the Maya have never been one homogenous people, but rather a fluid and diverse conglomeration of several groups of peoples with widely varying beliefs, practices, and over twenty spoken languages. Years of invasion and conflict have substantially contributed to beautiful cultural and ethnic diversity within Mayan society; unfortunately, cultural tensions and conflicts also resulted in a structurally weakened and decentralized civilization that was vulnerable to the Spanish conquest of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textit{Conquest and Independence}

The Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado exited Mexico City on December 6, 1523 and marched toward Guatemala, entering its borders sometime in January.\textsuperscript{16} Alvarado was consistently ruthless in his conquest, hanging and burning alive those who opposed him. Many historians have declared that within months Alvarado’s invasion was a success, but there is ample evidence suggesting that only pockets of areas were conquered and the Maya remained at war, rebelling against invading neighbors from Mexico as well as other groups of Maya who had allied themselves with the Spanish conquistadors. Not until 1529 did Jorge Alvarado, Pedro’s brother, finally subdue most of the country.\textsuperscript{17} Guatemalan citizens were under the virulently racist, ethnocentric, and violent Spanish colonial rule until declaring independence from Spain on September 15, 1821. This was a bloodless revolution for independence; however, the Guatemalan

\textsuperscript{15} Fischer and Brown, 9.
Declaration of Independence, as written, favored the elite ruling class in the country, now known as ladinos, and formed the foundations for future violence and revolution.

The ladinos – those with both Mayan and European ancestry who form a statistical minority – attained political, economic, and social prominence in Guatemala over the more numerous indigenous Maya following Guatemalan independence.\(^{18}\) Wealthy ladinos believe themselves to be the ruling elite of the country, heirs to the legacy of the Spanish conquistadors, and were bolstered in their claims by the design of the Declaration of Independence and centuries of discrimination against indigenous groups. As a group they have discriminated against and persecuted indigenous groups, reinforcing ethnic divides and tensions present since the conquest. It should be noted that not all who would be labeled as ladinos are wealthy elites who have contributed to discrimination; however, those who are financially successful and have power in Guatemalan society historically have almost exclusively been of ladino heritage, and even poor ladinos tend to segregate themselves from indigenous groups.

After declaring independence, Guatemala was briefly part of the Mexican Empire and then of a federation of nation-states called the United Provinces of Central America.\(^ {19}\) These unifying ties were short-lived, and hopes of a just political process were soon vanquished. A power struggle erupted between Liberals, who generally speaking wanted to create a new social system adhering to the ideals of liberalism and capitalism, and Conservatives who wanted to maintain the status quo of the colonial era.\(^ {20}\) A series of elected dictators ruled the country until the mid-1980s, each having his own effect on the country, especially on the Mayan majority, and set the stage for turmoil to come, either by protecting Mayan culture through generally ignoring it (e.g. Rafael

\(^{18}\) Fischer and Brown, 9-11.
\(^{19}\) U.S. Department of State, [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm), 2009.
Carrera) or through liberal reforms and commercialization which resulted in marginalization and land loss for the Maya (e.g. Justo Rufino Barrios).

One of the driving forces behind the political and economic strategies throughout Guatemala’s history has been the question of land ownership. In November of 1950, Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Gúzman took over the presidency of Guatemala and began a radical agrarian reform policy. He expropriated hundreds of thousands of acres of land and redistributed it to landless citizens in an effort to alleviate the country’s economic disparities.\(^2\) Reports of Arbenz’s reforms made their way to the U.S. White House and were viewed as communist in nature, despite Arbenz’s capitalistic goals. Subsequently, CIA officials planned and executed a coup in Guatemala, ousting Arbenz from power and putting in his place an oppressive military junta led by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. Armas’s leadership ushered in a time of severe military oppression and corruption, including fixed elections and increasing levels of violence against individuals and small groups who advocated in any capacity for reform or revolution.\(^2\) Continuous political discord, finally resulting in an oppressive and increasingly violent military dictatorship, significant economic disparities, and assumptions of racial and ethnic superiority remaining from colonial times all combined to create the ideal climate for an unspeakably cruel civil war.

*The War and Its Aftermath*

After years of oppression, dictatorships, and discrimination, many indigenous groups refused to go back to the way things were prior to Arbenz’s reforms. Local groups formed despite policies against public organization and strived to sustain local autonomy and independence from the military’s counter reforms. The military attempted to suppress these groups as well as others,

\(^2\) Lovell, 139-140.
including unions, student associations, clergy, and other intellectuals who spoke out against the military’s tactics. Indigenous guerilla groups began to take shape in the Highlands of Guatemala where the violence was most concentrated; in turn, the Guatemalan military strengthened its numbers and, in the 1960s, initiated vicious attacks against unarmed civilians as well as insurgents.23 Anyone who outwardly opposed the ruling regime was labeled as a communist, anarchist, traitor, or all of the above and executed without question.

The 1980s indisputably saw the most heinous violations of human rights in Guatemala since the time of the conquest. The violence of the 1960s and 1970s was mostly directed against specific targets of military interest. However, when General Efraín Ríos Montt came to power in March of 1982, he initiated an unprecedented scorched-earth policy in which noncombatants were indiscriminately tortured and massacred.24 Entire villages were annihilated and thousands of people were “disappeared,” never to be heard from again. The vast majority of victims during this time were indigenous Maya. Targets were burned, shot, raped, mutilated, stabbed, strangled, beaten, thrown off sides of cliffs or into volcanoes, and buried in mass graves. Tens of thousands of people were slaughtered during the less than two years Ríos Montt was in power.

Large-scale violence continued into the 1990s, although nowhere near the levels of the early 1980s, until in June of 1993 Ramiro de León Carpio, the country’s Human Rights Ombudsperson, became President of Guatemala and signed the Comprehensive Human Rights Accord on March 29, 1994.25 This document initiated the quest for lasting peace. Alvaro Arzú was elected President in January of 1996 and following Carpio’s example, on December 26, 1996 negotiated an end to the 36-year war between the government and guerilla groups. When all was

25 Lovell, 92-93.
said and done, Guatemala had experienced Latin America’s longest and arguably most brutal civil war to date. Over 440 villages were decimated, and well over 100,000 civilians were killed, possibly as many as 150,000 according to the Catholic Church.26 The United States estimates that closer to 200,000 unarmed civilians, mostly indigenous Maya, were killed or “disappeared” and military personnel murdered the majority of them, not the guerillas as military propaganda had led many individuals to believe.27 Some people, including some of those I interviewed, have gone so far as to label the atrocities as the “Mayan genocide.” Although the war is officially over, smaller level violence persists in the form of petty crime and continuing retaliations for wartime events. Centuries of political unrest, racism, discrimination, and mass murders have left a pall over Guatemalan society that probably will not dissipate any time soon.

Victims and their family members are still daily experiencing the aftermath of the violence, from coping with the trauma of torture and loss of loved ones to enduring the effects of poverty in the struggling post-war economy. There is hardly a single Guatemalan citizen who has not been in some way affected by the decades of violence. Mayan women have suffered most acutely, living with their horrific memories of colonization, subjugation, discrimination, and genocide, all the while struggling to make ends meet as wives, mothers, and now widows in a country pervaded by the racist and sexist beliefs.28 Scarcely mentioned in larger historical narratives, Mayan women’s contributions have largely been ignored and their suffering overlooked. Nevertheless, they have demonstrated incredible resilience and functioned as the preservers of their culture and keepers of the historical memory for centuries. Mayan women’s historical experiences of oppression – both from outside colonizing forces and from internal sexist structures that developed within their own

27 Ibid.
28 Margaret Hooks, Guatemalan Women Speak, (Washington, DC: Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), 1993), ix-xii.
peoples – and experiences as the keepers of the cultural memory has situated them in a key position now to lobby for peace, justice, and equality in their society. Arguably one of the strongest mobilizing forces for contemporary Mayan women has been the Roman Catholic Church.

The Role of the Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church has had a formidable though not always positive presence in Guatemala since the beginning of colonial times. The Maya developed their own complex religious systems incorporating nature – especially the sun, rain, and corn – with a functioning priesthood in place long before the Spanish arrived in the 16th century. Mayan society, including religion, was based on a system of complementarity where men and women were seen as halves of a whole that reflected the divine. According to myth, there were pairs of gods and goddesses representing the how the masculine and feminine roles were needed to complement one another. Men and women were seen as having different productive roles, but this system may not have been necessarily oppressive. Women’s reproductive capacity appears to have been highly valued and ritualized. Men and women would have both participated in various religious rituals, especially since many took place in the home where women were most productive with raising children, weaving, and food production.²⁹

For centuries after the conquest, Catholicism was imposed upon the Maya by Spanish missionaries, and punishments were often allotted when the indigenous did not cooperate.³⁰ The Spanish missionaries implemented a policy of congregación whereby Mayans living in scattered

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rural groups, especially those in the mountains, were herded into larger congregations in towns where they would be catechized and instructed how to be civilized.\footnote{Lovell, 117.} The Maya were forced to leave behind their former religious practices in favor of Catholic traditions and Western ideals, although they were allowed to speak their native languages. This allowed them to preserve much more of their cultural and religious heritage than other conquered peoples and to continue traditional religious rites in secret.

The Spanish committed unspeakable atrocities in the name of religion and conversion. Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican priest and missionary, vehemently spoke out against the treatment of the indigenous. He condemned the suffering induced by the cruelty of the colonizers, the Maya’s exposure to European diseases, and the forced conversion of the Maya. He believed the tactics of the Spanish to be counter-productive to the goals of the Church and contradictory to the teachings of Jesus Christ.\footnote{Restall and Asselbergs, 70.} Unfortunately, his was a lone voice amid the storm of destruction, and the inhumane practices continued until long after the declaration of independence.

The liberal governments that assumed power after independence minimized the Church’s influence in Guatemala for decades. Many priests and religious were exiled or forced into retirement, leaving fewer priests to minister to substantial populations. Because of this, rural Maya were largely unaffected by Church efforts between 1870 and 1940; they were left to practice their religions as they saw fit, often intermingling Christian beliefs and rites they had learned with traditional Mayan spiritual practices.\footnote{Bruce J. Calder, “Interwoven Histories: The Catholic Church and the Maya, 1940 to the Present,” Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change, eds. Edward L. Cleary and Timothy J. Steigenga (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 94-95.} Mayan spirituality and cosmovision flourished during this time, and many Mayan groups were precluded from the influence of the patriarchal views that abounded in the Church during those decades.
The 1940s saw yet another change in the level of Church involvement in Mayan communities when a large numbers of Catholic missionaries were sent to Guatemala in an effort to revitalize the Church’s presence in Guatemala. This change coincided with the waning power of the Liberals and the election of more “radical” leaders in the 1940s and 1950s. Part of the increased Church involvement included a controversial program entitled Catholic Action. The outward goal of Catholic Action was spiritual rejuvenation and catechetical instruction to counter the reversion to traditional Mayan practices, but a second goal was also to counter the influence of communism and secularism during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{34} While these were the objective goals of Catholic Action, there were some unforeseen consequences: a decentralizing effect on the Church hierarchy on account of the increased numbers of dioceses and the foreign missionary presence; political and social mobilization in local communities due to the increased educational and catechetical attention given to Mayan rural communities; and an overall increase in the number of educated indigenous, including indigenous women.\textsuperscript{35}

The Church’s more recent history, which will be analyzed in greater detail in the sociological section, bears witness to yet another shift in mission orientation beginning in the 1960s. The growing importance of liberation theology and the onset of civil war had a distinct impact on the relationship between the Catholic Church and Guatemalans, especially indigenous Guatemalans. Social justice, as opposed to conversion and indoctrination, became the norm, and this trend continues today. A heightened awareness of the importance of respecting indigenous culture, including religious traditions, also evolved over the past five decades. Inculturation theology, defined as “de-contextualizing Christian narratives from their Western cultural references and repositioning them within a Mayan telos, or cosmovision,” has flourished in recent times.

\textsuperscript{34} Calder, 95-96.
\textsuperscript{35} Handy, 236-242.
years, especially with the influence of Bishop Julio Cabrera.\textsuperscript{36} Many Church leaders have encouraged dialogue about the beliefs common to both traditional Mayan religion and Catholicism. Inculturation theology has led to greater respect between Church officials and the Maya, including the Mayan women who take great pride in remembering and re-telling their cultural history and traditions. This overall atmosphere of openness to diversity, social change, and equality within the Guatemalan Church’s recent history contributes to the creation of a space for women, especially Mayan women, to advance their position within the Church and the greater Guatemalan society. The information I collected during my field research affirms the positive relationship between Mayan women and the Guatemalan Church.

\textbf{Contemporary Women in the Guatemalan Catholic Church}

My field research was based on in-depth interviews carried out with 30 individuals in the dioceses of Petén, Jalapa, and the Archdiocese of Los Altos in Guatemala as well as several informal conversations I took part in throughout the course of my travels. I interviewed thirteen men and seventeen women, including one archbishop, one bishop, five parish priests (one who was serving as acting bishop), six lay men, two religious sisters (one of whom was a missionary), a female doctor and missionary in a local clinic, and fourteen lay Mayan women. The ages of my subjects ranged from 18 to possibly 80 years of age. I traveled the areas interviewing people, mostly in their homes, rectories, or parish centers.

When interviewing the women and men of Guatemala, I made several kinds of inquiries. I asked them questions about themselves, their family lives, and their daily tasks. I asked about how

they participated in their homes, their Churches, and their communities. I asked how they felt about the Church’s presence in their lives and in their communities. I asked about their personal problems and about greater social problems in their area. I specifically asked how they felt the Church viewed women and how the Church was responding to the rampant social problems in the country. I also asked about their personal faith life, what their beliefs and practices were, and how they understood and related to the person of Jesus Christ. Lastly, I asked about their hopes for the future. I was continually amazed by the courage of my interviewees and by the responses they graciously afforded me.

One of the first themes that emerged in my interviews was that the peace treaty signed in 1996 is only “a peace on paper” for many Guatemalan citizens. My interviewees agreed that violence and disappearances are still common, although not nearly as prevalent as during the 1980s. The Church has an ongoing commission in the Archdiocese’s Human Rights Office, which was created in the 1990s in response to the assassinations and disappearances, with the goal of addressing past and present human rights violations. The Maya are still discriminated against, sometimes violently, and the most vulnerable to discrimination are women because of the pervasiveness of both racism and sexism in society. The majority of the people in Guatemala is incredibly poor and has little access to resources such as arable land or potable water. Of an overall population of 14.02 million, an estimated 6 million people are living in poverty, the majority of them in the rural areas, and the average inflation rate is about 7%. According to the 2006 UNDP, nearly 60% of shared income went to the richest 20% of the population while only

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2.9% went to the poorest 20%. The ones who suffer most intensely from this economic disparity are Mayan women.

One woman named María from Petén told me that Mayan women have “three strikes” against them – they are “women, indigenous, and from a rural area”. Padre José from Jalapa said that Mayan women are sometimes “five times discriminated” in their society because they are “women, Mayan, poor, illiterate, and many are widows”. The more interviews I carried out the more I came to appreciate this concept. Women who are supporting a family without a husband, which accounts for over half the families in some parishes, cannot get jobs. Priority goes to men who are still seen culturally as the head of the family, and women are often seen as incompetent. Many women are illiterate and, since they have spent most of their lives in the home, only know their native tongue instead of Spanish. They are also often refused jobs if they wear traditional Mayan dress, as it is seen as a “refusal to adapt to the society around them, and because hatreds from the war run deep.” Even when women can secure jobs, they are paid significantly less than men. This is partly why the Church has instituted programs teaching women to employ “acceptable” household skills, such as shampoo or broom-making, to help them earn money; yet, simultaneously, the Church encourages the education for young girls in reading, math, and science, in anticipation of changes in what is considered “acceptable” by society.

The obstacles facing Mayan women are endless. I heard the same list over and over again: domestic violence, anxiety disorders, depression, dangers of childbirth, abandonment by husbands who have migrated north, infidelity in marriage, young marriage (as young as 12), illiteracy, lack of education, male alcoholism, sexual assault, machismo, AIDS…. All I had to do was ask if there were any problems or hardships for women in Guatemala, and it was as if I had opened a

floodgate. As I predicted, almost all of these difficulties were in some way tied to the widespread poverty and unequal power dynamics in Guatemala. For example, education, considered by nearly all those I interviewed as essential for change in their society, is costly. Many do not receive an education because it is more important that they get a job and work to feed their family, even as young children. “Poor people do not have time for an education,” I was told. “That is for rich ladinos.” If a family has the ability to send one child to school, it is usually a male child, because a man would be more likely to succeed in society. This particular example illustrates beliefs about gender roles as well as current socioeconomic and racial stratification in Guatemalan society.

In several interviews, I still encountered the deeply rooted Catholic belief that men and women have complementary roles in the family. However, in practice, this belief did not impede support for what I would term feminist reforms in all aspects of life. At the parish level, it is understood that women are frequently in charge of families because of single motherhood, widowhood, or because the men have migrated to the U.S. to find work. This has led many parishioners and clergy members to recognize that beliefs about traditional gender roles are antiquated and simply impractical. The Catholic Church in Guatemala seems to be battling against the widely accepted machismo norm – the idea of male domination and female inferiority – instead of perpetuating it. There are numerous social ministries put in place by the Church for both men and women about health care, social justice, human rights, equal parenting, women’s equality, and the role of the youth. Contrary to what I had assumed, the Church is vigorously working to improve the lives of all people in Guatemala, especially those of Mayan women.

Most of my interviewees agreed that social problems are more common and more severe for the Maya in the rural communities. A doctor at a clinic in Jalapa told me that “outside ideas” reach the cities first, but with the way communication systems are in Guatemala, ideas of equality
and human dignity for women are almost completely *extraño* (strange, foreign) in rural areas. Some Mayan women are under the complete control of their fathers and/or husbands and are not even allowed to leave their homes. This is where the Church’s role is essential, especially given the indigenous’ distrust of government programs and the taboo nature of secular feminist movements. Faith and spirituality are immeasurably significant in the lives of those I interviewed, and women are considered by the Maya to be the ones who pass on traditions and spiritual values; therefore, women are allowed to attend Church-sponsored events where educators can preach about various women’s rights issues. Church authority does not mean that women’s presence at such events is never questioned. One priest told me that he has had men ask what kinds of things are being taught at these meetings, and there have been cases of women being physically punished for participation or others being prevented from attending future events. Still, women continue to attend Church meetings and support groups in increasing numbers. Thus, the Church is taking advantage of its power in this particular situation to improve Mayan women’s lives.

I encountered yet another example of progress at one of the clinics I visited that is administrated by religious sisters in Petén. There were many pictorial posters on the walls with information about various relevant topics such as nutrition, heart disease, diabetes, and dental care. There were also a substantial number of posters specifically about reproductive health for men, and even more for women. There were posters about the significance of hygiene, cancers of the reproductive system, the menstrual cycle, childbirth, sexually transmitted diseases, and the importance of monthly breast self-exams. Issues ignored in the past were displayed in the front office where everyone could see. Not only were men and women being professionally cared for at a state-of-the-art facility, but there was an emphasis on education, knowledge, and preventive
medicine, all of which empower individuals and offer them more control over their own lives in a difficult and unpredictable social situation.

Nearly every parish I visited has an active women’s ministry which works to educate the women about their own dignity and human rights. While ideals of complementarity are prevalent, developments that also foreground women as children of God mitigate the use of complementarity as an oppressive principle. There are workshops offered for women that address self-esteem building, human dignity, active participation in the community, how to combat domestic violence, and recourse for victims of assault. One parish even has a pro bono lawyer who works with victims of sexual and domestic violence. Success is minimal due to the constraints of the justice system, but no longer is violence against women an issue being swept under the rug in that parish. Isabel, a lovely young woman in Petén, told me that she did not know it was wrong for her husband to hit her until, at a women’s meeting, her priest noticed her bruises and told her that she had her “own dignity as a child of God” and she was “created as an equal to [her] husband, not as his possession.” One women’s ministry leader, Sr. Rita, explained how women at these meetings experience consienciación – what feminists might refer to as “consciousness-raising”. They are not just told what they should think, but they are – sometimes for the first time in their lives – asked what they believe to be true about themselves and their world. These women are no longer subject to the beliefs of others but are validated as active agents with the power to construct their own truths and identities. There is also talk of the theme ser y hacer (to be and to do), referring to who women are and what they can do. Women are human persons, not possessions, and they have the capability to do many more things than they or others initially perceive.

Many of the parishes want to start focusing on educating men now that many of the women have become despertada (awakened) and are less willing to tolerate mistreatment. “One must
value herself before she can convince others to do the same,” Padre Leonardo from Los Altos informed me. There are obstacles, of course, such as fear of breaking societal norms and the pervasiveness of machismo. Sr. Rita explained to me the importance of romper a situación, breaking the cycle. She said, “Women are beginning to reevaluate and redefine who they are, but there is still a great deal of fear that their male counterparts will not accept these new definitions.” Progress since the war is certainly evident, but everyone I spoke to said that there is still a long, long way to go.

With the words equality and self-worth now in their vocabulary, women are taking the initiative and becoming more active in their own communities. There are endless examples. More and more women throughout the dioceses are becoming Eucharistic ministers, lectors, and community leaders. One of the bishops told me that in some parishes he is commissioning more women than men for the first time ever. An acting bishop said that groups of both men and women are leading many of his core groups, like the health ministry and literacy commission. He thinks this is wonderful and offers these people the “ability to work as equals, not as masters and slaves”. The Petén diocese was in the process of preparing for its diocesan conference and the main topic being highlighted that year was the Women’s Commission. Men and women from all over the diocese would be discussing the value of women in the Church. The novelty of the idea was not lost on anyone during that focus group I held, including the local priests.

The hierarchal male priesthood remains in place and functions as it does throughout the world, yet the overall atmosphere within several parishes is significantly modified by the ever-growing presence of women in leadership roles that have traditionally been reserved for men. A couple of clergy members also intimated to me their acceptance of women in the priesthood, “off the record of course.” One exceptional Mayan woman I met, an anthropologist named Elisa, has
just finished translating the Bible into Quiché so that those Maya who cannot read Spanish can still read the Bible and learn theology. Women lead Bible study groups, are in charge of catechesis, and are active and respected members of parish councils that make decisions for their parishes. I met with a parish council in Los Altos that had almost equal numbers of men and women, and every member individually expressed the need to continue working and educating men and women about equality as children of God. They say there is much work to be done, and they intend to do it.

Something else worthy of note is the correlation I found between areas where feminist ideas and reforms are beginning to take root and evidence of Mayan traditional practices being incorporated with Catholic practices in those same areas. The areas where women seemed to have the most active Church roles were areas where Catholic feast days are celebrated in conjunction with Mayan holidays, masses are said in native Mayan languages, and Mayan religious rites occur within the walls of official Church buildings. One older woman in the Los Altos area explained that “In the past, the Catholic Church has not been a good thing. There has been oppression. But now the Church is a very good thing, and people in the Church are trying to help the Maya be free and live our lives as we see fit. They want to help women, and widows, and the poor be free, too.” She continued to say that she thought many of the Mayan beliefs were compatible with her Catholic faith and she did not see contradictions in practicing both. Her pastor agreed.

Another woman I spoke to in Jalapa said she also saw the two belief systems as compatible. “There is one God, but we need better ways to express God. God has masculine and feminine characteristics that get ignored. Thinking and talking about God the way we [the Maya] talk about nature and earth would be very beneficial.” One of the bishops and also her pastor agreed with these statements of how to speak of God and hoped the whole Church would learn to appreciate el feminismo (feminism) and its potential to enrich and revitalize the Guatemalan as
well as the Universal Church. Many of my interviewees used the term *el feminismo* without much hesitation, however they were quick to point out the differences between their beliefs and more secular feminist goals. They were adamant that equality for women did not mean reversing the system and oppressing or excluding men, nor did it mean giving up their identities as Catholic women or as Maya or their traditional practices. The women I spoke with spoke with certainty about a world where all of these aspects of life would co-exist in harmony. These women clearly demonstrated active agency in imaging their ideal world and in working to create that ideal.

I asked nearly everyone I interviewed what their hopes were for the future. Almost all of them mentioned “*mis hijos*” or “*los niños y las niñas*” (the children), and the idea of educating future generations to respect all people. An elder woman told me that their society has “not always treated women this way and in time the young ones will learn the respect of their ancestors”. She said that the Catholic Church, in her opinion, was currently one of their strongest allies, encouraging women to pursue education. There are more young girls attending school and, more importantly, staying in school, although child brides are still all too common in rural areas. Many women are choosing to remain single to finish their education and get jobs of their own, instead of being forced to rely on a husband to provide for them. The Church members I spoke to were very much in favor of this. They said women had the same rights as men to an education and participating in the workforce. Young men and women are gradually learning to treat one another as equals in the public sphere. This is most noticeable in the city, where I saw female college students and professional women interacting with their male peers. Julio in Los Altos told me he thinks the next steps are “deepening men’s understanding of women’s complex role in the world, changing the laws, and more women in politics”.


In sum, the advancements that have been made in women’s rights are extraordinary considering the social pressures facing most Guatemalan women. Increasing numbers of women are receiving education and job training, attending consciousness-raising sessions, participating in leadership roles in their Church communities, and standing up to the violence and sexism in their lives. These actions are fully supported by local Church leaders and resource groups. There is still much to be accomplished, like reaching more women in the rural communities, educating men, and conveying ideas of male and female equality to the larger society. Societal and institutional violence, including domestic violence, and the machismo culture are serious hindrances to further advances, but they are not impossible to overcome. Currently, the demands most women, especially Mayan women, are making are in line with Church doctrine and abide by the deeply entrenched idea of complementarity between the sexes that exists both in the Church and in traditional Mayan culture. Progress could become limited if women begin advocating for a more secularized version of feminism. However, for the time being, the relationship between women and the Catholic Church appears to be a fruitful and mutually beneficial one.

My constant question throughout my interviews was, how? How did the Catholic Church come to occupy the role of liberator for so many women in several different areas? The country’s history rendered some answers, yet I still felt my curiosity was not entirely satisfied. I then turned to the field of sociology in a quest for a more complete resolution to the conundrum I encountered on my trip.

Using the Sociological Imagination

Guatemala’s historical and social facts provide an excellent foundation in explaining the necessary context making the current opportunities for women possible; however, they are not on
their own sufficient causes for why some Guatemalan women have so decisively taken a stand against the injustices in their lives. The historical facts along with other social and religious facts must be analyzed from a sociological perspective in order to provide a more comprehensive theory. Using the sociological imagination, which allows a scholar to recognize that personal issues and incidences usually coincide with larger scale events and social trends will generate a clearer picture of how Guatemalan women and the Catholic Church have come to be united in such a mutually beneficial relationship in several different dioceses.39 I will adopt an approach similar to what a sociologist of religion might take to analyze occurrences in the recent history of the Church and assess what impact they have had on Guatemalan women’s participation in their Church.

Changing Religious Climate

Historians, social scientists, and theologians agree that one of the most catalyzing events in the Catholic Church’s recent history was its Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). Vatican II, the Church’s most recent ecumenical council occurring from 1962-1965, is distinguished by its emphasis on renewal and modernization, such as increased participation by lay people, making the Church’s teachings more relevant to the modern world, preference to the poor and vulnerable, and openness to dialogue with other faith traditions that had previously been rejected.40 Vatican II’s groundbreaking documents and ideas served as springboards for further theological discourse and for social movements seeking to improve the quality of life of the poor and oppressed in countries around the world. Guatemala was no different. The increasing numbers of European and North American priests in Guatemala during the mid-20th century internalized the teachings of the

council in different ways, but the majority took very seriously the call for dialogue, openness, and special concern for the poor. Fr. Vincenzo, a young missionary priest in Guatemala during the 1960s whom I interviewed, explained that as soon as news from the conclusion of the Council reached him, he immediately began consulting parish members about the conditions of their lives and listening to suggestions of what he and a fellow priest could do to improve the situation. The years following Vatican II led to the implementation of several new policies and ideals, ushering in a new era in the Latin American and, correspondingly, the Guatemalan Church.

Several aspects of Vatican II appear to have impacted Guatemalan women directly and provided a space for them to take a greater role in their communities. One of the most influential of the Vatican II documents was *Gaudium et Spes*, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.” This document expounded how the Church needed to respond to the signs of the times and changes in the world. Part of this effort included recognizing that Christ came to save all of humanity, not just a select few, and that he came to save them body and soul.\(^{41}\) Christ came to heal the world not just from sin, but also from all bodily ailments so that each human person could fully glorify God with both body and soul. The declaration that Christ is concerned about the whole human person was a key step in moving beyond traditional binaries that connected women with a corrupted bodily existence and men with the more holy spiritual side of life to a more holistic view of each human person, male and female, as a combination of both. With Vatican II, both bodily integrity and spiritual well-being finally received their due attention.

Proclaiming the importance of bodily experiences and material reality also opened the doors for a greater concern about tending to individuals’ physical needs and toiling for an end to poverty, hunger, violence, and oppression, all of which are most acutely suffered by women the

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world over. *Lumen Gentium.* “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church” also greatly affected the role of women in the Church as it highlighted that all people, not just clergy, are called to holiness. This document also demanded an increased participation of the laity in the life of the Church.  

With an emphasis on increased participation came the decree that education for all people, including women, was an essential right and not a privilege for a select minority. In the years following the initial implementation of Vatican II, women have become a more visible presence, serving as lectors, Eucharistic ministers, music ministers, altar servers, catechists, parish council members, and the like. My data from Guatemala supports this, with bishops and priests reporting a steady increase in lay women’s demand for education and their participation in Church ministries.

Another pivotal event that paved the way for improved relations between the Church and Guatemalan women was the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellín in Colombia in 1968. This event was a gathering of all the Latin American bishops who were charged, like all the bishops around the world at the end of Vatican II in 1965, to convene assemblies dedicated to discerning how best to apply the teachings of the Council to their local parish communities. The Medellín conference took the message of Vatican II to “open the windows of the Church to let in the fresh wind of the world” and applied it specifically to the situation in Latin America. Medellín served as an impetus for change, calling for an end to violence and repression in all its forms in Latin America. The messages from Vatican II and from Pope Paul VI’s visit to Bogotá, Colombia in 1968 were ruminated upon and applied to the everyday lives of the people of Latin America. For the first time, abstract theological discourse

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was concretely applied to the peoples of Latin America. The bishops publicly condemned the frequent large-scale violence, illiteracy, and abject poverty suffered by the masses in Latin America.\textsuperscript{45} While women were not specifically targeted in this message, the acknowledgement of human dignity and theology’s role in eradicating misery and injustice provided the underpinnings and legitimization for a feminist theology in Latin America.\textsuperscript{46} Such courageous statements by revered public officials were groundbreaking and set the tone for how theology would be developed throughout Latin America for years to come.

A third factor that also functioned as a spark for social change in Latin America was the birth of liberation theology. Liberation theology is both a social and theological movement that gained strength after the Second Vatican Council and continues to be popular in Latin America, especially in Guatemala. Its central tenet involves recognizing the experiences of the poorest of the poor as a source of revelation in conjunction with traditional sources of scripture and official Church teaching (preferential option for the poor).\textsuperscript{47}

Undoubtedly, the significances of liberation theology have been most fully articulated by the brilliant and controversial theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. He has written at length about the movement itself, the reason for its emergence, and its implications for Christianity and for society. While there are numerous theological implications of this perspective, there are also several more sociological ones. Liberation theology’s focus on praxis, its preferential option for the poor, and emphasis on actually working to change the status of the marginalized in society (as opposed to more traditional forms of theology that see suffering as God’s will) is what fostered its growth in poor Latin America countries where suffering and marginalization are facts.

\textsuperscript{45} Bahmann, 9-11.
\textsuperscript{46} Aquino 2001, 236-238.
of everyday life. Solidified by the belief that it is part of God’s plan for individuals to combat poverty, violence, and injustice – an idea that accords with both Vatican II and Medellín – adherents to the liberation theology movement began creating and maintaining various social service programs and working with the poor and oppressed to help them overcome societal struggles and inequalities.

Several of my interviewees casually referenced some of Gutiérrez’s teachings during our conversations. They mentioned the need to look at the world from the vantage point of the poorest of the poor, or they described how the reality of society must be reflected in Church teachings and practices and the way theology is lived by the people in that area. “The message of Jesus is liberating…[Catholic] theology is liberating. Therefore, all theology is a form of liberation theology, don’t you think?” This argument was posed to me by a parish priest in Jalapa. It sounded exactly like something I would read in a work by Gutiérrez or Jon Sobrino, another forerunner of liberation theology. Clearly a theology of liberation is alive and well in the dioceses I visited in Guatemala. To many of the subjects in my study, including a religious sister working with a local women’s group, a feminist theology of liberation is an indispensable part of an overall liberation theological vision.

Feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino points to evidence of the relationship between the broader discipline of liberation theology and a feminist theology of liberation, saying, “In the last three decades, a creative dialogue between liberation theologians and feminist movements has developed, because both share critical theories that are compatible with the relational, inclusive, and realistic understanding of the gospel message and of faith experience.”48 The difference is, whereas liberation theology begins from the perspective of the poor, feminist

liberation theology, like feminism more generally, begins in the experience of women. Their experience has been ignored by traditional theology as well as liberation theology and needs to be addressed. The Mayan women I spoke with were in agreement with the need for inclusion and acceptance of their experiences within the greater historical and theological narrative of our time.

The Mayan women whose experiences form the basis of feminist liberation theology in Guatemala are daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers; they encounter violence and an immediate threat to their physical and emotional well-being on a daily basis, often from the men who should love and protect them; they struggle to feed and clothe themselves and their children; they face discrimination at various levels; these women know pain and unending heartbreak. Thus Aquino’s exhortation that, “the core of this [feminist] theology is the concern for establishing a relationship between God’s revelation and the reality lived by women and men in existing patriarchal cultures” is in line with the desires of many Guatemalan women. Their theology is grounded in women’s experience and relationships and, from that reality, endeavors to raise the consciousness of both women and men in an effort to improve the conditions of both women and men in Guatemala.

As described in the historical section, the years following the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America were years of extreme political upheaval in Guatemala. Widespread land consolidation, economic decline, and increasing levels of state violence created an atmosphere in which women’s traditional roles were thrown into chaos. Trying to keep families together in the midst of government-instigated oppression and supplementing men’s livelihoods on a scale unseen before in the country while at the same hearing from the church pews messages about God’s love for the suffering, poor, and oppressed and God’s desire for

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individuals to fight for justice, all created a space in which women felt they could and should assume greater powers and responsibilities within the Church and local communities. Of equal importance is that the very same situation also led the Guatemalan Church to reconsider its position about the rights and roles of women in the Church and greater society, especially in rural Mayan communities where women tend to be the most restricted. An unfortunate yet necessary social factor contributing to the current relationship between Mayan women and the Church was the large-scale violence of Guatemala’s civil war, commonly referred to as la Violencia.

*Common Bonds Created through Violence*

The same years that witnessed great change in Church policy also witnessed unthinkable atrocities in Guatemala. Each and every citizen ran the risk of being targeted for kidnappings, torture (including sexual violence), executions, and even mass murders and community decimations, especially once the scorched-earth policy of the early 1980s was enacted. Although everyone was at risk, certain groups were sought out more frequently than others. Two of the most targeted groups tended to be Catholics and indigenous Maya because of cultural changes within both groups during the 1960s and 1970s.

Reinvigorated by the messages of Vatican II, the Latin American bishops, and liberation theology, a significant portion of the Catholic clergy began taking greater interest in the quality of life of parishioners and mobilizing local peasants, especially poor, disenfranchised indigenous Maya, to fight against their oppressive situations. Many of these mass mobilizations developed out of Acción Católica’s base communities and catechist groups from the 1940s and 1950s.\(^{51}\) The social movements and organized protests of the 1970s did not go unnoticed and resulted in

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\(^{51}\) Calder, 101-102.
severe retaliation against both the indigenous groups and the Catholic leaders that had inspired the uprisings. The violence against the indigenous and members of the Catholic Church in the 1980s was both unprecedented and relentless.

Entire villages were destroyed; children were killed and their bodies grotesquely displayed as warnings to their parents, relatives, and friends against involvement in liberation movements; women were kidnapped, tortured, sexually violated, and killed to make points both to other women and to the men in their lives; young girls were raped in patterns of sexual violence as warfare; several priests were assassinated and the Archbishop constantly received death threats. One priest I spoke to was a young man in Quiché during the height of the violence. Quiché was an area in which so many clergy, religious, and lay catechists (synonymous with “guerilla insurgents” to the army) were targeted that Bishop Gerardi was forced to close down many parishes and temporarily the entire diocese. Padre Eduardo described to me the terror that was felt by the entire community and the futility that could be seen in the eyes of the clergy and religious “‘The violence was so severe…no one knew what to do, who would be next…. Many people believe it was cowardly to close the diocese, but they just didn’t know what to do to make the killings stop,’” he explained. In response to such persecution, social movements relocated and were carried out more cautiously, although they were never completely vanquished. The bonds between the Maya and the Church continued to grow and strengthen during the repression, especially the bonds formed between the Church and Mayan women.

Women suffered most acutely during the height of la Violencia. Not only were they kidnapped and killed like the men, sometimes while fighting alongside each other, but they were

52 Delli Sante, 178-181.
frequently tortured or raped and then abandoned. Women were also the ones left behind to wonder if loved ones were dead or alive, to bury the dead, and to continue supporting their children in a country that did not recognize women’s rights to equal work, fair wages, or to inherit and own property. Nevertheless, women formed the backbones of their communities, keeping memories and hope alive. María from Jalapa recalled how her mother helped all of her children escape from rampant violence in one area of the country to another safer area through a rather ingenious method. “Mamá sent us one at a time over a period of weeks so that we would not arouse suspicion by leaving all together. One other family left together and they died together when the army caught them. Mamá was smart and saved our lives. Papá even told stories of how she saved us.” Clearly, these women were not weak or frail; they bravely stood in the face of violent adversity and their efforts were recognized by their Church.

One bishop I spoke with praised the “unshakeable strength and courage” demonstrated by so many women during the conflict. He rhetorically inquired, “How could we [the Church] not welcome their gifts, physical and spiritual, into the service of the Church?” The bishop’s sentiments were clearly genuine, but there is another way to look at the situation: necessity. Not only did women demonstrate desirable characteristics for Church leaders, but with the deaths and disappearances of so many men, if the Church was going to continue in Guatemala, it had to accept and train women as catechists and leaders. This necessity in no way diminishes the contributions of women during the war, but it was certainly a factor in the Church’s warm welcome toward Guatemalan women.

As the war progressed, the Catholic hierarchy continued to speak out against the atrocities being waged against the innocent citizens of Guatemala, and many women, particularly Mayan women and widows, joined their voices in the protest. The Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo
(Mutual Support Group), or more commonly just called the GAM, began in 1984 in the Archbishop’s residence with a group of church-going women, all suffering the “disappearances” of their loved ones.\textsuperscript{54} They began by petitioning their government for explanations as to the whereabouts of their loved ones and continue that same project to this day, searching for information about their missing brothers, husbands, sons, and friends. The group currently consists of two-thirds indigenous members working together with \textit{ladinas} and \textit{mestizas} to build bridges and find answers to their common questions.

Another similar yet distinct group is the National Coordinating Committee of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA). In 1998 CONAVIGUA became the first “women only” group to emerge in Guatemala, and it is almost exclusively composed of indigenous women.\textsuperscript{55} The group fights for what I would label as “feminist” goals: dignity and unity of women; respect for indigenous rights; access to food, medicine, clothing, housing, education; legislation to protect women and widows; and the recovery of “disappeared” family members. Both GAM and CONAVIGUA arose out of one of the most heinous cases of human rights violations, and they are both examples of the power women have when they overcome their internal differences and unite for a common goal. Significantly, both groups’ efforts toward justice, reconciliation, and peacemaking are supported by the Guatemalan Church. The Church’s unwavering support of these women’s groups is undoubtedly due to the Church’s commitment to the same goals.

In 1990 the Catholic bishops opened the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala. This office has fought diligently for the rule of law and for redressing past and present human rights violations.\textsuperscript{56} In 1994, it was decided that a Truth Commission (CEH) should be created to collect testimonies of the atrocities suffered during the 36-year violence.

\textsuperscript{54} Berger, 24.  
\textsuperscript{55} Hooks, 126.  
\textsuperscript{56} Calder, 116-117.
Several legal and time restrictions were placed on CEH officials, so the Guatemalan Catholic Church organized a lengthier and more in-depth project, the Interdiocesan Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REHMI). The Human Rights Office ran the project and it was coordinated by Bishop Juan Gerardi. The Church, compared to distrusted governmental organizations, had unequalled reach and power in more rural and indigenous areas because of shared experiences throughout the decades of violence and the increased levels of respect the Church was beginning to show for indigenous culture and traditions. The Church also had the power to break the silence with the hope of beginning the healing process in the suffering Mayan communities, a goal that was not necessarily part of the CEH’s. The emphasis on healing and forgiveness inherent in many Church doctrines manifested itself in the REHMI project, allowing the Church to reach perpetrators as well as victims and offer them the opportunity to unburden themselves of their stories and locate missing loved ones.

Another aspect of the REHMI project that endeared the Church to many Mayan women was the precedence given to memory and narrative as opposed to the basic presentation of facts. This practice both demonstrated respect for Mayan culture and the prominence given to oral story-telling and valued the experience of Mayan women who are considered the keepers of cultural and historical memories in their society. The interview style and kinds of questions asked also reaffirmed the agency of each individual interviewed instead of leaving them feeling like helpless victims. The REHMI Project deepened the bonds of solidarity between the Church and all those who had suffered during la Violencia, the majority of whom were Mayan women. The REHMI report was published in 1998 and shortly thereafter Bishop Gerardi was assassinated, most likely directly because of the document. With the REHMI project, the Church

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57 López Levy, 105.
58 Ibid., 107.
affirmed its commitment to the poorest of the poor and to bolstering the dignity of all, an affirmation heard loud and clear by Mayan women. As Enma, one of the Mayan women I interviewed, declared, “Bishop Gerardi and his work [REHMI] showed us that our experiences mattered. What I suffered, what my people suffered, was significant and worth telling to others so it won’t happen again.”

Unlike religious groups in so many other Latin American post-conflict situations, the Guatemalan Church continues to function as a beacon of peace and justice in Guatemala. The Church facilitates hospitals, orphanages, schools, job training programs, women’s and widows’ groups, and countless other programs, especially in the rural areas where indigenous are skeptical of anything organized by the government. The Church continues to incorporate traditional Mayan beliefs within the practice of Catholicism. The Guatemalan Church on the whole is much more progressive than in many other areas around the world and, since the end of the conflict, has remained grounded in its commitment to the gospel, its message of liberation, and social justice.\textsuperscript{59} Based on all the conversations I had while in Guatemala, this liberating trend seems to be one that will continue in the future.

The Church has been reluctant to return to the pre-conflict status quo in most social circumstances, including in its relationship with women. In turn, based on their past experiences – especially during \textit{la Violencia} – and the support they have received from their Church, Mayan women are taking the initiative; they are mobilizing in social groups and fighting for their own rights in an incredibly patriarchal society. That the materialization of a women’s movement is currently possible makes sense given the historical and sociological analysis of the region, yet something is still missing. What has sustained these women during such turmoil, strife, and persecution? From where does their “unshakeable strength and courage” described by the bishop

\textsuperscript{59} Reilly, 47.
emerge? To answer this question, one must look beyond the macro-social world and delve into the deep spirituality and individual theological beliefs of these valiant women.

Who Do You Say That I Am? – Theological Reflections of Mayan Women

In numerous societies, women have traditionally been considered more pious than men; women are the ones who instill virtues, memories, and traditions in the young of a particular culture. This is especially true within both Latina and Mayan culture. Both the men and women I interviewed explained that it has been women’s role to remember the story of their people and ensure that the young grow up to understand the spirituality and beliefs of their culture. The irony is that, despite these beliefs about women’s virtues and responsibilities, Mayan women have long been excluded from serving in more substantial leadership roles in both their Mayan and Christian faiths. Nevertheless, they have maintained a connection to God, to traditional Mayan beliefs, to the Catholic faith, and especially to the person of Jesus Christ. Mayan women’s deep spiritual connection to God and the earth has sustained them for centuries. Now with greater recognition and support from Guatemalan Catholic hierarchy, women are being educated in their faith and are more fully embracing and re-imagining the truths they have believed in for years.

The presence of both liberation theology and a feminist theology of liberation in Guatemala have had various sociological implications that I have already addressed. More importantly, they have also had significant theological impacts on both Guatemalan men and women. The ideas of liberation and feminist theology were clearly the motivation for several of the men I encountered on my trip. They articulated the role their theological beliefs play in their fight for justice, including justice for women in their communities. “As I learn more about Jesus
and my relationship with Him deepens, the more I feel the need to emulate Him and work harder to make others understand that we are all equal in Him,” declared Juan, a lay man from the Los Altos. The essence of his statement was a common theme among my male interviewees. They all pointed to the person of Jesus Christ as their model and guide and as an inspiration in liberation. And, contrary to the criticisms of Euro-American feminist theologians about the liberating powers of Christ, the Mayan women I spoke with saw their Catholic faith and belief in Jesus as key not only to their spiritual salvation, but also to their physical liberation in this life. Their faith is far from functioning merely as an opiate – it is a powerful life force from which they draw the strength to persevere and the courage to challenge the current status quo.

As feminist theologian María Aquino highlights, theology for Latin American women is not some underlying belief they only think about on Sunday or something to be done in their spare time; rather, it is something they live, something that emerges naturally from their deep spirituality and sustains them. Theology is not a luxury, but a necessity of daily life because, “Latin American Christian women are convinced that their faith has something to say about their oppressive situation. Neither God, nor the egalitarian praxis of Jesus, nor the gospel’s liberating message, nor a sizeable section of the ecclesial community remain passive before the immeasurable suffering inflicted on them.” While my interviewees would be reticent to use the words “feminist theology,” its core values, such as an emphasis on the experience of women as a valid starting point for theological reflection as well as an emphasis on concrete action generated from participation in the spiritual life of a liberative ecclesial community, were evident in their statements and beliefs. Mayan women were especially vocal about their deeply-held belief in

60 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973), 79.

Christ as the basis of their convictions concerning their own power, dignity, and equality with men.

The women I spoke with were quite adamant about their solidarity with Christ and of the healing and strengthening power they find in uniting with him. Manuela from Jalapa expressed, “Jesus is my friend and guide. He walks with me. He is always with me.” The fact that Jesus was a human male is not problematic for them, but rather gives them hope that the men in their lives may also learn to treat them with respect in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Jesus is sometimes the “only man in [their] lives who does not hurt” them or put them down because they are women. Jesus welcomed women into his historical community, and many Guatemalan women feel he continues to welcome them with open arms today, offering possibilities for reconciliation and hope.

Another frequent conversation topic during my discussions with Mayan women was their ability to identify with the suffering Christ. This is possibly the most common theme in Latin American women’s speech about Jesus. For example, Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo describes how women in El Salvador identify most closely with Jesus as martyr. So many Latin American women are intimately affected by the deaths of loved ones killed in the struggle against oppressive and violent forces within their society. By adhering to the theology of martyrdom espoused by liberation theology more generally, women are able to label the concrete reasons for injustice and actively resist, participating fully in their own emancipation; also, they are capable of seeing themselves more fully as *imago Dei* and *imago Christi* because they are capable of imaging the suffering God.62 I found this to be the case for many Mayan women as well.

Because of the violent reality of their past experiences, they recognize themselves in the

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suffering Christ and identify with him in their own historical moment. They relate to Jesus’ suffering on the cross, which often leads them to fight for their own liberation.

Liberation theology has inspired new understandings of Christ’s cross, death, and resurrection that have been incorporated into feminist theology, and these understandings were present in several of the statements made to me. A key component of liberation theology’s Christology is that God did not will the crucifixion of Christ in exchange for the salvation of humankind as has been taught previously, but that it was the inevitable outcome of a life spent in freely chosen commitment to God and bringing about God’s justice. Like Jesus, women and men who struggle for justice will be the victims of suffering and persecution, not because it is God’s divine will, but because they do not yet live in a social system that allows for the freedom and respect of every person. As long as there are power and resource imbalances, those with power will attempt to thwart the efforts of those fighting for justice and equality. This was most fully articulated to me by Yolanda from Petén who said, “I do not suffer because it is the will of God. I suffer because of poverty, because of war, because of men who do not care about women and do not act like Christ. I know that now and so now I no longer suffer alone in silence. I fight to change what causes my grief.”

Yolanda’s statement is clearly an intelligent re-imagining of Christ’s purpose on earth informed by her personal experiences, something at the heart of liberation and feminist theology. Guatemalan women are not just repeating phrases they learn in catechism, but creating their own relevant and rational theological categories. For her to see suffering as associated with the struggle for justice as inevitable is not masochistic but realistic. Understanding that suffering is a possibility is not the same as actively seeking physical or mental distress, nor is it the same as

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resigning oneself to a life of misery. It is an acceptance of reality, but of a fluid reality that is subject to improve through the actions of those willing to accept the possible consequences of a life aimed toward achieving justice.

In addition, belief in a God who suffered along with humanity and who now can understand and share their pain is an incredibly comforting image to nearly all of the women I interviewed in Guatemala. Suffering is part of their daily existence. They do not seek it out, it just exists. They often feel that no one but Jesus cares about whether they are afflicted. They do not believe he requires suffering or sacrifice of them. On the contrary, he desires nothing but peace and love to reign on this earth; unfortunately, that is not yet the reality of life on earth. As Carmina Navia Velasco of Colombia states in one of her articles, “Pain exists in the world, this is a fact and not a masochistic proposal.”64 Women often endure a disproportionate amount of human suffering due to unjust social structures, and to search for meaning and ways to cope with that suffering is necessary for their survival. For Mayan women subsisting in constant poverty and in situations where unnatural death is an all too common occurrence, meaning must be given to suffering or else life itself ceases to be worth living. Jesus calls women not to look for suffering or quietly accept their life the way it is, but to resist any way they can.

Mayan women are looking to end their toils and the strife of all those around them, but in the meantime suffering must somehow be theologized in order to make life tolerable and provide hope for something better here on this earth in the future. As Eulie from Jalapa put it, “Knowing that my Jesus knows my pain and suffers with me gives me the strength to keep going and to look for a way to make my situation better.” There is no adequate explanation for all the suffering of this world and these women know that. Nevertheless, believing that Christ is

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64 Carmina Navia Velasco, “Women and the Cross,” LADOC XXVI (July/August 1996),1.
suffering right beside them is a comforting interpretation necessary until that suffering is ended. It is a truth system created in light of the harsh realities these women face every single day.

In nearly every conversation I had in Guatemala, the suffering and cross of Christ were only part of the story. Jesus’ Passion and death were only relevant to the women when taken in context with the message he preached, the example he provided of egalitarian relationships in his life and ministry, and of course, his resurrection. Likewise, his resurrection could not be understood without looking to his life and death. As Padre Leonardo in Los Altos informed me, “One cannot look to Christ as an image without taking into account his entire life and mission.” Margarita from Petén whose son was tortured and killed during la Violencia smiled as she explained to me that she believed her son “suffered and died, but he will live again like Jesus…well, sort of.” She then proceeded to explain to me her combined beliefs in both the resurrection as taught in Catholic doctrine and her traditional Mayan teachings that he lives now with the ancestors as part of a cycle of death and rebirth. Finding compatible truths in both of her faith traditions, she has creatively combined them into one coherent belief system.

Yes, seeking meaning in suffering is a dangerous game. There is always the possibility of glorifying suffering or using sacrificial, self-giving language to further oppress groups of people. Remaining conscious of Jesus’ ultimate mission of righting relationships – among individuals and between humanity and God – is a safeguard against falling into the trap of overemphasizing or misinterpreting human pain. Christ came to heal the suffering and bring about a world of love and peace free of power struggles, domination, subordination, and pain. Mayan women have experienced every form of pain possible and then some, yet they continue on and are gradually realizing and fighting for their rights as women. Their religious beliefs about Christ’s life, death, and resurrection are directly related to their mobilization.
Beliefs about the Virgin Mary are also part of their recent awakening. “Mary is omnipresent” in Latin American theologies of the cross; that is, wherever Christ is, there also is Mary. Images of a suffering savior are rarely found without images of his mother suffering alongside him. In many of the Churches I visited, statues of Mary were as easy to locate as the crucifix (and were often larger in size and surrounded by candles or other religious paraphernalia). Interpretations of Mary’s role in salvation history, much like interpretations of Christ or the cross, have often been used to pacify women and maintain their subordination in the home and greater society. Just as Mary was obedient to God’s will, so too should women be obedient to their husbands and other men in their lives. Thankfully, other, more liberating interpretations of Mary’s role are being articulated by Guatemalan clergy members and by the women looking to Mary as an example.

Mary, who has appeared as an indigenous woman in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, is a powerful and liberating figure for Mayan women. Mary is able to empathize with the suffering of mothers who lost their children and loved ones during *la Violencia*, and with her tender, motherly love she is a representative of God’s power to alleviate suffering and transform and renew the earth. The pregnant Guadalupe is also a reminder of the possibility of new life as well as the fact that women’s bodies are holy and sacred at all stages of life and not to be violated by physical or sexual abuse. This belief in the sacredness of women’s bodies and their reproductive powers are consonant with traditional Mayan rituals concerning birth and the life cycle, too. Mary is a symbol of hope for a new creation and a world of peace much in the same way that Christ is. After reflecting on their experiences, Guatemalan women have redeemed traditionally oppressive interpretations of Mary’s role in salvation history. They tend

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to identify with her because she is a woman who knows their sufferings intimately and can bring them closer to Christ just as she did throughout her earthly life, not because of her passive submission to the will of God.

The theological beliefs I encountered are so rich and varied that I could never begin to address every aspect of them. There were discussions about the connection between the Mayan cosmovision and certain aspects of Catholic teachings. There were also conversations about the importance of speaking about God both in masculine and feminine terms to more fully represent the idea that both women and men are created in the image of God. This belief is bolstered by traditional Mayan beliefs in male and female deity pairs who are only complete when together. While all of these topics are important, the personal relationship that Catholic Mayan women have with Jesus Christ seems to be imperative for them in coming to an understanding of themselves as full human persons with both rights and responsibilities in their communities. Their relationship with Christ also seems to be the area in which they have demonstrated the greatest amount of agency in reinterpreting traditional teachings and making them relevant to their own life experiences. Guatemalan women are active not only in service to their Church, but also in adding to the theological understandings of their spiritual communities.

Conclusion

I have summarized the situation I encountered during my research with women in Guatemala and their relationship with their Catholic faith. I have traced the history and social atmosphere of the country, beginning with the rise of Mayan society through the conquest years to the decades-long civil war and now the post-conflict period. In doing so, I have found the underpinnings of the current women’s movement in Guatemala. I have also looked at the
Catholic Church’s history in Guatemala and its relationship to the country’s inhabitants, especially concerning the Mayan women. I have explained how that relationship has grown and changed over time to become one of mutual respect and support. I have also acknowledged and analyzed the power of the theological beliefs held by Guatemalan women so as to gain insight into their resilience and creative energies. This interdisciplinary approach has allowed me to fully appreciate and explain the reality and agency of the individuals I interviewed in a way that would have been prohibited if I had adopted a narrower perspective.

Mayan women are not passive agents. There is evidence that they were active in the early stages of their culture’s development. This pattern did eventually change as gender roles became more restrictive, and many women are still subject to the patriarchal rule of the fathers, husbands, and male leaders. However, with the cultural and religious changes of the mid-late 20th century, numerous women have rediscovered their voices and are making themselves heard. Women in Guatemala are recognizing their own dignity and potential. They are striving for justice after conflict and standing up for their rights as women. Women are also appropriating leadership roles in the Church and participating in re-interpreting theological truths and realities based on their life experiences. And now they are beginning to educate men and other women about their dignity as human persons so as to create a more egalitarian way of life.

The situation is far from perfect. There are still substantial challenges to overcome, such as pervading machismo attitudes held by both men and women and the misperceptions of outsiders concerning the roles of women and the role of the Catholic Church in their lives. Additionally, racism and economic hardships continue to compound gender issues in Guatemala. It is important to note that there is always the possibility that as feminist consciousness grows among Catholic women, they may begin working toward goals that provoke backlash from
Church hierarchy; however, for the time being, Church officials are genuinely supportive of women’s rights efforts. Despite various limitations, Guatemalan women are making great strides on the path to their equality. Hopefully this analysis has demonstrated that the momentum instigated by social and historical forces combined with the agency of individuals and the liberating powers of religious faith should never be underestimated.
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