

PROTESTANTISM IN RURAL GUATEMALA, 1872–1954

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For eighteen months, between March 1982 and August 1983, Guatemala was ruled by a born-again Christian, General Efraín Ríos Montt. He drew world attention to Guatemala because of his brutally effective suppression of the nation's guerrilla movement and his idiosyncratic style of rule but above all, because of his religion. The idea that a Protestant could serve as the chief of state in a country as staunchly Catholic as Guatemala struck many observers as an anomaly. Closer examination reveals, however, that it was not anomalous for a Protestant to be president of Guatemala. By 1982 nearly 30 percent of the Guatemalan population were Protestants, the result of a quiet wave of conversion that started during the nineteenth century and has accelerated dramatically in the last three decades. The idea that President Ríos Montt's religion would influence his entire administration was even less surprising, for Protestantism has been wed to politics in Guatemala ever since it first arrived in the country. The purpose of this research report is to examine the development of patterns in the relationship between the Guatemalan state and Protestantism as they evolved during the formative years between 1872 and 1954 and to explore the effects of this relationship on Protestant conversion.

For most of its history, Protestantism in Guatemala has been as much a vehicle for conveying political and social behaviors as a form of religion. This link was particularly strong during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Liberal party ruled Guatemala. The Liberals of the late nineteenth century were developmentalists. Seeking the twin goals of order and progress, Liberal leaders aspired to remake Guatemala into a successful modern nation, along the lines of industrialized—and Protestant—nations like the United States, Germany, and Great Britain. In an effort to modernize the national economy, the Liberals opened Guatemala's resources to foreign investors and attempted to mold the nation's large and isolated Indian population into a compliant work force. By 1870 Liberal thinkers had identified the Protestant religion, and its accompanying body of ethics and values, as a force that might help in this modernizing process. Thus when Justo

Rufino Barrios, the first of the great late-nineteenth-century strongmen to rule Guatemala, assumed power in 1873, it was only a matter of time before Protestant missionaries entered the country to establish a decades-long union between a foreign faith and the secular Liberal state.¹

On 15 March 1873, President Barrios issued the *Declaración de Libertad de Conciencia y de Cultos*, which established freedom of religion in Guatemala and opened the country to foreign missionaries. Several factors prompted Barrios to issue the decree, probably the least of them being any personal affinity with the Protestant faith. In fact, the decree regarding freedom of worship was only part of a larger body of anticlerical legislation designed to cripple the secular power of the Roman Catholic Church; and at the time, it made less impression on the local populace than related legislation such as the secularization of cemeteries and prohibitions against wearing clerical clothing.²

Yet the long-term effects of laws establishing religious toleration had potent political ramifications that eventually reached far beyond the state's relations with the Catholic Church. The most obvious benefit of such a law was that it might encourage immigration to Guatemala from Protestant, "modern" countries like the United States and Germany, a central goal of Barrios's positivist agenda for advancing the republic. That Barrios envisioned an influx of Protestant immigrants is clear in the wording of the decree, which specified: "The right to freedom of religion in Guatemala will remove one of the principal obstacles that have heretofore impeded foreign immigration to our country, for many do not wish to settle where they are not allowed to exercise their religion."³

More important, the declaration also offered domestic political benefits. Barrios hoped that a Protestant presence in Guatemala would help to consolidate his authority in the northwest highlands, where many staunchly conservative Indian villages vigorously opposed the caudillo's Liberal programs. By introducing Protestant missionaries into such villages, particularly around Nahualá and in El Quiché where opposition to his rule was most violent, Barrios hoped that some of the most vehemently conservative Indian groups might splinter into religious factions. In short, Barrios believed that Protestantism might serve as a tool of social control over politically troublesome regions.⁴

Initially, however, the declaration appeared to be merely a paper reform. The decree lured no Protestant missionaries to Guatemala for nearly ten years because foreign mission boards were reluctant to send personnel to such a traditionally unstable country. In frustration, Barrios himself went to New York in 1882 and persuaded the Presbyterian Board of Missions (which he contacted because the U.S. ambassador's wife was a Presbyterian) and persuaded them to divert a missionary bound for China to return with him to Guatemala. Thus in November

of that year, Presbyterian John Clark Hill opened Guatemala's first permanent Protestant mission under the protection and encouragement of the national government.⁵

The early Presbyterian mission, however, which was located just off the central plaza in Guatemala City, did little to accomplish Barrios's aims. Hill never attempted to learn to speak Spanish, and although the mission conducted regular worship services and opened a school in 1884, the church attracted no new native converts. By 1886 the Presbyterian work was floundering so badly that the mission board in the United States recalled Hill and replaced him with a Spanish-speaking missionary named Edward Haymaker. Under Haymaker, Presbyterian work grew slowly and by 1900 included several small congregations and primary schools in the capital, as well as a tiny church in Quezaltenango.⁶

Although the Presbyterian successes were modest, American missionary boards in other denominations were afire with the theories of "spiritual manifest destiny" popularized by Josiah Strong and other American evangelists in the 1890s. These groups were encouraged by the ongoing support that the Guatemalan government was giving the missionary effort, which continued unabated after Barrios's death in 1885. Heartened by official attitudes, four more American Protestant organizations sent missionaries to Guatemala between 1896 and 1915. The largest of these was the Central American Mission (CAM), a Dallas-based nondenominational "faith mission" that sent its first missionary to Guatemala in 1896. A small Pentecostal sect (subsequently absorbed by the Nazarene Church) entered the country in 1901, followed by the Quakers the following year. Finally, the Primitive Methodist Church, an offshoot of the United Methodists, sent its first missionary to Guatemala in 1914.⁷

Although both the Central American Mission and the Presbyterians maintained their largest congregations and schools in the capital, the primary target of all Protestant missions in the early years was the rural poor—a group Presbyterian Edward Haymaker once referred to as "the Great Unwashed." The reason that the missionaries concentrated on this group was simple pragmatism: as Haymaker himself explained frankly in 1914, "The lowest classes who have nothing on earth to lose [are the ones most likely to associate] with us."⁸

Although Haymaker was probably correct in his assessment, the logistics of rural mission work brought several critical issues to the fore. The first was that the rural population was divided between *ladino* peasants (of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry) and Indians, two groups who shared neither language nor culture but only a common enmity. At the turn of the century, missionaries were divided on the question of whether to confine themselves to working in Spanish among *ladinos* or

to try to work in the various languages spoken by the majority of Guatemala's population. Encouraged to use only Spanish by the national government, which had legally prohibited the use of Indian languages in public schools, the missionaries initially eschewed dialect work. Arguing that the Indian population could only be fully assimilated into ladino society through elimination of native languages—an end that both the missionaries and the government thought desirable—the early missionaries initially refused to undertake any work that targeted Indians alone. Albert Bishop, the patriarch of the Central American Mission in Guatemala, stated this point of view succinctly when he wrote in 1908, "The Indians of Guatemala cannot read their own language; they have no literature in their own tongue. . . . it is only through [Spanish] that the tribes must be evangelized, if evangelized effectively."⁹

Not surprisingly, Protestant missions attracted few converts during the early years of the century. Indians and ladinos refused to attend services together, and missionaries were forced by necessity to use ladino translators to address Indian gatherings. It was not until 1919, when a renegade missionary of the Central American Mission named Cameron Townsend initiated a successful dialect ministry among Cakchiquel speakers in San Antonio Aguascalientes, that the Protestant missions began formal, if limited, work among the speakers of Indian languages.¹⁰

A second issue facing the early missionaries in rural areas concerned methodology. To all Protestant groups save the Central American Mission, "mission work" involved establishing developmental projects such as schools or clinics along with basic "church planting." This approach combined the ideals of Christian charity with simple practicality: potential converts could be exposed to the missionaries' message when they came to use mission hospitals or schools. Moreover, the missionaries' message was not exclusively religious. They sought to convey a whole body of secular values, standards, and models for living along with the theological tenets of the Protestant faith.

To this end, during the early years of the century, missions introduced a vast network of Protestant-run development projects into the Guatemalan countryside. Between 1900 and 1940, the missions opened more than a dozen rural schools, built a large modern hospital in the capital, and sponsored numerous ambulatory clinics in the highlands. They also founded half a dozen large secondary-level Bible institutes throughout the country, initiated two Bible translation projects among the Quiché and Mam, and imported at least three printing presses to publish denominational newsletters, religious tracts, and educational materials.¹¹ Despite this impressive flurry of activity, however, none of the missions registered any significant growth in rural areas during the

first three decades of the twentieth century. A few groups like the Central American Mission and the Presbyterians recorded steady but modest growth in their congregations outside the capital, while others like the Quakers and Nazarenes achieved no real pattern of growth at all. By 1930 even the growth within the Central American Mission and Presbyterian Church had leveled off.¹²

In part, this remarkable stagnation stemmed from the fact that not one of the denominations, even those using Indian languages, was able to appeal effectively to potential Indian converts. Indeed, in some instances it seemed as if the missionaries' methods were designed more to assault their listeners than to attract them. Most missionaries tried to promote Protestantism by unleashing vitriolic attacks on the Catholic Church, a typical approach until about 1930. Such attacks were central to most preaching revivals in the countryside, while anti-Catholic rhetoric was vigorously promoted in Protestant schools and belabored in the denominational journals. By the 1930s, many missionaries had realized that such diatribes were alienating their Catholic listeners, and they abandoned the approach. The anti-Catholic polemic continued to ring in the ears of Indians in the staunchly Catholic highlands, however, particularly in areas where Catholic lay brotherhoods, or *cofradías*, dominated the local communities.¹³

A second reason that Protestantism did not take root in Indian communities was that this religion, as taught by the missionaries, posed a formidable threat to the traditional indigenous way of life. Foreign missionaries, armed with their Bibles, textbooks, sensible shoes, dictionaries, and stethoscopes, epitomized exactly the kinds of ideas and institutions that small, localized indigenous communities wanted to keep out. The villagers in isolated "folk communities" believed that they could survive Liberal rule only by trying to protect the traditional order of their villages from culturally disruptive change—whether it came from social, economic, political, or religious sources.¹⁴

Because of this attitude, public reaction to Protestant missionaries in the countryside was generally hostile and frequently violent. It was not unusual for angry mobs to storm prayer meetings and noisily disrupt worship services with fireworks, often with the tacit approval of their parish priests. In one extreme episode in 1903, a Bible agent in a village in the Cuchumatanes was attacked and horsewhipped fifty times before barely escaping with his life. In 1915 Nazarene missionaries in Baja Verapaz reported that local pranksters had tainted their entire food supply with crushed red ants and hot peppers. In 1926 town leaders in the highland villages of Nahualá and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán threatened a group of CAM missionaries who had attempted to proselytize the town. They warned, "It may be that the government

gives you license to preach that religion in the rest of the republic, but our towns are different. . . . You had better get out and stay out or we will kill you.”¹⁵

But despite local opposition, the national government continued to offer Protestant work its full encouragement. Believing the Protestants to be a civilizing influence on a recalcitrant rural population, Liberal governments actively supported mission work from the post-Barrios years to the 1920s. The expediency was clear: the missionaries brought with them the kinds of American values and development projects (the “public works”) that were most dear to the Liberals’ developmentalist philosophy. Better still, the Protestants brought their goods and services into the country at little political or monetary cost to the national government. Moreover, by the middle of the long regime of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898–1920), Liberals had begun to favor the Protestants not only for their specific projects but also because Liberals recognized a correlation between Protestantism and capitalism. On the one hand, the Liberals hoped that the missionaries might transform the lower sectors of the populations into God-fearing capitalists and proletarians; on the other, they believed that the foreigners’ activities would promote North American culture in what they thought to be the most hopelessly backward sectors of their own society.

Most missionaries welcomed this association with the United States. During this era of great North American economic expansion, most missionaries perceived themselves to be envoys of what was best about American society, as epitomized by Protestant religion. They conceived their mission as one of enlightening the “mind, soul, and body,” according to an American model. Thus they, like the Liberals who facilitated their work, considered themselves to be purveyors of American values and prosperity.

The missionaries’ strong association with secular American values was in keeping with the currents of social and political thought prevalent in the United States at the turn of the century, which were known collectively as “progressivism.” Progressive thought was based partly on the idea that the United States had prospered as a nation because it had been able to throw off the constrictive yoke of European tradition and medievalism at Independence, which had allowed North American society to develop according to natural laws. Many, although by no means all, progressive thinkers believed that one of the keys to this development was Protestantism, which allowed the individual to be free of what they believed to be the most constraining and archaic of European entities, the Roman Catholic Church.

According to the popular thinking of the day, the Reformation had begun the progression away from historical patterns and toward natural patterns. The defeat of the Spanish Armada by the British, the

recent defeat of the Spanish in Cuba, and above all, the ever-increasing political and economic power of the United States were all cited as evidence of the veracity of this theory of national development. To the missionaries, therefore, Guatemala was laboring under a burden of Catholic ethics, tradition, and superstition that had warped the nation's potential for growth. Thus in the early decades of the century, American missionaries went to Guatemala not only to save individual souls but to correct the course of Guatemalan society.¹⁶

This close relationship between Protestantism and American culture naturally suggested, in the era of Dollar Diplomacy, that the missions would maintain cordial relations with the American companies doing business in Guatemala. According to the ideas of the so-called Gospel of Wealth, a complementary theology popular in the United States at the turn of the century, a working relationship between Protestant missions and North American business was entirely natural and, to an extent, symbiotic. The Gospel of Wealth decreed that wealth was God's way of rewarding the diligent and honest, while poverty was punishment for idleness and sin. Thus there was no inherent contradiction in American missionaries allying themselves closely with American business and Liberal government; doing so simply affirmed the words of a prominent North American evangelist of the day who opined that "Godliness is in league with riches." In short, political leaders and missionaries alike viewed Protestantism as a bridge between North American economic and cultural expansion in Guatemala and Liberal developmentalist ideology.¹⁷

Surprisingly, however, when Unionist forces deposed Liberal leader Estrada Cabrera in 1920, Protestant missions suffered only slightly from their association with the old regime. The Unionist and moderate Liberal governments that ruled Guatemala during the 1920s viewed the Protestants with some suspicion but made no significant attempts to stem the tide of missionaries who continued to pour into the country until 1929. Nonetheless, by the end of the decade, mission work had tapered off considerably in the country. This trend partly reflected the reluctance of American missionary boards to support work in the climate of political turmoil in Guatemala between the end of the Estrada Cabrera administration and the beginning of the rule of Jorge Ubico in 1931. After 1929 an even more important factor was that U.S. mission boards, strapped by the Depression, could no longer afford to support new foreign ventures.¹⁸

With the restoration of civil order following the rise of strongman Jorge Ubico to the presidency in 1931, however, a slight resurgence occurred in new missionary activity. In 1934 the Church of God, a Pentecostal offshoot of the Primitive Methodist Church, opened fourteen missions in El Quiché and Totonicapán. Three years later, a branch of

the Pentecostal Assembly of God opened missions in Jutiapa and Guatemala City.¹⁹

Yet the Ubico years were not especially fruitful for Protestants either in the capital or in rural areas. The repressive nature of the Ubico government, coupled with the financial weakness of North American mission boards gave scant encouragement to mission development during these years. Moreover, although Ubico shared the developmentalist dreams of his Liberal predecessors and perceived the value of the Protestants' secular projects, he was not at all disposed to encourage further mission work in the country. Apparently acting from a personal aversion to missionaries, Ubico enacted a series of antimissionary laws within a year of taking office. In 1932 Ubico froze the number of missionaries that would be allowed in the country. Shortly thereafter, he imposed a quota system on the number of preachers that each mission could support, citing economic reasons. Eventually, the exigencies of the Good Neighbor Policy and pressure from the Roosevelt administration forced Ubico to improve relations with the missionaries, but Protestant growth stagnated nonetheless during the 1930s. In 1940, after nearly sixty years of proselytizing, the national census showed that less than 2 percent of the Guatemalan population claimed to be Protestant. Less than half of this 2 percent lived outside Guatemala City.²⁰

Despite the small size of the Protestant population, the ouster of Ubico and the emergence of the revolutionary regime of Juan José Arévalo in 1944 marked the beginning of a new era in mission activity in Guatemala. Inspired by the opening of Guatemalan society after the austerity of the Ubico years and the end of World War II, mission boards sent unprecedented amounts of money and staff to their Guatemalan missions after 1944. Yet the real significance of the Protestant presence during the revolutionary decade from 1944 to 1954 lay not in the influx of new missionaries and money but in an unusual alliance that formed between the revolutionary government and the Protestant missions. Once again, Protestants were cast into their traditional role as a political check on Catholic power. What made this alliance unusual, however, was that during the Arévalo administration, the Protestants, who tended to be politically conservative in the twentieth-century meaning of the word, found themselves teaming up with a regime that was politically leftist and sometimes anti-American in its rhetoric.

This strange union came about as a result of the Catholic Church's displeasure with Arévalo, whose agenda of "spiritual socialism" promised to rejuvenate Guatemala through education, land reform, labor legislation, and reduced economic dependency. The Catholic hierarchy, under the leadership of the ultraconservative Archbishop Rossell y Arellano, had initially hoped that the revolutionary government would reverse the anticlerical tone of the earlier Liberal period.

But it soon became apparent that the new Constitution of 1945 retained the same kinds of religious legislation that the old Liberal leaders had advocated. Indeed, the new constitution went so far as to specify that “religious . . . groups or their members and ministers of cults may not intervene in politics or in questions related to the organization of labor.” Such legislation convinced the church hierarchy that the new regime was virtually indistinguishable in matters of church and state from any of its predecessors since Justo Rufino Barrios. From that point on, the Catholic Church took the leading role in mobilizing internal opposition to the revolutionary governments of Arévalo and his successor, Jacobo Arbenz.²¹

Particularly onerous to ultraconservative Catholics were the Protestants, who were now the opposition not only on religious and political grounds but also for nationalistic reasons. A highly caustic and widely read journal called *Acción Social Cristiana*, based on the Spanish Falangist chronicle *Cristianidad*, became the loudest voice of anti-Protestant rhetoric during the Arévalo years. As early as 1944, the journal accused Protestant missionaries of being the “opening wedge of communist penetration” into the country. A later series of articles spoke of “an accord between Protestantism and communism” and suggested that “the avalanche of missionaries could be communists taking advantage of excessive freedom of religion to take over the country.”²²

Indeed, these charges of Protestant associations with communism—or at least with the social goals of the revolutionary government—were not as patently absurd as they seemed, for relations between the foreign missions and the Arévalo administration from 1944 to 1950 were quite close. Beyond political expediency, the bond that tied the Protestant missions to the new government during these years was the shared concern about literacy. Arévalo, a teacher himself, believed that universal literacy was one of the fundamental solutions to society’s ills. For this reason, early on in his term of office, Arévalo began to turn for advice to the one group that had actively championed literacy for decades—the Protestant missions.

The missions responded promptly, and in 1945, they created a joint literacy committee (Comité de Alfabetización) to coordinate the disparate and sometimes overlapping literacy programs being sponsored by the various denominations. With each denomination contributing both funds and manpower, the committee opened a number of rural schools for children and adults in the western highlands and on the Pacific coast. The committee also oversaw the training and certification of government instructors for rural areas and supplied many of the first teachers to serve in government-run schools. The goal established by the committee for its own schools was to teach four hundred people to read every six months.²³

The Protestant-run rural schools operated in close conjunction with government-sponsored literacy programs. The Literacy Committee established new schools only where a government reading program did not already exist to avoid duplication of effort. In turn, the government adopted the reading method used by the missionary schools, designed by an American missionary in the Orient, for its own literacy program. The government and the Protestant Literacy Committee also worked in tandem to provide reading materials for the newly literate. Missionaries who worked among the Quiché and Mam peoples published syllabic reading charts in those languages, while the government provided most of the literature in Spanish. From 1946 to 1951, the Literacy Committee published a monthly magazine for new readers called *Publicación Pro-Alfabetización*, or simply, *PAN*. The magazine included stories, anecdotes, Bible passages, brief lessons in health and hygiene, and political slogans, all in a colorful large-print format.²⁴

The rural schools proliferated in Huehuetenango, Quezaltenango, San Marcos, Chimaltenango, Totonicapán and Sololá, El Quiché, and Suchitepequez, while active programs also operated in Jutiapa and in Alta and Baja Verapaz. Protestant-run literacy projects also thrived on the large *fincas* on Guatemala's Pacific coast, where the committee sold *PAN* and other reading materials to local *finqueros* for distribution among their workers. The Literacy Campaign thus cut across all linguistic and denominational lines. More importantly, it represented the first joint effort ever undertaken by the Guatemalan government and the Protestant missions to improve the lot of the national population, despite decades of political collusion.²⁵

The election of Jacobo Arbenz to the Presidency in 1950, however, brought the happy alliance of the Protestant missionaries and the revolutionary government to a hasty close. Calling for an end to economic imperialism and demanding that Guatemala's feudal patterns of labor relations and landownership be completely restructured, Arbenz found the idea of foreign missionaries in the country to be utterly inimical to his political agenda. American missionaries, for their part, were immediately alarmed by the radical tone of the new government.

Although Arbenz's goals for Guatemala were not substantively different from those of his predecessor, the programs he implemented were considerably more radical than Arévalo's efforts had been. Moreover, although Arbenz was not a communist himself, several of his most influential advisors were. Under their guidance, the administration introduced unprecedented legislation to divest the nation's largest landholders of their vast plots of unused lands and to redistribute them among the tillers of the soil. Because the largest landowner in Guatemala was the United Fruit Company, a mammoth North American cor-

poration, Arbenz's demands for land reform and his overall agenda for social change carried strongly nationalistic overtones.

In this context, it was not surprising that Arbenz also sought to diminish the power of American missionaries. For missionaries, the timing was tragic because they had at last begun, after so many years, to gain influence in the countryside not through proselytization, but through the rural schools. Arbenz was adamant, however, and soon after taking office, he ordered the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores to tighten up requirements for entry and residence visas for foreigners, including missionaries. Shortly thereafter, he required missionaries to provide proof of financial support and undergo scrutiny by the national police before being permitted to enter the country. By 1952 the flow of new missionaries into the country had slowed to a trickle. The greatest blow to the Protestant effort, however, took place in late 1953, when the Arbenz administration took over the mission-run schools, thereby severing the missions' last substantive tie with the rural population.²⁶

Amid the growing alienation between the missionaries and the Arbenz administration, an important new development was taking place among native Protestant converts. In this tumultuous era, native converts were for the first time beginning to disassociate themselves from the cultural and political tutelage of the missionaries and were becoming ardent supporters of radical reform. It is entirely understandable that the greatest advocates of Arbenz's reforms were those who benefited the most from it—the poor, the landless, and the illiterate. Because the vast majority of native Protestants came from the lower classes, it was not surprising that the radical reforms found considerable support in the Protestant churches. Moreover, the fact that church members had already committed a major deviance from accepted social norms by joining a Protestant church in the first place meant that indigenous Protestants were often more receptive to dramatic change than were their Catholic brethren. To many Protestant converts, the process was logical—having thrown off religious oppression, it was now time to strike out for political freedom as well.

Another factor that made native Protestants open to reform, and to land reform in particular, was that they tended to have fewer vested material interests than their Catholic counterparts. In Indian villages, most men were members of local Catholic religious brotherhoods. During the Arbenz administration, these brotherhoods frequently opposed government programs on the grounds that *cofradía* landholdings would be jeopardized by land reform programs. Protestants, in contrast, had no *cofradía* interests at stake and therefore had little to lose and much to gain by supporting the reforms.²⁷

It was in the Indian communities of the western highlands that native Protestants became most actively involved in the radical reform.

In Chinautla, in the department of Guatemala, Protestant laymen formed the leadership of the Unión Campesina, which managed the distribution of lands under Arbenz's comprehensive agrarian reform law of 1952. Indigenous Protestants also figured prominently in the agrarian reform movement in the villages around Lake Atitlán, where they represented most of the leadership of local agrarian committees and peasant leagues. In several lake villages and in highland communities near San Juan Ostencalco, local elections during the early 1950s placed Protestant leaders in public office for the first time.²⁸

The ouster of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 in a CIA-backed coup ended the peculiar union of revolution and Protestantism in Guatemala. The conservative government of Carlos Castillo Armas eventually allowed the foreign missionaries to operate in Guatemala much as they had in the past, even permitting new, politically conservative, and ardently pro-American mission organizations to initiate work in the country. Thus by the late 1950s, foreign missionaries again dominated Protestantism in Guatemala, again with much visibility but little numerical success. In 1960 the national census measured the number of Protestants in the country at slightly less than 5 percent.²⁹

This modest figure, however, masked a transformation that had taken place among Guatemalan Protestants over the preceding decade. During the previous ten years, native Protestants, having experienced a spiritual transformation and briefly taken part in the nation's political transformation, began to nurture a desire for change. In the 1960s, they channeled yearning for change into a new brand of indigenous, native Protestantism that rejected old foreign missionary forms but completely embraced the fundamental theology of Protestant Christianity. This new indigenous faith, fueled by local culture and nationalism, went on to succeed where the missionaries had failed.

The tumult of the revolutionary and postrevolutionary period became the catalyst for the growth of Protestantism in Guatemala during the years to come. After 1954 local converts began to reevaluate their faith, attempting to redefine it in terms not loaded with the cultural baggage that had traditionally been part of the missionaries' teachings. Abandoning the foreigners' notion that Protestant Christianity was somehow inextricably linked to North American lifestyles and Guatemalan national politics, Guatemalan converts began during the late 1950s to break away from the missions to form new denominations that were, in their own words, "*pura guatemalteca*." Explicitly rejecting the forms and methods used by the missionaries, the new indigenous denominations claimed no financial or institutional ties with foreign churches nor with any government, and they embraced Pentecostalism, a theological movement shunned by all the major missionary organizations. They encouraged a native pastorate familiar with the customs,

norms, and values of their own congregations, while retaining the theological fundamentalism and political conservatism of the missions. The new churches became a crucible, and the new indigenous faith went on in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, to become Protestantism's "consuming fire."

Conclusion

Protestant work in Guatemala has been inextricably intertwined with national politics for much of its history. Perceiving Protestantism as a useful political tool, Liberal leaders invited missionaries into the country in 1872 and lent their encouragement and support to mission activities through the first half of the twentieth century. Liberal leaders initially valued Protestantism because they hoped it would serve as a foil for the Catholic Church, but by the turn of the century, Liberals had recognized the developmental potential of the Protestant message. Realizing that Protestant missionaries brought with them into the country not only churches but schools, hospitals, and printing presses at little or no expense to the nation, the Guatemalan government in the early years of the century actively promoted the proliferation of missions in the capital and the countryside.

The Liberal leadership gave its greatest support to the development of Protestant missions in rural areas, particularly in the western highlands. These regions were viewed by the government as most in need of the Protestant message, which might transform the traditional, isolated "folk communities" of the hinterland into an assimilated, proletarianized work force. The proletarianization of the rural poor—as evidenced by the flurry of vagrancy laws, the resurrection of the *mandimiento* (forced rotational labor), and similar legislation that appeared between 1872 and 1920—was central to the aims of Liberals. The expediency of integrating the Indians was obvious: only through providing a large, cheap, docile work force could Guatemala hope to attract the foreign investment that was vital to the government's developmentalist aims.

Protestantism seemed to provide an ideal vehicle for such proletarianization and assimilation. Anticipating by decades Max Weber's interpretation of the links between Protestant religion and a capitalistic work ethic, Guatemalan Liberal leaders hoped that missionaries would instill in the rural populace the kinds of beliefs, ethics, and values that had propelled the United States to economic and political greatness. Missionaries were fully aware of their host government's expectations and saw nothing offensive about such goals. Although their primary purpose was religious conversion, the missionaries, too, interpreted Protestantism as a system of customs and ethics, specifically those

which they brought with them from the United States. This interpretation was in keeping with the context of the day, when Protestant activities in Asia as well as Latin America were viewed as an integral part of expanding U.S. political, economic, and cultural imperialism.

Not until 1944, when the government of Juan José Arévalo took power and Guatemala's revolutionary decade began, did this symbiotic relationship between the Protestant churches and the secular state begin to change. During the Arévalo administration, the government and missions continued to work together to control the rural populace, but the focus had shifted from domination to education. Yet in a sense, the larger purpose was the same—the assimilation of the “folk” into the larger national structure.

This long-standing association between Protestant missions and the national government soured during the administration of Jacobo Arbenz (1951–1954), who believed that foreign missionaries and the views they represented were inimical to his own nationalistic agenda. Yet during the Arbenz administration, native Protestant converts began to assert an identity that differed from that of their missionary mentors. In short, it was during the 1950s that native believers began to chart their own course and to create the momentum for the meteoric trajectory of Guatemalan Protestantism during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

NOTES

1. For a thorough discussion of Liberal ideology, see Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). See also David McCreery, “Coffee and Class: The Structure of Development in Liberal Guatemala,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 56, no. 3 (1976):342–460; and Thomas R. Herrick, *Desarrollo económico y político de Guatemala, 1871–1885* (San José: n.p., 1974).
2. See Gobierno de Guatemala, *Recopilación de las leyes emitadas por el Gobierno de la República de Guatemala*, vol. 1, 3 June 1871–30 June 1881 (Guatemala: Tipografía “El Progreso,” 1881), p. 24. See also Herbert Miller, *Iglesia y estado en el tiempo de Justo Rufino Barrios* (Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos, 1976); J. Lloyd Mechem, *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastic Relations*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Mary P. Holleran, *Church and State in Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).
3. *Recopilación*, 174; and Paul Burgess, *Justo Rufino Barrios* (New York: Dorranca, 1926), 109.
4. David Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cultural Survival, 1981), 40.
5. Iglesia Evangélica Nacional Presbiteriana de Guatemala (hereafter cited as IENP), *Apuntes para la historia* (Guatemala: Iglesia Nacional Presbiteriana de Guatemala, 1980), 40; and Edward Haymaker, “Footnotes on the Beginnings of the Evangelical Movement in Guatemala,” mimeo, 1946, p. 11.
6. Archives of the Iglesia Nacional Presbiteriana de Guatemala, Guatemala City, Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., Board of Foreign Missions, letters to John C. Hill, 1882–1886, Presbyterian Boards of Foreign Missions letters, 1882–1902 (hereafter cited as PBFM).
7. See Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Present Crisis* (New York: Home

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