

Subaltern Christianity.

The Mutual Reshaping of Indigeneity and Protestantism

サバルタンキリスト教

先住民とプロテスタント教会の相互関係と変容

A Dissertation Presented to

the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

International Christian University

for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

国際基督教大学大学院

アーツ・サイエンス研究科提出博士論文

September 5th, 2024

2024 年 09 月 05

GONZÁLEZ MÁRQUEZ, Silvia Luz

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審査委員会メンバー

Members of Evaluation Committee

主査 / Chief Examiner

SHANI, Giorgiandrea 教授

副査 / Examiner

SALTON, Herman 准教授

副査 / Examiner

BROWN, Bernardo Enrique 准教授

副査 / Examiner

MALARNEY Shaun K 名誉教授

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Original in Spanish:

"Carta de motivos de investigación con indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa, para su aprobación de divulgación por parte del contacto representante"

English Translation:

"Research motives with Indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution. Permission of publication by the contact representative."

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This thesis reflects the collective memory and stories of three generations of Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas. I dedicate it to them, to those who have persevered in their faith despite persecution. They have shown me *The Word* coming to life through miracles, saved souls, and a sense of peace even when everything felt lost. To my *hermanos* in Chiapas—by witnessing Christ through it all, you stopped me from giving up on this longer-than-expected Ph.D. journey.

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To my family in Christ, from various corners of the world—my Small Group, BSF, and mentors—thank you for leaving your footprint in my spiritual life and enabling me to remain rooted in Him, The Rock, through winds and storms, without excuses.

Special thanks to my beloved friends from different paths of faith—for embracing me, nourishing me, expanding my world and humanity. Thank you for feeding me with the best of foods in your sacred days, and in normal days. For your kindness and devotion showed me the beauty and importance of living a life that honors and advocates for religious freedom for everyone.

A Jesucristo,

*“Me sirves de baluarte,
de asilo de mis temores,
de centro de mis amores,
y a ti ¿qué puedo yo darte?
Egoístamente amarte;
pedirte que seas verdad;
que comprendas mi maldad;
que mi ser tenga sentido,
y que mi último latido
haga eco en la eternidad”*

Poem Fragment *Decimas a Dios* by Pita Amor

Preface.

Author's and Dissertation Background

Sixteen years ago, I met a group of Indigenous *Tzotziles*¹ from Chiapas. They were primarily women and children camping outside the Supreme Court of Justice in Mexico City. Sleeping under an improvised tent, susceptible to thieves and harsh weather conditions, they kept children and infants warm by gathering in a circle at the center. These people were determined to have an audience with the supreme judges; they were tired, and their faces showed the pain they were going through, but they were also confident, determined, kind, and hopeful. I approached their camp out of curiosity and with a desire to know how I could be of help in their situation. They welcomed me and offered me some coffee. After about an hour, one of them started playing guitar music, and everyone followed, singing. They closed their eyes and raised their hands, and some sobbed. I identified the melody was a Baptist hymn. They were worshiping God in their native Tzotzil language, their faces looked refreshed and the atmosphere around us was peaceful, despite the vulnerable conditions. In conversation with them in the weeks and months that followed, I knew they were Indigenous Protestants and most believed in Jesus until late adulthood. By listening to their testimonios, I learned how they live their faith in a context of constant religious intolerance from their Catholic neighbors and family. Besides facing rejection, oppression, and violence, as Indigenous Protestants, they have also been questioned about their indigeneity. While embracing their new faith in Jesus, they abandon various practices of the Catholic tradition in their communities that are considered a fundamental aspect of being

¹Indigenous group belonging to the Mayan people, also related to the language they speak. Tzotziles live mostly in Los Altos, Chiapas, although some are also located further south in Simojovel and Grijalva river (CDI, 2003, p. 5).

Indigenous. I was a college student, and this first encounter with Indigenous Protestants was a breaking point in my life as a social scientist and as a Christian.

I am a woman whose body portrays Latin America. I am a *mestiza* with Yaqui and Mazahua Indigenous blood, a great-grandchild of African descendants and Christian Lebanese immigrants. I belong to a large family, diverse in social classes and occupations. I spent my childhood between the privileged spots of the Palace of *Bellas Artes* and dealing with the long commutes and robberies on Mexico City's public transportation.

Most of my family are Catholics, attending church was an obligation growing up. As a rebellious teenager, I chose 'reason and knowledge' as a path to self-discovery to find freedom from what I felt as a religious straitjacket, at least in the way it was presented to me.

After five years in a very turbulent voyage with different religions, philosophies, and sects, I converted to Protestantism at 17.

My faith in Jesus gave me indescribable inner peace and a sense of purpose but also made me experience ostracism and mockery with my family and in school. When studying Sociology at UNAM, I was told that no reliable social scientist could be religious because religion is an 'invention' of society. In the words of an author that classmates and professors in university quote often for me, Marx (1843), "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (Schwarzwalder, 2019, para 4). I was told that my faith was *brain washing* and that I would get rid of it as my mind became more 'mature'. Contrary to what they expected, my faith became stronger, and I found delight in nourishing Christian thought through Bible reading and in further relationships with Christians from other countries.

In adulthood, through study and work experience in human rights, tolerance, and religious freedom, working in human development and research for vulnerable populations, I traveled around Mexico and then Japan to do research at the Graduate School level. These experiences allowed me to converse and discuss with people from academia with different faiths: Muslims (from the Middle East and Asia), Indigenous Tzotzil Muslims, Jewish people and Jewish religious leaders, Catholic priests, seminarians, nuns, Hindus, Buddhists, seekers, and atheists. In conversation and friendships, serving the community alongside them, and, at times, being uncomfortably rejected, I have found myself fighting not only others' prejudices towards me, but my prejudices, fears, and intolerance as well. I would argue that researching religion while being a religious person has allowed me to pose certain questions that I would not make if it was not because of my close experience in the way religion can change a person, society and the human history.

This dissertation is the outcome of over two decades of my journey walking with, working for, and learning from Indigenous peoples. I hope it serves as a tribute to their fight and in solidarity with their struggles, while shedding light on the delicate matter of religious intolerance in Indigenous communities in Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

Persecution of Christians is largely under-reported by mainstream media and several studies show this vastly unknown reality. In 2009, the International Society of Human Rights estimated that Christians were the victims of 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world. The Pew Research Center (2016) shows that between 2007 and 2014, Christians were harassed in more countries than any other religious group (Philpott & Shah, 2018, paraphrase mine).

The religious landscape in Mexico has also changed significantly in recent decades. This shift is partly due to the government's improved methods of collecting data on religion and expanding the scope of questions, which reveal the rich religious diversity in the country as explained by INEGI in the *Clasificación de Religiones, 2020*. The National Census 2020 results show that the percentage of Protestants in Mexico has increased from 7.5% to 11.2%, while Catholicism has decreased from 82.7% to 77.7%. Additionally, the percentage of people in Mexico who declare themselves without religion has nearly doubled, rising from 4.7% in 2010 to 8.1% in 2020 (Rodriguez, 2022). Despite the religious diversity and the fact that religious freedom is a constitutional right in Mexico, in practice it does not prevent discrimination and intolerance towards religious minorities (Veloz, 2020).

Religious intolerance is strongly manifested towards Protestants, the largest religious minority (Blancarte, 2018), yet I have found that the degree of violence expressed is not sufficiently addressed. It may be hard to believe and accept that Catholicism, with its colorful manifestations used as a symbol of identity and national unity in Mexico (Veloz, 2020), also fosters suffering among Indigenous Protestants. The subalternity of Indigenous Protestants, as marginalized people silenced by dominant power structures (Gramsci, 1971; Spivak, 1988), is

likely deepened by their status as a racialized religious minority, contributing to the silencing of their stories and the dilution of their experiences, among other problems present in their communities. Even in academic circles that focus on the issue of Christian persecution.

In 2015, I was able to attend the International Conference on Christian Response to Persecution held at the Vatican. It was a deeply inspiring experience where I could meet religious freedom advocates and survivors of Christian persecution from around the globe, the Middle East and Africa. Unfortunately, the section about the Latin American experience did not include the alarming situation happening in Mexico towards Indigenous Protestants. Thus, in solidarity with them, this dissertation ‘starts the process of justifying a search for subjugated knowledge among the marginalized communities’ (Sathianathan, 1998, p. 11, paraphrase mine) of Indigenous Protestants in Mexico. To open more of a conversation about religious intolerance in indigenous communities in Mexico, and shine a light on its urgency to be addressed in further research by answering the following research questions: What is Subaltern Christianity? What is the relationship between conversion and human (in)security in Indigenous communities of Chiapas? And, why do Indigenous People convert to Protestantism in present postcolonial times?

Part of the main argument of this dissertation introduces Subaltern Christianity, using post/decolonial approaches. Drawing upon examples of subalterns around the world, past and present, it calls on the importance of subaltern representation (Spivak, 1988), acknowledging the still present hierarchical power matrix of the knowledge production apparatus and practices of peace and conflict studies, and invites the ‘experts’ to listen to the subaltern speak (Behera, 2023). In this work, listen to the Indigenous Protestants sing, worship, read, and interpret the Bible their way, as a religious minority exercising agency among a hegemonic power (Gramsci, 1971) that oppresses them in the name of defending tradition.

In Mexico, Catholicism serves as a symbol of both identity and national unity (Veloz, 2020). The historiography on Mexico's religious expansion has recently deepened, “the history of those who do not have one is made, and a voice is given to those who have not been heard” (Martin, 2018, p. 18, English translation mine). Like so, the Protestant narrative is vastly missing from the official story of Mexico, thus it is great difficulty to supply this narrative, even more that of the Indigenous Protestants. This thesis aims to present a revised history of Mexico and argues that religious intolerance towards Protestants is not recent, but rather has colonial roots. To address this issue, this dissertation also proposes the use of a human security approach defined as "the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want" (CHS, 2003), that is also broad and postcolonial (Shani, 2017), to include ontological security which sees the relevance that emotions play in the conflict. Lastly, through the sharing of *testimonios* of conversion, this dissertation presents Indigenous peoples as protagonists exercising agency, and Protestantism as the religious tradition that echoes better with their new faith, born from impactful and memorable intimate experiences that sustain them in the midst of their struggles. The following are some of the most recent cases of religious intolerance in Mexico that show what many Indigenous Protestants in Mexico are going through.

In April 2024, in Huejutla, Hidalgo, approximately 172 Protestants were expelled from their communities due to religious intolerance by the predominantly Catholic population. Prior to their expulsion, with their pleas ignored by state agents, their homes and temples were burned, and access to other properties were blocked with barbed wire. Now living in overcrowded conditions, the Protestant minority were required to pay 150,000 pesos fine to return home, but only if they renounced their faith and participated in Catholic religious festivities. Since 2018, local authorities have supported these acts of intolerance by denying education to 60 children

from the Protestant community. Despite efforts to engage in dialogue, the situation remains unresolved, with the displaced community members continuing to seek justice and protection for their religious rights (Hernandez, 2024; Juarez, 2024).

In Oaxaca, 500 Protestants were expelled from their community for refusing to participate in the Catholic festivities, called *fiestas patronales*. On July 25, 2018, in San Juan Bautista, Tuxtepec, family Velasco was at their home when a violent crowd, made up of their neighbors and local police, carrying machetes and guns, knocked at their door. Family Velasco was threatened to sign a document that stated they renounced their Evangelical (Protestant) religion; otherwise, they would be forced to leave the community. They left, leaving behind their land, their animals, and their business. For five years they have been irregularly relocated, with their health worsening. While unable to live any longer on subsistence farming, they have accumulated a financial debt that they cannot pay (Mundaca, 2023). Their story is not isolated, and as the case study shows in-depth, the acts of religious intolerance get even worse.

According to the CONAPRED (National Council to Prevent Discrimination), in Mexico, 3 out of every 10 people are discriminated against for professing a religion different from Catholicism. Although the ENADIS, the National Survey on Discrimination, conducted in 2010 by CONAPRED concluded that one out of four "non-Catholic" people in Mexico (25.6%) consider that their rights have been violated for their religious beliefs, the survey remains general without exploring the particularities that each religious group face.

This thesis was specific as it analyzed the deeper root of the hostilities towards Indigenous Protestants, arguing that it is as long as the history of Mexico as a nation. The thesis analyzed the perspectives that exist towards Protestants in Mexico, particularly in academia,

while putting in context the cases of religious persecution in Indigenous communities and the personal experiences of Indigenous people through the sharing of their *testimonios*.

Indigenous manifestations of faith

We will start engaging with and applying this research to the theoretical framework. Finding so much encouragement in Andrä, C., et al. (2023). *Textiling World Politics*, who boldly innovate an approach to International Relations that incorporate textile-making as a metaphor and method for understanding and engaging with global politics. Their methodology aims to expose and align the assumptions and dichotomies of this discipline to open new possibilities for understanding and relating with people across the world. Andrä's text is relevant for this research as it promotes a decolonial and inclusive approach to knowledge production and ways to engage with it. The emphasis that the authors make on "making is thinking" (p. 2, 4) resonates with many Indigenous cultures where textiling is an intrinsic part to cultural (and individual) expression and knowledge transmission to the next generations.

This thesis was presented in layers; from a big picture, the researcher started gradually by observing critically and carefully different aspects. As such, as an initial exercise, the researcher started by examining the following photo:



Figure 1. “*Jehova is my shepherd*” (Psalm 23:1) Indigenous Protestant textile

This textile illustrates what this dissertation is about. It is from an Indigenous community known as the Zinacantan, located in Los Altos Chiapas. Although the textile originated from the Zinacantan, I found it in the city of Tuxtla, used as a table cover in the house of Deborah, a social activist and a believer in Christ. The textile was given to her as a present by her friend, an Indigenous woman named Catita.

When Deborah met Catita, she was not a believer in Christ; she had a life with issues like many people do. She was struggling, and she found in Deborah a friend who cared for her, listened to her and gave her material and spiritual support. After a long working season in the

city, Catita returned to her community with a new faith, and she found a way to talk about it: through embroidery. This embroidery, if one pays close attention, shows corn fields, different types of flowers, birds such as toucans, and white and black sheep. It is a window into Catita's cosmos, a "complex plural ethos of interconnections" that unfolds a pluriverse (Querayazu, 2021, p. 877), where *cosmologies*, a bound of "metaphysical assumptions about being" give answers to existential questions regarding how the basic dimensions of human life interact and co-exist (Behr & Shani, 2021; Shani, 2021). Thus, in a single tapestry this embroidery showcases the mundane (sheep) with the sacred (Bible verse), and the Indigenous (this embroidery style) with the non-Indigenous (Spanish) language. It shows *intersectionality*, which, in critical race theory (CRT), is when various aspects of one's identity combine; thus, Indigenous people can be Protestant without being any less Indigenous. It is rather, as the title of this dissertation states, the mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism.

The center of the tapestry features embroidery of a Bible verse, Psalm 23:1, written in Spanish, with misspellings such as "Jeova" instead of *Jehova*, and a "z" where there should be an "s". This proves the humble origin of the maker, an Indigenous woman who did not learn "proper" Spanish at school, and who memorized the verse by hearing it rather than reading it. This demonstrates "another form of knowing" (Querayazu, 2021, p. 879) from someone who considers the Bible verse worthy to be included in a fine embroidery that must have taken several months to finish. This embroidery, "a tactile, affective, and embodied intimacy" (Andrä, C., et al. 2023, p. 4), shows independence and originality, a design chosen by its maker, without special license or blessings from any religious figure. It tells of a *choice* made by an Indigenous person, embracing a new faith that echoes better with the Protestant tradition, apart from certain structures and religious expressions with which Indigenous people in Mexico are often

recognized. Catita did not become a believer in Christ as an imposition from colonial enterprises, nor after falling into "manipulation" by foreign missionaries. Believing in Jesus was her choice, one that is *relational* (in connection with), personal, intimate, and conscious of what it may cost. This faith, expressed differently from Catholic Traditionalism, is a *faith that exiles* the Protestant believer from the rights and services available in indigenous communities, where religious intolerance is a cause of internal forced displacement (Leyte, 2022), among other acts of violence well known (Congreso de Chiapas, 2017). Despite this, Protestantism is a faith that continues to grow in numbers, including in Chiapas, the least Catholic Mexican state.

Catita did not suffer religious persecution, but she was an exception to the rule. This dissertation discusses what is normal: religious persecution towards Indigenous Protestants in Indigenous communities. This work explains how religious intolerance in Mexico has historical roots from colonial times. As Spain joined the Counter Reform, a state-endorsed religious intolerance was implemented against all religious expressions that were non-Catholic, whilst the Mexican identity was built on Catholic grounds: The Founding Fathers, Hidalgo and Morelos, were Catholic priests, the *Virgen de Guadalupe* is celebrated as a "national" icon, and most of the holidays happen in accordance to the Catholic calendar. This has generated a widespread tendency to ignore religious diversity in the country, making non-Catholics face barriers of exclusion in several areas (CONAPRED, n.d.). The passing of time, the independence, the 1910 revolution war, and the creation of a secular state could not erase the fact that religious differences in Mexico continue to be mocked, punished, and even annihilated. Thus, one in four non-Catholic people (25.6%) considers their rights to have been violated because of their religious beliefs (ENADIS, 2010). This dissertation focuses on the Protestant experience, discussing matters of identity, indigeneity, and religion, bringing as part of the central argument,

the *testimonios* of Indigenous Protestant converts who endured persecution and, despite all, did not renounce their religious choice. Their testimonios describe how very personal and powerful events happened while hearing the gospel, bringing them to believe in Jesus. Holding on to this faith has caused them great material loss and multiple human insecurities, yet it has given them sufficient hope, peace, and joy to keep on going; elements that I believe, nourish their ontological security and psychological security of the self (Shani, 2017).

Whilst religious intolerance in Chiapas has caused the expulsion of over 50,000 Indigenous people from their communities, its recognition is vastly seen in connection to political and economic reasons (Heaton et al., 2012; Infobae, 2021; NRC, 2015; Rivera, 2014, 2019; Uribe Cortez & Martínez Velasco, 2012). Nevertheless, this research focused on the religious element, presenting people's experiences as victims of religious intolerance, through the sharing and studying of their testimonios.

This researcher furthers the objectives of other scholars in *Rethinking Peace* (2019), as an attempt to identify an unacknowledged underside of peace studies about Chiapas. The subjectivities ignored, exiled, and museumized: Indigenous Protestants, presented here as subalterns that emerge (Hinton et al., 2019, p. xx, paraphrase mine) and tell with their own words about their experience and "everyday agency" (Richmond, 2019). The specific context of Indigenous Protestants, as a religious minority living in the most religiously intolerant Mexican state, through their faith-based interactions (practices, actions) and resilience, nurture peace and resist "weakly" (Scott, 2008) not by responding violently to the oppression of the religious hegemony, but rather praying for them and remaining "good neighbors", aiding them when given the chance, "loving the enemy" despite all (see Chapter 4). This thesis, by amplifying and

emphasizing the role of the local in the *testimonios*, and demonstrates MacGinty's concept of "everyday peace" (2021, 2023) or the subtle, yet powerful actions of (extra)ordinary people, the subalterns among the subalterns, the thrice discriminated, for being Indigenous, poor, and Protestants. These, who show us bottom-up initiatives for peace in which they put at play the intersected roles and experiences as Protestants and Indigenous peoples, to know how to relate with their fellow Indigenous neighbors despite when they are rejected by them.

The faith of persecuted Indigenous Protestants, the richness and beauty of Chiapas, with its pain and fight, the mosaic with various shades of complexity that continues to form Mexico's identity, and the co-learning experience with mentors in Graduate School, inspired and challenged me to go deeper and wider in my research on religious intolerance in Mexico, exposing it in this doctoral dissertation. Thus, this thesis investigates these questions: 1) What is Subaltern Christianity; 2) What is the relationship between conversion and *human (in)security* in Indigenous communities of Chiapas? Having as supplementary research questions the following: What is the relationship between Mexican colonial history and the present religious intolerance? To what extent is human insecurity experienced among Indigenous Protestants in Mexico? And, who are some of the main actors in the issue of religious intolerance in Mexico? Finally, it sought to bring at the center the *testimonios* of conversion of Indigenous peoples to answer a third question: 3) Why do Indigenous People convert to Protestantism in present postcolonial times?

The literature review and theoretical framework took an interdisciplinary approach and aimed to answer some of these research questions that connect to different degrees of theories and concepts. It argued that one cannot understand nor study religious intolerance in Indigenous

communities in Mexico without acknowledging colonialism and its heritage in *coloniality* (Quijano, 1989), the colonial surviving forms of social domination, and Eurocentric ways of rationality and modernity (Arias, 2013).

I consider that it is a risk to propose ways to protect religious minorities without understanding what makes people, in this case Indigenous Protestants, feel safe and have lives worth living.

Thesis Structure

The literature review was divided into three subsections that condense and relate to specific arguments around the thesis. The first subdivision, *On religion, relationships, and security*, addresses the way religion has been considered (or avoided) in academia, followed by specifying the definition of religion that this work was based on, which includes the element of the sacred and implications of beliefs on being, meaning, and truth (Eliade, 1958). This subdivision also addressed how *Protestantism* is a Christian tradition with singularities that are necessary to address, especially if one wishes to understand how it is experienced among Indigenous peoples. I started by narrating a brief historical compilation of the birth, growth, and expansion of Protestantism. A tradition that started in Germany with Martin Luther emphasizes that *salvation* cannot be earned by human efforts, it is rather an "undeserved favor" from God, a work of divine grace (Hillerbrand, 2022). Separating from Rome and its political concerns, Protestantism became a banner with which entire nations identified. Later on, Protestantism was re-interpreted by and thus dragged into the colonial enterprises of England, and subsequently United States, as part of plans for the implementation of White supremacy, the occupation of territories, genocide, and enslavement of native peoples and people of African

descent (Kwiyani, 2022; Neill, 1966; Nkomazana & Setume, 2016). Actions that, to be justified, colonialism needed to mutilate the same gospel it claimed to represent. A gospel mutilation that was reflected in the policy, legitimized it in the law (R. A. Williams, 2005), and thought through materials made for their purposes, such as the *Negro Bible* (1807), an edition made for slaves which manipulated the gospel and promoted slavery by leaving out 90% of the New Testament (King, 2023).

Nevertheless, Christianity was indigenized (changed to fit the local culture), embraced by the oppressed groups, and lived out in their struggle for freedom. Therefore, contrary to what is often assumed, Protestantism exists in larger numbers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and the number of converts continues to rise (Earls, 2017; Sahgal, 2017). An increase in converts has followed in the case of Mexico, despite acts of religious intolerance of such magnitude that they can be considered religious persecution. The terms religious intolerance and persecution were explained, defined, and justified in relevance to the research done for this project. Religious persecution that happens in Indigenous communities, possesses singularities that are better addressed with the CRT and tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit). It is necessary to break the romanticized narratives of "culture", "tradition" and "Mexican identity" and instead to revise and openly question the history and what is believed as true, especially concerning indigeneity in Mexico.

In this regard, as Indigenous peoples in their various worlds experience and express Christianity, *relationality* (ways of practicing existence) is relevant, and, as told by Trownsell et

al. in the special issue, *Pluriversal Relationality*² (2022), recognize the many ways in which ontological and cosmological traditions coexist. Thus, the stories lived and told about conversion influence the 'world politics' of Indigenous people to find answers and ways to respond to the complex realities in which they live (Querayazu, 2021). The failure to acknowledge the pluriversal relationality of Indigenous peoples (Trowsell et al., 2022) creates space for the development of harmful policies. These policies, despite their intention to provide human security, defined as 'the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want' (CHS, 2003), often adopt a narrow approach. By focusing primarily on physical aspects, such as satisfying material needs and protecting the body, the Mexican government neglects the ontological security of Indigenous Protestants. Subjectivities strongly present in the issue of religious intolerance (hate, fear) aggravate the problem for the present and future generations. By removing Indigenous peoples/or keeping them removed from their communities for their safety, the government has deprived them of ontological security (the psychological security of the self) that comes in the subjectivities present in the Indigenous culture reproduced in their ancestral lands, open fields, mountains, and subsistence farming.

In city shelters the persecuted Indigenous people might be physically safe, but very anxious. The literature review featured in this thesis explains more in-depth human security approaches and proposes the use of a *broadly postcolonial* approach to human security (Shani,

² Pluriversal relationality is proposed to expand relationality (ways of practicing existence) in IR as *multidimensional*, encompassing, in relational frames, and as a whole, the various (notice the plural) elements that exist: human, non-human, and the cosmos. In the acknowledgment of this plurality, expressions grounded in multiple cosmological traditions (such as those lived by many Indigenous peoples) are not left out (Trowsell et al., 2022, p. 789).

2017), which encompasses ontological security when defining policy that impacts Indigenous peoples.

Building up from such a study comes the section on the postcolonial and decolonial approaches, which *revise* and break down the history to tell of the search for sovereignty and decolonization by peoples and nations that were derived from Western imperialism frameworks. Although it discloses the singularities of postcolonial and decolonialism, this dissertation uses the unified term *post/decolonial*, as these approaches complement each other and share the same concerns. This helps, for example, to identify how coloniality makes itself present in the language with pejorative terms used to define Indigenous peoples. In Latin America and Mexico, the term *indio* specifically, carries with it the assumption that Indigenous people are dishonest, ugly, and have a higher predisposition to crime, as well as being intellectually and genetically inferior (Forte de Leff, 2002; Vasconcelos, 1994). These assumptions have practical implications in unequal access to services, social justice, and job opportunities for Indigenous people (Estrada, 2022; Espinosa, 2021).

Chapter 2. Defining Subaltern Christianity. Coming from the post/decolonial approaches, this dissertation presents Indigenous peoples as *subalterns* (Pandey, 2010), people with limited or no access to cultural imperialism, who inhabit a space of difference (Spivak, 2004). Meaning, that as part of this exclusion, subalterns do not have access to the cultural, educational, or economic systems that the dominant culture promotes, causing them to remain marginalized. Thus, while facing isolation and neglect, they are mostly ignored by the dominant systems of power and influence. Subaltern is a term first taken from philosopher and political theorist Gramsci (1971), who indicates the broader concept of *hegemony*, referring to the dominance of a

particular social group's worldview and values over others. The term "subaltern" is often used to describe marginalized and oppressed groups within society, focused on the idea that certain groups (i.e., women, minorities, and colonized populations), often economically and socially marginalized, were in a subordinate or subaltern position within a given society. In sum, Gramsci sought to "understand what hegemony looks like and how it might be overcome" (Bracke, 2016, p. 844). The literature review elaborates on the subaltern from the theoretical discussions and problematization of the term in academia to the real-life experiences of subalterns, people who have been excluded from the dominant discourse, yet continue to push to be heard. By constantly testing my own coloniality (Arce-Valentín, 2017), this dissertation attempts to avoid "exerting tyranny" over Indigenous people, a tyranny that speaks *for* them, instead of speaking *about* them (Beier, 2002). Instead, I used my 'intellectual labor' to create in this dissertation a space where the voices of Indigenous protestants can be heard (Spivak, 1999). I do this through the *testimonios* of Indigenous peoples shared in this research that aims to show subalterns as survivors of oppression, resilient individuals, and bold speakers, despite their constant neglect, and the invisibilization of the claims they continue to endure.

From the revised history of Christianity and Protestantism, the study of the post/decolonial, and the application of this approach in the struggle of the subalterns, this work presents a *decolonial Christianity* to debate the general assumption of seeing Christianity as detrimental to Indigenous peoples. When following this assumption, one misses the opportunity to see the way this millenarian faith is lived across cultures, ethnicities, and nations. From its origins in the Middle East to Africa, Aboriginal people in Australia, and Indigenous peoples in Latin America, Christianity has not always been an imposition, but rather a choice and a way to face life's struggles. Thus, this work first proposes a definition for *Subaltern Christianity*:

Subaltern Christianity is a faith practiced by subaltern agents who express their belief in Jesus Christ through Indigenous *cosmologies* (Shani & Behera, 2022). Engaging with the Bible in their native languages, they undergo a process of decolonization and healing from colonialism, reclaiming their Indigenous identity and dignity (Twiss et al., 2008). In dialogue with Western Christianity, they aim to improve their communities, despite often being marginalized or oppressed (Stermann, 2007; Horst, 2015; Sathianathan, 1998). Their faith journey reflects resilience, a commitment to justice, and a deep sense of responsibility in sharing the gospel (Ata, 2022; Carvalhaes, 2020).

Through the reading and hearing of the Bible translated into their native languages, Indigenous people see themselves as God sees them, not in the way colonizers instruct them (Twiss et al., 2008). Indigenous theology shows how Indigenous peoples have identified Bible teachings not as being in dispute with the legends and wisdom told by their elders through Oral Tradition, but instead, often echoing them (Solano, 2021; Woodley, 2022). Subaltern Christians, through personal religious experiences that reassure them of God's character and their Christ-centered identity, can persevere in their faith despite the constant rejection from West-centric fellow believers who may justify and collaborate with further oppression towards them.

Chapter 3. Anthropology of Conversion and Christianity. This research relied heavily on fieldwork and interviews among Indigenous peoples sharing their stories of conversion while using approaches that have been taken in the fields of Anthropology of Christianity and Anthropology of Conversion. In these, I could find some of the struggles that have existed in this field. One such struggle is trying to overcome colonial assumptions in which Anthropology has left a "legacy of harm" supporting racist agendas (Parsons, 2022) that discriminate against

Indigenous peoples: for example, labeling them as *exotic* (Pollock, 1996) or people with immature thinking. Another obstacle is that some considering Christianity as "tediously familiar" and unworthy of renewed examination (Cannell, 2006; Robins & Engelke, 2010), ignore or question the authenticity of native perspectives on Christianity for not displaying in the way social scientists assumed Christianity should. Nevertheless, since the late 1990s and early 2000s (i.e., Rambo, Cannell, Robbins), the course to research conversion in non-Western contexts, particularly Christian Indigenous communities, became more open. Thus, the literature review on conversion is rich and detailed, attempting to understand conversion in various ways. Some scholars consider conversion as a *process*, when the convert changes little by little, or as *rupture*, where the change in a person is radical and evident. Overall, conversion is a complex process, and although the wrongs that missionary colonialism committed against Indigenous communities should be recognized and addressed, it does not represent conversions as a whole or the experience of Indigenous Christians nowadays, in particular first-generation converts. Comprehensively, this thesis advocates respect for the agency of individual converts and avoids the problematic quest for proving the veracity of individuals' religious experiences. In this regard, the *kind of Christianity* presented in the case study is that of the Protestant tradition. Protestantism that has its own way of expressing in Indigenous communities in Mexico, where *tradition anxiety* legitimates the Catholic Traditionalist status quo that makes no room for religious diversity and fuels religious intolerance in its worst form.

Chapter 4. Religious intolerance as human insecurity. A Mexican experience is part of the case study. It starts with the revised history of Mexico and its colonial past and how it became the basis for the political decisions that accompanied them. In this study I decided to take a broadly post-secular human security approach (Shani, 2017), which focuses on the *dignity*

of the person and attempted to be more specific using ontological security, and security of the self (Giddens, 1991). Unraveling what makes a person feel secure goes beyond the satisfaction of material needs and physical protection.

It is pertinent to clarify that although this dissertation often refers to Catholics as perpetrators of violence and oppression, it does it specifically from the Mexican experience, especially Indigenous Protestants in Mexico. Some of these Protestants shared their *testimonios* for this case study; people who, despite extreme oppression, consistently live as a religious minority and continue to advocate for non-violent ways to achieve justice.

Despite the religious intolerance from the Catholic Church (as an institution) and many Catholics towards Protestants in Mexico, this thesis states clearly the consistent distinctions among those. Thus, even from the early colonial period, the work and commitment of several Catholic figures showed an embrace and protection of Indigenous peoples and an active engagement in fights for justice, equality, and independence, among them the Founding Fathers, the *criollo*³ Miguel Hidalgo, and African descendant, José Maria Morelos. People willing to make a stand risked their lives by being against the conservative Vatican hegemony, such as when priests embraced Liberation Theology. Furthermore, there are some exceptional yet admirable cases of priests who advocated for religious freedom and played a role as peacemakers among their parishioners, such as F. Joel Padrón, parish priest in Chiapas. Nevertheless, broad concerns of the Mexican Catholic church as a powerful institution, deeply influential in the state, were able to implement and reproduce a rhetoric of contempt towards Protestants. This rhetoric has consequences that are lived out today, as religious affiliation plays an important role in

³Spaniard born in La Nueva España.

setting priorities and addressing conflict. This thesis argues that the Mexican identity positively pairs Catholicism with "tradition", making it very difficult, even for government agents, to sympathize and act in favor of the Protestant minority. This situation, although it might be similar to that of the USA and Ireland, the nature and historical context of discrimination differ significantly. Although the U.S. is portrayed as a nation committed to religious freedom since its founding, historical records suggest otherwise (Davis, 2010). For a long time in the U.S., anti-Catholic sentiment was often tied to waves of immigration and fears of cultural change (Haden, 2013) which faded considerably (but did not entirely go away), since the election of their first Catholic President, John F Kennedy. An openness further expressed in the widespread welcoming of Pope Francis during his first visit as pontiff (Carroll, 2015). In Ireland, the sectarian conflicts were intertwined with broader political movements involving Ireland and Britain and rooted in a historical hatred and prejudice against Catholics, which were legitimized through penal laws until the nineteenth century (Overton, 2019). It is not the aim of this research to develop a comparative study among these vast (and still ongoing) cases, but what I could find after a first exploration is the following: Mexico differs in the way that the discrimination towards Protestants was legitimized in the law as early as the fifteenth century, and perpetuated to date, 500 years later, in Indigenous communities under narratives of defending *tradition* (see Chapter 5).

Chapter 5. Chiapas. The most religiously diverse and intolerant Mexican state. The case study focused on the state of Chiapas, a beautiful place with a long history of fights and pursuit for justice against government repression and abuse of landowners. Those that fueled Indigenous rebellion and the rise of the EZLN, the valiant army of Indigenous people who declared war on the Mexican state and challenged the conception that not only Mexico, but the whole world had

on Indigenous peoples. The EZLN works in an open, close relationship with the Catholic church and the *Frayba*, a Human Rights Center. Thus, this dissertation attempts to critically examine these prominent figures when studying the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas. As the roots, leadership (and often, funding) of the EZLN and *Frayba* are mainly Catholic, it is possible that in adherence to their religious sympathies, they have their own set of concerns and priorities (manifested in their reports and articles) that suggest that they have left unaddressed the concerns and pains of the Indigenous Protestants (see subsection on the EZLN in Chapter 5).

Chiapas, a land of jungle, mountains, and coffee, colonial cities, museums, marimba music, and over 1,459,648 Indigenous people (INEGI, 2020), is also the most religiously diverse and intolerant Mexican state. The latter aspect is poorly studied from a religious perspective. This section argues about how the Indigenous worldview, in which all aspects (religious, social, political) are interconnected, makes the issue of religious intolerance especially complex. An issue where *caciques* (local leaders) are in control of resources and with political influence, and government agents (i.e., *presidente municipal*) agreeing with the religious zeal of the Catholic majority, can inflame the conflict. An example of this is when they provide for the execution of decisions taken in the *Asamblea Comunitaria*, the Indigenous autonomous legal system that excludes Protestants. When Protestants refuse to engage in the worship of saints, displayed in *fiestas patronales*, they are considered unworthy of taking part in the community decisions made at the *Asamblea*. Thus, what happens to Protestants is decided and executed without them having a say in it. Consequently, religious intolerance thrives, often with the help of the local police, and is taken to levels as high as murder and rape (see Chapter 4). This dissertation does not water down the violence perpetrated against persecuted Indigenous Protestants; it is rather very specific, using their *testimonios* at the core of the argument.

Religious intolerance can be a response to, and a source of, ontological insecurity. When Catholic Traditionalists in Indigenous communities feel anxious observing Indigenous Protestants engage with the sacred in different ways, they try to *securitize the subjectivity*; a process by which identity and personal experiences are framed in terms of security concerns (Kinvall, 2004); in this case, a diverse faith causes them to feel ontologically insecure, threatening them, and making them fearful. The violation of subjectivities escalates to physicality when Indigenous Protestants are attacked and beaten, and their houses and temples of worship burned down. Those who survive all this end up expelled from their community or, if they stay, remain paralyzed in their economic activities (i.e, they are forbidden to sell or buy in the community) under severe deprivation of basic services (with water or electricity cut off), and constant harassment, including the children of Protestant families experiencing ostracism at school. The *testimonios* elaborate on details about personal experiences with religious intolerance, including the perspectives that Catholic priests, pastors, NPO representatives, journalists, and government officials have on the matter. The *testimonios* expose the state's responses to religious persecution at different stages of violence, which have contributed to the continuation of the acts of religious intolerance.

Chapter 6. *Conversion Roads* gives endogenous explanations for conversion in Chiapas, starting with the exposition of the dominant narratives that exist towards Protestants, as well as the sources of the vastly negative view that exists towards them. It contexts these by deepening the Indigenous people's perspectives through the stories of conversion shared in the *testimonios* of persecuted Protestants, such as how they came to believe in Jesus and continued to believe in Him, despite all. It exposes how faith in Christ, presented in the Protestant tradition, was offered in unique timing, addressing latent needs, whether physical, such as miraculous healing, or

ontological, by giving people peace, *meaning*, and certainty. A decision to believe in Jesus that was taken, not at the cost of destroying their indigeneity, but reinterpreting it, in constant maturation of their faith through the study of the Bible accessible in Indigenous languages; both written (print text) and spoken (in sermons on-site at the temple, through the radio or audio Bible). Overall, this chapter exhibits the importance that *relations* have in conversion when one "sees" another differently, but better, more pleasant to be around, and in the case of children, seeing in their parents a safe space to go to and a model of life to follow.

The *Findings* chapter exposes in detail the answers to the research questions that this dissertation proposed. It mentions the *significance* of how this research matters and contributes to religious freedom advocacy, Human Security studies, and Indigenist research. The *Conclusions* chapter, in addition to summarizing the key points elaborated in the Findings chapter, explains this dissertation's title. Overall, the conclusions discuss the limitations of this research as it brings more questions than answers. It also suggests areas for further research among subaltern Christians, especially Indigenous Protestants in Mexico, as a subgroup whose concerns are vastly unaddressed and demonstrate a window of opportunity for much learning in IR and Peace Studies.

Method and Setting

With each visit to Chiapas, where people and religious freedom advocates welcomed me with open arms, I noticed that despite my initial inquiry about details of the settings and actors involved in Indigenous Protestant's struggle, the residents always shared their Christian testimony. It was evident that it was vital for them to share; hence, I was moved to expand my

research questions and the type of analysis this doctoral dissertation follows, using Anthropology of Conversion and indigenist research methods. I wanted to be careful and respectful with Indigenous peoples, to take them seriously, and honor the trust they had in me when sharing their testimonios. This methodology deepens how I conducted my work and (re)directed my thinking.

"Knowledge and peoples will cease to be objectified when researchers fulfill their role in the research relationship through their methodology" (Wilson, 2008, p. 74)

This dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach and uses Anthropology, History, and Theology to discuss approaches to human security. I attempt to link these disciplines with the proposals made in *Rethinking Peace* (Hinton et al., 2019) "to move beyond the reductive binaries, formulas and... tendencies of peace studies towards hypostasis, teleology, normativity and enterprise" (p. xix). As such, Chiapas, where this research focused, has also been strongly marked by binaries in a cropland of dominant discourses where Protestants are presented as *evil* and Catholics as *good*, even by the *Frayba*⁴ one of the most respected sources referred to by academics. Thus, I present this work, aware as Avendaño (2017, p. 147) exposed, that as a peace studies scholar I carry a huge responsibility collaborating in the administration and transformation of the narratives that exist.

I aim to expose from the Indigenous perspective some of the answers as to why Indigenous peoples convert to Protestantism in a Postcolonial era and persevere in their faith. My work also relies on extensive consultation of *bibliographic sources* and online *vernacular*

⁴ Human Rights Center, *Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* or *Frayba*. See Chapter 4 for an analysis of the report *Ni Paz Ni Justicia* made by them.

sources: poems, songs, YouTube videos, and social media from Indigenous people, where one can gain firsthand knowledge of their perspectives.

Indigenist Research

This research used methodologies from Indigenous scholars: *Decolonized methodology* from Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) tells of the importance of setting aside the 'Western' view, as Indigenous people understand time and space differently. Gregory Younging, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba, provides a guide that helps researchers to be consistent and respectful in "Elements of Indigenous Style" (2018). In *Research Is Ceremony. Indigenous Research Methods* by Wilson (2008), Opaskwayak Cree from northern Manitoba describes Indigenous scholars' process. Starting with the 'assimilationist' period, although they managed to access mainstream educational levels, they mimicked Western scholars, thinking that this was the only way to be taken seriously in academia. Later, they acknowledged this paradigm and started a decolonization process that began by indigenizing Western methodologies to accept and respect Indigenous peoples by doing research that "emanates from, honors and illuminates their worldviews" (Wilson, 2008, p. 54). Wilson explains an Indigenist Research phase as one in which research must be accessed with integrity and fidelity to Indigenous Knowledge. Indigenous methodology continues to struggle to find legitimacy in academia. Caused by an "Apartheid of knowledge" (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002), the epistemological racism that exists within the mainstream research community uses the practice of "othering" People of Color. "[A]n epistemology based on the social history and culture of the dominant race has produced scholarship which portrays people of color as deficient and judges the scholarship produced by Scholars of Color as biased and non-rigorous." (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002, 169, citations omitted in Perez, 2009, p. 641).

Nevertheless, an Indigenous methodology is a good starting point for Indigenous research, regardless of the researchers' identities (Hart et al., 2017, p. 333–334).

Attempting to do an indigenist work is that I *prepare myself for the ceremony of research* (Hughes et al., 2022) in a good relationship with knowledge and others. Aware that, with the privileges that come with being a light-skinned Mexican urban woman, I cannot fully understand the racism that Indigenous people endure, nor possess their worldview. Instead, I participate and try to engage respectfully with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge. I needed to “read myself” aware of my feelings and intentions in the process, to not cause more harm to the groups of people and find deliverance instead in conversation. It was an almost organic process for the people I interviewed, whom I met years ago. Some of the stories they shared they had shared in the past as well, as it is relevant for them, in those stories, I found consistency despite the passing of time. It was a co-construction of the experiences communicated in a group. At times, having people jump in, adding details to stories, while others nodded and cried, was an experience in deep engagement with emotions.

Finding the right methodology for my research became more than a way to be faithful and accountable to the people who trusted me with their stories. I also needed to find a method that was meaningful to me and that reflected the type of researcher I wanted to be. Thus, I decided to follow Hughes et al. (2022) in her *Indigenist Researcher Training* and identify my research ritual, which is as follows.

My Research Ritual

The PhD journey has been overwhelming and much longer than I expected. It has included life and death events, celebration, and grief, disease and global pandemic, with a drastic

change of life seasons, from singleness to marriage, and then motherhood. These experiences affected the way I do research and set life priorities. They influenced how I relate and communicate, and caused me to see time as an ephemeral gift; hence appreciating, at a deeper level, the people who shared their stories with me. Thus, I offered myself to them, committing to a relationship through their struggles. Beyond the time of doing research, we stayed in touch even when not sharing the same space. My research ritual involved prayer to keep me accountable to God and to seek guidance and peace while facing problems whenever I was confused or discouraged. I needed to remember that my work was not about me. It is relevant despite how I feel. My ritual also required writing and reading, not just in solitude but in the community. To see from the outside of me, to be reminded of a shared humanity, to allow my emotions to be expressed, and to be vulnerable. An online network with other women in academia and doing theology provided me, more than once, with much-needed care, encouragement, and advice for my academic path and as a first-time mother. I found relief in knowing that I am not alone.

Relationality Over Extractivism in Research

Country is a term used commonly among Aboriginal peoples and indigenist scholars to describe the interconnected land and bodies of water that contain rich conceptions about people, family, law, culture, beliefs, language, and identity (AIATSIS, 2023). Aboriginal scholar Tynan (2021) went to her ancestral Country, Tebrakunna, in northeast Tasmania, to find inspiration to write about relationality from an Indigenous perspective; finding instead Country not only *caring* for her but exercising *agency* against her (Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013), in the shape of flies, strong winds, and sand on her face. Likewise, I went to 'Country' in Chiapas, to meet people and

bring my heart back to my writing, as doing research far away from there often made me forget why I am doing this Ph.D. I found Chiapas a land with so much to offer, yet so much more being taken away. The land and people of Chiapas treated me kindly. Even the storms we dealt with found us already under cover, with the trust of those who became our hosts, providing us with shelter. Those trips in Chiapas were intense and exhaustive, and I rose early, yet, the days went by quickly. While there, I needed prayer for God to examine my heart and point out the ways and moments in which I was working and "collecting data" with an *extractivist* mentality. For Simpson,

The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning . . . extracting is stealing. It is taking without consent, without thought, care, or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest. (2017, p. 75).

In research, academics have harmed indigenous peoples through actions such as collecting information without Indigenous people's consent, with no intention of serving the communities but instead of serving the researcher's agenda, all for the sake of producing "original research." This experience has led to the creation of frameworks for collaboration and mutual respect (Hendry & Fitznor, 2014), serving as a warning to any scholar doing research with, about, and among Indigenous Peoples. In my research, I needed to be careful not to commit those mistakes. The alternative to extractivism is *relationality*, "it's deep reciprocity. It's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility, and it's local" (Klein & Simpson, para. 14, cited in Tynan, 2021, p. 604). Thus, I tried to remain consistently connected with Chiapas, its people, poetry, music, the land, and their pain. More about this beautiful Mexican Country, Chiapas, is found in

the case study. I am, however, compelled to share that the methodology of my dissertation was developed, discovered, and understood gradually in the course of this research, not just during my travels to Chiapas. I wish I had known certain things sooner! I wish I had known and put into practice the importance of relationality with Chiapas as a Country (Tynan, 2021), not just to be there, with my feet on it, but with my ears open, to *listen* to Chiapas. I aimed to connect with people, especially those who shared their stories with me, yet the land itself has so much to tell. The land was a quiet witness of all those accounts that were shared. The land, in which cornfields and mountains hid the *hermanas* running for their lives carrying their infants while the hitting of machetes shouted like thunder, and the dogs sought their smell. The land in which rain blessed the crops, and "God multiplied" their gain. The land to which all the expelled Protestants wish to return one day.

Testimonio as Methodology

This research relies predominantly on the use of *testimonios* as methodology. As these are for Indigenous people, "the primary linguistic means that people have of sharing their knowledge with other people" (Malcolm, 2021). Testimonio is a literary genre established by Miguel Barnet in his 1966 *Biografía de un cimarrón*, about the life of the Afro-Cuban Esteban Montejo. Testimonio is the verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal relevant and often traumatic experiences and injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future. Testimonio is narrated as eyewitness reports and presented as a written text (Perez, 2009, p. 644, paraphrase mine; Beverly, 2005, as cited in Witteborn, 2012, p. 424). *Testimonio* (in English testimony) originated in the 1960s in Latin America, during the delicate times of USA interventions and backed military dictatorships

in the region (Escobar, 2021). During a time when the state did such horrendous things to people and created mechanisms to hide these atrocities, one could only know about them by hearing from those who lived to tell their stories. A *testimonio* contrasts with the narratives of an authorial voice that seeks to make itself attractive to a specific, often White, audience. Instead, it seeks coalition and solidarity with the one who speaks, usually a subaltern, who does not have access or understanding of the spaces (ideological, sociopolitical, and economic) where his plea could be heard. A *testimonio* is written by a writer from various backgrounds to bring public attention, thus bringing unique ethical and epistemological demands (Beverley, 2005, p. 550) because when we hear and write about their stories, we become complicit and are held accountable.

Testimonio allows us to push back against hegemonic narratives and enables the researcher to expand beyond his preconceived ideas of what is relevant and worth inquiring about as the one who testifies is in charge of the story, they have ownership of what they share (Mizel, 2021, paraphrase mine). *Testimonio* was the only methodological approach that could be truthful to the powerful experiences of Indigenous Protestants. I did not want to position myself as an authoritative figure, nor speak 'for' them. My religious intuition also made me concerned and aware of the significant meaning that testimonios have, as in Christianity, testimonios are the public profession of a faith journey and relationship with God (Gilden, 2019). Most often, it is an account of a person's salvation experience. They say it with their lives, in a written text, or, in this case, verbally.

While collecting the testimonios, the atmosphere constantly changed, from sadness, outrage, and frustration when sharing about the various ways Indigenous Protestants have

suffered religious intolerance, to hope and relief when focusing on what God has done in their lives, through and despite their pain. The interviews turned into a space of healing where we found encouragement by remembering who they 'were' before accepting Jesus, and who they 'are' now that they have Him.

Reading the work of Nájera (2009), who does research in a town in which she has a "personal historical connection," made me understand that I am also an "insider" using auto/ethnography in my work, "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9, cited in Nájera, p. 48). Thus, although one may argue that being a Protestant does not allow me to have sufficient critical distance, I would argue that it allowed me to show a unique side to the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas: one that widens the understanding of a delicate matter that consists in its reproduction not only of conflict, but in the number of Indigenous converts in the Protestant tradition. Following Nájera, in this research I did not intend to prove the "authenticity" of the testimonios, but rather to understand the realities within a context of historical and structural inequality and violence. As an insider, yet a social scientist, I tried not to recreate power relations with the persecuted Indigenous Protestants. I was honest about my inability to help fix their situation. I offered with sincerity what I could give: my prayer support and the commitment to not forget about them, pursuing opportunities to serve them more and better in the future. Learning from experts in testimonios like Jason Mizell (2021), who works with Afro-Latino Youth in the USA, I intended in this research to use my privilege and academic labor for Indigenous Protestants to tell their community needs.

People who Shared their Perspectives and Testimonios

The data presented in this research flows from semi-structured interviews (Yhang&Wildemuth, 2009) among non-Indigenous local actors and scholars whose work has focused on Chiapas. These are people with prominent experience with Indigenous peoples and knowledgeable about religious intolerance, whether professionally and/or for having witnessed it. The purpose of these interviews was to collect the various perspectives on the matter of religious intolerance in Chiapas and enhance my understanding of it. I will always be thankful for their trust, generosity of time, and the sharing of their rich experience that is too vast to cover in this work.

The people that allowed me to *interview* them were:

- Abdías Tobilla. Religious Freedom advocate, lawyer, and Protestant Pastor. 2015, Tuxtla, MEXICO.
- Andrés Castelazo Noguera. Second generation Pastor of "Solo Cristo Salva", a pioneer Protestant church in Chiapas. 2015, Tuxtla, MEXICO.
- Cesar Avendaño. Journalist, author, and Political Scientist. 2015, Mexico City, MEXICO.
- Clever Salazar Mendiguchia. Former President of the Council of Evangelical Pastors of Chiapas. 2015, Tuxtla, MEXICO.

- Cristian Gomez Macias. President of the Museum of the Bible, philosopher, Pastor, and veteran religious freedom advocate. 2015, 2022, Mexico City, MEXICO.
- Elio Avendaño. Journalist from *La Jornada*. 2015, San Cristobal, MEXICO.
- Esdrás Alonso. Leader of "Alas de Águila" and founder of "El Ejército de Dios". 2017, San Cristóbal, MEXICO.
- F. Joel Padrón. Parish Priest in an Indigenous community. 2015, San Cristobal, MEXICO.
- Fr. José Áviles. Catholic Vicar of Peace and Justice (*Vicario de Paz y Justicia*). 2017, San Cristobal, MEXICO.
- Ibrahim Chechev and family. Indigenous Muslim leaders of *Comunidad Ahmadía*. 2015, San Cristobal, MEXICO.
- Mario Hernández. Former Coordinator of SERAPAZ, a Catholic-founded NPO focused on peacebuilding. 2015, San Cristobal, MEXICO.
- Professor Rubi Barocio. Author and Historian expert on Protestantism in Mexico; and a direct descendent of the founders of the first Baptist churches in Mexico. 2017, 2021, Mexico City, MEXICO.

- Professor Toru Shimizu. Historian, Professor Emeritus of Keio University, author of various books on Indigenous Chamula from Chiapas. 2014, Tokyo, JAPAN.
- Víctor Hugo Sánchez Zebadúa. Public servant. Former Undersecretary of Religious Affairs in Chiapas. 2015, Tuxtla, MEXICO.

The *testimonios* were collected among 12 groups of Indigenous peoples actively experiencing religious intolerance. These first-hand stories were collected in the years 2015, 2017, and 2021. I interviewed 47 people who gathered as family members, friends, or neighbors. Some people were from the region of Los Altos, while others belonged to the *municipios*, Venustiano Carranza, Margaritas, and Matamoros. I was mainly introduced by religious freedom advocates and others I have established contact with in the past decade. Intergenerational men and women welcomed me and opened up to share their stories.

In Indigenous communities, people welcomed me in their homes, usually in the kitchen, which also serves as a dining room. They were small spaces with the smell of the wood stove and the sight of children breastfeeding freely. The people showed me around: the chickens, their land with corn and squash, the green misty scenery, and the textiles they made (they gifted me with some). It was a feeling of joy and pride. They also pointed at the damage done by attackers: bullet holes in the walls, wells buried with sand, and houses that were demolished and are being rebuilt. It was a feeling of sadness and indignation. Still, on every visit they always wanted to feed me with chicken soup, *chayote*, potato, and tortillas. They put some chicken in my soup but not in theirs. It was not enough for everyone. They honored me.

In the government-rented spaces in the city of San Cristobal that serve as shelters, the material poverty and the sorrow were deeper. There were crowded rooms, cement buildings between buildings, with every edible item bought. Internal Displaced Indigenous Protestants miss the fields, especially the elders. People came out from their rooms, and we talked together in a large circle; they passed along sweet bread and coffee. They asked me about Japan, and I wrote their names in *katakana*. We laughed together at how different the language was.

People talked to me in the language they felt most comfortable, most of them in Spanish, and others in an Indigenous language (Tzotzil or Tojolabal), in which cases I relied on generous live translation in Spanish from someone they trusted, such as a friend or family member. They allowed me to record them, and I preserved their testimonios as audio documentary material. Each visit took a day or half a day due to the long commute, but also because I did not want to rush the interviews, overwhelm them with questions, and leave. We stayed calmly, sometimes in contemplation, sharing a meal and joining in prayer.

For the protection of the participants, names were altered or remain anonymous when sharing quotes from their testimonies. This dissertation will not include full transcriptions of the interviews, to prevent providing context that could reveal the interviewees' identity. For this same reason, all caption photos used in this dissertation that I took during the fieldwork (otherwise specified), purposefully do not show the faces of the participants.

The *testimonios* are verbatim audio transcriptions, cited often in my English translation, to make the reading smooth as this dissertation is written in English. The *testimonios* of conversion contain the citation in its original language to honor the way they express themselves

and allow the readers to interpret the stories shared. The content in brackets:[], adds non-verbal expressions and some clarification.

CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This broadened literature review and theoretical approach aimed to expose the relevance of making an open interconnection of elements when trying to discuss matters of religion, identity, and security perspectives. This dissertation argued that one cannot understand nor try to propose better alternatives to deal with religious intolerance in Indigenous communities in Mexico without acknowledging colonialism and its still presence with coloniality. It is also a risk to propose ways to protect religious minorities without understanding what makes people, in this case, Indigenous Protestants, feel secure and have a life worth living. This is how this work took an interdisciplinary approach and aimed to answer multiple research questions that connected to different degrees to the theories and concepts. It was necessary to divide this chapter into three subsections that condensed and related to specific arguments around the thesis. The first subdivision, *1.1. On religion, relationships, and security* addressed the matter of race and spirituality, as the case study talks about Indigenous Protestants, a group that belongs to a social group that has historically been discriminated. Protestantism is a Christian tradition with singularities that cannot be avoided if one wishes to understand how it is experienced among Indigenous peoples. Further explanation of the other two subdivisions are as an introduction of each one of them.

On Religion, Relationships, and Security

Limiting Religion

"To define is to limit," as Oscar Wilde (1890) said. Defining and naming is a human attempt to conceptualize something by making a boundary around a set of elements that when compiled and confined, mean or are something. Defining is part of our pursuit of understanding. But what about the things that are difficult to define? Such as God, when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush, in response to his question of, "Who are you?" He just said, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

Defining religion is a very difficult enterprise as it means so many things to so many people, depending on the "discursive field" (Munyao & Tanui, 2021). Mizruchi suggests that studying (and defining) religion is "an exercise in *disruptive classification*, interrogating earlier modes of classification regarding religion and culture while at the same time developing categories for capturing what has been mystified... and unified..." (2001, xii, cited in Henking, 2021, emphasis mine). Thereupon, Plate acknowledges the avoidance of "God" in academic circles since "We rely on the rational, the explainable, the evidence of the senses. And so we tend to pass over the deities" (2021, p. 99).

Religion can also be considered an *authorizing system* (Kavka, 2021). For Kavka, religion is a claim for authority, one made by 'claimers', people who have their own set of private interests that are managed with different levels of argumentative skills. In this sense, religions/religious discourses are the ultimate normative act as they make transcendence claims (Schaeffer, 2021). Schaeffer questions if scholars of religion should distance themselves from religion as an authorizing system to carry out scholarship about it.

Some (more skeptical) scholars argue that there is no universal definition of religion as it is the "*historical product* of discursive processes" (Asad, 1993, p. 9, cited in Bruce, 2011, emphasis mine; Koch, 2021). An *imagined and biased term* by Euro-American

Protestant scholars, thus, it does not come as a surprise that it is used in everyday sociopolitical setting (Plate, 2021, p. 101). The term religion goes beyond the scholarly circles, it has been appropriated by the consumerist culture, thus, Lofton (2019) in her book "Consuming religion", puts a question mark on how we are drawn to (worship) the various elements that involve "relevance" in life. Who puts the highest value in things such as a TV program, a music idol, the telenovela that my grandma "must not miss," or in the corporate culture? Is it not heard more frequently companies labeling themselves not as a workplace but as a "family" where no one is turned down? There on, journalist Derek Thompson talks about religion being replaced by *workism*, defined as "the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose" (Hess, 2023). For Thompson, everyone worships something, and workism is one of the most competing (and destructive) religions among Americans these days, as it is "a falsifiable god, which rejects the vast majority of its worshippers" (Thompson, 2019).

Thompson and Lofton see religion widely, where definitions of religion are rather allegations about its consequences. As religion meets specific people's needs, at times, it is considered to recognize certain activities and beliefs as religion, such as dancing, sports, or music (Bruce, 2011), for they could provide people with "out of the body experiences" which subjectivities (emotions, inner sensations) can feel quite intense. Music, for example, can "trigger a religious experience" among people from various backgrounds (Demmrich, 2021). Thus, for C.S Lewis, music was "a medium for meeting God" (MacInnis, 2019).

There are different forms of religiosity, and yet, for some people whose practice matches certain markers of religiosity that scholars establish (i.e., pray or believe in supernatural beings or even believe in Christ, as is the case for several Protestants in Chiapas) may, however, not

even self-identify as "religious" but "spiritual." This was exposed as a problem by Mexican scholars (Cruz et al., 2008) in the way the Mexican government, by not having proper measurements to quantify religious plurality in the national census, was reproducing statistical invisibility of religious minorities. They were referring to the 2000 National Mexican Census (INEGI) that showed an exponential increase of non-Catholic religions as well as people "without religion", whilst, in practice, a person can check this option for different reasons. One can be a believer without ascribing to any religious institution in particular, hence, none was listed in the census. One can also be on a spiritual journey in search of, without defining it yet, or being openly against any affiliation that may demand religious exclusivity. Furthermore, even Christianity is considered for some believers not a religion but a "lifestyle" (Cruz et al., 2008, p. 83, 84). From these lenses, a prominent example is the *Jesus People Movement* or the *Jesus Revolution*, which, in response to the social chaos (civil rights movement, nuclear threats, the Vietnam war) of the 1960s-1970s, "many young people were disappointed with the Christian religion and pursued a *free-spirited* lifestyle" (Merlo, 2020, emphasis mine). In Chiapas, where this case study focused, many believers in Christ I met, although they attend Protestant temples, declared themselves "without religion" for "Christianity isn't about religion, is about having a *relationship* with Jesus Christ" (personal communication, 2015, emphasis mine).

Among all these definitions and discussions on religion, I would agree with Romanian philosopher and historian, Mircea Eliade, that there is no such thing as a "purely" religious phenomenon because this is experienced by humans; it is affected by other elements (biological, social, psychological, and so on). For Eliade, among all things, the one unique and irreducible thing we cannot miss is the element of the *sacred* (1958, cited in 1987, paraphrase and emphasis mine). Every notion of the sacred implies believing in *being*, *meaning*, and *truth*. What would be

of humans without the conviction that there is something *real*, that a person's impulses and experiences have a *meaning*? (Eliade, 1979, p. xiii, author's emphasis, paraphrase mine).

Therefore, I will define religion referring to Eliade's (1959, p. 11; 1979, p. xiii, 1958, p. xi, cited in 1987 p. xv) understanding of it:

Religion is the experience of the sacred that gives human beings a sense of reality, *meaning*, and *truth*. One in which often the conception of *transcendence* (an experience beyond the normal or physical level) or the belief in a life beyond this life, is strongly present and influences people's considerations for action.

Protestantism. Origins and Indigenization

Christianity is the largest religion worldwide, and Protestantism is the second largest form of Christianity (Bada, 2018). Protestantism "is an all-inclusive term for religious movements descended directly or indirectly from the 16th-century Reformation in which Martin Luther and John Calvin played leading roles" (Noll, 2011, p. 5). The origin of the word *Protestant* comes from the protests made by German princes at the Second Diet of Speyer in 1529, which voted to end the toleration of those who followed the teachings of Martin Luther within Germany (protestantism.co.uk/). Martin Luther lived a life of very contrasting, almost antagonistic seasons. He went from secular to religious, for he was a lawyer before becoming a priest. Luther was constantly tormented as a priest about his inability to do enough good work to feel worthy of salvation. *Salvation*, in Christianity, is the act of being rescued from menace or saved from sin (Leake, 2022). A *sin* is a harmful act against God's law (Bible, 1 John 3:4) and creates a separation between humans and God. As a priest, Luther had access to the Holy Scriptures. When reading Paul's letter to the Romans (1:17), he understood that salvation is a work of divine grace, an "undeserved favor," and humans can do nothing to earn it (Hillerbrand,

2022). He said, "At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it, the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'" (Luther et al., 1960, p. 336-337). Yet, over the centuries, the Catholic Church had conceived various ways to achieve salvation, one of them being by purchasing a letter of *indulgence*. Granted by Pope Leo X, friar Tetzel was selling indulgences to collect money to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. This situation irritated Luther in such a way that he wrote a *Ninety-Five Thesis* proposing a debate about indulgences and unintentionally questioned the authority of the Pope (Wagner, 2019). This event ultimately led to Luther's excommunication, starting a new stage of life as he married Katharina von Bora (a former nun) and became the father of six children. It was continuing to give shape to a theological breakthrough in the Christian church, surging *Protestantism*. The theological foundation of Protestantism is based on Luther's conception of grace (Taliaferro & Marty, 2010, p. 141).

Overall, Protestants refer to non-papal Christians. At some point, the term 'Protestant' became a political (not necessarily yet religious) banner to unite against Rome; hence, it was adopted to represent an anti-Catholic coalition among nations. They are considered part of the Protestant family: Adventism, Calvinism, Lutheranism, Methodism, Mennonitism, Pentecostalism, Quakerism, and Unitarianism, among others (Ryrie, 2016). Despite the multiplicity of Protestant denominations, there is some unanimity in emphasizing the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone" (*sola fide*). Protestantism is also the religion of *sola scriptura*, meaning Bible Christianity finds prime authority in the unmediated Word of God (Ryrie, 6 February 2016). Protestants encourage private interpretation of the scriptures by individuals rather than relying on the interpretation of the church institutions as those are clear enough regarding the essential truths of salvation (<http://protestantism.co.uk/>, paraphrase mine).

For Max Weber, Protestantism influenced the economy. In his seminal work 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,' he focused mainly on the European experience, particularly German, of the nineteenth century, referring in part to the work by the philosopher and economist Sir William Petty (1623-1687). Weber could identify that the statistics "indicate that people who own capital, companies tend to be with sticking frequency, Protestant" (2013, p. 3). Although his work is highly referred to when studying Protestantism, I consider it not applicable to the Chiapas context nor is it relevant for the purpose of this research. For although Weber's broader contributions about the relationship between religion, culture and economics can be helpful for understanding Indigenous people's endurance, the uniqueness of their worldviews and traditions differ from the Western societies that Weber explores. It is crucial to approach the case study with careful evaluation of the cultural context of Indigenous Protestants.

On the matter, due to its European origins, Protestantism is often seen first in connection to Western culture and imperialism. Labeled Christian missions were part of the van of European expansion in which "the presence and teaching of missionaries ridiculed Indigenous beliefs, called customs into question, undermined self-confidence, eroded respect for traditional authorities, and consequently stimulated political or social conflict" (Porter, 1997, p. 367). Protestantism and colonialism worked very well together because the first justified spiritually the colonial agenda, while colonialism provided the Christian mission with material means to expand to the unreached people. Besides, the missionaries shared the gospel through literacy, where the natives were educated in the colonialists' ways, making it easier to introduce their governance and policies (Munyao & Tanui, 2021, p. 2, paraphrase mine). The British Empire, for instance, sponsored Protestant missions and hurt deeply with their policy of White supremacy in all of the territories they were dominated (Schwarz, 2011); from the seventeenth to the

nineteenth century, in America, the Caribbean, Africa, and India. Materials such as the *Negro Bible* (1807), a truncated version of the Bible, were printed to justify slavery among enslaved Black Africans. Dr. Karen L. King (2023) explains how 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament needed to be left out for the *Negro Bible* to exist.

Nevertheless, through the years of colonialism, imperialism, and the postcolonial era, many Indigenous peoples and other oppressed groups from non-Christian backgrounds have embraced the gospel while rejecting the various expressions of imperialism and the social injustice that comes with it. An awareness and boldness are provided by personal religious experiences and the interpretation of the Bible, which is encouraged in the Protestant tradition (Mt. Olivet, 2008). In the USA paradox, while the colonists fought for freedom from the British, slavery was maintained and avoided in the Constitution (Elliott & Hughes, 2019), finding a way to justify it under religious grounds. Nevertheless, enslaved Africans found hope and divine justification for their pursuit of freedom in Christianity "while masters believed that their religion could be used to pacify their slaves, African Americans transformed Christianity and created a new culture that would serve as the foundation of their freedom struggle" (Gates Jr., in Smith, 2020). In faith and fight, conviction and perseverance are reflected one hundred years later in Martin Luther King Jr's words:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

Across the globe and at various levels of historical and social complexity, one can find other ways Protestantism has been *indigenized*, changed to fit the local culture. Thus, despite its

birthplace, Protestantism is in higher numbers in other continents and non-Western contexts. In 2010, nearly 87% of the world's Protestants lived outside of Europe, in Africa, Asia (Earls, 2017), and the "global south." In Latin America, "where nearly 40% of the world's Catholics live, Protestant populations have risen sharply" (Sahgal, 2017). Protestantism was primarily brought by American missionaries on a considerable scale in Latin America after the Second World War (the 1950s onwards), but its success was due to its Latinization. For it has been accustomed locally to provide a solution to the spiritual anxieties of Latin Americans; thus, as it loses its 'foreignness,' Protestantism has come to be felt as home (P.P. Damboriena, cited in Palacios, p. 171).

Protestants in Latin America are commonly named *evangélicos*, although they are not necessarily related to the *Evangelical Movement* that in the USA is often seen in connection with conservative right-wing groups. In Latin America, Evangelicals merely refer to non-Catholic Christians (Stoll, 2002, as cited in Jungblut, 2015). Some of the Indigenous Christians in the case study of this dissertation call themselves and are recognized by others as *evangélicos*. However, this research used the term *Protestants* based on its historical definition since it is an easy to comprehend term and avoids doctrinal arguments.

Defining Protestantism as a religion was relevant to this research because it is relevant to all conflict, specifically to the conflict in Chiapas that this case study presented, in which religion concerns matters of life and death, and while defining what is sacred for people, it also elucidates just war and justice in war (Otis, 2004). The following concepts are used together frequently, yet it was pertinent to explain them to expose what this dissertation precisely investigated when putting them in context.

Religious Freedom, Religious Intolerance, and Religious Persecution

Religious Freedom is a human right that declares the moral and civic immunity of individuals and religious communities from coercion or violence on account of their religious beliefs and practices. Religious Freedom is guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other major international legal conventions. It protects the public communication of their message, governance structures, schools, charities, property, and contributions to political life (In Response to Persecution 2017 report, p. 9, paraphrase mine). Mexico has signed all of these conventions, and yet, government actors still work in solidarity with the Catholic majority at the expense of the violation of the religious freedom of the Protestant minority.

Elizabeth Shakman (2015) advocated for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, emphasizing the need for a more distinctive and context-specific approach to understanding the role of religion in contemporary geopolitics. Shakman shows scepticism towards any benevolent government intentions that involve religion or welcome religious representatives to the table under the assumption that their participation is apolitical (2017). In the specific case of Mexico, the particular political and economic interest of the religious majority (Catholicism), has worked hand by hand with state agents for centuries. Protestants are a minority that shakes the status quo and means of control that exist and operates in the selling of alcohol and the *fiestas patronales* (see case study). *Religious Intolerance* is often an attack on religious freedom as it is a combination of prejudicial intolerance: closed-mindedness and antipathy toward a group of people with specific religious beliefs. That often comes with *deliberative* intolerance, "which involves interfering with specific beliefs or practices that are considered to violate moral principles and values" (Verkuyten et al., 2020). In this research, intolerance happens when the Catholic Traditionalist majority intimidates and harasses

the Protestant religious minority for their beliefs, and changes in practices are often perceived as a violation of the community's sacred principles (SERAPAZ Coordinator, personal communication, 2017).

Religious persecution is used for the most severe manifestations of religious intolerance and violations of religious freedom. Persecution goes beyond negative thought and mere prejudice; persecution comprises *action* (Under Caesar's Sword, n.d.). Based on the 2017 report *In Response to Persecution* by the University of Notre Dame and dictionaries in multiple disciplines⁵, I would like to define *religious persecution* as:

The infliction of unjust penalties and sufferings with the purpose of discouraging a person's or people's religious beliefs. These hostilities can come from non-government and government actors, be legalized, and escalate to murder and genocide as an attempt to eradicate religion.

Although the situation in Chiapas is often labeled as religious intolerance, I argue there are sufficient grounds to call it religious persecution due to the severity of these acts. The gravity of religious intolerance in Chiapas is well-documented in various sources. The 2016 report by the Mexican National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), titled *Informe Especial Sobre Desplazamiento Forzado Interno*, details alarming circumstances faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to religious motivations, such as expulsion, imprisonment, and rape (CNDH Mexico, 2016, pp. 62-63). Additionally, the Religious Affairs Office of Chiapas has documented over 955 cases of expulsions for religious reasons between 2000 and 2018 (Leyte, 2022). These accounts, along with others, fail to fully capture the profound sentiment conveyed by the

⁵ English Oxford Dictionary, 1989; The Social Sciences dictionary by Zadrozny, 1959; and the Dictionary of Religion and Ethics by Matthews and Smith, 1973.

testimonies from Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas that I have had the privilege to hear.

Therefore, I will refer to the situation in Chiapas as persecution. More details will be provided in the relevant section of this case study, which, due to its focus on Indigenous communities, will address the matter of race with the appropriate theoretical framework that follows.

Critical Race Theory - Tribal Critical Race Theory

This research used CRT, which aims for racial and social justice for Communities of Color by distinguishing in the research process the relevance of experiential knowledge and the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches to recognize and dispute subordination in its various manifestations (Perez, 2009, p. 643, paraphrase mine). I drew upon the insightful work by Delgado and Stefancic (2017), who explained that CRT calls for a *revisionist history* (p. 25) to replace comforting/romanticized interpretations of events that tell more accurately of minorities' experiences. This work would be that of the Protestant minority in Mexico, an experience that has been repeatedly silenced and stigmatized when mentioned. This revision is also relevant when consulting scholarly work, for, in particular, social scientists researching religion in Chiapas have prioritized broad concerns over those of the Protestant subgroup; thus, many of their needs have been unaddressed. As said, "It takes a multitude of the oppressed to make their voices heard and felt, but what about the voices that do not fit into one single category of oppression?" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 64).

CRT talks about *intersectionality*, of how various aspects of our identities combine. We are not just "one" thing, and for Indigenous Protestants, the layer of their identity as Indigenous people embraces the other of their adopted Christian faith. In this case study, Indigenous Protestants face, among other pains, modern racism: the propensity to focus on religion or culture instead of race where differences between *them* and *us*, and the threat they constitute, are

posed in terms of cultural, religious characteristics found to be incompatible with the culture/nation (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 761, paraphrase mine). An argument often used to justify or minimize the gravity of the persecution towards Protestants, suggesting that Catholicism is "culture" and "Mexican tradition", while Protestantism is not, rather a *sect* and a threat to the community structure (see Chapter 3).

Among the CRT scholars is Native American Robert Williams Jr. In his book, *Like a Loaded Weapon: The Relinquish Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal History of Racism in America* (2005), he exhaustively studies how the Law in the United States has perpetuated racism and oppression towards Native Americans and people of African descent. Williams calls out the normalization of the use of language that uses negative stereotypes and “apocryphal tales to justify the stigma of inferiority attached to certain racially subordinated groups” (p. xvii). More specifically, tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) addresses the racialized and specific political condition of Indigenous people as members of sovereign nations. TribalCrit helps expose the complex positioning of Indigenous peoples and centering their voices in research (Dolores, 2019). Developing TribalCrit, McKinley and Brayboy (2006) pointed out that widely used theories do not explicitly address concerns relevant to Indigenous peoples. To mention one aspect, 'theory' is often put above stories, considered the first 'scientific' and reliable, and the latter as emotional and subjective. Thus, "locating theory as something absent from stories and practices is problematic in many Indigenous communities and in the work of [social scientists] who seek to represent Indigenous communities" (p. 426). This dissertation has stories at its core; stories and relationships.

(Pluriversal) Relationality

Relationality refers to connectedness, to see the world in which no one and nothing exists in isolation, for existence needs relationships (Wijngaarden, 2022), even with those one may not want to relate to or even may consider inferior, issues that CRT exposes. Disconnection, or the lack of relationality in our present times, is pathological and has caused a mental health crisis and chronic loneliness. "Because we come into being with and for the other, we are ethically implicated in the lives of others in ways from which we cannot easily extricate ourselves – or if we do, in our emulations of the “autonomous and impermeable self-sufficiency of the liberal subject,” then we end up simultaneously harming ourselves, as the relational creatures that we are. Which is to say, we cannot extricate ourselves without simultaneously plunging into a “crisis of connection.”(Drichel, 2019, p. 6). Relationality invites us to connect, human and non-human, something that Indigenous peoples have emphasized for centuries. For Tynan, a Trawlulwuy woman and Aboriginal Australian scholar, relationality is vastly learned from the elders, the Country (the Earth, nature, the land), and the stories, and not so much from the academia. She emphasizes that "relationality is not a new metaphor to be reaped for academic gain, but a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country" (2022, p. 598). With a similar regard, Joanne Faulkner talks about *Postcolonial relationality* as a way to pursue a relationship with Indigenous peoples recognizing, and thus, working towards overcoming, the coloniality present in the social structures and in the way governments, like Australia, pursue to include Indigenous peoples in decision-making. On the one hand, they are calling to reconcile with Indigenous peoples while continuing to privilege specific sectors in the parliament (Faulkner, 2019, p. 137). For Faulkner, the government campaign that uses the figure of an Aboriginal child returning home is a fetish since Australia continues to perpetuate a colonialist logic of removing children from their kin, their families, and communities. I think about Mexico. Is the figure of the

Mexican Indigenous a fetish? In tourism and political campaigns, one sees a cheerful person dancing, dressing in colorful clothes, cooking amazing meals from scratch, representing "Millenarian tradition"?

Nevertheless, who cares about Indigenous people's daily suffering of social exclusion, poor health care services, generational diabetes and alcoholism, gender, and domestic violence? Who walks in their communities when they are at their lowest, far away from the TV broadcasting the vivid celebrations of the *fiestas patronales*, shown as "Mexican culture"? Isn't it (some) local churches, missionaries, and Catholic priests, and in this case study, NPOs, religious freedom advocates, and, more specifically, the new convert who returns home with renewed hope and is passionate about sharing it with others, in prayers, visitations and acts of service? One willing to get their hands dirt in the soil, living simply, and stay, despite the rejection, the attacks, and the expulsions? More about them is explained in the case study.

This dissertation used relationality to approach the local, that is relevant for IR. Various scholars question in the special issue on *Pluriversal Relationality* (Trowsell et al., 2022) knowledge frames in IR and point out how people from multiple worlds practice *relationality* (ways of practicing existence) in a different manner from that constantly presented in the modern 'one-world world' (p. 787). In this relationality, they start with an existential assumption of the interconnection of humans and 'other-than-humans' towards a *Pluriversal IR* that "holds the promise of recognizing the coexistence of diverse ontological or cosmological traditions and their interactions and of paving the way for political negotiations that allow other realities to exist on their own terms" (p. 793). Querayazu (2021) invites one to use *cosmopraxis*, which "entangles and combines everyday life ways of doing things." Querayazu questions how we do IR and states beautifully,

‘What do magic, dreams, songs, storytelling have to do with world politics’?

Acknowledging and remembering that they were already part of world politics before we came up with the term ‘world politics’ is important. Perhaps we should ask the question differently: why not use all the skills we have at our disposal to expand the ways we can come up with meaningful answers and sensemaking of the complex realities we live? (p. 886).

This dissertation researcher wished to join these scholars in their pursuit that goes beyond traditional relational approaches of IR. One that does not persist to "privilege relations between pre-existing, distinct, separate, and stable units that may not accord with the worldviews of many people who live their lives according to relational frameworks" (Shani, 2021, p. 837). Rather, exposes the views of Indigenous people in Chiapas dealing with religious conflict. They, who, while dealing with everything (civil, political, economic, and religious) with the same rigor, interconnected; face the pain of disconnection when finding their religious differences too much of a weight to keep them going. Up to the extreme of harming each other, in their human and ontological security.

Human Security and Ontological Security

On the eve of the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), celebrated in May 2016, the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs of Mexico (SRE) talked about making Human Security the principal motivation of public policy on the global level. In 2021, the Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC) hosted a dialogue on Human Security and Chronic Violence in Mexico, reinforcing the commitment of civil servants to eliminate violent practices (SSPC, 2021). Such aims are not reflected in Indigenous communities, where civil servants provide public resources (i.e., the use of the police) to execute acts of religious

intolerance towards the Protestant minority (Mundaca, 2023). Despite this lack of consistency, Human Security, as *the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want* (CHS, 2003), is a promising approach and has the potential to address effectively the delicate matter happening in Indigenous communities if applied accurately. The initial definition of Human Security came from the 1994 Human Development Report, stating, "Human Security... has two main aspects. It means first safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression. Secondly, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life". For many years, the concept of security was linked to the state, with the military as the primary source of protection. The security and preservation of individual human beings were not considered of primary importance (McFarlane, 2006). All efforts prioritized the protection, stabilization, and safeguarding of the state. However, if it is to be considered that human development is a process of enlarging people's choices, one must include political freedom (McFarlane, 2006, p. 146).

Human security has taken various approaches: narrow, broad, critical, and postcolonial (Shani, 2015). The *narrow* approach to Human Security establishes that the state is the best actor to guarantee the rule of law. However, it also recognizes that NGOs, media, and non-state actors can provide a comprehensive and more accurate perspective on global issues that require immediate attention (ICSS, 2001, p. 25). The main focus of attention seems to be protecting people from violent and *physical* threats (such as war and diseases), with the state's responsibility to react to conflict and 'rebuild' with actions at the end of it (HSR, 2009).

The *broad* approach proposes understanding the fragilities and limitations of Human Security in a universe where various actors converge with different power ranges and the use of violence is not encouraged (Roberts, 2011, p. 87). The broad approach also makes a bold

proposition, talking about the need to reduce global military expenditure in favor of security, prioritizing the human over the state, as "for most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, and security from crime- these are the emerging concerns of human security worldwide." (HDR, 1994, p. 3)

The *critical* approach argues that Human Security has failed because it became another means to reproduce power and preserve the *status quo* (Grayson, 2008). Shani (2017) proposed to refine Human Security instead of disregarding it, using a *post-secular* and *postcolonial* approach. It adds concern to *non-physical* elements that tend to be marginalized in public policies, such as individuals' identity and culture. The post-secular also recognizes the centrality of religion in a postcolonial subjectivity and the rich plurality of understandings of "security" and "the human." The postcolonial acknowledges the tendency of Human Security to attempt to universalize Eurocentric conceptions for these. International bodies like the United Nations continue to impose a cultural conversion of non-Western states to a Western civilizational standard, failing to engage with the locals and be sensitive to cultural differences (p. 277, 280, 281). Protected by the state under the right to self-determination, Indigenous people in Mexico are promised to live freely in their own culture and identity. However, this 'self-determination' has a double standard, as it is regulated. On the one hand, Indigenous people keep being ignored, for example, when the state uses natural resources from their lands or authorizes industrial permits that affect their communities' ecosystem and economy without consulting them.

In contrast, regarding the cases of religious intolerance, the state falls short in protecting religious freedom. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, religious freedom is the right of every human being, "This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and

freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. “Concerning this, the protection of Human Security includes the satisfaction and provision of material needs, human rights, and mental and *emotional* security (Lombardi & Wellman, 2012, emphasis mine). Further discussed by Shani (2017), ‘Human Security as ontological security,’ “The argument is, therefore that the right of people to live in freedom and dignity is based on the prior existence of a stable self which is able to engage and interact with others. Without ontological security, individuals "are unable to establish relations of basic trust with other individuals and, consequently, are unlikely to be able to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want.” For Shani (a postcolonial approach of) Human Security presupposes *ontological security* (the psychological security of the self) in which culture and religion may play an essential role as they give answers to existential questions.

Ontological security ('security as being', Giddens, 1991) invites us to pay attention beyond physicality, to subjectivity, such as emotions, which are often insufficiently addressed when studying conflict. Although community life in traditional settings is seen as the best option for having a protective framework and psychological support (Giddens, 1991, p. 33), in practice may not be the case, especially when anxiety (the "fear of fear") cripples. This case study showed how traditional communities are not inherently peaceful oases where everything flows harmoniously. They are integrated by people with will and opinions, emotions and desires. People who make choices that affect others, whether in practice or subjectively. As Kinnvall (2004) proposed, when we think about security as a *thick signifier*, we position the individuals and groups in the *context* of "a wider order of meaning" that defines threats and how one relates to humans and other-than-humans, thus, to see better the security discourses framed in structural

relations (p. 744-745). "Analyzing security as a thick signifier thus makes us realize how structural conditions of insecurity are intimately linked to the emotional significance of identity mobilization" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 745). In the case of religious intolerance in Chiapas, Indigenous people have different senses and sources of security. For Indigenous Protestants, Jesus is "the only true and living God". For Catholic Traditionalists, it is the saint they worship and keeping *el uso y la costumbre* that comes with it. Nevertheless, Protestants have a structural inequality, living in a community setting that runs under the ways of Traditionalists, who, as a majority, decide who can access anything (see Chapter 4).

Ontological security was relevant to this research because emotions play a crucial role. When an Indigenous person in the community becomes Protestant, the Traditionalists feel they can no longer trust them, as they do not understand or accept their desire to change what they have been doing and believing for generations. The majority will confront the Protestants to bring them back to what they know and understand: Catholic Traditionalism. Protestants will confront the Catholics with their determination to still believe in the new faith they have adopted. As Protestantism prevails and prospers, the anxiety levels among the Traditionalists increase, turning to *securitize subjectivity* through physical means: physical aggression, the expulsion of Protestants, murder, rape. "Restore" or protect what makes them feel ontologically safe by destroying the religious minority and its manifestations of faith (i.e., the demolition of their temples). This harmful interaction has its core in an emotional intersubjectivity that, at times, is even unconscious. "In this process of securitizing subjectivity, hate becomes the link among the present, the future, and a re-created past. In this sense, it serves as a social chain for successive generations as a particular event or trauma becomes mythologized and intertwined with a group sense of self" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 755). Such hate is experienced among both groups, among

Traditionalists towards Protestants for their constant rejection of following the Catholic ways, and among Protestants hate towards Catholics for what they did and continue to do to them. A hate that links to the future when it is transferred to the next generations. As children live such hostilities between groups and learn *othering* people, refusing to engage or seeing them with mistrust without even trying to get to know each other.

This research proposed a broadly postcolonial approach to Human Security incorporating ontological security, considering the comprehensive aspects that should be considered for a person to feel safe in *their terms*: physical and psychological security of the self, living in freedom and dignity. Human Security, in the broad approach, 'complements' the state's role in primary responsibility to implement a protective structure for their citizens. Taking a broadly postcolonial approach to Human Security in this research is pertinent to address more effectively the issue of religious intolerance in Mexico, where the victims live in an environment of cultural complexity, belong to a historically vulnerable group, and struggle with the consequences of an imposed colonial order. Having said this, it was also necessary to expand on the postcolonial/decolonial itself, which led to the proposed (first) definition of Subaltern Christianity.

The Postcolonial/Decolonial

This dissertation addressed an aspect of religion in Mexico; thus, it was necessary to examine the history of the Spanish colonization in the region. I considered this history to be better understood with the postcolonial and decolonial approaches because they tell broadly of the history of decolonization and the pursuit of sovereignty by peoples and nations that emerged in a context of Western imperialism and often domination. The postcolonial and decolonial approaches share the same concerns, and their use is often undifferentiated. Nevertheless, they

have some geographical and disciplinary particularities relevant to understanding their origins and contributions.

The Postcolonial scholars, although many of them were residing in the West, mostly came originally from the Middle East and Asia. They are literary cultural critics that built up in the work of Edward W. Said, such as Bhabha, Spivak, Fanon, Emecheta, and Kincaid, among others. The postcolonial focuses mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is based on the Indian and Palestinian experiences, the Enlightenment in Europe of the eighteenth century (E-International Relations, 2017).

Decolonial scholars came from Latin America and started building up from the Argentinean/Mexican philosopher, Enrique Dussel. Among the leading decolonial scholars were philosophers Anibal Quijano and Rolando Vazquez. María Lugones, Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. The decolonial school started earlier in history with the fifteen-century European expeditions to the Americas and the European Renaissance (E-International Relations, 2017).

Postcolonial scholars have been criticized for following postmodern Eurocentric thinking and theorization when examining colonialism (A. Fernandez, 2013; Grosfoguel, 2011). Maintaining distance from prevailing knowledge structures is necessary to learn from others in a different development (Bhabra, 2014, p. 119). Putting it this way, "to enrich our thought, we have to engage with other cultures, in dialogue and even confrontation, especially when challenging the persistent West-centric views, 'rethink our identity and our roots' (Arce-Valentín, 2017, p. 45).

The term "post" is also considered ambiguous, for, as it exists in the same domain, it is *neocolonial* instead (A. Fernandez, 2013). The decolonial approach differentiates, arguing "their

critiques and proposals of liberation emerge from the cosmovisions of exploited and marginal groups rather than from privileged institutions of higher learning" (Asher, 2013, p. 833). Further, the term "post" is cornered to the unipolar time conception of the West, while the "de" comprise multicultural/civilization time notion and denotes newness, a needed change (E-International Relations, 2017).

Despite the mentioned particularities, I considered that the proposals of the decolonial and postcolonial approaches are rich and relevant, and they complement each other. Therefore, I used them as a unified term *post/decolonial*, although the cited sources may refer specifically to one of them. The post/decolonial approach is also pertinent for this research because the case study was based on Indigenous peoples and Christian conversion. Throughout the development of scientific thought, Indigenous peoples have been dehumanized by racist and colonial ideologies. In contrast, the post/decolonial are an "intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance" (Bhambra, 2014, p. 120). They were developed to challenge the Western ideal and question how it has been defined as what is believed and taught as true.

The post/decolonial is committed to transnational social justice political ideals (Young, 2016, p.58), with an often-strong position to attack the status quo. It sees the transformation of the formerly colonized nations and the changes or adaptation of the policy of the former colonial powers. Yet, it also acknowledges the more profound effects of colonization, an aspect that was more relevant in the historical background of the case study of this research. Nevertheless, the reach of the post/decolonial work is also limited as we are constrained to certain procedures that are rigid. Many materials that provide relevant and precious post/decolonial perspectives remain mostly unknown for not following academic parameters, the "publishing empire," states Jagessar (2022). Thus, this dissertation opened up to include unpublished work, mostly transcribed in

written analysis of an interiorized knowledge that is not just "mine", but rather one that was enriched through my interactions and dialogue with Indigenous people and Christians from non-Western contexts, as well as from my personal experience as a Mexican scholar on Peace Studies. Thus, I have something to say regarding a term that is more than that, as it encapsulates the problem that addresses the post/decolonial approach and that causes practical implications in people's lives. The following subsection dissects the word 'indio', before specifying the definition on Indigenous people that this dissertation was based on.

"Indio", a colonial legacy. From baptisms to definitions.

In Mexico, as in many other Latin American countries under Spanish rule, *mestizaje* or interracial marriages have been legal and even encouraged since the fifteen centuries. African descendent President Vicente Guerrero removed race as a demographic category from the national census, aiming for equality and the banishment of distinction between castes (Chaves-Duenas et al., 2014). Although the law allowed everyone equal access to civil rights, like a 'racial utopia', in reality, skin color has always played a major role in distinguishing who gets access to what resources (Perez, 2017, p. 40, paraphrase mine).

In Mexico, the colloquial way to refer to Indigenous peoples is *indio*. *Indio* is a colonial category used mostly pejoratively. When the Spaniards conquered Mexico, they established a five-layered class system: 1) Peninsulares (Spaniards born in Spain); 2) Criollos (Spaniards born in Mexico); 3) Mestizos (mixed blood Spaniard-Indigenous); 4) Indigenous people; and, 5) enslaved Black people brought from Africa. Spaniards had fair skin, Indigenous people were brown, and enslaved Africans were mostly black. Skin color remained prominent in social and political relationships until today "It has been a principal symbolic organizer and identity model since the conquest" (Forte de Leff, 2002, p. 620). Dark skin color was, and still is, associated

with the vanquished and uneducated, the ones to avoid ever be: *indio*. This is called *colorism*, a term that combines the word color and racism, used for the first time by feminist African American writer Alice Walker in 1983. A study by INEGI addresses colorism in a 2017 study. It included a section on self-identification by skin tone, showing a correlation between skin tone, education, and position in the workplace hierarchy (Estrada, 2022). The fairer the skin tone, the better the life opportunities one can get.

Using *indio* as an insult is just the first layer of normalized systematic discrimination (Mireles, 2021), racism that Mexicans do not want to see (Camhajiet al., 2019; Najar, 2016), even when practically almost every Mexican has Indigenous ancestors "The unavoidable presence of our Indian legacy is a mirror in which we do not want to see ourselves" (Bonfil, 1994, as cited in Fortes de Leff, 2002). Colloquially used phrases like "*la culpa no lo tiene el indio sino quien lo hace compadre*" (The indio is not to blame, but the one who made him mate) or "*cásate con un güero, para mejorar la raza*" (marry a blond one, to improve the race) suggest Indigenous people be intellectually and genetically inferior. "*¡Ándale, pareces indio!*" (come on, you look like an indio!) is a phrase to call out someone who is shy and refuses to do something, as if Indigenous people are weak of character. The racism portrayed in the TV and *telenovelas* that put heroes as fair-skinned people and criminals as brown people with dirty looks have raised generations of children, actually, the majority of them, to believe that who they are is wrong and how they look is ugly. Family therapist and professor Fortes de Leff (2002) tells of how racism wounds family relationships when the fair skin family members are treated with a higher level of respect, and the dark skin ones are often mocked and nicknamed *indio* or *negrito* (little black). Present generations of young people are contesting these racial stereotypes. Mexican artists such as Tenoch Huerta, talk of racism in the Mexican TV industry and the lack of healthy ethnic

representation in the stories shown. He states in an interview, "We have to figure out how to dismantle the monster" (Huerta, 2022). Things are changing; still, there is much to do.

Although Mexicans have a dark sense of humor, and we tend to laugh at tragedy and death, calling someone 'indio' is often attempting to be funny, but it is not. Negative racial stereotypes are "spirit murdering," dehumanizing, and harmful; they lead to reasoning, attitudes, and behaviors toward people we do not know (R. A. Williams, 2005, p. 8, paraphrase mine). This situation has made it standard for Mexican Indigenous people to feel racial inferiority and ashamed of using their Indigenous languages in the presence of "ladinos" (non-Indigenous) and outside their Indigenous communities. A sad reality that I could witness was when I was a teenager. My mother, sister, and I were returning home late at night when we saw a group of three Indigenous people from Oaxaca on the public bus. Their colorful clothes and the bright sound of their native language caught our attention. They were two women and a man. The women seemed to be having a good time, and they were laughing and poking at each other. When the man saw us noticing them, he scolded the women, telling them to stop talking. He looked ashamed, nervous, and fearful. I wondered how a society comes to this point of preventing a person from not feeling at home and free to use their mother tongue? As R. A. William says, racial mythology of violence can work as a "loaded weapon" or "mental ammunition" to justify violence and injustice towards a group of people. Negative stereotypes are powerful, motivating, and vital forces in an individual (2005, p. 9), and we must be careful with our use of language.

The challenges Indigenous people in Mexico face go beyond wounded social interactions. By 2021, nearly 6,000 Indigenous people in Mexico were imprisoned without an interpreter, which means they were put in jail without understanding why or having the chance to defend

themselves. Ninety-nine percent endured their legal process behind bars and without a sentence (Espinosa, 2021). We still need to rectify racism in society, in policing, and in the criminal justice system. Take part as academics and activists in developing and nourishing a world that protects human dignity and embraces pluriversality. A society that stops requiring assimilation for minorities to have access to school, jobs, and a proper legal process.

Referring to the story I shared above, despite Indigenous Mexicans seeing themselves as a disadvantage to urban people (CDI, 2006, p. 27), their origins give a brighter perception. Thus, one can find a contrast between the names given to them, whether from the ancient empires or the conquistadores during the colonial times, and the names they recognize themselves. In the Northern state of Chihuahua, Mexico, we have the *Tarahumaras*, named because of the Tarahumara mountains, where they live. Nevertheless, the way these people have called themselves for centuries is *Raramuris*, which means "people of light feet." A name that refers to their worldly known ability to run long distances. The Raramuris have received much attention for being able to travel internationally to run marathons that they have won, running with *huaraches*⁶.

Some Indigenous peoples from Oaxaca are known as *Zapotecas*, a Nahuatl word, the tongue of the ancient Aztec empire. It means "town of zapote," a fruit commercialized in this region. Little is known that in their native language, they call themselves *Binnizáa*, which means "people who come from the clouds." The *Binnizáa*, it is said, are not settlers but came from the gods, from the clouds.

⁶ Low-heeled sandal having an upper made of interwoven leather strips (MerriamWebster)

Naming is not simple. "To name is to struggle," as put by Indigenous Kochwa intellectual, Armando Muyolema (as cited in Walsh, 2018, p. 22). Indio/ Indigenous is an imposed category, which is not a (mere) ethnic category, but a category of struggle (Rivera Cusicanqui, as cited in Walsh, 2018, p. 81). It is one that was "given" or, better said, imposed by the conquerors, who made a clear division between themselves, the "civilized," and they, the "barbarians."

Indigenous peoples bear in their given name the misunderstanding of their culture. Its origin is a geographic error by Columbus et al. (2007), who thought he had reached India when arriving in the Americas. While colonialism baptized peoples with 'Christian names' (European names, to be more precise), it also separated Europeans and natives with newly invented categories that spread, and we still use, with some modifications. Changing names was also a systematic attempt to erase Indigenous cultures and identities. In countries like Canada, it regulated Indigenous peoples under patriarchal colonial norms even when they came from matrilineal and matriarchal cultures. It also helped control property division among heirs according to European property laws (Vowel & CBC News, 2018, November 4).

Despite the intention to adapt to the changes in time by "improving" colonial categories, there is no single 'internationally' used definition of *indio*. In Canada, the term is 'First Nations,' 'Maori' in New Zealand, 'Aboriginals' in the case of Australia, and 'Native Populations' in the United States. Each term has its historical struggles and defects. The colonial state 'imagined' concepts and collective Indigenous identities, and by classifying them, they also altered the political landscape (Shani, 2019, p. 51). The re-articulation of local cosmological identities into 'global narratives' has transcended, impacting the postcolonial peoples, for they see themselves as misrecognized by foreign categories, "causing a split in the self" "into a world not of their

making" (Shani, 2019, p. 53). Some Indigenous people argue: "*We have been, and continue to be, defined by settlers*" for the government's constant denial of acknowledging "*our names for ourselves*" insisting on using categories such as "Indian," "Aboriginal," or "Indigenous" has ideological roots in the same idea, "*We name you. We grant you your identity—or not. You are ours to name as we choose*" (Lefebvre & Elliott, 2020, June 22).

Acknowledging the previous discussion, one can agree on the difficulties of defining Indigenous people. In 1986, an international definition, yet not fully adequate (Maddock, 1997), came from the United Nations, further specified by the International Labor Organization, Convention 169 (1989). Regardless, in my opinion, the most complete definition so far is the one prepared by the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Jose R. Martinez Cobo⁷ (1986). His extensive comprehensive work on understanding the problem of discrimination against Indigenous populations took from 1979 to 1984. Producing a report that addresses widely Indigenous affairs and provides a (non-official) definition that one could resume like this:

Indigenous peoples have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies. They are still non-dominant sectors, considered distinct, and determined to preserve, develop, and transmit their ancestral territories and ethnic identity to future generations.

However, the most "fruitful approach is to identify rather than define" (UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues). Thus, this dissertation used this *identification* when referring to Indigenous people, adding the *s*, recognizing the plurality of communities and identities among the 500

⁷ United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

million Indigenous peoples worldwide (World Bank, 2021). Indigenous peoples are considered subalterns (Pandey, 2010). The following chapter elaborates on the origins of the subaltern as a concept that was developed and contested by the post/decolonial approach.

CHAPTER 2. DEFINING SUBALTERN CHRISTIANITY

Since my first encounter with Indigenous Peoples, I have connected with other Christians from non-Western contexts, predominantly Indigenous Christians. By developing friendships, learning with and from them in workshops, round table discussions, conferences, online courses, symposiums, and following their social media, I have seen a *Decolonized worship* (CREWShall, 2020) "the Indigenous face of God" (Memoria Indigena, n.d.). That offered me a new panorama of this faith, which I would call *Subaltern Christianity*. After enriching discussions with academic mentors, I was encouraged to propose a definition for Subaltern Christianity as one of my research questions. The present chapter elaborates on the theoretical framework that forms this concept's base, discussing the historical elaboration of problematic categories and continuing with the exposition of Indigenous people as subalterns. Finally, the proposed definition headlining this chapter will present specific aspects of its constitution, with examples that cite whom I consider Subaltern Christians. This section explains subaltern Christians' personal experiences, including how they live a decolonized Christianity that makes Indigenous theology, which became part of the cornerstone that fuels their lives to develop methods of resistance and survival. It serves as a timeline explaining how social sciences have addressed Indigenous issues and Christianity, from the emancipation pursuit of the post/decolonial to the bold exposition of Indigenous thinkers and scholars that opened their way in the academia and the world to talk about themselves in their own terms. In sum, this dissertation argued that colonialism did not win; it could not make Christianity captive, and it could not end the subalterns, but let us see how we got here.

The Subaltern and Indigenous Peoples

The term subaltern was taken from Gramsci's writings (1976-1978), who cited back to Marx, referring to the social groups subject to the ruling classes' hegemony (Beverly, 2001, p. 53). Gramsci goes beyond the Marxist's understanding of class relations. For him, the subaltern "encompassed racial minorities and women, and thus recognized that subalternity was defined by an intersection of class, 'race,' culture, and religion that functioned in different modalities in specific historical contexts" (Green, 2011, p. 395, as in Bracke, 2016, p. 845).

Gramsci explores the subaltern culture "driven by an interest in the conditions of *subaltern life* and the mechanisms that keep human beings in a state of subalternity. In other words, Gramsci seeks to understand what hegemony looks like and how it might be overcome." (Bracke, 2016, p. 844, emphasis mine). Subaltern groups "are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups... even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves (Gramsci, 1934-35, as cited in Hoare & Smith, 2003).

This chapter will also discuss the subaltern while referring to Spivak's work, who defines subaltern as everything with limited or no access to cultural imperialism that inhabits a space of difference (Spivak, 2004).

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote "Can the Subaltern Speak?". In this essay, Spivak refers to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive methods, seeking to reveal the limitations of language and power structures that impact the ability of marginalized groups to articulate their experiences and perspectives. Something that will be discussed in the case study when referring to the term '*indio*', that despite having colonial origins to refer pejoratively to Indigenous peoples, is still used vastly in Latin America.

Spivak explored the relationship between power and *representation* within colonialism. She argued that the subalterns are excluded from the dominant discourse and are unable (not

unwilling) to speak within it. Over the years Spivak's has revisited her argument (1999), and nuanced it. For instance, in her 2004 key note speech "The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work" she elaborated that the subaltern is not literally muted, is rather incapable to be heard within the dominant discourse. This argument echoes with Behera (2023), holding accountable the 'experts' who, in one way or another have been complicit in silencing the subalterns, who have talked, but not been listened to.

Furthermore, the subalterns are *producers of knowledge* that aims (in part) to modify the power relations to participate in the definition of themselves (Behera, 2023, p. 1912). They often express themselves through oral traditions, songs, and stories, which are not recognized within the dominant discourse. The subalterns can speak through practices of resistance, which challenge the dominant discourse and disrupt the systems of power that exclude them. Scott's work, *Weapons of the Weak* (2008), broadens perspectives on methods of resistance among subalterns. For Scott, warlike revolts and revolutions are extreme manifestations of resistance and are often the last resort. First come the "petty acts of insubordination" that commonly go unnoticed, such as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, or sabotage. These are revealed in folksongs, proverbs, legends, jokes, rituals, and religion among subalterns, which, although they may not make headlines, are forms of resistance that they use to "sanction power" (Scott, 2008, p. 41), the fruit of collective grievances creating stories (p. 45, paraphrase mine). Reading Scott's work made me view in a more positive light the reluctance of persecuted Indigenous Protestants to sue their attackers. Instead, they pray for them, asking God to change their hearts. Or, if they are forbidden from doing religious proselytism in their communities, they trick this restriction on their right to religious freedom by walking longer distances to neighboring communities, prisons, or hospitals to evangelize there instead. As a

researcher, I needed to recognize that Indigenous Protestants were fighting, just not in the way I initially thought was best. However, this does not mean they were mistaken. Using non-violent methods of resistance does not mean they were not angry (Scott, 2008, p. 278); they are angry, sad, and desperate, but as they expressed on multiple occasions in their testimonies, they have given their anger to God, who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Romans 12:19). Prayer is their act of resistance.

The Struggle of "Representing" the Subaltern

Spivak (1988) insists on subaltern agency and the responsibility of intellectuals to engage with and try to understand the subaltern condition to create spaces where their voices can be recognized. This, as part of "the right for intellectual labor" (Spivak, 2018). Thus, she calls for the intellectuals not to abstain from representation, instead, challenge the dominant structures to reconsider the way one can "touch the consciousness of the people " while doing research about the subaltern. The pursuit of intellectuals to represent the subaltern has been a struggle since the 'beginning'. In such manner, in 1982, the *Subaltern Studies Group (SSG)*, attempting to rescue the role of the subaltern from the colonial narratives, developed as a series of journal articles published in India. The Subaltern Studies Group worked with Marxist thoughts because "They go back to the question of European imperialism from which the problem of Indian modernity cannot be separated," especially since the problem of colonialism remains absent in most post-modern thinking (Chakrabarty, 1993, p. 1094). For Chakrabarty, "The figure of the subaltern is necessarily mediated by problems of representation" (1993, p. 1096). Guha states, "We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography ... for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny [...] This critique lies at the very heart of our project" (Guha, 1984: vii, as cited in Go, 2016, p. 30). The SSG created volumes of

scholarly work that invited people to rethink the link between History and Anthropology, removing European discourses from the center. Not to deny Western categories but rather to point to a new and autonomous relation to them. In summary, the SGG calls for an awareness of the colonial past and its implications with restated relation with (dominant) intellectual traditions (Das, 1989, p. 310; paraphrasis mine).

Nevertheless, despite all beneficent scholarly intentions, the academic work about the subaltern has been speaking *for* them rather than speaking *about* them, not taking their voices seriously enough (Beier, 2002, p. 87). The post/decolonial approaches have fallen into the spiral of reproducing West-Centric views by restricting the definitions of specific cultural and religious expressions. As social scientists, we have to constantly refine, ideologically and theoretically, our own coloniality (Arce-Valentín, 2017, p. 44), thus, recognizing and celebrating the pluriverse of identities in constant change and manifesting in various ways. By reproducing hegemonic knowledge, many non-Western worldviews and lifeways are disapproved; hence post/decolonial scholars exert tyranny over Indigenous peoples (Beier, 2002, p. 110). This 'tyranny' comes from the orthodoxy⁸ of International Relations, which considers the state as the sole locus of political *order* and Indigenous peoples as *anarchic*. This is a thought that resides in the history of Indigenous peoples written by the colonizers who assumed that they would eventually be extinct (Curthoys et al., 2007, p. 83) or assimilated into the dominant culture (Prine, 2020).

Regarding the definition and representation of the subaltern, for Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Group, in which context Spivak intervened, subaltern came to mean persons

⁸Orthodoxy originated since the travelogues of the European age of "discovery" (Beier, 2002, p. 107), where "Indigenous peoples are denied the possibility of a politics and are reduced, instead of to a political *issue*" (Beier, 2002, p. 108, emphasis mine).

and groups cut off from upward social mobility. Yet, talking about the “new subaltern” argues that the subaltern needs to be rethought” for s/he is not entirely prevented from accessing the “center” who has been growing specific interest in Indigenous subaltern populations (Spivak, 2016, p. 851) often with utilitarian intentions under the covers of protecting intellectual rights (Spivak, 2006). I consider that, even with growing interest in the subaltern, from various sources and entities with nuanced intentions, it has been predominantly subaltern resilience more than willingness from the “center” that has given them access to places that were once denied to them. As feminist historian, Gerda Lerner, said, “First of all, nobody gave us anything,” urging to recognize the unrelenting efforts of women through more than a century to get suffrage. In the same way, I must disagree with any affirmations that suggest Indigenous people have been granted access. It has been a fight for access that continues to cost their lives as they speak for themselves. This includes the revolutionized opportunities that digital technologies have brought, such as the use of social media among Indigenous peoples (Rice et al., 2016), particularly the young generation (Korff, 2022). Could it be as well, as the Egyptian artist, Mehri Khalil, wonders possible, that the world has opened its eyes to “otherness” so subalterns can get the legitimacy they deserve? (2017, paraphrase mine).

I can agree with the scholars mentioned regarding the struggle of representing the subaltern in my writing. I have been careful not to replace the experience of Indigenous Protestants with my own. Still, I must recognize, as Scott (2008) does, that my transcript of their experience is limited, not whole. It is limited by the practical constraints of time and space, as well as by my own interests and experience. Nevertheless, I have attempted to set myself aside to let the subaltern speak as they see fit in their *testimonios*.

Outspoken Subalterns: Indigenous People

As it was discussed in the previous section, the subaltern can speak, and it does it loudly; the problem lies in the recipient, who does not listen. Indigenous peoples have fought back all attempts to be silenced and erased unceasingly, remaining instead, in one way or another.

Indigenous peoples as subalterns (Pandey, 2010) have particularly been outspoken, even in historical moments when all the social structure was against them. For instance, the Ghost Dance in the late eighteenth century among Native Americans, a religious ceremonial practice used as resistance against white settlement (Mohrbacher, 1996). Their dancing was their speech, and although their resilience culminated in massacre, it is preserved as a historical example of subaltern form of representation.

Many Indigenous people went presumably extinct due to labor exploitation and diseases, such as the Indigenous Taino peoples that used to live in what are now Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands (Library of Congress, 2007). Genetic anthropologists, such as Jada Benn Torres, found their ancient DNA in living people; she states, "They are adamant about their continuous existence, that they have *always been* [on these islands]" (Wade, 2018, emphasis mine).

Diseases almost silenced the subalterns. The Europeans first brought viral diseases unintentionally when they arrived in the Americas, like the first smallpox epidemic that spread in Mexico in 1520. Then, they did it intentionally. Paul Kelton (2009) clarifies the use of infected blankets as biological weapons, with special mention of the one perpetrated by Colonel Henry Bouquet, who authorized his officers to spread smallpox amongst Native Americans by deliberately infecting blankets after peace talks in 1763 (Kiger, 2019). A historical painting shows Ottawa Chief Pontiac confronting Bouquet for that fact. Chief Pontiac led a rebellion against the British from 1763 to 1766.

Each subaltern group's action, even in the face of defeat, failure, or even extinction, must be considered carefully for being a fundamental piece to understanding the development of human history. Hundreds of years have passed, yet, to the present date, Indigenous peoples are often not included in the decision-making that affects them and their communities, commonly because they do not consider themselves capable or worthy of it. Former President Bolsonaro from Brazil said, "*The Indians do not speak our language, they do not have money, they do not have culture. They are native peoples. How did they manage to get 13% of the national territory?*" (Campo Grande News, April 22, 2015, cited and translated by www.survivalinternational.org).

While working with Indigenous peoples in Chiapas, I have noticed that they are often pushed to depend on the state when facing struggles. Bolsonaro⁹ reflects (in its most extreme

⁹ Bolsonaro had a close relationship and received political backing from the conservative Evangelical right in Brazil due to his stance against homosexuality and abortion and his support for 'family values' (Osborn, 2022). According to some scholars, he could not have won the presidency without the votes of Evangelicals in Brazil (Smith, 2022). Although Bolsonaro at one point belonged to the Christian Democratic Party and the Social Christian Party (Wallenfeldt, 2024) and often used religious language in his public statements, I would argue that his religious identity is unclear. Nevertheless, even if Bolsonaro is an Evangelical Christian, his racist and intolerant statements, along with his disregard for environmental protection, contrast with the views of Indigenous Christians. For them, recognizing the spirituality of Creation as reflected in Genesis 1, caring for

way, perhaps), a state that still reproduces a colonialist logic of dominion, supremacy-submission, and vassalage. It suggests that Indigenous peoples cannot exercise agency and be transformed in their ways if they want to (Beier, 2002, p. 108). This reality is ignored when forms of governance that do not include them while making decisions that impact them exacerbate conflict and aggravate the already delicate living conditions that Indigenous peoples deal with. As the case study will elaborate, persecuted Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas are expelled by the Catholic majority, nevertheless, they are kept outside their ancestral lands by the state, aiming to keep them (physically) safe from their attackers. Yet, placed in the city, they become fully dependent on charity and the local government, unable to continue living on subsistence farming, their dignity and ontological security are harmed feeling constantly anxious and inadequate for the urban lifestyle they do not understand. What if the state listened to what it means for Indigenous Protestants to be safe?

This neglect has been constant. Historical noble fights for social justice, such as the British abolition of slavery (1833) or the recognition of Indigenous peoples as fellow humans with De Las Casas (1551), did not include the voices of subaltern Africans and Indigenous peoples in their statements. Being represented by others, they "were considered patient, living organisms to be told, not to be heard" (Mignolo, 2002, p. 63).

In 2019, 212 environmental defenders were killed (Global Witness, July 2020). Indigenous defenders are the most frequent victims of the reprisals, and two-thirds of the total killings happened in Latin America (UN Environment Program, August 9, 2020). In Canada, an

nature is seen not in an utilitarian way, rather as a sacred calling and a responsibility of humankind (LaBlanc, 2008).

Indigenous person is more than 10 times more likely to have been shot and killed by a police officer than a white person.

Indigenous peoples safeguard 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. Their vital ancestral knowledge and expertise are outstanding and valuable in how to adapt, mitigate, and reduce climate and disaster risks (worldbank.org). More than that, the worldviews of Indigenous peoples have persistently contested the crisis of values in a humanity that has increasingly become individualist, accumulative, and predatory (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010). Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples' views are gaining increasing attention. The fact that they have gotten themselves a place where they were not even considered (e.g., international bodies such as the United Nations) is a testimony of their resilience for centuries.

Indigenous principles are getting greater recognition and, thus, are being studied more deeply to introduce their knowledge in various fields, IR included. Brigg et al. (2022) present the value of Aboriginal Australian political theory that allows us to address some flaws in IR.

Its self-authorizing way of knowing emerges when we acknowledge that human knowledge-making is necessarily a participant-first activity and that observation with a participant's perspective in mind works very differently to the version of observation favored by conventional social science and IR. To be in a system and to be, as human beings, active contributors to it as well as to ways of knowing it and claiming validity for such knowing, necessarily carries notions of quality, of better and worse, or rightfulness and wrongness, both of particular behaviors and the overall arrangements of the system (Brigg et al., 2022, p. 898).

Sharing this, I do not suggest that Indigenous knowledge is flawless, nor is the solution to all world problems. I rather consider, as I was exposed in the Methodology section, that Indigenous

perspectives are candid about our humanity and the way we carry it with us, always, even in moments when we attempt to do science "objectively." Our humanity is not a problem. It is an asset.

Prevailing Indigenous peoples' actions are increasingly neither easily invisibilized nor forgotten. Individuals such as Aboriginal Australian lawyer Shareena Clanton bring into sight a new and 'hybrid' international willing to sacrifice a lot on their way to reestablish [for] themselves (and others) a better life (Richmond, 2019, p. 37). As she stated boldly on February 19, 2018, in a Q&A session with Australian government officers, *"I am tired of begging and asking for our humanity. When is it enough?!...closing the gap is coming from Indigenous peoples, not from initiatives in the Parliament... We are deconstructing the power systems that exist"*. Clanton said Aboriginals have been learning how the structures work. Hence, the Australian government, instead of seeking "advice" from Indigenous peoples, must open the opportunity for them to participate in the Parliament. Thus, decide what is best for themselves and make decisions. "Only those with the adequate Indigenous knowledge base are qualified and equipped to deal with Indigenous oral stories respectfully and knowledgeably" (Borrows, 2001, p. 10, as cited in Bell, 2014, p. 163). In this way, peace emerges from the subaltern subject, "armed with twenty-first-century technology, information, and potential, following the global political economy towards the world's centers of relative stability and prosperity and away from violence or structural violence" (Richmond, 2019, p. 37). Avril Bell elaborates that this is a reality that causes a "dichotomization of indigeneity and modernity" that argues on cultural rights to be denied to Indigenous peoples when they are no longer living in the "traditional" "pure" and "spiritual" way of their ancestors. "Indigeneity is the past. Modernity and settler society is the present and the future" (Bell, 2014, p. 53). Some people consider it "culturally inauthentic" to see

Indigenous peoples occupying spaces or using products that project power, status, and wealth, such as wearing Rolex, using riffles, and motorized chase boats to hunt whales. Every time Yalitza Aparicio, an Indigenous actress from Oaxaca, Mexico, is chosen as a model for luxurious brands (Prada, Valentino, Gucci, and Dior), social media is filled with negative comments saying that she looks "ridiculous" because as an Indigenous woman, she should be wearing traditional clothes (Infobae, 2021). Such a narrative goes beyond words. It has practical implications, thus, is common to consult Indigenous peoples on environmental management but not on urban planning or more widespread federal laws. Indigenous peoples are not museum artifacts, unchanged, frozen in time; they are people with the right to choose what they wear and to have access to technology that can make their lives safer and more comfortable if they want to. Where is it coming from the apparent attempt to measure indigeneity?

Some Indigenous peoples stand in front of government authorities with a university title and complete knowledge of the law, such as Clanton or Indigenous lawyer Chief Willie Littlechild, Commissioner of the Truth of Reconciliation Commission in Canada. Others stand boldly with nothing else but their spirit and faith, like Estela Perez, an Indigenous *Tzotzil* woman and leader of a committee of Indigenous peoples. She stood at the Supreme Court of Justice to claim for the release of 70 innocent men from her community¹⁰. She served as a maid in San Cristobal for three years to learn Spanish and be able to speak with the supreme judges. Still, she believes God is the one who gave her courage (*personal communication*, Mexico City, 2008).

¹⁰Langner, A. (2013, April 10). *La SCJN Invalida Pruebas y liberan a otros 15 de Acteal*. El Economista. Retrieved February 10, 2022, from <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/La-SCJN-invalida-pruebas-y-liberan-a-otros-15-de-Acteal-20130410-0103.html>

Through social media, Indigenous people communicate and create awareness about their rights, culture, and the current challenges they deal with. People like Shina Nova¹¹ use Inuk throat singing to celebrate an aspect of her culture that, despite colonizers' attempts, was kept alive in secret until it came to the open. With eloquent speech, online classes, and poetry, Indigenous Gunadule from Panama, Jocabed Solano, shares Indigenous theology and pedagogy with other Indigenous Christians from AbyaYala, in the virtual space, *Memoria Indigena (MI)*¹².

Via WhatsApp groups and over 67 radio stations¹³, Mayan Indigenous from different Christian denominations shares sermons and worship in their native languages in Chiapas, Mexico. All these can be expressions of *subalternization of knowledge* located "outside the parameters of modern conceptions of reason and rationality" (Mignolo, 2000, p. 67). In the case study, I exposed Indigenous Protestants showing a subalternization of our knowledge about Christian worship through their Indigenous cultural and artistic manifestations, a *Subaltern Christianity* that one can appreciate better, acknowledging decolonial Christianities.

Decolonial Christianities

To elaborate this section, I build upon ideas compiled around decoloniality, Christianity, and indigeneity.

Indigeneity is understood as a term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world's colonized peoples... [whose shared experiences] have been subjected to the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty, by a

¹¹<https://www.instagram.com/shinanova/?hl=es>

¹² Memoria Indigena. (n.d.). Retrieved December 17, 2020, from <https://memoriaindigena.org/nosotros/principio/>

¹³ Martinez Mendoza, Cordero Fernandez, & Villar Pinto. (2013, July/August). El púlpitoelectrónico: La radio religiosa en Chiapas. *Razón Y Palabra*. Retrieved December 17, 2020, from http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/N/N83/V83/18_MartinezCorderoVillar_V83.pdf

colonizing society that has come to dominate and determine the shape and the quality of their lives, even after it has formally pulled out" (Smith, 1999, p. 7, as cited in Bell, 2014, p. 9, paraphrase mine)

On Indigenous Christians, Andrade (2004), in his work, *Protestantismo Indígena* (Indigenous Protestantism), elaborates on the experiences of conversion and social change among Indigenous Quichuas in El Chamborazo, Ecuador. A Protestantism that comes in the form of resistance

... expressed as well in the way of appropriation and interpretation of the new faith, characterized by the continuity and combination of the magical-religious traditions and evangelism. The most notorious expression of this appropriation is the capacity to re-elaborate religious practices. (p. 216, translation mine)

More recently is the work: *Decolonial Christianities: Latinx and Latin American Perspectives* (Barreto&Sirvent, 2019). It brings scholars with a decolonial turn (making visible the invisible) towards an intercultural dialogue while relocating as protagonists of marginalized groups' practices. Tamez makes a call for Christianity to confront its long historical complicity with colonialism, emphasizing that "Decolonial thought contributes to dismantling [sic] dominant Christian [Western] narratives that glorify missionary colonialism" (2019, p. 9). Although this is true, I have found that dominant Christian Western narratives often ignore Indigenous peoples' relevant and protagonist role as missionaries and sharers of the message of salvation. Indigenous peoples, even those who have already converted to Christianity, are commonly shown as passive subjects, "poor and needy," that require leadership from non-Indigenous missionaries when the reality can be very different. Swain and Rose (1988) wrote a remarkable research piece on Australian Aboriginal Christians' history. Some Aboriginals developed a Christianity that became a lighthouse to follow: "They no longer see a white person

standing in front of them, telling them about the Bible, but one of their own kind... one whose language is their own" (p. 261). In *Decolonial Christianities* (2019), the task of Christian theologizing in the region "is to help non-Indigenous peoples to open up their mentality to receive with joy and equality those different practices of faith" (Barreto & Sirvent, 2019, p. 2). I would add that a decolonial Christianity should remain humble and open to *listen to* the various experiences that Indigenous peoples have had with Christianity. Instead of catching entirely in a wide net classifying the Christian experience among Indigenous peoples as destructive, be willing to see the many times in which the Christian faith has also brought shelter from the social and political problems that Indigenous peoples face. Thus, they can say, as an Aboriginal Christian Yarrabah states, "*They take more and more of our land, but if they squeeze us into a corner, I don't care, I still have my Lord*" (Swain & Rose, 1988, p. 261).

Furthermore, although Christianity is often connected with European colonialism, and conquistadores like Cortes used religious arguments to justify their actions, it is relevant to emphasize that Christianity originated millenniums before in the Middle East. Deborah Tonelli, Coordinator of an interdisciplinary project on "Religions and Violence" states, "Despite the conventional narrative, a re-reading of the birth and of the expansion of Christianity could be useful for building an inclusive narrative, balancing facts, points of view, interpretations, and purposes. Doing so, we could rediscover historical resources to build a common narrative as a basis for a decolonial theology" (Tonelli, 2020). A narrative that, by engaging a wider Christian community, is truthful to its birth. The Bible describes how the Christian gospel spread first among fishermen, the sick, prostitutes, beggars, tax collectors, women, religious minorities (Canaanites), and others. One can consider they were historical subalterns, inhabiting a space of difference, struggling to make their voices heard, with practically no access to cultural

imperialism. They were social groups subject to the ruling class's hegemony, one led by men of certain status and religion and oppressed by the Roman Empire. The desire of primitive Christians to share their faith and persecution made them move to other places, Greece, Rome, and Africa. Christianity came to Africa way before the European colonization (Shaw & Gitau, 2020; Soares, 2006), as Ibn al-Dawādārī, a Muslim Historian chronicler of the 1300s, tells of a Christian community in Tarkur (now modern Senegal and Mauritania) that paid tribute to the Muslim rulers. Moreover, the Gospels tell of evangelism in Africa since the first century, when, for example, apostle Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Ethiopia is home to some of the oldest churches in Africa, particularly the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, founded more than 15 centuries ago. It survived the Roman Empire, the spread of Islam, multiple colonization attempts, and the proliferation of Western Protestant theology and Catholicism in the region (Habtemariam, 2017). The Tewahedo Church appropriated Christianity, Ethiopian style.

Indigenous Theology

This section is an introduction to Indigenous Theology as it is necessary to understand the relevance and the departure point of whom I consider subaltern Christians. Theology comes from two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word/thought). It means speaking or thinking about God. For St Anselm (1033-1109), theology was "*fides quaerens intellectum*" ('faith seeking understanding') not in a doubtful way towards God, but rather as "an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God" (T. Williams, 2020). Anyone who wishes, not just someone pursuing a degree in Theology, can do theology. In the present time, with more people declaring themselves non-religious while keeping a curiosity for the divine, doing theology does not necessarily come hand-in-hand with faith. "Some are studying theology because they wish to

move from faith to a fuller understanding of that faith. Others are studying theology because they want to understand [and debate] what Christians believe" (Badham, 1996). If we move back to St Anselm and read the Bible, one can see that understanding faith is deeply encouraged. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, saying that the most important commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your *mind*" (Mathew 22:37, emphasis mine). When Paul and Silas presented the gospel in Berea, it states, "the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:10-11, NIV). These are some examples. Nevertheless, as Christianity was mainly introduced among Indigenous peoples under the assumption that they had no reason or were of inferior intellect, they were deprived, for many years, of the opportunity to do theology on their own terms and have a richer understanding of the Scriptures. There were exceptions, even in places such as Australia, where historically, the racism and discrimination towards Indigenous people remained legal until the late 1940s. Aboriginals were not considered citizens until 1948, nor could they have equal wages until 1965; some missionaries were affirming 100 years before "that the first Australians were human and should have the same rights and dignities, the same opportunities and respect as were normally accorded to other Australians" (Burridge, 1988, p. 29). Many other missionaries have dared to disobey their governments and church traditions, translating the Bible to Indigenous languages, and seeing natives with equal dignity and worth in God's eyes, as will be further explained in the case study. However, since, through Colonialism, the vast majority of the first Christian experience among Indigenous peoples was harmful, Indigenous theology took longer to flourish.

Recognizing the challenges, limitations, and historical debts that Theology, as a discipline, has with cultural diversity was exposed by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (2006). In a marriage of convenience with Colonialism, Christianity was introduced in Indigenous communities with a conscious sense of superiority that engaged aggressively with the other. A practice that is still reproduced; thus, it is necessary to learn to see our theologies (in plural) for what they are as ways to participate in God's path. At the moment when theology, as we mainly know it and do it (as Western Christianity), faces cultural diversity, the narrowness of their normal discourse is exposed, for "cultural diversity and *interculturality* announce the sublime infinity of The Word, which diversity pressure makes explode cultural borders, sending theology to a perpetual exodus" (Fornet-Betancourt, 2006, p. 57, English translation and emphasis mine).

Intercultural philosophy, as defined by Stermann (2007), is an intellectual habit, an attitude with the will to commit to constantly reflecting on the conditions and limitations of "polílogo" or *plurilogue*, between different cultures. About this term, Shani and Behera (2022) elaborate, "*Plurilogue* implies that there are more than two voices and perspectives simultaneously that are equally legitimate (and worthy of respect). Thus, plurilogue implies a deep commitment to perspectivity and inclusion" (Shani& Behera, 2022, p. 1, emphasis mine). I consider that plurilogue is a work that has been done translating the Bible to Indigenous languages. Missionaries with specific training in linguistics and other disciplines live for decades among Indigenous people and, with their help and guidance, prepare the translation of the Sacred Scriptures. I have met several missionaries living across the Americas, and I know it is a long haul, for often translations require the creation of an alphabet for a language that has never been written before, and even after the Bible is translated, audio-Bibles are prepared for its more efficient distribution among Indigenous peoples, who have an Oral Tradition. It is a hard and

sacred effort in which multigenerational Indigenous Christians from different communities participate in plurilogue, giving their opinion to find the words and expressions that could best explain the Bible message in their language.

In conclusion, Indigenous theology acknowledges the obligation that Theology owes to Indigenous peoples and rejects the destructive ways that Christianity was presented to them. It engages intercultural philosophy in plurilogue with other cultures. It does so through constant study of the Bible. It disseminates among Indigenous peoples, often putting efforts in making culturally appropriate translations of the Bible for them to read and interpret it from the native perspective.

The term 'Indigenous theology' was first mentioned in the 1950s in Latin America, recognizing socio-cultural realities, particularly the needs of the region's poor, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups (Opas, 2017). To date, there is scholarly work that addresses the history, development, and present ways of Indigenous churches from all over the world: China (Clark A. E., 2017), tribal Indigenous from India (Elias, 2023), Black African (Aye, 2021; Clark J, 2022); Sami (Jernsletten, 2010), to mention some. Most of this work was done by non-Indigenous scholars, like myself, who possess a certain level of respect and admiration towards Indigenous peoples and adventured into the field, attempting to understand, observe, participate, and share about Indigenous theology and Indigenous churches.

In the process of decolonizing Christianity, Indigenous churches rediscover and reconcile with their indigeneity. Late Rev. Richard Twiss, Indigenous Sioux, points out that Indigenous people are experiencing a rediscovering of who they are as native people and who they are as followers of Jesus, realizing that

"to following Jesus in no way puts you in odds with being native... Jesus walked among people as a tribal man, he never was a white man... our challenge as native people is how do we sort out the culture from the gospel. How do we follow Jesus without following cultural ways as being part of what that means?" (2008).

Recovering their names, as mentioned in the section about 'indio', has been a way to manifest their freedom and treasure their origins as "all identity labels carry 'a meaning, a penalty and a responsibility'" (Appiah, 1995, p. 103, as cited in Bell, 2014, p. 135). Thus, as Bolivian Indigenous leaders Takir Mamani and Tupaj Katari suggested, Indigenist people and Indigenous people use the term *Abya Yala* to refer to the American continent in their official declarations. Katari argues that recognizing and "placing foreign names on our villages, our cities, and our continents is equivalent to subjecting our identities to the will of our invaders and their heirs" (Arias & Carcamo, 2012, p. 7, translation by Del Valle, 2014). Therefore, renaming the continent is the first step in epistemic decolonization (Del Valle, 2014). For many years, Indigenous ancestral knowledge was considered *paganism*; in contrast, *Abya Yala*'s theology allows us to see ancestral knowledge as part of a decolonial turn that visibilizes Indigenous peoples and presents them as worthy of salvation. Delgado and Ramírez (2023) elaborated, "The message of death and submission to the native people is transformed in the Christianity of *Abya Yala* as a message of resurrection and hope. Just as the corn seeds need to be dried out so when they are planted, they can resurrect as beautiful fresh corncob; in the same way, in the consciousness, memories, and voices of our ancestors, new generations are growing and resurging, resurrecting" (English translation mine). For Indigenous people, it has been necessary to go way back, before Colonialism, to the origins of Christianity, to the source, the Bible, and know the stories told there, and do theology in native codes. Indigenous Christians have done Indigenous theology for

many decades; what has been recent is to see scholarly work about Indigenous theology done by Indigenous Christians, such as a few I will introduce next.

'In the beginning'

A recurrent Bible interpretation among Indigenous peoples is in the book of Genesis, as they have found similarities with the stories told by their ancestors. Indigenous Mi'kmaq-Acadian, Dr. Terry LaBlanc (2008) explains that the Western Church misses the spirituality of God's creation, even in ecological concerns, for they only see it in a utilitarian way. This comes due to a "foundational fallacy" from the Platonic Dualism that divides reality and creates binary thinking (legal-illegal, heaven-hell, clean-dirty, good-bad), making it difficult to see "two seemingly incompatible things in tension" without resolution, and not as a problem to be solved, as said by Cherokee author, Dr. Randy Woodley (2022). In the Native American story of the Cherokee First Woman and Man, they were created to be "partners with Creator in creation care," "to work, to serve, to till," and to co-sustain and guard the creation that they were entrusted. Just as in the book of Genesis, where *everything* God made was good, night and day, heaven and earth, animals and man, and everything concludes in harmony (Woodley, 2022). Solano (2021) re-reads the book of Genesis in her Master thesis in co-relation with the ancestral stories of the Gunadule people of Panama. In these, we are images of *Ologwadule* (Mother Earth), who was carefully created by *Nana* and *Baba*, with blue gold and blue silver, planted with seeds that turned into flowers, culminating in a great celebration:

A medida que nana Ologwadule, madre tierra, se iba completando, nuestros espíritus también iban tomando su forma, definiéndose al ritmo de ella. Porque gracias a ella seríamos hombres y mujeres; desde ella nos definimos. Luego Baba extendió otra capa de oro. Baba y Nana trabajaban unidos. Esta vez Baba utilizó el oro azul. Nana utilizó la plata azul. Ellos envolvieron de nuevo el

rostro de nana Ologwadule. Baba volvió a atar las columnas y los arcos de oro azul con bejucos de oro macizo azul. Baba esparció las semillas e hizo florecer la gama de flores y de hierbabuena. Las flores se alegraban; fue entonces una gran fiesta. Y nana Ologwadule fue tomando, poco a poco, su forma definitiva.

(Solano, 2021, p. 81).

For the Gunadule, God is man and woman, Nana and Baba, mother and father, a feminine and masculine figure that complements each other. One that delights in creating the Earth, a living being that matures in a relationship with God (Solano, 2021, p.85). As other Indigenous Christians just mentioned, Solano argues that God revealed himself to Indigenous people before the Colonizers came. He is present in the stories and the narratives of the Gunadule people, and by reading the Bible, to see Jesus presented as a narrator, a narrator that is narrated, enhances Indigenous people's understanding of the divinity (Solano, 2023). Thus, denying or condemning indigeneity and ancestral knowledge was not a necessary step to evangelizing Indigenous people; instead, it made it more difficult and caused deep generational trauma. This harm happened because evangelization was not a priority in Colonization. It was an excuse to dominate and control a new land, their resources, and native peoples whom they considered inferior. Thus, "it is obvious that the conquerors could not recognize the presence of the *Ruah* [Spirit of Life, Holy Spirit] among the living experiences and cosmovisions of the Indigenous people of Abya Yala" (Solano, 2021, p. 27, English translation mine). Therefore, the conquistadores thought it was best to destroy everything: their culture, their ways, their beliefs, even the person, under the argument "kill the Indian and save the man," as remembered by Native Americans (Kliweret al., 2022). Most Indigenous peoples went through a process of *assimilation* to absorb them into the dominant culture or society by gradually stripping them of all cultural expressions of being

Indigenous, including their language (Pauls, 2022). Indigenous peoples did not hear the gospel, which means "good news." For them, Christianity was a synonym for pain and destruction, of loss and violence; thus, the existence of Indigenous churches doing Indigenous theology is quite remarkable, to say the least. To reflect on God's almighty power, for us believers, and rejoice because Colonization could not eclipse the gospel. Understanding the theological contributions and the challenges of indigeneity is unavoidable if one pursues to decolonize Christianity and understand Subaltern Christians' concerns and sources of strength.

Subaltern Christianity. A First Definition.

Here are the main characteristics of Subaltern Christianity: it is lived, developed, and reproduced by non-Western theological agents that project their faith and worship in Jesus Christ from the lenses of their own cultures. Subaltern Christianity has *retroverted* (Sahay, 1990), allowing believers to interpret the Bible and teach it in their contexts, with some accompaniment of Western fellow believers, without depending on them (Horst, 2011). Ismael Conchacala¹⁴, Colombian Indigenous Wiwa, tells of the importance of identifying the possibilities to share the gospel in dialogue with the culture and recognizing the value of Indigenous symbols. Thus, the Bible can bring hope and call to *reconciliation* with their indigeneity:

Empezamos a asumir la palabra de Dios, la Biblia, esa Palabra que da vida, no como un objeto... sino como una anciana que se invita a conversar en la fogata. La que nos cuenta la historia, tanto buenas, malas, las que hay que hacer, las que no hay que hacer... Estos procesos se han dado gracias también a que como creyente nos hemos dado a la tarea de no simplemente decir, juzgar, [y decir] 'esto no es malo, esto no me sirve,

¹⁴ Conchacala, I. (2021, November 5). *¿Por qué debemos afirmar nuestra identidad* . Youtube. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3pPbGjtpCU>

esto ha dañado mi cultura', sino de hecho desde nuestra identidad de ser Wiwa también hemos sido insistente en cómo estos textos, estas espiritualidades [bíblicas] también puede dialogar con nuestros saberes indígenas (Conchacala, 2021).

We started to look at the Word of God, the Bible, that Word that gives life, not as an object...but as an elderly woman that invites one to have a conversation by the fire. Who tells us the story, whether good or bad, what ought to do, what do not ought to do... This process has also happened because, as believers, we have up to the task of not merely judging, [and say] 'this is bad, this is worthless, this has damaged my culture'. Instead, from our Wiwa identity, we have insisted on how these texts, this [biblical] spiritualities, can also dialogue with our [Indigenous] knowledge.

Subaltern Christians can speak for themselves, aware of their "God-given" rights and dignity and their role and responsibility to live out their faith as followers of Jesus (Bishop Angaelos, 2016). An Indigenous Protestant living in Los Altos Chiapas shared how he has shared the gospel among his Indigenous neighbors:

Por eso siempre voy a evangelizar así aunque a las personas no les guste pero gracias a Dios ya aceptaron Cristo como mi vecino de aquí que ya es cristiano, ¿sabes porque?, porque les voy a regalar mi atolito, mi comida, y como somos indígenas comemos siempre verduras, siempre atolito que hacen aquí y compartimos cuando yo voy a visitar a los hermanos, siempre llevo un poquito de elote y un poquito de chayote. Les voy a compartir un poco a mis vecinos. Es así que mi vecino conoce a Cristo, solamente que no va a mi iglesia pero de todos modos ya es cristiano, y así estamos

evangelizando y gracias a Dios ahorita ya casi todos son cristianos aquí por los alrededores.

That is why I always go to evangelize, just like that, even when people dislike it [when we talk about our faith] but thank God they have accepted Christ. Like my neighbor here, who is already a Christian. Do you know why? Because I go and give them from my atole, and my food, and since we are Indigenous, we always eat vegetables. Every time they make atole here [at my home], we share when I visit the brothers. I always bring a little bit of corn and a little bit of chayote. I share some with my neighbors. That is how my neighbor knows Christ; he does not go to my church, but, anyway, he is a Christian. That is how we are evangelizing, and thank God, now, almost everybody around here is Christian.

Subaltern Christians persevere on having hope for the future. Even when their fellow believers from the West and more privileged contexts do not support them or even join others in the oppression that they deal with. Christians in the Middle East, such as Christian Palestinians, are a minority in danger of becoming extinct due to the complicity of Evangelicals from around the globe. The immense financial and political support right-wing Evangelicals and the US government have given the Israeli occupation is well known (Posner, 2023; Salleh & Zakariya, 2012). As put by seventh-generation Christian Palestinian Dr. Abe B. W. Ata, "because of a... religious right misunderstanding of the Bible," a tragedy, to say the least, leaves a vulnerable group alone in their suffering. Ata continues,

"House Majority Leader Dick Armey (Rep., Texas) was even more forthright: *'I'm content to have Israel grab the entire West Bank ... I happen to believe that the Palestinians should leave.'*

There is a phrase for this—ethnic cleansing.

Silencing us from seeking your support and enlightening you about our suffering goes counter to what Jesus has mandated us to do...

So why do American Christians stand by while their leaders advocate the expulsion of fellow Christians? Could it be that they do not know that the Holy Land has been a home to Christians since, well... since Christ?

Do not think I am asking for special treatment for Christians. Ethnic cleansing is evil to whoever does it and to whomever it is done...

What we seek is support: material, moral, political, and spiritual. As Palestinians, we grieve for what we have lost, and few people have lost more than us (the Ashkenazi Jews are one). But grief can be assuaged by the fellowship of friends."¹⁵

Subaltern Christians have or are following a process of decolonization. They can be aware of the effects of colonization, and through their faith in Jesus, they are working actively to improve their realities and seek justice. The Red Road founded and led by Native Americans, celebrates Indigenous culture, educates about the historical and present challenges they have dealt with, and gives tools for self-sustainability to Natives. Providing "the tools for reconciliation and healing

¹⁵ Ata, A. W. (n.d.). *The Palestinian Christian: Betrayed, persecuted, sacrificed*. Religion Online. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-palestinian-christian-betrayed-persecuted-sacrificed/>

in Native communities throughout North America while clarifying the Christian message of Jesus."¹⁶

Subaltern Christians suffer and are neglected, but they are not silent. They not only speak, but they also shout. Despite the oppression that coloniality brings, they believe in Jesus as their redeemer and see themselves through the eyes of their redeemer. Siouxsan Robinson, president of the Red Road project, shares how her mother, a Canadian Residential School survivor¹⁷, came to believe in Jesus:

My mom and I were talking tonight, and she said, *"I believe in Jesus because he suffered like native people, and He was a very spiritual man. All the other stuff is man-made. He was killed by His own people but He was a good man and came back to life again. Then He let us know where He was going and that he will be coming back for us."*

He didn't meet my mama in a church... She was an atheist. He met her in nature, through the sign of an eagle, during a time when she was going to give her life back to Him.

Through this experience, the Creator gave my mama back her native identity that was stolen through the Indian Residential School.

¹⁶To know more: <https://theredroad.org/work/>

¹⁷ For a period of 150 years, First Nations children were forcibly removed from their families to be sent to Residential Schools. Up to 70% of these Schools were run by the Roman Catholic Church, "a systematic... attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples" (TRC). It was proved that the children were physically and sexually abused by the clergy, and many other died, leaving a generational trauma to which First Nations are still recovering from. On April 1st, 2022, Pope Francis apologized to a Canadian Indigenous delegation for the Catholic Church's role in the country's residential school system (BBC, 2022).

To this day, she still does not go to church. He meets her in her own home. She says, "*He is always with me.*"¹⁸

Paraphrasing Cannell, in the peripheral parts of what one may consider 'real Christianity' "We might instead come to see [Subaltern] Christianity not just as local 'resistance', or as peripheral parts of 'real Christianity', but as alternative Christianities deeply rooted in the highly unstable syntheses which Christian orthodoxies themselves represent" (Cannell, 2005, p. 352).

In conclusion, Subaltern Christianity is lived, developed, and reproduced by subaltern agents that express their faith in Jesus Christ through their Indigenous cosmovisions that are in *plurilogue* and accompaniment with Western Christianity. Subaltern Christians are living a process of *healing* from colonialism in *reconciliation* with their indigeneity. Through reading and interpreting the Bible in their native languages, they are following a process of decolonization that allows them to see themselves through the eyes of their Redeemer: with *dignity* and awareness of their *rights*. Subaltern Christians are conscious of their responsibility as gospel sharers and agents in their Creator's work, working actively to improve their contexts and help their neighbor, persevering courageously and hopefully, despite the frequent neglect and even oppression from fellow believers that reproduce a colonialist logic of dominion over them. Subaltern Christians often exist in contexts as a religious minority or a group at a political disadvantage, therefore, struggle to find spaces where they can be heard. Nevertheless, they resist and persevere in their faith and pursuit of justice.

¹⁸Siouxsan Robinson (2021, June 10). *My mama and I were talking tonight and she said "I believe in Jesus because he suffered like native people* [Image attached] [status update]. Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10223717040866308&set=pb.1601496587.-2207520000..&type=3>

As this is an interdisciplinary research that relies strongly in data obtained in fieldwork done with subaltern Christians, specifically, Indigenous peoples that convert to Protestantism. Therefore it was paramount to explore what the field Anthropology of Christianity, has to offer, that could be of value to better understand the people in the case study.

CHAPTER 3. ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONVERSION AND CHRISTIANITY

Introduction

Conversion is paradoxical. It is elusive. It is inclusive. It destroys, and it saves.

Conversion is sudden, and it is gradual. It is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans. Conversion is personal and communal, private and public. It is both passive and active. It is a retreat from the world. It is a resolution of conflict and an empowerment to go into the world and to confront, if not create, conflict.

Conversion is an event and a process. It is an ending and a beginning. It is final and open ended. Conversion leaves us devastated and transformed. (Rambo, 1993, p. 173)

The following section of the literature review focuses on the Anthropological aspect of my research, referring to the primary scholars and approaches to religious conversion that have been developed in this important branch of the social sciences. This, what I consider a theoretical vignette to the Anthropology of Conversion, shows that despite the differences in time and place where the field research happened, academic background, and religious affiliation of the scholars, there are multiple points of agreement in their works. For obvious reasons, I emphasized on Christian conversion. Starting from the discussion surrounding Christianity and modernity, then continuing with the types of conversion and debate around false conversions. This chapter, although it is part of the theoretical framework will interact with the case study by sharing some of the testimonios and stories of Indigenous peoples that respond to what scholars consider about conversion. Finally, after engaging with the perspectives of Anthropology of Conversion, I will introduce the case study of this dissertation elaborating on the type of Christianity that this research presents.

Christianity, Whiteness, and Modernity

Despite Christianity being present and practiced by multiethnic groups in almost every country around the world, it became "White" during colonialism (Jennings, 2010). Whiteness monopolizes truth and obscures specificity. Whiteness refers "not only to the socio-cultural differential of power and privilege that results from categories of race and ethnicity; it also stands as a marker for the privilege and power that acts to reinforce itself through hegemonic cultural practice that excludes all who are different" (Munyao & Tanui, 2021, p. 1, 2). As such, I have found when discussing the issue of Christian conversion among Indigenous people when their religious experience is labeled as not "real" Christianity. Researchers like Roblero Morales (2008), who studied Christians among the Indigenous Lacandones in Chiapas, miss seeing that being a Christian does not constitute destroying one's culture but rather a reinterpretation of it. He concludes, "I consider that evangelized people in Naha have peculiar characteristics that allow us to *question their true adoption to Christianity*, and we should, instead, consider that some re-signified Christian elements are incorporated into the Lacandon cosmovision and tradition" (p. 136, emphasis and translation mine).

The previous argument is common, as it has been a struggle to deal with Christianity in academia. For many years, Christianity was considered almost a taboo topic of study, not deserving of Anthropological treatment (Robins & Engelke, 2010, p. 629, 630). Christianity, especially for Anthropologists, is so "tediously familiar" that it was assumed that it does not need constantly renewed examination (Cannell, 2006, p. 3). Such familiarity is because Christianity is part of the Western cultural tradition that contributed to the modernist ideas on which Anthropology was founded (Hann, 2007, p. 384). Joel Robbins (2006) mentioned some of the efforts that have been made to track the role of theology in the formation of anthropological thought (Asad, 1993; Keane, 1997; Sahlin, 1996). Despite the claims of Sociology and

Anthropology as secular disciplines, they did not make an absolute break with theology. They were incorporating, for example, Augustinian (or ascetic) thinking within its theoretical apparatus (Cannell, 2006, p. 341). For Larsen (2016), the secular nature of Anthropology is a myth. In His book "The Slain God" he presents details on how key anthropologists (e.g. Edward Burnett Tylor, Mary Douglas, Victor, and Edith Turner) have contended with and contributed to the understanding of religion, emphasizing the significant influence of their personal Christian faith on their professional work. Larsen explains about the times that Anthropologists embracing openly the Christian faith were antagonized by their colleagues who forgot that "Anthropology makes you take seriously the human experience which is deeply interwoven with the spiritual realm" (Larsen, 2015). In other words, religion has always influenced the work of social scientists, whether we like it or not, want to believe it or not.

Christianity was decisive in constructing modern Western thinking (Cannell, 2006). Departing from Weber (1905), the "usefulness" of Christianity was assumed mainly as a precursor of secular modernity and the relation between Protestantism and Capitalism in the modern world. Some present arguments relate the high rates of Protestant conversion in Latin America as a sign of a stronger modernization in the last 40 years, including the (at least official) openness to freedom of religion (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 14, 15). Although one can agree to some extent, this argument alone oversimplifies Christianity, for "It may be that the history of modernity is inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity, but this does not mean that the history of modernity sufficiently explains the meaning of Christianity" (Cannell, 2006, p. 38). Works such as Vilaça (2009) enrich the study of this faith by telling of the *native* experience of Christianity among Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Showing "what native culture does to Christianity" via native categories and from native experience. The case study of this dissertation

may contribute to the area of the native experience of Christianity from the perspective of Mexican Indigenous who converted to Protestantism.

Decolonizing concepts: *Traditional Religions* and *World Religions*

When studying about religion, a common referent is the Sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). In his work, he emphasized the importance of religion in directing human behavior "The type of a religion, once stamped, has usually exerted a rather far-reaching influence upon the life-conduct of very heterogeneous strata" (Weber, 2009, p. 270). He is a relevant source in the anthropology of conversion to differentiate between *traditional religions* and *world religions*. In 'The Sociology of Religion, he proposes a formula that summarizes them:

The bureaucrat in Confucianism, the magician in Hinduism, the mendicant monk in Buddhism. 'In Islam, the warrior seeking to conquer the world; in Judaism, the wandering trader; and in Christianity, the itinerant journeyman' (Weber, 1965, p. 132, in Turner, 1993, p. 58).

As a formula, is a representation of Weber's reflections, influenced by his background and religious views (Swatos & Kivisto, 1991). Therefore, despite his analysis of value neutrality, he was judgmental, for instance, when referring to Islam as a "warrior religion" Turner elaborates that Weber did not pay sufficient attention to different traditions within Islam, particularly Sufism, a religious tradition in Islam that imperial ambitions had not driven (2016, p. 219, paraphrase mine). For Weber, *traditional religion* is interested in worldly concerns for the satisfaction of immediate material/physical satisfaction, such as food, health, long life, revenge/protection from enemies, marriage, and so on (Hefner, 1993, p. 8). *World religions*, in contrast, are distinguished by greater intellectual coherence and moral rigor. Weber argued that world religions had "superior rationality" as they formulate better responses to human life's

ethical, emotional, and intellectual challenges. They provide ready-made answers to the macrocosmos, which makes them very attractive. Thus, world religions are "the longest lasting of civilization primary institutions" (Hefner, 1993, p. 2-3). World religions are different from traditional beliefs because they have wildly succeeded and propagated despite the passing of time, persecution, social change, and transformation in culture and politics.

In differentiating between world religions and traditional religions, Weber, however, ignores the impact of colonialism. Traditional religions affected by colonialism were either intentionally targeted for destruction by colonizers or survived through fusion with the colonizers' religion, primarily Christianity. This led to syncretism, a blending of traditional and world religions which cases are present today. For instance, in the *La Montaña* region of Guerrero, Mexico, agricultural rites are performed at sacred sites dedicated to the mountain and rain deity. In these places, the people construct altars to Saint Mark, considered a dual deity, and also revere the Holy Cross, or cross of the hill, which has stronger pre-Hispanic associations. The orientation of these altars relative to the cardinal directions imparts specific meanings to the offerings (Villela F., 2018)

It is possible that Weber saw traditional religions with a sense of superiority, thus, he could not appreciate how traditional religions can be concerned beyond immediate satisfaction, as many of them believe in *transcendence*, the afterlife. For example, the *Xibalbá*, where the souls of the diseased traveled, according to the sacred Mayan book, the *Popol Vuh* (Sadurni, 2023). What would be of traditional religions if these had not been impacted by colonialism? Some more might have survived or evolved. I consider that some Indigenous Christians demonstrate what it means to believe in Christ through the perspective of nations affected by colonialism. This perspective is no longer shaped by the colonizers but by a decolonized interpretation that reappreciates their culture and heritage. As Solano explains, they see how God manifested

among them before the colonizers and recognize His presence in the stories shared by their elders a long time ago (Memoria Indigena, 2023).

Despite these necessary considerations of Weber's perspectives, there are still points in his work that are relevant to this research. For instance, Geertz (1973) agreed world religions "relocate the divisive solidarities of language, custom, and religion within a broader community and a higher truth" (Hefner, 1993, p. 34), which I consider is true. Villaca (1992) explains how, for the natives from the Amazonia, it was disruptive to see the white missionaries being compassionate, kind, and generous towards them. Christianity was associated with the death and loss that colonialism and the encounter with the Europeans brought. Yet, being presented once more, it challenged their beliefs of what an enemy is. They noticed that "The war club fights ended. Anger ended. They ate happily with God. All of them were Christians. There were no angry persons. Everyone was a Christian" (Xi Waram, OroEo, Negro Village River Village, 1992, conversation with Villaca, 2016, quote fragment selected by me). Among Aboriginal Australians, Christianity has brought together different clans, as being a Christian one can form new networks of classificatory kin through the church, thus cutting across actual kinship groupings and extending to off-Reserve areas, as Yarrabah Christians meet other Aborigines at fellowships, conferences, and meetings. It, thus, becomes a means of uniting Christian Aborigines nationally. (Swain & Rose, 1988, p. 261).

In other words, Christian conversion can expand the sense of community among Indigenous people, and even more, it can also, narrow down the divide they have with people from ethnicities or origins that brought them so much pain through colonialism and coloniality. During my field trip in Chiapas, in 2017, I was invited to join a report of activities meeting with a religious freedom advocacy NPO. There were various groups of Indigenous Protestants

survivors of religious persecution, domestic and foreign missionaries involved in religious freedom advocacy, and NPO workers gathered. Among the people present were also a couple of visitors from Canada. One of them, Paul, years before had known¹⁹ of the story of an Indigenous man, Lazaro, who had been in prison for three years under false charges, as punishment for stopping engaging in the Catholic festivities. Lazaro was present at the meeting with his family, and we were talking when Paul recognized him and came forward to talk to him, asking if I could translate for him. Paul rejoiced to see Lazaro out of jail and opened up in tears to share how Lazaro's story encouraged him a lot during a difficult time in his life when he was struggling with his faith. Lazaro was surprised, he did not know that such a difficult time in his life had impacted a person who lives so far away, who speaks a language he does not know. Lazaro and his family asked to pray for Paul and he accepted. Paul was twice as tall as Lazaro, he bowed down, and Lazaro's family surrounded him, praying in Tzotzil. Like this, two men, completely different in complexion, culture, and languages, who had never met before; embraced, wept, and spent some more time calling each other *hermano*, brother. This is an example of how Christianity can create a community without boundaries among fellow believers, but religious affiliation cannot stand alone for this to happen, willingness to see the 'other' as *hermano* is necessary.

Conversion Types

Conversion as an Event of a Radical Rupture

¹⁹ Christian NPOs, missionaries and other organizations have mail lists/prayer lists where they keep their sponsors or contributors updated about the activities they are doing and the people they are serving. Paul most likely knew about Lazaro and his family in one of these mails/reports.

At the individual level: "Christianity is a religion of radical discontinuity" (Cannell, 2006, p. 8, 14). When people convert to Christianity, it is said they are "newborns" because once they decide to believe in Jesus, "the old self has died, and... new life is kept with Christ in God" (Bible, Colossians 3:3). "Time following conversion is not just time after but beyond. Even though he has not yet entered eternal life, the convert is thought to be touched by the transcendent and enter into its economy" (Cannell, 2006, p. 38). It is a core of adopted beliefs that are lived out and expressed in a convert's routine.

Evidence of social break associated with Christian conversion is a *change* that is 'noted' by self, society, and analysts and the *transformation* of "models of the speaking and hearing person" (Bialecky, 2008, p. 1146). For Harding, conversion in Christians implies the production of good speech (Harding, 2001, cited in Bialecky, 2008, p. 1146), which is also supported in the Bible "For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Matthew 12:34, NIV).

At the community level: Conversion and faith in the Protestant tradition are "*radically interiorized states*" (Gow, 2006). As "Conversion is being born again, coming to experience salvation as an exclusively personal transformation in relation to the world and to God" (Gow, 2006, p. 218). Yet, conversion is not just an *individual* interiorized act but a *collective* act, with practical implications in daily life and the way it relates to another (Gow, 2006, p. 219, emphasis mine). The complexity of conversion (not only Christian conversion) is that it includes joining a group for "No one can become a Christian in complete isolation" (McCormack, in Robbins, 2006, p. 25).

For Robbins (2007), as well, conversion is a (not evolving) process of radical change. It is an event that *ruptures* into a person's life that marks a very clear before and after. The moment of conversion is often emphasized with the ritual of baptism. The *collective* phenomenon of

conversion happens when entire groups of people have converted to Christianity. In this case, they share their memories as a community that bears a collective history (Robbins, 2007, p. 11).

Conversion is a matter of belief and social structure of faith and affiliation. It "always involves a commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new or reconceptualized social identity" (Hefner, 1993, p. 17). Conversion falls on people's sense of community and self-worth, highlighting the problem of dignity and self-identification in this unstable world in which we live. Referring to people's affectations on their identity and cosmological and moral assumptions, Barker (1993) talks about conversion in phases: inward and outward. *Inward*, towards the microcosm of the local community. Rooted in cosmological notions and moral orientations, and *outward*, towards the multiple people's engagement in the macrocosmos, dealing with bureaucracies, rules, and roles (p. 225).

Conversion as Continuity

Other scholars consider conversion as a *process* rather than an isolated event one could identify, it comes in *relationality*, in connection with others, in which "conversion takes place over time, interacts with institutional religious, network, and cultural contexts, and does not necessarily proceed in a linear or chronological fashion" (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 7). Here, conversion can come in stages:

First stage conversion. It is "one in which utilitarian concerns eventually give way to intellectualist ones as people come to understand the religion they are converting to" (Robbins, 2004, p. 87). This first stage of conversion happens in the encounter between what Rambo (1993) calls the *advocate* (such as a missionary) and the (potential) *convert*. However, even in cases where the person converts, anthropological findings show that most target populations reject new religious options. Hence, what makes any voluntary conversion process possible for

this first stage of conversion to happen is a (very) complex confluence of the "right" potential convert, under proper circumstances, at the right time, and with the proper advocate and religious option that he offers (Rambo, 1993, p. 87).

Second stage conversion. Also called a *revival* in which "the real work of adoption takes place as people grasp a new set of cultural understandings in its own terms" (Robbins, 2004, p. 88).

In this stage, in the case of Christianity, what has been considered outpourings of the Holy Spirit happen, manifested in miraculous healing, prophesy, speaking in tongues, visions, and others (Robbins, 2004, p. 122). Here, converts become more independent from the missionaries, pastors, and other religious leaders who shared with them in the first stage because now they have understood/experienced that they can talk to God directly. These, however, cause them to respect the religious leaders more because they go to them to ask for an explanation about the experiences they are having, explanations and experiences that their primal religion cannot give answers to. The firsthand, often considered unfruitful, spread of Christian knowledge in the first conversion stage is crucial for the *revival* to happen.

Thinking about conversion as a process, one can relate to Richardson's arguments about *conversion careers*, suggesting that conversion can be multiple events in a person's life (cited in Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 42). This means that the person may convert to different religions at different points in his life, depending on the difficulties he faces. One may think that, in these cases, apostasy and reconversion can occur all in the same person's life. I learned about these cases by interviewing Indigenous Muslims in Chiapas, Mexico, in 2017. Most of them were raised in Evangelical families. However, their personal disappointment with their family members and the lack of answers to their spiritual growth made them turn to other options remaining critical of religion, as the *testimonio* that follows reflects:

Once I met a person in San Cristóbal... to whom I did a little job, because I'm a carpenter. When he found out my religion, he started throwing garbage at me. He even asked me why it was possible that I didn't believe in the Seventh Day, when Jesus and God themselves put a lot of emphasis on keeping Saturday. He told me he was sure that I would be filled with plagues because I wasn't a believer. Then I told him: Easy, you already threw garbage at me, right? Let me defend myself ... First of all, you do not know if God created the heavens and the earth in six days, like our days, because for God there is no special day. I am not really interested in your God because your God is very bad. If your God is how you say it is, I don't want your God, I prefer mine because it's more merciful than yours. Why? Because no matter how many mistakes I make, he always forgives me, while your God isn't like that. We know this as legalism. So then, I show him what's written in the First Letter of the Apostle John: God is love. Consequently, if God is love and you tell me that your God will punish me because he is cruel, I don't accept it. Then he began to calm down. (Ismael, Community Ahmadía, personal communication, 2015, San Cristobal, Chiapas)

Ismael demonstrates the process in which one's various experiences with different religions and conversions can remain part of the individual and interact at different moments. Thus, in this *testimonio*, Ismael remembers a Bible verse from his personal experience with Christianity and uses it to confront a legalist interpretation of the Scriptures that were being used to attack his Muslim ways of living. Christianity will always be part of Ismael without making him any less Muslim. He can evaluate what part of the Christian faith still echoes with his new religion and treasure it, thus as a Muslim he agrees with Apostle John (1 John 4:7-21): "God is love". In that regard, Buckser and Glazier (2003) argue, like Richardson, that converts often accept aspects of more than one religion, church, or sect rather than making a clean rupture from one religion for absolute commitment to another (Corr, 2007, p. 175). Corr supports this in her research about Indigenous people in Ecuador who converted to native spiritual religions "The

process is one of continuous transformation rather than a sudden and definite break from an old religion" (2007, p. 175).

Categorizing Conversion as a Process

Sahay (1990), studying the Uraon tribe of Christian converts in Chotanagpur, India, provided a set of categories that are useful when thinking about conversion as a process: cultural oscillation, scrutinization, combination, indigenization, and retroversion. I used these because I considered them to give a valuable explanation of conversion as a process and its internal complexity; besides, it echoed some arguments used by other authors I mentioned above.

1. Oscillation. Here, the converts are mostly nominal, and their knowledge of Christianity is limited. Hence, their behavior fluctuates a lot between Christian and traditional practices, which they go through in times of trouble such as sickness.

2. Scrutinization. Converts are more aware of how traditional beliefs conflict with Christian beliefs. With a stronger Christian identity, they do things that can differentiate them as Christians, and they eliminate from their quotidian lives the religious elements of their primal religion. In this state, converts will also test the efficacy or truthfulness of formerly unquestioned practices of their primal religion in the face of Christian beliefs. On this account, Robbins (2004) tells the story of the Christian converts in Papua New Guinea, who tested the existence of the power of the ancestors they used to worship: "*And if we plant this taro and it bears fruit, we can watch [it grow] until we realize that this devil of ours was a lie*" (Robbins, 2004, p. 149). They wanted to test if there was power in the bones of their ancestors; the taro plant would not grow, at least they worshiped their ancestor's bones. They did not worship the bones, yet, the taro grew so much that they determined that the Christian God was the only true God. This type of test may not make sense to me as an outsider, but it makes sense to them, the converts, and that is what

matters; it tells of the particular religious experience that talks to each person in their context.

Alternatively, as I heard in conversation with Indigenous Christians in the NAIITS symposium,

"God always finds a way to make himself clear to us."

3. *Combination*. It is when converts mix various elements of Christianity with local traditions, such as dancing. In my research in Mexico with Indigenous Protestants, I saw that the dancing that was formerly used in traditionalist rituals to worship a Catholic saint switched to worship Jesus alone, instead.

4. *Indigenization*. Christian traditions were incorporated into the local way of doing things. Here occurs fusion and replacement of practices. One could consider Bible translation as a way to Indigenize Christianity. As languages encompass the culture, the work of the missionaries has been to transform the Christian narratives of the locals, with the help and constant evaluation of the local native speakers, in a way that they can understand and relate to. Various versions of the New Testament in Indigenous languages in Mexico have translated the message of Jesus, "the *bread* of life," with "the *tortilla* of life". Indigenous people from these regions do not eat bread, nor is it significant. Tortilla is the cultural equivalent of bread in the context in which the Bible was originally written.

5. *Retroversion*. After the elimination of (some) traditional practices, converts, more mature in their Christian faith, reevaluate the former traditional practices. Then, *decide* to readopt some of them as they assess they do not conflict with Christianity (in Rambo²⁰, 1993, p. 99-101, emphasis mine).

Conversion as an Imposition. Missionary Colonialism.

²⁰For Lewis R. Rambo (1993), conversion is also seen as a process that comes in *stages* which are: Context-Crisis-Quest-Encounter-Interaction-Commitment-Consequences

Vast research has shown that Christianity has often been used as a tool of Colonization and an imposed religion. In the case of Latin America, during the fifteenth and eighteen centuries, Indigenous people were forced to convert or die otherwise (Olmos, 2002). The idea of conversion as an imposition has been seen as well in the increasing numbers of people converting to Protestantism in Latin America, a kind of colonization of ideology and thinking. "This perspective argued that Protestant [American] missionaries represented an invading force sent from the North [the United States] to demobilize those who might otherwise embrace liberation theology" (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 16). Nevertheless, despite the various ways that one could document these arguments, they should be questioned "for ignoring the popular and Indigenous nature of the movement, for denying the agency of individual converts, and for questioning the validity of individuals' religious experiences. The fact that Latin Americans now run most of Latin America's Protestant churches adds empirical evidence to these critiques" (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 16). Indigenous groups' non-steady religious ideology is constantly adapting to changes in their world in all factors: religious, social, political, and economic (Rambo, 1993). Hence, the transformation of the religious ideology of Indigenous people can happen even without the influence or imposition of foreign messages (Rambo, 1993, p. 93). The explanation used for Latin America can apply to other case studies in different contexts, such as the one by Robbins (2004) studying the Christian converts in Papua New Guinea. Bronislaw Malinowski, considered one of the most influential Anthropologists of the twentieth century (Holdsworth, 2019), is one of many scholars who thought that Christian missionaries were *corrupting* Indigenous culture with their message. In this regard, Whitehouse (2006) stated that "What Malinowski never seriously considered was that, Trobrianders were making Christianity part of their culture" (p. 297). Just as Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas live

their faith in Jesus in Indigenous ways of life. On the matter, an Indigenous scholar from the Guna Dule nation, Solano, tells of her personal experience as a Christian who grew up doing evangelizing work with her parents.

We sang hymns in the Guna language, and the teaching was bilingual; it was a community church in which, after the worship service was over, we prepared food to share with each other. We also had time to talk and *play*. (2015, p. 23-24, emphasis mine).

Academic generalizations about missions ignore essential dynamics of this reality: converted natives/ Indigenous people are those spreading Christianity, and what initially were 'foreign' missions developed into nationally based missions (Whitehouse, 2006, p. 297). Jacorzynski (2017), studying the history of the religious conversion in the community of Chibtik in Chenalhó, Chiapas, explains how Indigenous people brought the gospel to their community, starting to share it with their families and friends:

When Victorio returned to Chibtik, he started to gather together with his siblings. He would preach and sing along to his wife the hymn that he learned in the missionary's house. This time, he could convert Sebastián, Agustín, Manuel, y Miguel. Miguel studied elementary school in Xunuk with Victorio from the Xupun-Hernández lineage. Two of the Pasinsa siblings, Victorio and Miguel, preached *sk'op Dios* (God's word) to the Xupun. It was a success. Victorio Xupun *la xch'unsk'op Dios* (obeyed God's word) to share it with his siblings [and more people converted]" (Jacorzynski, 2017, English translation mine)

From a symbolic interactionist point of view, conversion is seen as a change in individuals' conceptions of the inward and outward. About themselves, the world, and God, which ultimately

becomes interpreted in the terms provided by the new religion. Their new beliefs change the individual's identity, making converts consider themselves different (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 39). Apiao converts in Chile, for example, adopted a peculiar religious language that vastly differed from the standard Apiao way of speaking (Bacchiddu, 2009, p. 57). Among evangelicals in Mexico, especially in Indigenous communities, I was always addressed as *hermana* without even inquiring about my religious affiliation for "God brought you here. So even though we just met you, we feel we met from long ago". This change of worldview or personal identity is what differentiates conversion from group recruiting, as this is generally limited to an outward activity with the group, not necessarily an internal change in the person.

Different Approaches to Explain Conversion

Utilitarian Approach

People convert for the mere satisfaction of material needs and the expression "rice Christians" comes from it. It tells of people's initial drive when they become interested in Christianity. In this regard, for Andrew Chesnut, conversion is a *pragmatic* decision. In his work, people became interested in Pentecostalism after they had exhausted other potential healthcare options and had reached the crisis stage of some form of poverty-related illness, whether in the physical, psychological, or social (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 17). In the utilitarian approach, converts may adapt to a new religion in return for protection (from the Colonialist or fleeing political or religious persecution), to get the gifts that missionaries offer them, or for an improvement in their political and social status (Pollock, 1993; Hefner, 1993). Burdick (1993) tells of the way, for example, people in Brazil converted to Protestantism because they noticed that the members of the Assembly of God could make good spouses as they have a reputation of not being alcoholics, abusive or sexually promiscuous (p. 137).

Intellectualist Approach

Argues that the new or secondary religions provided an answer to the problem of *meaning* in an area that the primal religion could not answer (Laitin, 1986, p. 36). "Conversion allows people to comprehend and live meaningfully in a changed world" (Robbins, 2004, p. 86). Daniel Míguez argued that what motivates people to convert is "defined by people's needs to find answers to transcendental questions and what they feel are appropriate ways to relate to sacred beings and forces" (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 17). For Corr, Indigenous people in Ecuador, whom traditional Catholicism has disillusioned, find spiritual fulfillment in other religious options. People move from one religion to another, aiming to find their "true identity" (2007, p. 191).

I consider that both utilitarian and intellectualist approaches should not be considered separate from each other. A person may initially convert for utilitarian reasons and then turn to a more intellectual commitment or desire for existential fulfillment. Reasons for a person to believe and keep believing can be both intellectual and utilitarian. Burdick (1993, p. 224) shared how gender and group dynamics change in Pentecostal churches. Women should be given greater support in the community to deal with their concerns and encouraged to be accountable to God first, before husbands. Women feel empowered in Pentecostal churches and do not submit to the man's authority if what he does contradicts Bible principles. Hence, they possess greater authority within their households. Protestant Indigenous women in Chiapas shared with me as well the way how seeing their violent husbands change into kind persons when they believed in Jesus encouraged them to believe as well, for "only God could have made my husband stop drinking, and be angry all the time" (personal communication, 2017).

While studying conversions, academics, people in general, I believe, have found difficulties defining or understanding what it means to be a Christian. As in conversions, the self-identity of the individual changes but not the system in which they live; differentiating between "culture" and "religion" means identifying what can be accepted from the culture without conflicting with the Christian doctrine (Cannell, 2006, p. 25, 26). Cannell states, "Christian thinking has always carried other selves within it" (2006, p. 26). The Bible was originally written as letters to diverse groups of peoples in various languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and with each language used, comes a whole cultural filter. Ross (2020) specifies that the Apostles did not find it problematic to incorporate Greek language and concepts (i.e. *logos*) in their letters to elucidate Jesus's teachings, which were originally delivered in Aramaic. If the gospels engage with various cultures to elaborate the teaching of Jesus, how is it that social sciences often struggle in determining what is Christian and what is not? "how far can we go without ceasing to become a Christian" (Cannell, 2006, p. 26) has always been the debate in missionizing churches. Yet, "How does one determine which components of a syncretism are "original" to a tradition and which are "foreign"? Whose voices receive priority in such judgments? How does a tradition retain continuity across its many inevitable syncretisms?" (Ross, 2020, p. 2). The Bible acknowledges and even celebrates diversity, calling people from every tribe and nation to worship The Lamb (Bible, Revelation 7:9). Keller (2006) in her work about an Adventist church in Madagascar, encourages one to recognize the lack of knowledge on the Christian experience and to avoid treating Christianity as a secondary phenomenon of underlying political or economic change. Overall, as social scientists studying Christian conversion we shall remain soft to re-learn what it means to be a Christian from the lenses and experiences of the nations and

cultures we interact with. To drop any ideal of finding “pure”, “uncontaminated”, “real” Christianity, for a lot of misconception with a heavy dose of coloniality come in this pursuit.

"False" Conversions and Scientific Skepticism

Social scientists have (attempted) to classify or identify conversions based on noticing a "real change" in the converts. For example, say that conversions might be done for 'pragmatic' reasons, to get money or status, or classify them as a *cliche* of Christian speech, referring to religious language or "formulas" that do not necessarily indicate an inner change in a person. The challenge for academics is when they study groups of Christian converts in situations of *mixed belief* (Robbins, 2007, p. 15). It is hard to identify what in their behavior is part of the 'old' way and what is 'new'. Hence, what Robbins proposes is to see Christians as people who try to achieve salvation in Christian ways, recognizing that this does not mean that "everything" they do has Christian salvation as their goal. Robbins is trying to encourage Anthropologists to avoid limiting their study by thinking a conversion is false since not all the person does is "Christian" (Robbins, 2007, p. 15). Putting it in another way, recognize there is a discontinuity in continuity. 'New' ways happen in the 'old' ways of the culture in which converts still live.

For other scholars, "real" conversions can be identified by noticing a "radical rupture," deep and irrevocable in the life of a person (Assouline, as cited in Luria, 1996, p. 24). In this struggle to identify true from false conversions, Steigenga and Cleary (2007, p. 27) proposed the term "*seekers*" referring to those whose commitment to Christianity is superficial as they may nominally affiliate with different religious groups over time. This concern to find ways to probe one's real conversion or commitment to Christianity has been among believers since its origins. Yet, the Bible warns of the absurdity of the pursuit to measure faith, even in apparent "evident"

manifestations of commitment: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and, in your name, perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew, 7: 21-23, NIV).

Nevertheless, for Luria (1996), one should consider the power of discourse that defined how converts were reported and understood (p. 39). Pollock (1996), despite his clear pessimistic position regarding (modern) Christian missions in the Amazonia, still considers there have been insufficient studies of Christian conversion about these because "While missionaries have probably exaggerated their success in converting, anthropologists studying Indigenous groups, have usually ignored the signs of conversion that would challenge or compromise the *exotic* images that finally appear in our accounts" (Pollock, 1996, p. 191, emphasis mine). Still, what if this exoticism, or better say, uniqueness among Indigenous people, can persist even when they convert to Christianity? Was not Christianity born in the Middle East and then, fueled by persecution, disseminated to believers across Europe and the world? When reading the gospels, there were already converts and churches among Romans and Greeks. One cannot expect their way of living Christianity to stop reflecting their culture, language, and food habits.

In the same way, Indigenous Christians can and are living their newly adopted faith through their cultural perspective; thus, while discerning the gospel, they find how Christian practices echo better with their Indigenous experience. As put by Samuel Escobar, "While [Western/urban] Evangelicals had a church life more rational and 'brainy', Indigenous churches were more attracted to prayer, miracles, and spiritual deliverance, which explains the explosive growth of Pentecostalism among Indigenous peoples." (Escobar, as cited in Fuller Theological

Seminary, n.d., p. 12, English translation mine). The openness to appreciate and respect the way Indigenous people make Christianity part of their reality in their ways has been an opportunity for learning and growth in social sciences. Also, in increasing numbers, foreign missionaries, who once were capable of reviewing their methods and focus of teaching, managed to walk and minister *alongside* these new churches, avoiding unfruitful quarrels that could distract them from the true purpose of their mission (Escobar, as cited in Fuller Theological Seminary, n.d., p. 12)

Kinds of Christianity

There are various kinds of Christianity; it is important to tell "what kind" one means when doing research (Cannell, 2005, p. 352; Robbins, 2007). Burdick (1993) compares the relevance of individuality reflected in how Protestant converts see authority figures. Because they consider themselves accountable to God first, they will oppose the government or husbands (in the case of women) when they do not follow "God's ways". In contrast, Catholics think in more conciliatory terms (Burdick, 1993, p. 218, as cited in Bialecki, 2008). Both Protestants and Catholics are Christians, but the 'type' of Christianity they follow alters their social relationships in different ways. "And as a general theoretical matter, it is fair to say that if the anthropology of Christianity is to flourish, it will have to attend to the cultural content of all kinds of Christianity" (Robbins, 2004, p. 326). The ethnography of Christianity has only begun to be undertaken, and many forms of Christianity have yet to be fully addressed (Bialecki, 2008, p. 1152).

Nevertheless, identifying the type of Christianity goes beyond the mention of the Christian tradition one is referring to. There are general aspects that could describe Catholicism and Protestantism, yet, even within each tradition, there are specifics that can make a case unique, and one should avoid generalizations that oversimplify the religious experience,

particularly when studying cases that involve delicate matters as religious persecution. Such as the case study in this dissertation.

Although, in the Mexican history, Protestantism has worked closely with progressive and liberal ideals, whilst Catholicism has tended to sympathize with more conservative national projects and political movements, there have been exceptions (see Chapter 4). P. Joel who I had the chance to interview in 2015, believes in the respect of individual religious experiences that may call a person to convert to Protestantism in Indigenous communities. He talks to his parishioners in Chiapas to reassure them that Protestants are not renouncing their faith in God, for when one truly knows God, one never loses Him, regardless of the tradition they choose to follow (*personal communication*, 2015). Furthermore, Pope Francis comes from an ecumenical and interreligious background (Cordova, 2015). He has been advocating for the legalization of same-sex marriages, accepting to baptize children whose parents have divorced, asking for forgiveness from Protestants for what Catholics have done to them, and sharing Catholic churches with non-Catholic Christians for them to worship in the same space (Olivié, 2022). Admirable decisions that have raised concern among many Catholics (De Chirico, 2016). Then, when this dissertation talks mostly negatively about Catholic Traditionalists in the case study, it does it based on the Mexican experience, particularly the main experience lived in Indigenous communities and in Chiapas. As expressed in the following testimonio from an Indigenous man who converted to Protestantism who explained what bothered the Catholic religious majority to the point to expel him and all other Protestants from the community:

It was because they didn't want to have another church besides the Catholic Church. They want people to be united in that church with all its traditions. They all stare at us because we don't do those things anymore. We no longer believe. I rather said we can no longer do that. In 2012, we convinced three more families [to believe in Jesus]. With this, they realized

that others are being convinced to stop being Catholics little by little. They wanted to force the new converts to return to the Catholic Church, but like us, the three families didn't return either. They are convinced, by faith, that only God can help us. Since that year they are determined to stop the Evangelical Church from growing.

(Jose, 2017, San Cristobal, personal communication)

True is that there are Catholics, authorities and regular flocks, that show solidarity with the suffering of Protestants and do not support religious intolerance, yet, their actions have been to so little degree or with such lukewarmness that the violent actions of the Catholic majority have caused the matter that dissertation addresses. This dissertation aims to contribute to the field of Anthropology of Conversion by presenting a kind of Christianity that, although born from the Protestant Evangelical tradition, lived among Indigenous People in Los Altos, Chiapas, finds a unique way of being expressed.

Religious Conversion in Mexico and the Type of Christian Converts this Dissertation Presents.

In 1990, Pope Juan Pablo II found himself again in front of many Mexican people who welcomed him with tears of joy and devotion in the *Basilica de Guadalupe*, the most visited Catholic temple in the Americas. Here, the Pope's words were "*México sabe bailar... sabe rezar... sabe gritar... México siempre fiel*"²¹ [Mexico knows how to dance... pray... shout... Mexico, always faithful]. Mexico has the second largest Catholic population in the world (Liu, 2013). However, for the last few decades, there has been a significant reduction in the number of Catholics while the percentage of Protestants has been increasing (INEGI, 2021). Overall, according to the Pew Research Center, 44% of Protestants in Mexico were raised as Catholics

²¹ Televisa (Ed.). (2010, March 14). "*México, Siempre Fiel*": Juan Pablo II (1990). YouTube. Retrieved July 28, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR-wADxd20M>

(Wormald, 2014). What is the reason of this shift? For the Anthropologist of Religion, Elio Masferrer, this is because Catholicism has lost "eficacia simbolica" (symbolic efficacy), which means the parishioners no longer see this religious proposal as able to transform reality (El Universal TV, 2018). Despite Catholics and Protestants being two kinds of Christianity, the rivalries and various levels of hostilities have been manifested throughout History and considered *sectarian conflict*. It has been long and widespread, such as the three decades (some would say still ongoing) of "The Troubles" in North Ireland (Wallenfeldt, 2020). It is also manifested in smaller regions, like Chamula, Chiapas, where the violence started in the 1970s towards the Indigenous Protestant minority and was so brutal that it inspired the movie "Chamula, Tierra de Sangre" in 1999. A survivor of this historical events is Pascuala, or *Paxcu*, she is an elder and a fervent evangelist. Paxcu runs a tortilleria in *Betania*²², a town close to San Cristobal that was founded by the hundreds of Indigenous Protestants Chamula who were displaced. Almost every Protestant from Chiapas has heard about *Paxcu*, and know where she lives. She is a hard working woman, with a lucid mind and elaborate speech. When we paid her a visit, she talked about the day she was almost killed. She was 20 years old:

They [the people who found her wounded] took me to the Public Ministry [Prosecution authority], where they started questioning me. Then they started talking about a lot of things. That's how the day went by until four in the afternoon. After that, they took me to the hospital. I couldn't take it anymore. I was hurting so much that I was complaining and crying. When they left me in the hospital, they gave me a bath, because the blood wouldn't come off, it was dry. I was naked [she was sleeping without clothes] when they shot me. I

²² Betania, or Bethany, means "house of fruits" or "house of affliction". In the Bible it was the place where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1, 41–44), it was the home of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3–10).

remember that my hair was all stiff because the blood had ran all over my body. Then they took me to a bed, where I felt that I wasn't going to be saved. I felt death. Later on, we started reading the Bible, where it says that God will never leave us alone. I understood that God will be there forever. I didn't know that at the time, because I had totally lost faith when I was shot. However, I know that God didn't leave me alone, because I am still here today. (Paxcu, Betania, personal communication, 2017)

Rambo's model of religious conversion (1993) describes the process as a series of interconnected stages. It begins with *context*, where an individual's cultural, social, and personal background establishes the foundation of their faith. A *crisis* then disrupts their existing beliefs, prompting a quest for new meaning. Here, the individual encounters a new religious or ideological system, leading to *interaction*, where they engage with the new beliefs and community, evaluating its relevance and appeal. If satisfied, they make a *commitment* to convert, blending the new beliefs into their identity. Finally, *consequences* follow, involving changes in behavior, relationships, and worldview as the new beliefs are fully adopted. Rambo's model emphasizes the conversion process as complex and multifaceted, shaped by various personal and contextual factors. Yet, many stories of conversion, particularly those that involve people who endured religious persecution, may feel out of place or even insensitive when categorized, so we have to be careful. In Paxcu's experience of conversion, there was a *context*: she heard the gospel from Miguel Caxlan, a prominent Indigenous evangelist who preached in Tzotzil and brought many to salvation before being tortured and ultimately martyred (Martinez Garcia, 2008). For Paxcu, Miguel Caxlan was different from other Protestant preachers because "he was like us, he spoke Tzotzil... he understood us." The following stages, such as *crisis*, were numerous, not just a single stage that was overcome at once. Paxcu's brother, uncles, and aunties were furious to

know she had become an Evangelical. As for *interaction*, it was painful and scary for *Paxcu* to evaluate her new faith in light of her reality, as she dealt with various layers of subalternity: she was a woman, poor, Indigenous, and Protestant (Protestante Digital, 2009). I would say that often a convert believes and commits at deeper levels after experiencing various *crises* in which they test and experience God's faithfulness and feel reassured of having made the right choice, despite other disadvantages or, in *Paxcu's* case, and many other Indigenous Protestants, despite experiencing the severe consequences of converting. Until now, the religious intolerance in Chiapas, predominantly against the (still growing numbers of) Protestants, is the highest at a national level.

Conversion versus "Tradition anxiety."

"Contemporary activities and additions to basic beliefs are evaluated in terms of historical origins since these origins are held to be *pure* and *uncontaminated* by later developments. It is for this reason that origins become a forum of ideological conflict. Comparisons between contemporary practice and tradition can lead either to the legitimization of the cultural status quo or to reformation in terms of pristine beliefs."

Turner, 1993, p. 64, emphasis mine.

Chiapas is where two kinds of Christianity collide as the fervor for sustaining the "traditional" local practices lived through Catholicism finds resistance for continuity among Protestant converts. They stop participating in celebrating the *santo patrono* (the Catholic saint) of the community in the *fiestas patronales*, and they no longer join them in drinking alcohol. In Mexico, Catholicism is paired with *tradition* (Monsiváis, 2002). In the issue of religious intolerance, *fiestas patronales* are considered part of a tradition that must be protected, and

Protestant conversion, a reason for concern, to say the least, must be stopped (CNDH, 2002). Regretfully, religious intolerance towards Protestants, especially in Indigenous communities, tends to be played down. As Mario Ruiz, a representative of a Catholic NPO, candidly told me, Catholics have a right to react the way they do because they feel offended when people knock at their door to talk to them about other religions and also because Protestants make “very noisy parties”. These statements do not acknowledge that Catholic festivities are also noisy, *fiestas patronales* affect the traffic for everyone, and their vivid expressions make them impossible to ignore. Protestant evangelization could be ignored by not opening the door. At the same time, Catholic religious expressions are so prominent that we have entire national holidays to make room to celebrate them, regardless of our religious affiliation. I mention this not to suggest that one religious manifestation is better than the other; religious freedom is a human right. Instead, I invite everyone, but even more scholars doing research on religion in Mexico, to recognize that,

"several centuries of colonial exchange have seen Indigenous peoples identities and ways doing politics become entangled with those of colonisers, especially as these are defined by states and the modern states system. These phenomena precisely demonstrate engagement across difference, and thus the possibility of traffic across very different ways of practicing and conceptualising political ordering and inter-polity relations." (Brigg et al., 2022, p. 902).

Could we believe then that Protestantism can work across the Catholic ways of living?

What are the origins of this (Catholic) tradition, and who regulates how it is deployed? Jagessar (2022) points to how the decolonizing work has focused more on diversifying discourses without a deep commitment to understanding what decolonizing demands to the communities and people. What is the cost of their liberation struggle? Are we willing to engage in their struggle? Let us

remember that "tradition is not immune to elite capture" (p. 32). "*Tradition anxiety* is there in liturgical silence, interest convergence, and resource capture to regulate narrow understandings of renewal. The roots are structural and systemic" (Jagessar, 2022, p. 31, emphasis mine).

Among the people I interviewed, conversion is shown as a *process* (see chapter 5). It happened gradually, in interaction with other converts, miraculous personal experiences, and answered prayers that built up in them a faith strong enough to be willing to stand against the potential known opposition in their cultural context. Some of these conversions happened initially for *utilitarian* reasons (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007), with people converting to meet their needs, such as those who wanted to heal. Although they remained in the faith despite experiencing religious intolerance, after getting an answer to the problem of *meaning* (Laitin, 1986, p. 36) that, the Catholic tradition could not answer.

It was interesting to discover that the most common reasons for conversion were *intellectual* (Corr, 2007; Robbins, 2004; Steigenga & Cleary, 2007). Indigenous people converted because they wanted relief from their emotional suffering. Some women, while they were experiencing domestic violence, believed that Jesus comforted them and reassured them of their worth. Some men decided to convert because they were dealing with alcoholism and constant anger, and they were disappointed at trying to overcome it without success; they became Christians, acknowledging they *needed* God's help to be "free". Other people's testimonies, particularly those who witnessed a drastic change in family members after believing in Christ, tell of what is considered a *rupture* (Cannell, 2006; Harding, 2008; Gow, 2006). A sudden radical difference in the character and manners of the person that they attribute to God's intervention. More details

about these endogenous reasons for conversion are given in chapter five. These have been poorly explored (Farfán, 2005, p. 50), yet, fascinating.

Conclusions

Christianity did not receive enough attention from social sciences until recent decades due to its relevance being considered mainly in relation to modernity and Capitalism (Weber, 1905). Overall, social sciences have tended to deny the influence that religion and religious affiliation in social scientists affect their work (Larsen, 2016), and the development of entire disciplines such as Sociology and Anthropology who did not make an absolute break with Theology. Authors such as Cannell and Robbins proposed to study Christianity beyond its connection with modernity, considering it as a religion that transforms people's lives and identity and is also reshaped in different *kinds* of Christianity lived in new ways from the groups of converts from different backgrounds and cultures. Furthermore, the study of Christianity has been expanding beyond its traditionally narrow view, which often analyzed Christian expressions in non-Western or Indigenous contexts as a sign of corruption (i.e. Malinoski, in Whitehouse, 2006). At times, with a sense of apparent superiority (e.g. Weber). Perspectives that have frequently led social scientists on unfruitful and problematic quests to define Christianity, often concluding that certain expressions are not “real Christianity” because they do not align with their preconceived notions of what this faith should be (e.g. Roblero, 2008).

Some scholars consider Christian conversion as an event of radical *rupture* between the old and the new life in relation to God and the world or community (Cannell, 2006; Harding, 2008; Gow, 2006). In which a transformation in a person is evident, beyond an inner belief, it has practical implications, inward and outwardly (Barker, 1993). It goes towards the moral orientations of the individual and the engagement with the macrocosmos, rules, and societal

roles. For other scholars, conversion is considered a *process* of continual transformation (Corr, 2007; Rambo, 1993; Robbins, 2004; Steigenga & Cleary, 2007). A process that comes in *stages* in which the convert experiences a greater maturity of his faith and comprehension of the Bible message. Nevertheless, when studying conversion, academics have to be careful to be sensitive and open to validate the converts experience, using the models of explaining conversion as a map, but not as a mold. As conversion is not an experience that happens in linear, orderly way, it is rather complex, scary and at times, painful, such as when believers experience religious persecution. A believer can make a change of *conversion careers*, cases where apostasy and reconversion may occur as the person is *seeking* the religion or the aspects of a religion that satisfy different needs or areas of his life (Richardson, as cited in Steigenga & Cleary, 2007) and often expressing one's religious choice demonstrating interaction with more than one faith (personal communication, 2015).

Sahay (1990) used categories to help one identify the conversion process. From *oscillation* where converts fluctuate between their primary to their secondary religion to *retroversion*, where a greater spiritual maturity allows converts to reevaluate their culture with Biblical principles and live Christianity with greater independence from the people they first heard the gospel. The historical relation between Christianity and Colonialism has made Anthropologists approach Christianity and modern Christian missions with mistrust and negative prejudice. Yet, this has been changing to recognize the agency of individual converts and the constant adaptation of Indigenous peoples to the world around them; as religious ideology transforms with or without foreign influence (Robbins, 2004; Steigenga & Cleary, 2007). Hence, even initially, foreign missions could develop into national-based religious movements led by locals (Whitehouse, 2006).

Regarding believing in the truthfulness of conversion, anthropologists have attempted to identify real from false conversions based on the changes in a person and a differentiation between the old and the new. Nevertheless, it has been proposed by some scholars (Robbins, 2007) to consider the discontinuity in a person's life when conversion happens, occurring, however, in a continuous cultural context. The converts change, but the world around them does not. Therefore, Christian ways can happen in non-Christian ways without diminishing the person's new belief. Also, anthropologists should consider the power of discourse and their own skeptical views that prevent them from giving deeper study and consideration to Christian missions and genuine conversions in Indigenous communities (Luria, 1996; Pollock, 1996).

The various approaches to explain conversion divide those who convert for *utilitarian* reasons, aiming to find practical solutions to their needs (physical, psychological, social) (Burdick, 1993; Steigenga & Cleary, 2007; Pollock, 1993) to those who convert for intellectual reasons aiming to find answers to transcendental questions such as the meaning of life. In this approach, people convert to find spiritual fulfillment. I suggest that both approaches should not be considered separate from each other, for a person can convert for utilitarian reasons and remain in the religion after finding intellectual satisfaction for their spiritual needs, and vice versa.

Anthropologists have recognized the complexity of conversion as it encompasses an influence on the culture and identity of the individual (Cannell, 2006). Therefore, they have found value in including the work of theologians in the field. As Keller (2006) states, recognizing the limitations of Anthropology to understand Christianity and avoid treating it as a secondary phenomenon. In this line of thought and following the steps done by other scholars (Villaca, 1993), this dissertation presented the native conversion experience in the kind of

Christianity among the Protestant tradition among Mexican Indigenous people from Chiapas.

People in an environment filled with tensions and religious intolerance from their Catholic neighbors choose to convert in a *process*. Mainly for *utilitarian* reasons (seeking healing or the resolution to a personal problem), but mostly for *intellectual* reasons, as the religious experience lived in the gospel presented to them answers the problem of *meaning*, providing believers with a renewed sense of hope.

CHAPTER 4. RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AS HUMAN INSECURITY.

A MEXICAN EXPERIENCE^{23*}.

Introduction

Mexico's rich diversity is reflected in its nature, cuisine, culture, and genetics (Bole, 2021). Mexicans are among the happiest and most friendly people globally (InterNations, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2014). Nevertheless, since the Spanish colonization, with Spain joining the Counter-reformation, any religion besides Catholicism was punished. To a major degree and persisting to this day is religious intolerance towards Protestants, which manifests brutally and deathly in Indigenous communities, violating human security's *right to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want* (CHS, 2003). This chapter analyzes how the emphasized hostilities towards Protestants are rooted in the history of Mexico, the state-Catholic Church relations, and the construction of the Mexican identity.

Religious intolerance in Mexico is widely recognized (Infobae, 2021; NRC, 2015). It has received attention from academics (Heaton et al., 2012; Rivera, 2014, 2019) who have focused on the political and economic aspects of the problem. As well as journalists who have reported in detail some of the conflicts (Henriquez, 2020; Perez, 2021). Chiapas, the same place where the Indigenous Zapatista movement (EZLN) rose in arms in 1994 against the Mexican state, demanding awareness of their rights "justice and peace" (Godelmann, 2014). It is also the place where some of the worst expressions of religious intolerance have happened. One of the first registered cases was the crime experienced by *Miguel Caxlan*, a well-known Indigenous Chamula evangelist in Los Altos, Chiapas. Martinez Garcia (2007) shares the details of Miguel

^{23*} This chapter's original version first appeared in the Journal of Social Science No. 89 (March 2022), pp. 29-50.

Caxlan's martyrdom, starting with attempted murder in 1966 until his ultimate torture and killing in 1981.

The exact number of expelled Protestants for religious motives is unclear, between 10,000 to 30,000 people (Farfán, 2005, p. 24), although religious freedom advocates suggest an even higher number of 50,000 (personal communication, 2015). The expulsion was of such magnitude that entire new towns with new names, such as *Betania* and *La Hormiga*, were created. Yet, among government and academics, religious intolerance is predominantly considered a secondary aspect of the expulsions, emphasizing that violence inflicted towards Protestants occurs primarily due to political and economic motivations. This dissertation argued that the intensity and gravity of violent cases in Chiapas have *religion* as a strong and often primary motivator.

This chapter takes a broadly postcolonial human security approach (Shani, 2017) to tell how the challenges from a world with multiethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural perspectives are an opportunity to develop strategies that protect and empower *all* humankind to live a life with *dignity* and freedom. As there is a constant marginalization of the Indigenous viewpoint while researching them, citations of the testimonios compiled among Indigenous people in Chiapas are at the core of this research.

Mexico. Historical Background

Spanish Colonization and Early Mexican Republic

On August 13, 1521, *La Gran Tenochtitlan*, the capital city of the Aztec empire, fell under the dominion of the Spaniards, and *La Nueva España* was born. As the conquistador Hernan Cortes was a military and religious man, he was also accompanied by Catholic clergy (Ricard, 1986). In 1524, the first Catholic mission with 12 Franciscan monks

came to *La Nueva España*. They used the Bula *Unam Sanctam*'s evangelization method from Pope Boniface VIII (1302). It states that one could only get salvation by being baptized in the Catholic Church and submitting to the Roman Pontiff. The Catholic missionaries felt their duty was to baptize Indigenous people to save them, regardless of their will to convert (Ricard, 2017). Baptisms happened massively, primarily by force.

Before the Spanish conquest, Tenochtitlan had a highly structured education system for noble and commoner children, the *Telpochcalli* and *Calmécac*, in which they were instructed in military affairs, ethics, history, religion, astronomy, ethics, arts, and politics (Juridicas UNAM, 1990). All these were dismantled, putting instead the religious orders in charge of the challenging mission of "educating" the natives (the European way) in a devastated city and in an environment full of tensions. Tensions surfaced confronting an unknown culture and among the regular clergy due to differences of opinion regarding the priorities of their mission. These diverse views were perhaps best expressed in 1550 in the Valladolid debate between the priests, Las Casas and Sepulveda, on whether to give the status of 'human' to Indigenous peoples. Las Casas was an evangelistic defender of Indigenous peoples. He advocated for individual freedom as a God-given right while emphasizing the king's duty to protect the Indigenous peoples from the abuses of the Spaniards (Maestre Sánchez, 2004). Las Casas is remembered with honor in all of Mexico. The closest city in Chiapas, where this case study focused, bears his name.

There were also differences among the Catholic clergy in their *political* agenda. *El Colegio de Santa Cruz de Santiago Tlatelolco*, which opened in 1536, is a good example. *El Colegio de Tlatelolco*, led by the Franciscans, had the purpose of offering a space for elite Indigenous children to receive education in Latinity: liberal arts, theology, religion, medicine, and painting. It had an outstanding library, considered the first academic library of the Americas;

several generations of Indigenous children grew and graduated from it and often stayed in adulthood, taking the roles of teachers and even rectors of the *Colegio*, such as Antonio Valeriano, who became a Latin professor (Alcántara, 2016). In 1585, with Spain implementing the Catholic reform decided on the Council of Trent, the *Colegio* was forced to stop its project on humanistic education, limiting its work to an "elemental" curriculum based on literacy, Christian doctrine, and the teaching of the Spanish language. The argument was that the type of education Indigenous people received would transform them into "dangerous beings" (Mathes, 1982); as they were *unfit* and *indecent* to take on European tasks, educating them in the way the *Colegio* was doing it would open the way for them to be a bad influence for society and the church (Rivas, 2007, p. 109-111). Although, for Alcántara (2016), an expert on Mesoamerican studies, the underlying reason for preventing Indigenous people from receiving higher education was that they were proving to be able not only to understand but even surpass the Europeans in their reasoning. They learned so well that they could speak and argue in Latin with priests who sometimes could not catch up with them, making evident that educating Indigenous people would make the purpose of the conquest, and the whole justification of the Colonization of the Americas, unnecessary. The *indios* were proving to be not inferior and primitive beings in need of the Spaniards to civilize them.

Despite the Catholic reform that made such changes, religious orders such as the Franciscans considered it crucial to evangelize the natives with the Bible; thus, they invested significant efforts in learning Indigenous languages, translating some books of the Bible for them, such as the catechism of Maturino Gilberti translated into Tarasco and Nahuatl. Nevertheless, by 1572, the Inquisition made all evangelizing and literacy mission progress suffer significantly with the prohibition and confiscation of all the materials translated into Indigenous

languages (de León Azcárate, 2015). For Quijano, "The colonizers... imposed a mystified image of their patterns of producing knowledge and meaning. At first, they placed these patterns far out of reach to the dominated. Later, they taught them partially and selectively, to co-opt some of the dominated into their power institutions" (2010, p. 23). These examples show how the most influential and powerful concerns of the Catholic institutions were primarily associated with the political and economic interests of the colonizers rather than the spiritual mission of the church.

The State-endorsed Religious Intolerance

By 1571, with Spain joining the Counter Reform mission, any other religion besides Catholicism was forbidden in their colonies. This decision was partly politically and partly religiously motivated. Spain and England, as competing superpowers with religious antagonisms, made ground for the creation of narratives that fed an imagination in which the condemnation (and often, elimination) of the *other* was celebrated (Avendaño, 2017, p. 232-233). Thus, we have, on one hand, Protestants like John Fox, shaping the image of Spain and Catholicism in England, with the *Book of the Martyrs*. A recollection of cases of people in history who suffered and died for the cause of Christ, describing in detail the activities of the Inquisition (1563, Chapter V). While Spain, under the Catholic banner, positions itself, more effectively within its colonies, as the possessors of the "ultimate objective truth". Insisting on having the direct appointment of Jesus Christ to Peter (considered the first pope) to carry on a divine mission with a specific hierarchy, having the pope as the head of the church (Mark, 2022).

With Catholicism established as superior to any other cultural option, Indigenous religions were labeled as *paganism*, the society was crushed, and the destruction of native knowledge (i.e. the burning of Mayan codes) caused "the historic extermination and the cultural theft of Indigenous memory" (Tello, 2002, p. 79). Once Spain was more settled and the Saint

Inquisition was in full bloom, the first registered cases of religious intolerance in *La Nueva España* were toward Jews (Soberanes Fernández, 1998, p. 286). They had presumably converted to Catholicism, nevertheless, many still secretly kept their Jewish faith and were known as *criptojudíos*, and once discovered, they were condemned to be burned at the stake. One of the most documented cases was the family Carvajal. The father, 'El Viejo' Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, was a *New Christian* (Jew converted to Christianity), a prominent Portuguese and slaver. He was made governor of Monterrey and could distribute land among 100 immigrants without proving their 'blood purity,' referring to their Christian ancestry. When some of his family members were discovered as *Crypto-Jews* (clandestine Jews), he faced charges due to non-compliance with religious regulations (BBC Mundo, 2017).

Other antireligious efforts of the Inquisition from 1546 were towards *Lutherans*, a term in which all Protestant denominations were included. Special surveillance was put on non-Spaniard foreigners in *La Nueva España* who were mainly exiled when found guilty of "Lutheranism" (Bastian, 1990). The punishment towards Catholic clergy, *criollos* (Spaniards born in the "New World") and *Peninsulares* (Spaniards born in Spain), was more severe, as many were sentenced to public torture to send a message to the people. Inquisitor of Murcia, Pedro Moya de Contreras, urged people to make official allegations against Protestants for being "rabid wolves and dogs infesting the souls of the Lord's Vine" (Greenleaf, 1981, as cited in Bastian, 1990, p. 73). In this way, the pedagogic strategy to educate hate towards the Protestant "heresy" made its way to sink into the Mexican imaginary (Bastian, 1990, p. 71).

The colonial history of the state-endorsed religious intolerance in Mexico not only affected the individual lives of those who believed differently but also deeply affected education and human development. For the Saint Inquisition established a tribunal that persecuted any sign

of religious diversity and confiscated all types of literature that questioned the Catholic faith (Greenleaf, 1981, as cited in Bastian, 1990). *La Nueva España* strictly observed the confiscation of the books listed in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Greenleaf, 1981, as cited in Bastian, 1990). Every ship arriving at *La Nueva España* needed to have a Catholic priest whose duty was to make sure everyone on board was a Catholic, otherwise, report them. For Freyre, "In the non-Catholic world, one would fear the political enemy capable of breaking or weakening that solidarity...with the Catholic religion. That solidarity was kept among us against the French Calvinists, the Dutch Reformers, and the English Protestants" (1949, p. 20). Such policy prevented the cultivation of thought that was already fueling revolutions in Enlightened Europe. The work of Rousseau, Montesquieu, Locke, La Bruyere, and Fenelon was among the list of forbidden books in the Spanish colonies. Nevertheless, the need for expert hands to exploit the mines forced Spain to relax its measures towards people from overseas, including Protestant-dominated nations. Foreign technicians were granted a legal stay in the Colonies without being bothered for "reasons of conscience" (Bastian, 1990, p. 82), thus, some Protestants made their way into Mexico in the 16th century, but they mostly kept their faith in private.

Mexican Independence

Among the Founding Fathers of Mexico that in 1810 led the movement of independence were the priests Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla and Jose Maria Morelos. Hidalgo and Morelos wanted a Liberal Republic, the end of slavery, equality regardless of race, and land distribution. They are considered national heroes and celebrated by the Catholic Church as one of their own. Yet, it is often avoided to acknowledge that they were excommunicated and executed by one of them, that they were tortured by the order expedited by archbishop Francisco Javier de Lizana y Beaumont in 1811 (arquidiocesismexico.org.mx). It states the excommunication bull that Hidalgo

and Morelos were accused of being "Lutherans, Calvinists and Judaizers atheists," a very absurd sentence indeed. That fact received peculiar attention in 2007 when the Chamber of Deputies' special commission to celebrate the 200 years of Mexican Independence supported the request initiated by Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera to cancel Hidalgo and Morelos's ex-communication penalties (León Zaragoza, 2007). One may wonder why a secular state would care for such matters if ex-communication is only relevant for Catholics and only exists within this religious tradition. Yet, it reflects how particular Catholic religious norms echo with relevance within the Mexican state.

The High Clergy did not support the independence movement led by Hidalgo because of the measures he proposed, taking the privileges of the rich. Through the suppression of the castes, the abolition of slavery, the elimination of the payment of tributes that Indigenous people were forced to pay, and the return of lands to them (Montreal, 2010). The independence from Spain happened on September 27, 1821. Yet, it did not bring freedom of worship, conscience, or speech. The 'emancipation' of people in Mexico, more specifically, for Indigenous people, was planned, dictated, and executed by the *criollos*; heirs of a European thought in which religion (one religion) would be tolerated as far it do not interfere to the political economy and theory that would allow them to continue to rule over the colonized (Mignolo, 2013). Thus, the Catholic religious monopoly continued to be reaffirmed in the Constitutions of 1811, 1813, and 1814 (Museo de las Constituciones Mexico, n.d.).

Significant contact with the Protestant tradition happened on April 29, 1827, when the Scottish missionary James Diego Thomson arrived in Mexico with 10,000 Bibles. Thomson came representing the *British and Foreign Bible Society* and found support to sell the Bible with Catholic clergy and various prominent Liberals such as Dr. José María Luis Mora (Martinez

Garcia, 2013), who endorsed his mission. Liberals and Protestants had in common the conviction that education was vital to developing and modernizing the nation (Garcia, 2010, p. 78, as cited in Barocio, 2018, p. 104), and the Bible was considered a good source.

Thomson traveled for many years throughout Mexico, developing a particular interest in Indigenous peoples' rights, urging the Mexican Secretary of State to provide education and assure them justice (Martinez Garcia, 2013). Thomson's efforts came from his conviction that reading the Bible was a fine way to educate and develop the mind, thus investing great efforts in making it available to Indigenous people in some dominant native languages, Nahuatl, Otomi, and Huasteco.

Mexican Revolution

By the second half of the nineteenth century, in 1857, Mexican President, Benito Juarez, decreed *Las Leyes de Reforma*, establishing the Act of Freedom of Worship. *La Reforma* proposed the separation between Church and State, a civil registration system, the secularization of cemeteries, the nationalization of church properties, and the elimination of religious communities. The Catholic Church opposed these reforms, contributing to *Guerra de Los Tres Años* (The Three Years War) between Liberals and Conservatives, achieving the establishment of the second Mexican empire for a short period (1864-1865) with Maximilian I. The aim of the Catholic Church defending a monarchical government was to preserve a social project beneficial for them based on landowning oligarchy (Gomez, 2007, p. 69). According to a summary table of Mexico published by Manuel Lerdo de Tejada in 1854, the clergy income was up to 20 million Mexican pesos yearly, in comparison with the 6 million that could arrive in the national treasury (Vázquez, 1986, 235 quoted by Gomez, 2007).

La Reforma, however, enabled religious diversity in the country, entering Protestant missions that founded hospitals, schools, and caritative programs among vulnerable populations while dealing with strong opposition from the Catholic Church. Catholic newspaper, *El Tiempo* (16 jul. 1891, p. 103, cited in Mendoza, 2023, p. 1220), accused Protestants in Mexico of aiming to Americanize the nation, seduce Mexicans with “el oro de la vecina del norte” (the gold of the American neighbor) and help to annex Mexico to the United States as part of the *Manifest Destiny*. These accusations were not all mistaken, what was little known or perhaps, suspected was that the relationship between Mexican Protestants and US Missions was not very harmonious.

Although US missions’ first intention was to create churches that could eventually become autonomous, respond to local needs, and be led by natives (Mision Mundial, 1990, p. 30), in reality, they maintained unilateral decision-making, employing Mexican Protestants subject to them. Despite the passage of time and constant opposition from the locals, this did not change (Mendoza, 2023, p. 1221) mostly due US missions came with a colonial approach thinking that all missions needed to be “under the direction of an ordained superintendent [of the US], to Christianize and evangelize the *primitive* people of the southern seas.” (Mision Mundial, 1990, p.28, emphasis mine), Mexico included. Converts in these regions were seen as uncivilized and inferior, not mature enough to make decisions. Needless to say, Mexican Protestants grew tired of it. “The rupture and anti-Americanism in the native [Mexican] churches was evident from 1905, becoming more intense in 1914” (Baldwin, 1990, in Mendoza, 2021, p. 1223, English translation mine). The differences could not be reconciled and led to a break from American missions, creating independent and self-sustained Mexican Protestant churches. This was a complex process, as it took a while for the Mexican Protestant congregation to unlearn the

paternalistic methods in which all funding was provided by the US without the need for local contribution.

Leticia Mendoza (2023) conducted an investigation into the study of Catholic and Protestant press, where one can see the historical context more broadly. By analyzing Protestant press (up to 60 magazines, newspapers, and missionary acts) published by them, she identified that opposing voices to the American model of church and mission priorities were present since 1881. The Mexican Revolution, the USA intervention in 1914, and the 1917 Constitution with its clear anticlerical position further strained the relationship between Mexican Protestant churches and American missions.

Further progress in religious freedom came during the rule of the controversial dictator Porfirio Diaz. He wanted to attract private investors from overseas, hence incentivizing conciliation between Protestants and Catholics. The "campañas de temperancia" (sobriety campaigns) during 1884-1910, which discouraged the use of alcohol and tobacco, among other expressions of the Protestant ethic, pleased Diaz's government (Barocio, 2018). Still, the Catholic Church remained strong, and when the Mexican Revolution started in 1910, it was able to support the coup that deposed and killed President Francisco I. Madero, a tragic event that happened with the collaboration of the US Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson (Arroyo et al.). This event strongly marked the revolutionaries' hatred towards the Catholic Church and Catholic political parties (Gomez, 2007, p. 71), in addition to a certain level of mistrust towards Protestants in Mexico, considering them allies of the Yankees (Mendoza, 2023). Nevertheless, "When revolutionary ferment boiled over in Mexico, [Mexican] Protestants were present in leadership as well as in rank-and-file support" as educators, war strategists, newspaper editors, military combatants, and more (Young, 2006, p. 21).

Although the revolution created opportunities for increased religious freedom and reduced Catholic Church hegemony, it also led to further religious tensions and challenges for both Protestant and Catholic communities. Some Protestant churches tried to remain neutral during the uprising, and many more grew in dislike towards Diaz for his authoritarian response and brutality to the people's outcry for change, turning to support the revolutionaries instead (Baldwin, 1990).

The Ongoing Pursuit of Secularization in Mexico

The 1917 Constitution forbid having foreign ministers of religion (priests, pastors) leading any church or school in Mexico. It also forbade religious education in schools, denied legal personality to the Church, limited its control over the social administration, and forbade it to participate in politics and own property. President Plutarco Elias Calles applied this legislation in 1926 and ordered intense surveillance of the Catholic Church. The parishioners were offended, seeing the temples profaned with the army's presence and the frequent interruption of ceremonies. Meyer (2020) states that a small yet influential group showed opposition by suspending the mass in all churches in the country. Although most bishops did not agree with this measure, they followed through, causing *La Cristiada*, another civil war, to rise under the slogan *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* (Hail, Christ King!) from 1926-1929 (CNDH). It is estimated that 20,000-50,000 people died in *La Cristiada* (Meyer, 1954, p. 252).

The post-conflict time was less hostile as negotiations and considerations between the state and the Catholic Church resulted in the subsequent convergence of agreement between the civil power emanating from the Mexican Revolution and the latter (Gomez, 2007, p. 71). Yet, this cannot be considered a triumph for religious freedom. As Cristian Gomez, director of the Museum of the Bible in Mexico, states, "the current religious intolerance has its roots in the

hegemony of a predominant institution that forbade the Bible for more than 400 years; this has left an imprint on the majority of the population that for centuries believed that only one religion can be allowed and protected in Mexico” (personal communication, 2017). I consider *La Cristiada* could have been a fight for "religious liberty," as Meyer (2013) states, but it was liberty for the Catholics, not for people of other religious beliefs. One could see this in the way the Catholic Church received the oncoming Protestant missions, as I share below.

Between 1948 and 1953, many more Protestant missions arrived in Mexico for the first time. This wave of missionaries differed from earlier ones, as it followed the 1910 Conference of Edinburgh and the 1928 Conference of Jerusalem, which emphasized cultural adaptation and gave local churches full control of missions in their countries. This approach led to more successful conversions. In response, the Catholic Church, led by Archbishop Luis María Martínez, launched what he termed a "Guerra Santa" (Holy War) against the "sects" (CNDH, 2002, p. 38). In 1950, the magazine *Tiempo* ran a headline declaring, "Contra el Evangelio, la Iglesia Católica practica el genocidio" (Against the Gospel, the Catholic Church practices Genocide). Referring to the violent actions of religious intolerance practiced by the Catholic Church towards the growing Protestant minority (CNDH, 2002, p. 30, 85), through killing, lynching, and burning of temples. It was an official condemnation promoted among the Catholic parishioners through magazines, leaflets, and messages delivered during the liturgy. For the Mexican philosopher and cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, Mexican society was slow to respect religious diversity due to the oppressive dimensions of faith still present since the late 1950s. That defined "moral", "good manners", and "national identity" exclusively concerning the Catholic tradition, sentencing the religious minorities to invisibility and neglect (Monsiváis in CNDH, 2002, p. 37).

Through it all, Protestantism could expand discreetly and resiliently. Starting with the first Protestant temple that was opened by the American independent preachers, Santiago Hickey and Tomas Westrup, on January 30th, 1864 in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon (Barocio, 2018, p. 106-107). By 1970, 700 Protestant temples managed to exist in Mexico. Later on, Mexico signed various international legal documents committing to respect and protect human rights, including the right to religious freedom. Significant changes were made in the Constitution in 1992, allowing *all* religious associations to have legal personality (Martinez de Codes, 2001, p. 527-528). Still, the centuries of promoted and state-endorsed hostility towards Protestants remained sealed in the Mexican identity.

CHAPTER 5. CASE STUDY: CHIAPAS.

THE MOST RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE MEXICAN STATE.



Figure 2. Chiapas, in green. Own work based on digital map INEGI.

<i>"Y surgió, inadvertida</i>	<i>And it emerged, unnoticed</i>
<i>como un rezo de lluvia entre las hojas,</i>	<i>Like a rain prayer between the leaves,</i>
<i>tenue como la brisa, tierna como un suspiro;</i>	<i>soft like the breeze, tender like a whisper;</i>
<i>pero surgió tan honda,</i>	<i>yet it emerged so deeply,</i>
<i>tan real, tan verdadera y tan eterna</i>	<i>so real, so truthful, and so eternal</i>
<i>como el dolor, que desde siempre</i>	<i>like the pain, that has always</i>
<i>riega su trágica semilla por el mundo"</i>	<i>watered its tragic seed across the world</i>

Enoch Cancino Casahonda, poem fragment 'Canto a Chiapas'
(English translation mine)

This section provides a general monograph of Chiapas, to understand better the context of the social issue that this dissertation focused on. Aiming that the brief exposition of some facts about

Chiapas can allow people to understand what elements helped define the character of the *Chiapanecos* in matters of identity (the *process of becoming*).

Chiapas Commencement

Chiapas is a state located in the southeast of Mexico on the border with Guatemala. Chiapas is at the heart of the Mayan culture, which excelled in Sculpture, Math, Astronomy, and Architecture between 250 B.C. and 900 B.C, building the cities of Palenque, Bonampak, Yaxchilán, Toniná, Tenán, y Chinkultic (Mexico Desconocido). The origin of name, Chiapas, comes from 'Chiapan' or 'Tepaciapan', about the antique Mayan population of the region (El Heraldo de Mexico, 2021) who confronted the Spaniard conquistador, Diego de Mazariegos, in various battles between 1532-1534, culminating in a collective suicide where many *Chiapas* jumped into the *Sumidero* Canyon to avoid being subjugated (La Voz del Norte, 2012).

Chiapas has seven different ecosystems in a territorial extension of 73,310 km. It is home to the *Lacandona* forest, a jewel of 230 000 years old, with outstanding biological diversity in 1.8 million hectares, regretfully, classified among the 25 biological zones of the planet in critical condition (SEMARNAT, 2018). Chiapas is placed second in national ethnic diversity with 3,406 million people, of whom 26.4% are Indigenous (INEGI, 2010). *Los Altos* is historically where most people have been concentrated, yet, Indigenous communities are not homogenous. They are, rather, grouped according to their practices, language, and modes of dress, characterized by special, fine, and colorful embroidery.

Uprisings in Chiapas with a religious element have been frequent since the seventeenth century in response to the economic crisis and authority abuse. Between 1708 and 1712, happened the *Tzeltal revolt* in which poverty, unemployment, and excessive tribute caused thousands of Indigenous people to desert the church. Indigenous people claimed that the Virgin

Mary had appeared to them in *Los Alto's* regions of Zinacantan, Santa Marta, and Cancue. The religious pride turned 4000 Indigenous people to rebel, using "the same terror tactics as their masters. They murdered landowners, took their wives and children, and destroyed crops and buildings" (Harvey, 1998, p. 41). This revolt demonstrated a closed contact between communities, which may have been reinforced by the ethnic consciousness created in the Catholic festivities.

The geographical location of Chiapas made it uninvolved and almost unaffected by big historical events happening in the country, including the Independence war. Once the country became independent, Chiapas was the only state that *chose* to be Mexican and not Guatemalan, for they thought it would better suit their interests. Thus, on September 14th, 1824, with a plebiscite of 96,826 votes in favor, Chiapas was annexed into Mexico (Ochoa, 2021).

The weakness of the newly freed Mexican state, combined with the distance between Chiapas and the capital, Mexico City, encouraged a regionalist sentiment and opened the door for local elites, *finqueros* (vast land owners) and *caciques* (local chiefs), to have some degree of autonomy. Providing them with a deeper layer of control over the Indigenous communities without much interference from the state. Their wealth increased even more during the *Porfiriato*.

During that time, under the rule of the progressive dictator, Porfirio Diaz (Hillerbrand, 2022), Chiapas was opened to the exportation of cacao and coffee; a market opportunity that facilitated the servitude and exploitation of Indigenous people through the *enganchemiento* system. As they migrated from their communities to live in the plantations, their need for living expenses forced them to acquire a debt that they were never able to pay back to the *finqueros*. For their attempt to

pay off with labor would be done in a perpetual need for more food²⁴, acquired in *tiendas de raya*, and housing far away from their homes. The coffee business was so profitable that foreign entrepreneurs from Germany and Britain got favor from Diaz's government for further concessions, getting more control over wider lands and expanding their ability to hire more workers.

The control of the coffee business has changed over time. From foreign entrepreneurs, it went to be under the management of nationals, and finally to Indigenous people, who cultivate it in a complex agro-forestry system at the family level (Montoya & Toledo, 2020). An astonishing dark green landscape in the highlands where the mist seems to wrap secure the families that call it home, despite the conflict, the injustice, and the hunger. The first group of Indigenous Protestants I met had coffee plantations. They lived in the scenery where I had been welcomed and honored multiple times with the best of its fruits and its people. Chiapas is, to date, number one at a national level in the production of organic coffee, offering the best quality (Gómez, 2022). Yet, most Indigenous people still do not get to taste the sweetness of the big revenue and international fame of this precious fruit. Still, depending on the *coyotes*, the middle man, to sell their coffee for Indigenous people, this business comes with blood and bitterness. As eloquently said by Chiapaneco poet Efraín Bartolomé:

²⁴ "Tiendas de raya" were stores where farm or factory workers were obligated to purchase basic products for their daily lives. *Raya*, which means 'line', refers to the way workers needed to sign whenever they got any product, as they were illiterates and unable to write their name. The land owners would put excessive prices on the products sold in *tiendas de raya*, forcing the workers to acquire a debt that would tie them to do not quit until they pay it, otherwise face punishment or incarceration (INFOBAE, 2021).

<i>"Hoy vi a un hombre sonriendo torpemente</i>	<i>I saw a man smiling clumsily today</i>
<i>Se destrozó los dedos</i>	<i>He destroyed his fingers</i>
<i>recogiendo café del piso de estos días amargos</i>	<i>picking up coffee from the ground of these bitter days</i>
<i>Con estas mismas manos acaricia su hambre</i>	<i>With these same hands, he caresses his hunger</i>
<i>a la hora del posol</i>	<i>during the posol hour</i>
<i>A la hora justa en que alguien bebe café</i>	<i>The same hour when someone drinks coffee</i>
<i>con restos de esta sangre</i>	<i>with traces of this blood</i>
<i>Con sangre de estos dedos</i>	<i>With blood from these fingers</i>
<i>Con dedos de estos años</i>	<i>With fingers from these years</i>
<i>De otros</i>	<i>From others</i>
<i>que son los mismos"</i>	<i>That are the same</i>

Efraín Bartolomé, poem fragment, "Corte de Cafe" (English translation mine)

The various reforms to the agrarian laws approved after the Mexican Revolution risked the privileges of the *finqueros* (vast land owners); who, in response, rose in arms against the government with what was called movement *Mapachista*. These *mapaches* claimed to be protecting the freedom of *el pueblo*, and, although celebrated locally as heroes (Chiapas Paralelo, 2014), they had rather individual motivations. Coming from generations of owners of large tracks, the *finqueros* were raised with a pro-European education in which they saw themselves as superiors. For them, Chiapas was *theirs*, and Indigenous people were an inferior race that deserved to be treated as working animals (Hernandez, 1989, p. 341). Such mistreatment contributed to the lack of trust that most Indigenous people have towards *ladinos* or non-Indigenous people, also called *caxlanes* in the Tzotzil language. The fight for land control has remained in Chiapas through the centuries. The rich ecosystem and fertile land made it attractive for foreign investors and local chiefs to possess communal land that had been given to Indigenous people, forcing them to retrieve further away to arid areas and into deeper levels of poverty.

Mexico has gone through various political changes that promised the end of the oppression and discrimination towards Indigenous people inherited from the Spanish colonization, especially with the triumph of the Liberal party. Nevertheless, racist assumptions towards them continued to justify the policy that kept Indigenous people in extreme poverty and despair, with their demands ignored and in living conditions of persistent servitude (Harvey, 1998). A tragic reality that came loudly to light in Chiapas in 1994 with the armed uprising of the EZLN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, demanding democracy, land reform, justice, food, health, education, autonomy, and peace for Indigenous people (Enlace Zapatista, 2020). Basic demands for any human being to live with dignity, yet, to such a degree inaccessible to Indigenous people that an armed uprising was needed for them to be noticed.

EZLN "*Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*"²⁵

The EZLN did not appear overnight; it was rather the solidification of a feeling and ideal for a more just life for Indigenous peoples. This section provides an overview of the context and historical facts that gave birth to the EZLN. It also points out some difficult, yet, important questions regarding the EZLN declaring itself a "secular" movement while working in close relationship with the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas and the beloved former bishop Samuel Ruiz (RIP). How did these remarkable actors engage with religious intolerance in Chiapas?

EZLN, Origins

By 1960, 70% of the land in Chiapas was under the control of *finqueros*, yet, another large portion was assigned to stockbreeding. Indigenous people were displaced even more,

²⁵"*A world in which many worlds have a place*"

aggravating their social exclusion, unfairness, and abuse. In compensation for the land taken, the government proposed to populate the Lacandona forest, bringing 10,000 people to settle there. Government disorganization and lack of unity of objectives complicated the land distribution in Chiapas when newly signed agreements discontinued or contradicted former ones, leaving many Indigenous people bereft of land. In response, Indigenous people created different social organizations: Union de Ejidos Lucha Campesina ('UELC' in 1970), Unión de Uniones Ejidales y Grupos Campesinos Solidarios de Chiapas ('UU' in 1980), Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo, ('ARIC' in 1988), among others. ARIC had a more mature and comprehensive plan, aiming not only for land control, but productive process appropriation. Indigenous people working for the *finqueros* also came together, creating the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos ('CIOAC'), linked to the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). There were various government attempts to solve the situation, but often the situation got worse, such as with the Agrarian Rehabilitation Plan (*Plan de Rehabilitación Agrario*) where land invasion proliferated, reaching up to 428 cases between 1982 and 1988, under the ruling of the Chiapas governor, Absalón Castellanos Domínguez. Governor Absalón was a military man characterized for the brutal repression towards Indigenous peoples, whose response was to create self-defense groups, the nurtured seeds of the EZLN.

The EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) was cultivated through the years in the political consciousness of individual and collective Indigenous groups seeking emancipation and justice in their terms, in perfectible ways but with a genuine vision. One influenced by other religious and political figures, the Theology of Liberation²⁶ with the Diocese of San Cristobal,

²⁶According to Enrique Dussel, Liberation Theology "seeks to replace more traditional theologies of salvation and to break the bondage of ecclesiastical, political, cultural, and economic oppression and domination by First World institutions in Latin America (...) Without proposing a

Socialist ideals, and in collaboration with non-Indigenous peoples and a small international community. Yet, through it all, the EZLN is a social Indigenous movement, formed by and working for Indigenous peoples, proposing a project that benefits them at a national and not just local level (Sánchez, 1998). Although the spokesman has been mostly a non-Indigenous person, the *Subcomandante Marcos*, most of the leaders are Indigenous people, and since 1993, their military body has been subordinated to the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee ('CCRI'). Thus, despite the founders of the EZLN being *mestizos*, the Indigenous majority imposed their demands, prioritizing Indigenous peoples' claims over traditional fights of leftist movements (Zolla, 2010).

The EZLN came to light on the same day that the Mexican President, Salinas de Gortari, celebrated the implementation of NAFTA. Salinas' plan to show a modern and progressive Mexico, at the level of the North American neighbors, was shaken by an army of Indigenous people declaring war on the Mexican state. The EZLN showed up in large numbers, women, and men, armed and hooded, crying out about the abandonment, abuse, and historical injustices perpetuated by the government. Salinas' government sent an army of 70,000 soldiers to confront the *zapatistas*, an armed conflict that lasted 11 days. The openness to dialogue from the Mexican government came due to the strong opposition to repression that Mexican society and the international community showed in solidarity with the *zapatistas*. The EZLN got support from the various local communities in Chiapas, which was sufficient to supply and sustain the movement (CNDH). The interactions between the EZLN and the Mexican government oscillated

detailed blueprint of the future, theologians of liberation are to develop plans and work to effect changes in existing social structures and organizations to enable the masses to work out their liberating social structures. In seeking to "destroy every self-enclosed totality" such theologians are to expose "original sin" institutionalized in oppressive social structures (p. 154)." (Kilgore, 1976, pp. 669-670).

from confrontation to dialogue on various occasions and through several presidency periods. During Ernesto Zedillo's Presidency, despite the fact that the *Acuerdos de San Andres* (San Andres Treaty) had been signed (to date has not been implemented), it was also planned with landowners (*finqueros* and *terratenientes*) in Chiapas, the settlement of paramilitary groups to oppose the zapatistas. A paramilitary that perpetrated despicable acts in Indigenous communities through decades, using terror in its multiple expressions as a way to control and persuade (León, 2011; Galindo de Pablo, 2015). The paramilitarism, is explained by Galindo de Pablo as follows, "It is a State policy that responds to the need to maintain, through clandestine means, the dominant production relations in the face of the possibility of social crises driven by the social, economic, and political contradictions of the current reproduction pattern" (2015, p. 192, translation mine).

After 29 years of the zapatista uprising, at the national level, the *Acuerdos de San Andres* have not been implemented; at a local level, the crimes perpetuated by the state and the paramilitary remain vastly unpunished. Despite Mexico being ruled by a leftist party (for the first time), the zapatistas are skeptical that Lopez Obrador can make any change or fulfill any promise. They remain vastly isolated in the autonomous communities that they have created, hoping, however, that things can still improve for Indigenous peoples (Nájar, 2019). For some people, the EZLN is a movement that appealed for its affectation in its speeches, saying phrases like that they came to speak "la palabra de corazón de los hombres verdaderos" (the word from the heart of the true men), and they just 'had their moment' (Romero & Mendoza, 2018). Nevertheless, it left a strong print and important lessons to the international community. Showing present-day Indigenous peoples as empowered and aware figures with sufficient political consciousness to lead a high-scale movement. The EZLN can be seen as a type of

‘subaltern representation’, a voice that shouted in this present century accessing ‘the center’ to the surprise of many. Breaking with the state-made imaginary of collective Indigenous identities (Shani, 2019, p. 51), the zapatistas showed Indigenous peoples as eloquent, organized, aggressive, and capable of being a threat to the modern state while making effective use of the media, including the internet. Thus, one can find all information related to the EZLN in chronological order on their website *Enlace Zapatista*.

Zapatismo, despite of its apparent appeasement, keeps giving important lessons in various disciplines. Recently, in a case study about grassroots innovation in autonomous Zapatista education (Maldonado-Villalpando et al., 2022).

Obscuring religious intolerance. A gray area of Zapatismo, Frayba, and Samuel Ruiz.

Anyone aiming to promote Human Security, should study the impact of religion in the societies we focus on, to better understand the flow of Human Security in those specific contexts, and thus, identify allies or enemies in the pursuit of Human Security for all (Wellman & Lombardi, 2012, p. 2, paraphrase mine). Therefore, what this section would like to point out, is the aspect of religion in the zapatista movement. A movement that although claims to be secular, does not deprive its members of a religious identity. I also would like to introduce the role of the *Frayba* Human Rights Center and late bishop Samuel Ruiz, in the narratives created towards Protestants, and make this a departure point for further research that could analyze deeply the effects that they caused.

“Silence is sometimes a ‘chosen instrument of power’ (Parrot, 2012, 383) that has been used to suppress expression” says Payne in her chapter on *Silence* in *Rethinking Peace* (2019, p. 110). For Payne, silence can be effective expression from peoples who have lost, mourned, and

grieved greatly, it allows victims of tragedy to protect their dignity and convey what words cannot tell. Thus, silence can be a plan, an act of resistance. The type of silence I would like to highlight here is different, is the type that it is neither respecting, nor worth keeping. One that has functioned as a powerful tool for oppression and the perpetuation of violence and injustice against Indigenous Protestants, reinforcing existing hierarchies and defending the status quo that has religious intolerance at its core. The EZLN, the *Frayba*, Human Rights Center, and Samuel Ruiz are prominent and respected entities that have taken an influential place representing the voices of the oppressed Indigenous peoples in Chiapas. They, however, have remained silent (and at times openly against) about the pleas of the Protestants for their right to live in their communities exercising the fundamental right of religious freedom. This section would like to see critically these figures, and observe particularly to what extent they could have influenced how Protestantism and religious intolerance towards Protestants is approached in Indigenous communities of Chiapas, even by academics.

The priorities and objectives of the EZLN and the Catholic Church have coincided to some degree. The original members of the EZLN's *Comité Clandestino Indígena Revolucionario (CCRI-EZLN)*²⁷, were Catholic catechists (Avendaño, 2017; BBC, 2016; Figueroa, 2023). Catechists, in Spanish, *catequistas* of Indigenous communities in Chiapas, are men and women who receive special training by *Agentes de Pastoral* (nuns, priests, etc.) to perform Catholic rituals. Being a *catequista* is a prestigious position, particularly prominent in Indigenous communities where a religious authority gets legitimacy in all other aspects of life: social, cultural, and political (Frayba, 1996).

²⁷Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee

Besides the religious identity of the EZLN leaders, they also chose the bishop Samuel Ruiz, as their mediator with the Mexican government. One should look very carefully at this intimate relationship with the EZLN-Catholic Church. Especially, if one considers the historical background shared in this dissertation and the fact that Chiapas, despite being the least Catholic state, has the highest rates of acts of religious intolerance towards Protestants.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz (1959-2011), *jTatik* (which means *father* in the Tzotzil language) as some Indigenous people used to call him, he was a loved and respected figure among Catholics, academics, social activists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. He was considered a priest of the Theology of Liberation, founder of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center (*Frayba*), and NPO, SERAPAZ, whose coordinator I could interview in 2015.

Samuel Ruiz was a controversial figure for being an "obispo guerrillero" (Saint-Pierre, 2001), a *guerrilla bishop*, being closely related to the EZLN, for speaking up boldly against the oppression of the government and caciques towards Indigenous peoples. He worked tirelessly for the expansion of a *Teología India* (Indigenous theology), that gave Indigenous peoples the freedom to express what for centuries the church condemned as pagan, and so hold church services in Indigenous language and according to their *usos y costumbres* (worshipping equally the mountains and rivers, saints and relics). Samuel Ruiz ordained close to 700 Indigenous catechists and deacons who became prominent authorities in their communities and the main figures responsible for Catholic religious proselytism and rites (Masferrer, in Figueroa, 2023).

Although it is believed that Samuel Ruiz *always* sought for equality for Indigenous peoples and the respect to their *human dignity* without reservations (Masferrer, in Figueroa, 2023), Indigenous Protestants in Los Altos knew a different side of him, a grey area that must be considered specially when using him as reference on religion and conflict in Chiapas.

In cases of religious persecution towards Protestants, Cristian Gomez, President of the Museum of the Bible, and other religious freedom advocates reached out to Samuel Ruiz on several occasions, asking him to condemn publically and openly the religious intolerance towards Protestants. In meetings with Samuel Ruiz and his team, their response was always kind and respectful towards non-Mexican Protestants (i.e., American missionaries), indifferent towards *ladinos* (non-Indigenous Mexicans), and harsh and rude towards Indigenous Protestants (*personal communication*, 2023). From his position as a Catholic religious leader in Chiapas, one could understand that Samuel Ruiz would not be pleased with Indigenous people who left Catholicism to convert to Protestantism. Nevertheless, as director of a human rights center, the *Frayba*, he had the responsibility to be truthful to the mission of its organization and give equal treatment to the population, regardless of their religious affiliation. *Frayba* not only has repeatedly denied attention to Protestants but also spoken against them, making dangerous generalized allegations, such as saying that Protestants are paramilitary. Particularly, the General Report *Ni Paz ni Justicia* (1996) uses a clearly anti-Protestant tone, starting by calling Protestants "sects", it follows suggesting that Presbyterian churches are attractive to Indigenous peoples for the *economic benefits* they present (p. 36, par 4), and to *ambitious* young men who want to become an *individualized* leader (p. 36, par 5). Furthermore, the more delicate statements towards Protestants is to pair them with Paramilitary (Frayba, 1996, p. 134, par 3). The Frayba's posture towards Protestants is more moderate in further reports. At times, they are not even mentioned. The last Frayba report, "*Chiapas, un desastre*" (2023), exposes some of the most pressing matters that are hurting Chiapas: remilitarization, land disputes, arbitrary detentions, murdering of journalists, and forced displacement, among others. Not a single mention is made

about the persecution of Protestants, nor about religious intolerance, not even in the section on forced displacement.

EZLN does not differ much either. The website, Enlace Zapatista, the official communication platform of the the EZLN either mentions of Evangelicals/Protestants or detailed discussions about them in the context of Zapatista ideology or activities. With sufficient references that expose the over 700 alarming number of displaced people for religious intolerance (Domínguez, 2019; Leyte, 2022; Montalvo, 2013), one could question if *Frayba* and the EZLN are intentionally invisibilizing the injustices that Protestants face under religious grounds at the hands of the Catholic majority in their communities.

Further research studying a much larger number of the *Frayba* reports, and other EZLN press releases is needed to come to any conclusions. Yet, with the first exploration that this section presents, it is noted how main figures representing and defending Indigenous issues, the *Frayba* and the EZLN, could be contributing to the perpetuation of religious intolerance towards Protestants in Chiapas, both by action and omission. It is also a wake-up call to anyone interested in doing research about Chiapas to see beyond the hegemonic narratives and symbols, even if these are respected and admired. To notice the subgroups that are often left without representation nor legitimacy, "for being Protestants and for not being zapatistas". Thus, as Sara Gomez states, one can see EZLN exhibitions around the world, in places as remarkably unusual such as the Reina Sofia Museum in Spain, but the realities and voices of the Protestant IDPs, who are left without land and a home, are not heard, are not seen (Maranatha MX, 2023). Who is asking the questions that include the pains of the subgroup, the subalterns among subalterns?

This section elaborated on the complexity of the role of religion among respected figures representing Indigenous Peoples, *Frayba*, EZLN and Bishop Samuel Ruiz. The following section

will further explore the history, spread and indigenization of Protestantism in Chiapas, and its interaction with the local practices expressed in Catholic Traditionalism.

Religion in Chiapas

Chiapas is the most religiously diverse Mexican state and, at the same time, the most religiously intolerant (Domínguez, 2021). Seventy-eight percent of Mexicans declare themselves as Catholics, yet in Chiapas, the percentage goes to 54%, with an average of 3 million Catholics and 2 million Protestants. *Los Altos*, the focus of this case study, is the most religiously diverse, with prominent mosques, Jewish temples, and other houses of worship (Domínguez, 2021). The double-layered discrimination (J. Fernandez, 2017) that Indigenous women experience, as women and Indigenous, becomes triple when they are Protestants. Like with the zapatistas, despite the proliferation of Protestantism in Chiapas, it has been merited to foreign influence and manipulation, specifically from American missionaries; in reality, most evangelization efforts have come from locals. Among the first generation of Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century was the Mexican José Coffin Sánchez. He traveled by foot and trained local converts, among them Indigenous people, to continue the evangelizing mission (Green, n.d.). Jose Coffin and his wife, Luz Otero, founded some of the first Presbyterian churches (Protestante Digital, April 19, 2009), which is, to date, the most prominent Protestant tradition among Indigenous people in Chiapas (Gomez, 2016, personal communication).

Indigenous peoples are not inherently peaceful; Indigenous Mexicans are not the exception. The history of Chiapas describes the various moments and reasons that brought about Indigenous insurrection. Vast work has been done about political conflicts in Chiapas, especially those that were outcried by the EZLN. Indigenous communities were not harmonious and became hostile after the Protestant evangelization. Believing this would oversimplify their

experience. Instead, religious diversity in Chiapas uncovered an intolerance towards Protestants cultivated for centuries (see Chapter 4), one that had remained dormant until it had the opportunity to come to the surface.

Indigenous Mexicans follow a type of Catholic Traditionalism understood as "the system of a social, political and religious organization to which belong people living in Indigenous communities. Characterized by their proximity to practices related to *sistema de cargos* and parties that consist in celebrating the Catholic saints of each community" (Cortés & Martínez, 2012, p. 143, translation mine). Often, these celebrations contain expressions of nature worship, recognizing the presence of spirits in places like the mountains. Thus, for Indigenous people, the Catholic priest and the *curandera*, a healer recognized with the ability to contact the spiritual world, can equally talk to the divinities and intercede for favors (Fr. Áviles, personal communication, 2017).

Mexican Indigenous Legal System and *Caciques*

The Western legal system includes written rules, and it takes time for new laws to be approved. Furthermore, the Indigenous legal system is primarily based on Oral Tradition. It is more flexible, adaptable to circumstances, and has quick implementation (Kraemer, 1998). Among Indigenous people in Mexico, decisions are usually taken through the *Asamblea Comunitaria*, a traditional and autonomous legal system where civil, political, and religious matters are equally discussed. Religion and government are not separated in the Indigenous worldview. Lic. Víctor Hugo Sánchez Zebadúa, former Subsecretariat of Religious Affairs of Chiapas explains:

In Indigenous communities, the law isn't seen in the Western way, where the individual prevails over the community and they begin with individual rights to continue

with social rights. In Indigenous communities, the right of the majority or the community stands above the individual, that is, they look for what's best for the community above the individual. So that's also a cultural shock of the discernment of their rights. Although they belong to the same community, the new convert understands the law very differently, since he already has another perspective, which creates a rupture and originates a conflict. (personal communication, Tuxtla, 2015).

There are a couple of insights in this statement that can be problematic. First, in this opinion, Zanchez considers having *another* perspective, “creates a rupture and originates a conflict” in Indigenous communities. This can imply that having same perspectives brings with unity and peace and it is not, as Chiapas has had frequent troubles not related to the difference of religion. Also, that “they look for what's best for the community above the individual” nevertheless who defines community? If it is the “majority” who decides that community will be based on an exclusive religious affiliation and practices, religious intolerance is endorsed, watered down, and the minorities are left exposed for others to have “the right” to decide what is best for them. Authorities and state actors have the responsibility to protect religious freedom, without excuse, especially because the Indigenous legal system *Asamblea Comunitaria*, put in effect decisions right away, they do not need more help to do this. Indigenous Protestants are those who need support. A testimonio explains when the Asamblea decide to invade the land of the Indigenous Protestants:

“El problema fue cuando quisimos construir el templo, nos pararon la obra y llamaron la Asamblea. Nos dieron 8 días para levantar nuestros alambrados, o sea, dejar libre nuestra parcela, para que ellos entraran y hicieran lo que quisieran. Y tuvimos que levantar nuestros alambrados, los animalitos se fueron, se perdieron.” (Carlota, 2021)

The problem came when we wanted to build the temple, they stopped the construction and they called the Assembly. They gave us 8 days to remove our wire fences... I mean, to

leave our field free, open for them to come in and do whatever they wanted. We needed to do it, our little animals left, they got lost...

Land invasion is a way, perpetrators use to punish the converts, and discourage them to display their new faith, such as by having a temple. Land invasion aims to intimidate them, and for the religious majority, to demonstrate their ability to cause them further harm if they do not comply. In Indigenous communities, family bonds are strong, almost everybody is related to somebody. When a person converts to Protestantism, they have often family members among the Catholic majority who remains as part of the *Asamblea*. Thus, when a decision is made here and extreme sentences are determined against the Protestants, at times they will have somebody to come to inform them in secret. A family I interviewed in 2015 talked about the time when the *Asamblea* decided to expel them and burn their home, they have a nephew who came running to inform them, giving them time to leave the house before the crowd arrive.

Fiestas patronales

An expression of Indigenous social order is *Fiestas Patronales*, religious festivities to worship a specific Catholic saint. *Fiestas patronales* depict the community's centuries of history and tradition and unite people in a celebration that could last several days. Nevertheless, in these vivid cultural expressions, religious intolerance flourishes. Due to the vast resources needed for the festivities, asking for loans from *caciques* is quite common. *Caciques* are small dictators (Ortega, 1973); they usually belong to the community and can abuse others less privileged because of financial status and power. Although they mostly operate at the local level, historically, *caciques* were crucial to winning the wars of Independence and then the Mexican Revolution. Some *caciques* had benevolent origins, such as the charismatic leader Erasmo Urbina, founder of the union of Indigenous workers (Sindicato de Trabajadores Indigenas). Among his partners were Indigenous rural teachers who, after getting political control, made

alliances with the government to monopolize the control of transportation and the *aguardiente* (rum) and sodas business, mostly the *Coca-Cola* brand. Besides becoming effective agents of capitalist expansion, caciques are immersed in the *sistema de cargos* that orbit around Catholic symbols and *fiestas patronales*; thus, often caciques present themselves as "defenders of tradition" (Marroquin, 1996, p. 149). Overall, the association between caciques and the political party, PRI, makes them dangerous, as it has kept for more than 80 years the political domain of this political party alongside the country (Olvera, 2011, p. 316, 324-325). However, it has been slowly diverging with the strengthening of leftist parties such as MORENA, led by the Mexican, President Lopez Obrador.

Pastor, lawyer and veteran religious freedom advocate, Abdias Tobilla, elaborates more on the complexity of the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas:

Then we learned that the persecution has an economic, cultural, social and agrarian focus, which was out of focus in the religious area. Agrarian, because when the brothers were kicked out and expelled they would keep their land and their plots. Political, because when the evangelicals would recover from alcoholism, they would start defending their rights and wanted to start involving themselves in social aspects. Cultural, because the traditional Catholic Church follows a system of syncretism, a combination of Catholic issues with Hispanic Catholicism. Economical, because when many Christians converted, from five thousand to fifteen thousand Chamulas, they stopped buying alcohol and drugs, which meant that their interests were affected, so they created the myth that Protestant evangelicals were going to destroy the temple of San Juan Chamula. They believe that if people wanted to continue living in this community they would have to worship San Juan [a Catholic saint], drink posh and be a supporter of

the PRI [political party]. This was the excuse they created to begin the mass expulsions. I was in the area from the 1980s until 1993, when the last mass expulsion of 584 brothers took place. (Abdias Tobilla, personal communication, Tuxtla, 2015)

Religious intolerance in Chiapas is more than mere hostility towards religious diversity or the marginalization of Indigenous Protestants. It encompasses the profound impact that a change in religious choice has on people's behaviors, which subsequently affects the economy, alters the market, and threatens the status quo. This disruption endangers those who hold power, including the *caciques*.

In Chiapas, *caciques* control political and economic resources and have monopolized the distribution of specific products, such as candles, *posh* or *pox* (a type of rum), and sodas, which are used abundantly during *fiestas patronales*. According to Elio Avendaño, a local reporter who has extensively covered news on religion in Chiapas for several decades, the control of the *caciques* was evident during the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, when the Asamblea Comunitaria decided to expel hundreds of Protestant families from San Juan Chamula, *caciques* made Coke trucks available to transport them (Avendaño, personal communication, 2015). This action was prompted by the fact that Indigenous people who convert to Protestantism cease to participate in Fiestas patronales, as celebrating a saint contradicts their new religious identity. Additionally, they stop drinking alcohol, since the prevalent form of Protestantism in Chiapas (commonly Presbyterian) discourages its consumption, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The intervention of the *caciques* is not only about defending the tradition of alcohol consumption for religious reasons but is also economically and politically motivated. The spread of Protestantism results in a loss of economic and political power for the *caciques*, as explained by Tobilla, Protestants do not incur the debt associated with participating in Fiestas patronales.

Therefore, the caciques actively support anyone who seeks to discourage Protestants from engaging in these festivities, even if it means resorting to acts of religious intolerance and violating human security.

Next, I would like to focus on the subjectivities involved in the case study as they are rarely addressed by academic and government sources.

Religious diversity, specifically Protestantism in Indigenous communities, causes existential anxiety. Anxiety is understood as the turmoil that sparks different emotions and behaviors that can have substantial social or political consequences. "In many ways, anxiety is a personal, even idiosyncratic, condition, a psychological, not a political phenomenon" (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 242). Anxiety can transcend the individual to the collective and spread through social processes that leaders of various kinds often use to exploit and manipulate in benefit of their interests. In the case of religious intolerance in Indigenous communities, I consider this manipulation to go both ways. *Caciques* prey on the religious jealousy of the Traditionalists, fueling the anxiety towards Protestants to secure their business and control of the supplies for the *fiestas*. But also, the Traditionalists often put pressure on the local government officials to support them in their persecution of the religious minorities, threatening them to stop offering support to their ruling. Thus, even when progressive candidates are chosen as *presidente municipal*, they find it difficult to put into practice their ideals. For instance, they might be in the beginning of their administration granting the use of public spaces equality to Protestants and Catholics, yet, when facing the discontent and often fury of the Traditionalists for seeing Protestants doing what they do: "playing music very loud", they tend to comply and start denying

Protestants the access to certain services, to inflict human and ontological insecurity towards them.

Religious Intolerance as a Source of Human and Ontological Insecurity

Religious intolerance is a source of human insecurity when the state agents or community dictate how people should believe and worship. If Indigenous Protestants cannot make their own choices, they cannot live "free from fear and want." There are different levels of violence in the acts of religious intolerance. The first level is threats to human security, having "sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life" (Human Development Report, 1994), which affects their *ontological* security (Shani, 2017, p. 282) when there is psychological violence and discrimination (e.g., they are furiously interrupted in their homes when they host prayer meetings). Suppose the harassment continues to increase in intensity, harming them physically. In that case, individuals are expelled from the community; otherwise, they get killed or jailed for several years under false accusations. The most severe cases of religious intolerance have resulted in rapes (Henriquez, 2011) and murders²⁸. Such behavior is a response to the ontological insecurity that Catholic Traditionalists experience when the presence of religious diversity shakes their sense of certainty and continuity, as explained by the scholars Kinnvall and Mitzen:

Ontological insecurity refers to such a state of disruption, where subjects have lost their stabilizing anchor, their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being. From this moment of breakdown, there are two broad possibilities. First, without the practical resources to manage those questions, subjects readily become ontologically insecure, which

²⁸Farfán (2005, 141–149) elaborates further with tables that contain quantitative and qualitative information per municipality.

can translate to a motivation to restore feelings of certainty, the feeling of having those answers. One way to do that is through securitizations of subjectivity, which describes a process of transposing existential anxieties into identifiable objects of fear. It refers to adopting or falling back on simplified definitions of the world in terms of *Us* and *Them*, where the illusion of a consistent, unitary identification supplies narrative anchorage" (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 245)

In this way, religious intolerance is a *response* to ontological insecurity (from Catholic Traditionalists) and a *source* of it (for Indigenous Protestants). These are exemplifications of securitization of subjectivity, people's faith, and the attempt to force anyone to redefine the way they engage with the sacred. Religion influences the way people react to conflict. For Indigenous Protestants, it has been to "put the other cheek," forgiving and asking for forgiveness from their attackers, aiming to reconcile with them, yet the hostilities continue escalating. Nevertheless, usually, Protestants do not get support from the government in their situation, until they are expelled and must relocate, usually to the closest city of San Cristobal. The testimony of a family explains,

L: Is there any chance for you to return to your community?

T1: No, not anymore. They won't let us. We made an effort; we wanted to return. We have tried twice to talk to the authorities... He received a letter, saying that everything was ready and that we could return. Even the civil defense was going to take our things for us. We went there, we entered the community, and we saw that all the people had gathered there. Then they went for the apostle ... The civil defense was there to record everything, but the people... [the community] piled up and took the camera away from them. But even with everything [the support of civil defense], we could not

stay in the house; we could not enter [the community]. Civil defense sent an agent to protect us, a guy called "Francisco", but the people from the community blocked the road, so they couldn't go through, they could not enter, so they headed back, and we were left alone. We were scared off with stones, machetes, and everything, so we made our way back [to the city of San Cristobal] (personal communication, Lázaro Cardenas, 2015).

These religiously motivated expulsions add an extra layer of pain because Indigenous people in Mexico live by subsistence farming. All their daily life and supplies come from the farm, measured by hectares. Some lands belong to the *ejidal* [farming cooperative] and others are private and belong to individuals from the community. The above-mentioned *Asamblea Comunitaria* decides when an Indigenous Protestant is expelled. The state has reacted in various ways, none of them effective enough to protect religious freedom and the lives of the victims of religious intolerance. Based on the testimonies of the victims and local support entities, the following table summarizes the reaction of the local government to acts of religious intolerance:

Table 1. *Local Government Responses to Acts of Religious Intolerance*

Acts of religious intolerance	The reaction of the local government
1) Invasion of private land.	1) No reaction
2) Confiscation of private land.	2) No reaction or buying the confiscated land from the attackers at the cost they have established.
3) Death threats	3) Visiting the community looking for "dialogue and conciliation" between the attackers and the victims.
4) Extreme intimidation with the use of physical and psychological violence and total deprivation of essential services (water and electricity).	4) "Dialogue and conciliation" by paying fines established by the attackers as the only condition to "forgive" the "rebels" and re-establish essential services.
5) Expulsion from the community.	5) Victim relocation: 5. 1) In temporary shelters in the city (houses or buildings), the government initially rents. 5. 2) In lessened land, the government buys <i>plots</i> between 10 m ² and 20 m ² . In contrast, the victim's confiscated land is between 10,000 to 60,000 meters.

During the relocations, people are mostly moved into crowded temporary shelters, living in even higher levels of social exclusion and sadness because they cannot express their indigeneity the way they used to. They change their lifestyle from living in the field, surrounded by nature and on-farm consumption, to living in the city, forced to become employees and servants because their level of education and 'skills' in the town are not competitive. They are primarily illiterates, and their Spanish level tends to be insufficient, even for daily life communication. Interviewing a group of families living for seven years in what was supposed to be a temporary shelter, they said,

L: How are you doing in comparison to when you were living... in your home?

T1: We lost the chance to grow our vegetables. Now we have to buy everything...

L: Did your husbands leave for work?

T: My husband is resting [today]...

L: What jobs have your husbands found here in San Cristobal?

T2: The ones that know work in construction, the other ones are helpers. That's what they've been able to find.

L: Back in your community, what were your husbands' jobs?

T1: In the maize fields, on open-air, planting beans. They even had horses. They finish there, and they've come to work here. (personal communication, San Cristobal, 2015).



Figur 4 and 5. Lifestyle in Indigenous communities of Chiapas: Open fields, subsistence agriculture, and wood fire stoves.

For people living in shelters, especially those who have been living there for many years, "a space of protection turns into a space of risk" (Witteborn, 2012, p. 427). At the expense of government support, without clarity of how long they will remain there and with the constant

fear that if the government stops paying the rent of the space they are using, they have nowhere else to go. In Chiapas, the government has the power to decide whether a body remains living in dignity or not. Indigenous Protestants seem to be disciplined by the government instead of being protected. A government that misunderstands their real needs, one that, when acts or cooperates to relocate them, fails to deliver its promise to protect their right to freedom of worship, instead, seems to forget about them. Besides not bringing a lasting solution that could give them back a place to live with dignity, the government stopped paying the rents of the shelter spaces altogether, as it had experienced several groups of expelled Indigenous Protestants. This happens usually whenever new government officers come to power, and they decide not to carry on with certain duties their predecessors were fulfilling.

In and outside the community, persecuted Christians are presented as bodies that need to be seen with suspicion and contempt for not being cooperative with the tradition in *el uso y la costumbre*. In contrast, when Indigenous Protestants shared their testimonios, they reclaimed agency; they controlled the narrative of themselves, of their faith, and their experience as a religious minority. Thus, they can share how often forced displacement happens suddenly, and they are not allowed to take any possessions with them:

My mom came running to retrieve her shawl, but they didn't let her. They wanted us to sign the statement that said that we were willingly leaving. We asked them to give us three days to retrieve our belongings, but not even that. So they said, "You only have 15 minutes". So then we finally get out of there, all of us, even the assemblyman. We went home to retrieve our things. They didn't give us 15 minutes, in less than five minutes, we had to get our stuff. "Close the house now, close it!" (They said). So we left with nothing, almost nothing. You would've thought that we left everything packed, but I could only get

my backpack. My dad and my mom, whatever they could reach for. So, yes, there is a lot of pain for what the Catholics did to us... (personal communication, Lázaro Cardenas, 2015)

The attackers know that they can profit from the conflict, for they can harvest the fields and keep the Protestants' properties if they can expel them:

T3: They took away a hectare of corn that was ready to harvest. They did it following the instructions of the comisionado [government agent]... and their people...

NPO r: Were they in groups of 20 or 30 people? Have they already distributed your land? Now, do they consider it as their own?

T3: That's right, they've already been distributed. Even our orchard, where we had bananas, coffee, and cacao.

T4: We were going to arrive at the place, but it was already taken. I even sold the donkey that used to carry my fruit because there was no way I could get inside my land. If I stayed on my land, they would threaten to tie me up with a load of corn. But why, if I am the owner of the land? I have the papers of when I bought it with... [the name of the attacker] himself (personal communication, Venustiano Carranza, 2017).



Figure 6. Donated corn sacks to a group of persecuted Indigenous Protestants. They have forbidden to trade in the community and with their lands confiscated by the Catholic majority, they are unable to cultivate their corn anymore.

Based on the testimonios, the perseverance of the attackers to force the Protestants to change their minds and *volver a ser católico* [go back to being Catholic] demonstrates that the religious motivator for the expulsions is primary. The attackers are often the family of the victims; they have grown together as neighbors and friends. Their lack of *tolerance*, understanding, and acceptance of the religious experience of the Protestants turns to frustration and then into hate. Hence, harassment gradually increases, pushing the Protestants to despair, sickness, and hunger. Sometimes Indigenous Protestants surrender to the hostilities and give up their freedom of worship, accepting to contribute to the *fiestas patronales*. Yet, more often, despite all, Indigenous Protestants do not deny their religious beliefs, and the Catholic majority expels them from the community, violating their human security with the support of police and the local government. Criminals are rarely arrested, and when that happens, they can quickly escape jail time (various actors, personal communication, 2015 and 2017). The following testimonio shares the moment when, during a prayer meeting, a group of Protestants were put in jail by a government agent and the community:

Exactly on... [a date], we went to visit our sister to find out how she was doing, because we knew that she had been healed by the powerful Jesus of Nazareth, with great happiness and very excited to see her again and give her a hug for the healing that God had done. However, we didn't know what would happen when we began to pray in the house of Brother Santiago and give a lecture and a word of encouragement of what faith is according to the book of Hebrews. When we finished, our kind brother and sister asked us to stay a while longer. "Have a cup of coffee with us before you leave". We accepted very joyful...but after the coffee, we heard loud whistles and some shots being fired by rifles and other firearms... we were inside with around 20 people from the community, including children and young people. The noise they made was horrible. It was already about seven o'clock in the evening when someone said: "Santiago, leave the house with all your people." We looked out and were surprised to see that it was the agente auxiliar [government agent] people. (Indigenous pastor and wife, personal communication, 2015, San Cristobal)

The recollection of Indigenous Protestants' experiences exposes the surprise that first converts have regarding their neighbors' response. Often, they believe it possible to exercise their faith freely, have prayer meetings, or Bible studies at someone's home, altogether with anyone who wishes to join them, for they are peaceful and people meet voluntarily. Yet, as Indigenous Protestants feel the rejection from their Catholic neighbors, seen also in the blocked access to government loans, or the taxis passing by denying them service, when looking for comfort in the Bible, they see the larger picture to their situation: they are not alone in their suffering. As we saw in the section on Indigenous Theology, as they engage with the Scriptures whether personally or in community attending the temple and meeting Protestants from other places, they

see in their concrete experience, the promises of God, the ones that tell of the peace He gives, to do not be troubled or afraid (John 14:27), but also on “you will be hated by everyone because of me” (Mathew 10:22). They read about The Church as a larger community across their lands and oceans, and see themselves as part of the body of Christ whose “collective grievances create stories, even art” (Scott, 2008, p. 45) like the one we saw in the textile at the beginning of this dissertation.

Good Intentions, Tensions, and the Other Side of the Victims

Fr. José Áviles, Vicar of Peace and Justice of Chiapas, considers the intense tension between Catholics and Protestants, makes it challenging to come together even to work on social projects of common concern (personal communication, 2017). Despite the intent of regular clergy to promote respect and tolerance, these appeals are frequently ignored by the parishioners. Fr. Áviles argues the authority of the Catholic priest is usually less relevant than what one can acknowledge. People follow the *uso y la costumbre* (custom and tradition) first; listening to the priest comes second.

Problems also arise despite all the efforts of NPOs, Protestant churches, and individual human rights defenders to help the victims. Often, it seems that persecuted Christians depend on advocacy organizations, as they do not have the legal knowledge to face their situation nor know about the bureaucratic procedures to present their cases. Their terms for achieving public attention are acts like social protests by camping in the flat area in front of government offices or the cathedral of San Cristobal Martir. Yet, this strategy has not proved very effective as they can stay there camping for several months without government intervention, exposing themselves to the dangers and health risks that come with living in the elements. Truth is, frequently, urban Christians (Catholics and Protestants) come along in solidarity to support them with food and

other supplies, yet, not everyone who has approached them, presuming to be a *hermano*, has acted like such. A problem that persecuted Indigenous Protestants have faced is the corruption of presumed lawyers or pastors, who take money from the victims, promising to solve their cases and disappear or drop their cases unsolved. A testimony explains:

T1: In the year 2012, we began delivering complaints, we began to raise official records, and we also hired lawyers to help us. The lawyer who was going to assist us had another, how do I explain it? He had another strategy on how to handle things. But instead of helping us with the document, he ruined everything. Then we did not know what to do and, the government, when we went to file a lawsuit, they would take too long, and those things take time, but there was some progress. That's how the government lied to us, they got along very well with the community, and we, the Christian evangelicals, they just ignored us. A year went by. Then, two years and so on. No progress; they just have our complaint sitting there. They are stalling because the government does not want to issue an arrest warrant against the people of the ejido [common land/the community]. From there, the lawyer left us because he did not know what to do, ruined everything, and we had to manage by ourselves.

NPO r: It's not like they fired the lawyer. The lawyers just started dropping the case and left us with no legal representation. (personal communication, 2017, San Cristobal)

Others have used religious intolerance as political propaganda, aiming to be appointed to a government position. However, the most common attitude is indifference and ignorance from urban privileged Protestants who have overlooked the suffering of those in need despite living in comfort and safety. NPOs and religious freedom advocates encounter cases of victims of

religious intolerance who, after receiving support, develop an attitude of dependency, victimization, and self-pity. At times, political conflicts in Indigenous communities are falsely labeled as religious to get attention from the media and economic resources. NPOs and others are developing strategies to discern if a conflict is what it seems.

When Indigenous people convert to another religion, such as Protestantism, they *rupture* with the imagery that sees them as submissive and unchanging (Martínez García, 2005). Nonetheless, at times, the devotion and good example of Indigenous Protestants is appreciated by the attackers and, occasionally, the hostilities diminished, when the attackers see them not as their enemy anymore, as explained by religious freedom advocate, Tobilla:

The Evangelicals already knew how to present applications to the government, while the Catholics entered the project and many traditionalists were benefited. When the *presidente municipal* saw that there were already many Evangelical groups in the communities, he ordered:

“Come, we are going to kick them out, expel them and kill them”, but because they were friend with the police, they told the president: “We don’t want to go, we just realized that for years you’ve been using us to be against our brothers, you are not expelling them. Do whatever you want. We are no longer helping you because they aren’t bad people, they are good people, they have even shared their projects with us despite everything we did to them”. (Abdias Tobilla, personal communication, 2015)

The cases of religious intolerance are complex, and the testimonies convey that there is still a sense of victory, hope, and purpose. Overall, despite the non-violent methods that Indigenous Protestants have chosen to respond to acts of religious intolerance, they are, nonetheless, fighting. They will endure as much as they can before going to the authorities. As a religious minority, they have no means to change their situation “only God can”. Following Scott

(2008), in their apparent passivity or submission, prayer and faith have been their greatest acts of resistance. Outwardly, they may appear trapped, suffocated by the religious majority, but inwardly, they are free to worship, and they do. Their faith in Jesus has achieved something, like a "weapon of the weak," with memories of resistance and courage lying in wait for future generations (Scott, p. 29, paraphrase mine). As a woman who was violently expelled and has been living in a government shelter for eight years shared,

My grandson sometimes comes to visit me. During his visits, I shared the gospel with him, and he believed. His friends know he is Evangelical and mock him for that, but he does not care. He still believes. He says he wants to study to be a pastor and shares the gospel with them. He says things in the community are hard but not as they used to be when they expelled us. I have faith... our suffering now living in these tiny rooms is not in vain (personal communication, San Cristobal, 2017).

Conclusions

This research has argued that religious intolerance in Mexico has its roots in the historical constitutional monopoly of Catholicism, since colonization until *La Reforma* in 1857. That perpetuated Catholic exclusivity, and ordained hostility towards Protestants, labelled as "sects", through Catholic media, and during the liturgy, among the parishioners and Catholic authorities. These, constructed a Mexican identity with a despise towards Protestants. Religious intolerance is currently present more severely in Indigenous communities where the Indigenous legal system *Asamblea Comunitaria* facilitates efficient discriminatory actions towards Protestants. Despite the prevailing family connections between the attackers and the victims, the religious distinctions weigh heavier and primarily. It is an environment where the expulsion of the Protestants is

encouraged by the *caciques*, as it is more profitable for them and their associates to keep the *status quo*.

Religious intolerance constitutes a violation of the *human security* of individuals because it physically harms and deprives them of the right to live a *life with dignity and free from fear*. It is also hurting the *ontological security* of the victims due to the constant harassment and discrimination.

The measures taken by the Mexican government have contributed to the problem by pleasing the demands of the attackers without punishing them. When Indigenous people are expelled from their homes, cultural expressions that allow one *to experience oneself as a whole person with a sense of agency* are banished. By placing evicted Indigenous Protestants in the cities, the state deprives them of crucial elements of their indigeneity. From subsistence farming in their ancestral lands to being employed as servants, "underqualified" for the city life demands, living in usually crowded shelters at the expense of charity and government support.

Against all odds, Protestantism continues to spread in Indigenous communities, being their faith in Jesus a *weapon of the weak* that leaves a precedent that allows the next generation to live a life with *choices*, encouraged to pursue freedom of worship, even as a religious minority. Indigenous people in Mexico are divided along religious lines. This division is not a matter of race, not even merely historical, as elaborated above. It goes to the centuries of rivalry among Catholics and Protestants, who despite believing in the same Savior, still find it difficult to call each other "brother". Especially Catholic leaders and Catholic media have to start taking more boldly responsibility for the situation happening in Chiapas and ask loudly their parishioners to stop the persecution towards Protestants. This is, without exaggerating, a matter of life and death. Pope Francis calls the "ecumenism of blood" (Bordoni, 2018), referring to the

equal suffering that Christians suffer around the world, regardless of the tradition they belong to, Catholics or not. Yet, the religious intolerance in Mexico among Catholics and Protestants reminds us that we still have a lot to do to promote tolerance and ecumenism among different Christian traditions.

CHAPTER 6. CONVERSION ROADS.

TESTIMONIOS OF SUBALTERN PROTESTANTS FROM CHIAPAS

Introduction

My work focused on the kind of Subaltern Christianity born in the heat of religious intolerance in Los Altos, Chiapas, in Mexico. A place where the converts share the gospel, and the oppressors of that choice are Indigenous people. Chiapas, being a mosaic in diversity, historical complexity, environmental concerns, and conflict has been vastly studied by social scientists. However, even when researching religion in the region, broad concerns about Indigenous peoples have been prioritized, leaving many of the needs of the Protestant subgroup neglected. My research subjects were Protestants, mainly from the Evangelical tradition, who came to Christ during adulthood. People who "do not fit into one single category of oppression" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 64), as to the layer of discrimination and poverty that comes with being Indigenous, another one is added when they become Protestants.

Despite religious intolerance, Protestantism continues to grow in Chiapas. Thirty-four percent of *chiapanecos* are Protestants, and 53.9% are Catholic, compared with 79% of Catholics nationally (INEGI, 2020). As to why the concerns of the Protestant subgroup have been poorly addressed, I considered that it is because the growth of Protestantism in Indigenous communities has been seen negatively, even by the academic community. I considered the work done by the *Frayba* Human Rights Center to be a seminal force for this. The following quote from one of their reports exemplifies a popular narrative that exists towards Protestants:

"...since 1994, the federal government has been implementing a new version of *juarista* [President Benito Juarez'] policy, supporting Protestants to diminish the authority of the Catholic Church. It is possible that it is done with the purpose to implement a North American [USA] intelligence community [CIA] recommendation against the

theology of liberation, using the militant sects to divide the communities and help the contra insurgency"²⁹(p. 36, par. 3).

Breaking down this statement, "juarista policy". Benito Juarez is the Mexican president who made the division between Church and State and declared the freedom of worship (see *Historical Background*, p. 90). As to why it considers that a (new) Juarez' policy is supportive of Protestantism, is unclear, since Juarez advocated for a secular state, not submissive to any religion. Yet, it is suggesting that the Mexican government is working with Protestants and the CIA against the theology of liberation and to divide (Indigenous) communities. Although *Frayba* do not give clear sources about their assertions, their report is widely cited. The last academic works (books and journals) that refer to it are from 2001, 2008, 2017, and 2022.

Overall, in 1987, in the *First Forum of Contemporary Culture of the South Border* carried out in Chetumal, Mexico, social scientists like Cesar Moreno and Sebastian Estrella Poot gave their opinion stating that Protestants were "sects" causing troubles in the communities. Estrella stated, "The Mexican State should adopt a strong decision in defense of the *cultural identity of our people* (...) Due that this influence has modified the *normal course* of life, especially in the towns with ancestral Mayan culture, it is proposed the expulsion of the religious sects out of the country" (Estrella, as cited in Monsivais, 2002, p. 26, emphasis mine). Fabregas Puig considers that those who preach a belief different from the local culture violate human rights (Fabregas, 1991, p. 10, as cited in Martinez, 2002). Furthermore, Professor Rivera (2005) has done

²⁹Original text in Spanish: "...el Gobierno de la República está implementando, desde fines de 1994, una nueva versión de la política juarista de apoyo a protestantes para que menoscaben la autoridad de la Iglesia Católica. Es probable, también, que se trate de implementar una de las recomendaciones de la comunidad de inteligencia norteamericana en contra de la teología de la liberación, utilizando las sectas militantes para dividir las comunidades y ayudar a la contrainsurgencia." p. 36, par. 3.

exhaustive research on religion in the region. Rivera, in collaboration with various researchers, bring up findings that tell us that the first studies on religion in Chiapas also had a pervasive view of the spread of Protestantism. Rus and Wasserstrom (1980) consider the missionaries had a political agenda they could implement, taking advantage of the existing tensions in the communities, whilst Fabregas suggests that continuing cultural and religious practices that Protestants reject is crucial to guarantee the community's existence (1991, as cited in Rivera, 2005, p. 45, 47). Hence, the presence and spread of Protestantism puts in danger the communitarian structure. Additionally, during the 1980s, scholars showed concern about the USA's imperialist mechanisms to penetrate the rural areas of Latin America using religious groups. From these lenses, the spread of Protestantism in Chiapas was alarming, seen as an expression of successful (modern) colonial expansion (Farfán, 2005, p. 39). Nevertheless, these prejudices were determined misleading when confronted with the reality unveiled in the local contexts (Bastian, 1997). It was an *epistemological trap*, "the mediation between a systemic analysis that introduces individuals as *victims* of social forces and historical processes; and a methodological individualism that assumes the *freedom* of the individual, whose destiny depends on its own rational options" (Hernandez Castillo, 1993, p. 182, as cited in Farfán, 2005, p. 42, emphasis and translation mine). This research found such a *trap*; thus, it consists on testing to "transcend the worries that placed religious change as a symptom of identity and cultural destruction" (Farfán, 2005, p. 54, translation mine). Instead, it encourages one to be open to reading the people's perspectives directly involved in the process by centering the voices of Indigenous peoples' research (Dolores, 2019).

As explained in chapter 5, vast scientific work has been done focusing on the social and political aspects of religious intolerance in Chiapas, yet these often ignore endogenous

explanations for conversion. The present chapter shares conversion from Indigenous perspectives and reasons they gave regarding why and how they came to believe in Jesus. The Protestants here, being a religious minority experiencing oppression, emerge as subalterns with a voice able to tell of their "every day agency" (Richmond, 2019).

The subdivisions show the main reasons for conversion among the *testimonialista*, someone giving a testimonio (DelgadoBernalet al., 2012), mainly citing them word by word, and occasionally narrating their stories. Each subdivision presents the Chiapas context and elaborates on the challenges that Indigenous people deal with that are addressed in their experiences of conversion. I have done my best to convey this in *relationality*: with deep reciprocity, respect, in relationship, responsibility, and connection with the local (Klein & Simpson, para. 14, cited in Tynan, 2021, p. 604).

Miraculous Healing

A miracle is often understood as an outstanding or unusual event manifesting supernatural intervention in human affairs (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), often fulfilling a promise made by a divine messenger or being: an angel, a prophet, or God. Moreover, as I have learned in Christian circles, the essence of a miracle is the timing, not the act in itself. Therefore, a miracle, although it could be explained scientifically, does not lose relevance, for it happened exactly when and how God wanted it. In this research, miracles happened in responding to a person's latent need.

Towns in Chiapas have the first place in social exclusion at the national level. In this case, 67.13% of their *municipios* are registered with 'high' or 'very high' levels of social exclusion (CONAPO, 2010). Concerning health, the poor care given to Indigenous peoples is alarming. There are no hospitals or clinics near their communities. They must walk for several

kilometers, sometimes even days, primarily on foot (Cevallos, 2009). Thus, often, sick people die on the way before getting access to healthcare services. Governor of Indigenous Peoples and Communities, Ana Lucía Zavala, accused the corruption of government officials that consistently diverted funds assigned to Indigenous communities for their gain (Bautista, 2020). Additionally, despite the growing improvement and investment in opening new clinics and hospitals, such as *Hospital de las Culturas* in San Cristobal, there is a growing mistrust and fear from Indigenous people to get medical attention there. Whether for a bad reputation of stories heard about people who died due to negligence or fear in general towards hospitals.

Conversion following miraculous healing can be explained with an *utilitarist* approach (Hefner, 1993; Pollock, 1993; Steinga & Clearly, 2007); Indigenous people convert because it addresses a common need, a practical solution to their problem, the need for healing. Almost every person I talked to had a story to tell about it. The following story encompasses the main elements present in the testimonios on miraculous healing:

Once, a man from an Indigenous community was very sick. He had a cough that had gotten worse until he spat up blood. Visiting the doctor, he found out he had tuberculosis and it was too late to do anything about it. He left one morning, saying goodbye to his family. Aiming to die in the city, he wanted to spare them the pain of seeing him gone in agony. Arriving at Tuxtla, he sits on a sidewalk, tired, looking down. Someone saw him and invited him to *el templo* (a Protestant church³⁰), and he followed. Once inside, he heard the message and talked to people about his situation. People at *el*

³⁰ In Mexico people often refer to a Protestant place of worship, as *templo* (which means temple). Makes sense since many worship services in the Protestant tradition are held in rental spaces that work for other purposes during the week, such as party halls, courtyards in open air, etc. Catholic churches are referred to as *iglesia* (church) or *catedral* (cathedral) if it is big. One can tell from which Christian tradition a person is by hearing to the way they refer to their place of worship.

templo gathered and prayed for him, and he felt better. He felt that whatever was inside his chest giving him pain was gone. He believed in Jesus and returned home with a Bible, full of excitement and energy. He wanted to tell his family everything. When his wife saw him, she was surprised. She may neither understand nor agree with the Protestant tradition, but she knew that her husband was now healed, and there was no way to explain it but to attribute it to a miracle and to the one he prayed to. The couple started to read the Bible and pray together, to tune into Protestant radio stations to listen to the sermons, and little by little, they grew in their understanding of this new faith (Castelazo, personal communication 2015).

Just like this, the man in this story became an evangelist, an enthusiastic advocate of the faith he just received, which, however, happens to be in solid opposition to Catholic Traditionalism, something that he may not know yet. This story has common elements in the spread of Protestantism in Chiapas that put the Indigenous convert at the center of the religious proselytism sphere. First, the place where the converts hear the message of salvation. It is often outside of their community, during their travels or, in the case of men, when they migrate for long periods of time to work and then return to their communities.

Second, the growth and understanding of their faith: the Bible (in the Indigenous language, given to them for free most of the times); and Protestant radio stations where they can hear a sermon remotely. Whilst for Christians around the world, joining to a service remotely (whether livestream or watching a pre-recorded sermon on YouTube) became a shocking novelty during the COVID-19 pandemic. For Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas, it has been common practice for several decades, with the radio broadcastings. Chiapas has 67 Protestant radio stations, which cover almost half of the entire state, without considering the radio stations that

reach from Guatemala. All these are vastly "irregular", working mostly without government-issued license, which causes alarm, particularly to the Catholics who "waited to be legal" to have their first radio station in 2011 (Martínez Mendoza, 2014). For Protestants, the radio is a reliable source. Because they are a religious minority, they do not tend to have a *templo* nearby, and not everyone can afford to travel for three, six hours, or half a day to get to one; therefore, hearing sermons, Bible studies, or worship music is common, and, desirable because the content is given in their Indigenous languages.

I could interview a pastor who was very excited for he had recently been invited to broadcast on the radio the word of God in Tzotzil, his native language, *"I cannot go very far with my bicycle to talk to people, sometimes it rains very hard, and I need to go by foot. But with the radio, many more people can hear the message without me being there"* (personal communication, 2017). Also, not everyone who tunes into Protestant radio stations belongs to this tradition. When I was working for the government, during a fieldtrip to distribute some donations to Indigenous communities, our driver, who was not a Protestant, tuned into a Protestant radio station, and stayed listening to it the entire trip. When I asked him why he would listen to it if he is not a Protestant, he said *"because I like the message and it makes me feel good to hear it"*. At another time, when doing fieldwork for this dissertation, we were walking in the places that were significant in a convert's life; he wanted to show us where some of the things he experienced happened. While looking at the cornfields and the clear blue sky, suddenly the weather changed. We heard a strong thunder, and a heavy rain started to fall, thus, we rushed into a neighbor's home. He accepted us in without questioning us. He was not a Protestant, yet he was listening to worship music in Tzotzil, and he was humming it *"It is good music,"* he said.

Thirdly, the people who hear the message from the convert are the immediate family and friends. Religious proselytism often happens, almost organically, to other people in the community, although not without opposition (see Chapter 5). Miraculous healing is powerful; it is undeniably *real* (Eliade, 1979). It is an extraordinary event witnessed in someone else's life or experienced in one's life. Healing happened in such a way that people remember details of the sensory elements, the time of the event, and the people involved:

Ese día como a las dos de la tarde fuimos a visitar a José Martínez, un hermano de cincuenta años de edad, con su esposa, la señora Remedios, quien pidió una oración por la razón de que tenía una enfermedad bastante fuerte, pues se le había adormecido la mitad de su cuerpo, y se levantaba y caminaba acompañada de su nuera porque no podía caminar sola a causa de esa misma situación. Cuando la mayoría de las personas que nos acompañaban alzaron la voz para decir que esta mujer había sanado, corrió la voz de que empezó a trabajar, a lavar su ropa.

At around two in the afternoon, we visited Jose Martinez, a fifty-year-old brother, and his wife, Remedios, who asked us to pray, for she had a very strong illness. Half her body was numb, and she had to walk with help from her daughter-in-law. Most of our people started to spread the Word that she had healed, and could now work and wash her clothes (pastor, San Cristobal, personal communication, October 2015, San Cristobal).

The following testimonio is from Remedios, the woman they referred to in the previous quote. Her experience with personal healing has happened more than once. The first time, it spread in the community. Her healing was the starting point for a *revival* to happen in the community, as people got a better understanding of their faith in their own terms (Robbins, 2004, p. 88), outpourings of the Holy Spirit (i.e. speaking in tongues, more miraculous healing, etc.) occur,

thus, within four months there were already about 30 converts of different ages gathering together to pray from time to time. They saw opposition from their neighbors, and tensions arose, thus, they talked to the government agent, the *comisionado* to explain their motives. That the only thing they wanted was to gather peacefully and respectfully in their homes and welcome anyone who wanted to join them. The next time they gathered together to pray, they were already spending time together having bread and coffee when someone knocked at their door. They opened and saw a multitude of neighbors, with the *comisionado*, carrying machetes and wood sticks. Furious, they grabbed the men and crammed them in a tiny prison cell, where they stayed overnight, standing, and without food, water, nor toilet breaks. They were released the following morning, along with their families, women, children, infants, and elders, Remedios included. This is *persecution*; persecution goes beyond thought and prejudice. It comprises *action* (Under Caesar's Sword, n.d.). One among many cases where civil servants provide public resources to use violence that violates the human security that they have committed to protect (SSPC, 2021).

In the meantime, the expelled Protestants wait. I interviewed Remedios and her group in a shelter in San Cristobal where, at the time I am writing these lines, they have been living for almost 10 years. She is the one who told me her testimonio of another time she experienced personal healing in the shelter. The religious experience has to be constant for the converts to keep believing, especially when they experience persecution.

Aquí en el albergue tenía yo también una bola así grandota en la mano, ya no podría cocinar ni agarrar la escoba. Mi esposo me dijo, "te voy a llevar al hospital para que te operen" y yo le dije no, no quiero ir. Lo que hice, hermanita, me encerré en mi cuarto y me ore tres veces y dije, "¡Opérame tu mismo Señor, no quiero ir a la clínica!" Y lo que ya no se es que en la noche o en el día es que ya estaba buena. ¡Ay, hermanita, yo

tengo mucha fe en el Señor! cuando me vio mi esposo me dijo "¡Mira tu mano!" yo dije "¡¿eh?! Santiago mira, ya no hay nada." ay, llora él y lloro yo, ay, "¡Gracias Padre!" [llanto] Por eso yo tengo mucha fe. Ya cuando Dios me llame, ahí estaré yo, hermanita, porque yo ya he visto la bendición de Dios... sí, yo lo he visto, con todo mi corazón. El Señor es el que nos cura, nos sana, Él es el buen médico. Si le pedimos de todo corazón, Él es el único que nos ayuda."

Here in the shelter, a giant tumor appeared in my hand. I could neither cook nor hold the broom. My husband said, "I will take you to the hospital for surgery," and I told him I did not want to go. What I did was I locked myself in the room, and I prayed three times. I said, "You, you operate on me, Lord. I do not want to go to the clinic!" and I do not know how, but it was night, and by the following day, I was well already. Oh, sister, I have so much faith in the Lord! When my husband saw me, he said, "look at your hand!" and I looked "eh?!" he cried, and I cried, saying, "Thank you, Father" [sobs]. That is why I have so much faith. Whenever the Lord calls me to His presence there, I will be because I have seen God's blessing... yes, I have seen it with all my heart. The Lord is the one who heals us. He is the good doctor. If we ask Him with all of our hearts, He is the only one who helps us. (Consuelo, personal communication, San Cristobal, 2021)

The healing can also occur with a group intervention where people gather to pray for the sick person. The places where the intercession (prayer on behalf of someone else) happens are multiple. At churches, when the invited person attended feeling curious and open to receiving an unconventional solution for their need, as said below:

Un hermano me llevó a su casa y me dijo: "Vas a creer en Dios." "Sí", le dije. El hermano pastor Nicolás me dio un cuarto y me dijo: "Bueno, ya estás aquí." Eso me

ayudó bastante. Un día, ya amaneciendo para domingo, viene a la iglesia. Entonces se juntaron todos los hermanos y me dijeron “No tengas miedo, hermano Miguel. Nada más cree en Dios.” Respondí: “Sí voy a creer.” Luego caí en tierra y gracias a Dios mi problema tuvo solución [mi columna, cabeza y cuerpo solían doler mucho]. Ahora ya estoy bien.

A brother took me to his home and told me: "You are going to believe in God." "Yes," I said. Pastor Nicolás gave me a room and said, "Well, you're here." That helped me a lot. One day, on Sunday, I went to church. And all the brothers got together and said, "Don't be afraid, brother Miguel. Just believe in God." I answered: "Yes, I will believe." Then I fell on the ground, and thank God my problem was solved [my spine, head, and body used to hurt a lot]. Now I'm fine. (Lazaro Cardenas, 2015)

Religious proselytism is especially common among Indigenous Protestants. Indigenous believers consider it their responsibility and *gozo* (joy) to share the gospel. Often, the *first stages* of conversion happen when the *advocate* or evangelist visits people (potential *converts*) in their homes when they are in jail or at the hospital. Conversions happen in a complex convergence of proper circumstances, time, and engaged people (Rambo, 1993, p. 87). Two elders shared:

Nosotros aceptamos la palabra de Dios por necesidad, porque teníamos un hijo que se accidentó. Y cuando estábamos ahí en el hospital es que llegaron hermanos a predicar la palabra, y fue cuando estábamos ahí que nos bendijeron con La Palabra, porque Dios sabe lo que necesitábamos. Ellos preguntaron qué cual era nuestro problema y dijeron "¿y que piensa usted de Dios?" porque seguido clamamos a Dios pero sin fundamento y cuando la necesidad es que aceptamos a Dios. Mencionaron nombres de

toda la familia, nombres que nunca les habíamos platicado, nos sorprendimos. Fue entonces que nosotros y mi hijo decidimos aceptar de Dios... ya luego nos dieron de alta, y con más ganas buscamos de las cosas de Dios.

We accepted the Word of God out of need because we had a son that had an accident. We were at the hospital when some brothers came to preach the Word. We were there when they blessed us because God knew what we needed. They asked, "What is your problem? What do you think about God?". Right away, we cry out to God... because we had a great need to accept God... They mentioned the names of all of our family members, words that we never said to them; we were amazed. It was when we, my wife, me, and my son, decided to accept God... later, we were discharged, and with even more fervor, we were seeking the way of the Lord. (Noe, personal communication, Venustiano Carranza, 2021)

Healing came after running out of options with doctors, curanderos, and other traditional healers. People then were open to putting to the test the message heard, and, thus, requested for a cure:

A veces contamos en la iglesia nuestro testimonio como antes en el mundo gastamos el dinero en pura medicina. Ahora trabajo dos o tres veces a la semana y lo demás se lo dedico a Dios. Me gusta salir o estar detrás de los pastores y del líder. Ahora ya estoy sana, ya no me da esa enfermedad que siempre me daba. Tenía mucha infección en el estómago, ahorita, gracias a Dios, nos sano casi a la mayoría de nosotros. Tengo una hermanita que en Tuxtla también encontró su sanidad. Antes sufríamos por enfermedad, ahora entramos todos porque vimos que en la Iglesia hay sanidad.

Sometimes we share our testimony in the church because we would spend all of our money on medicine before. Now I work two or three times a week, and the rest of my time is set aside for God. I like to go out and be behind the pastors and the leader. Now I'm healthy. I no longer get sick from that disease I had. I always had stomach infections. Right now, thanks to God, most of us have been healed. I have a little sister in Tuxtla who also found her healing. Before we suffered from illness, now we all go to church because we know it was a place of healing. (Roberta, personal communication, Lazaro Cardenas, 2015)

Desde hace como 20 años recibí la palabra de Dios... por la enfermedad de mi esposa,.. ella estaba mala, y primero la llevamos con curanderos, con doctores y nada, ya con la palabra de Dios tuvo mejoría... nos quitaron todo pero no le damos importancia... por eso seguimos creyendo aun con los problemas...

Twenty years ago, I received the Word of God due to my wife's disease... she was unwell. First, we took her to witch doctors, but nothing. She got better with the Word of God. They took away from us everything, but we do not consider such things important. That is why we keep believing despite the problems... (Lazaro, personal communication, Venustiano Carranza, 2021)

Healing in Response to Faithful and Skeptical Prayers Alike

Indigenous people, like rational beings, evaluate the new faith presented and examine it in light of their life, like the story of Christians in Papua New Guinea who tested their new faith (Robbins, 2004) by observing if a taro tree would grow if they stopped worshipping the bones of

their ancestors. In Chiapas, the stories shared tell of prayers before conversion, prayers to test the truthfulness of the gospel. When a significant need arises, they turn to pray, and when their need is solved, they believe and they "surrender".

It is pertinent to mention that the definition of a miracle responds to a person's needs and desires. In the testimonies collected, despite the poverty and very challenging social contexts, children were considered as a blessing and a symbol of prosperity. Even in places like the crowded shelters, people mentioned more than once, "Dios nos ha prosperado" (God has prospered us), pointing at the children running around. Chiapas has one of the highest population growth rates, 2.0% yearly, which means an expansionary population pyramid (INEGI, 2011). Among women, testimonios were often about miracles regarding motherhood, pregnancy, and children:

Como la hermana Elba, mi primera hija cuando aceptamos la palabra de Dios, dijimos el testimonio, vimos el poder de Dios, todas, la hermana Rosa, y con todo nació mi hijito bien, y se enfermó después de tres días. Orábamos, así por siete días. Los doctores dijeron que tenía abierto el corazoncito el bebe, pero ahí, con la gloria de Dios se sanó. Estábamos en el hospital cuando entró un doctor, blanca su camisa, azul su pantalón y amarillo su zapato donde estoy. Pero yo estaba orando. cómo está chiquita la cama donde estaba mi bebe, fue cuando lo vi entrar. Vi que tenía una bola de algodón que se cayó al piso, luego lo recogió y se fue. En ese momento se sanó mi bebé. Yo creo que ese doctor fue el Señor porque se sanó mi bebe.

I was with sister Elba, me, and my elder daughter when we heard the Word of God, we the power of God, all of us, sister Rosa. Happened that my little son was born, and he got sick after three days. We prayed for seven days. Doctors said that he had an

injury in his heart, but he was healed with God's glory. We were in the hospital when a doctor came in. He was wearing a white t-shirt, blue pants, and yellow shoes. I was praying. I could see him because my son's bed was small. I saw him when he came into the room. I saw him carrying a cotton ball that fell on the floor. He picked it up and left. At that moment, my baby was healed. I believe that the doctor was the Lord because my baby was healed. (Marta, personal communication, Las Margaritas, 2021)

The following testimony is from a man in his 30s. He heard the gospel from his neighbor, who told him about the power of prayer, which he tested when he needed healing. His prayer was answered following a revelation in his dreams. His wife and infant child were present when he shared the story:]

El hizo misericordia en mi vida. Hermana, yo oraba, no cesaba de orar, le pedía "tenga misericordia, te pido, Señor que me des sanidad" Y fue una noche, hermana a las 12:45 me reveló el Señor dijo "Hijo, tu enfermedad, tiene medicina". En mi sueño llegué a un hospital, y ahí me dijeron "No te preocupes, tu enfermedad tiene medicina". Luego me desperté contento, porque sabía que el Señor me iba a sanar. Y los siguientes días anduve malo sacando todo, gusanos, como moco, pero ya luego sané [su esposa asentía con la cabeza mientras él contaba esto].

He showed me mercy, my sister. I never ceased praying. I asked Him, "Please have mercy on me, I ask you, Lord, please give me healing". It was a night, sister, around 12:45 that the Lord revealed to me, "My son, there is medicine for your disease". I arrived in a hospital in my dream, where they told me, "Do not worry, there is medicine for your disease". When I woke up, I was very happy because I knew that the Lord was

going to heal me. The next few days, I was very unwell, throwing out everything, worms, like mucus... but after this, I was healed [his wife nodded as he shared the story]

The prayer or miracle can happen to connect various people who were praying simultaneously from different locations. A group primarily remembered, "One day, we were about to eat beans with weevils. In the middle of that, God provided, and we ate well because God sent sister Petra with some chicken for us" (personal communication, Las Margaritas, 2021). Petra is not from their community. She lives 6 hours away, within car distance, in San Cristobal. Petra had also been praying for a way to help them, and she went that morning "moved by the Spirit" to bring them some food.



Figure 7. A common landscape in *Los Altos*.
The lack of roads makes walking the only way to access some communities.

Revelation in Dreams

Perhaps one of the most unique reasons for conversion I have found among Indigenous Protestants is a conversion that follows a dream revelation. This is *intersectionality* (Kinnvall, 2004), where indigeneity and faith in Christ combine. Both the Bible and *la costumbre* recognize

the authority of the dreams (Jacorzynski, 2017). In the Bible, there are numerous recollections of people hearing revelation from God regardless of their social status, such as King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2) and people like Joseph, who was sold as a slave when he was summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream (Genesis 41). For Indigenous people, dreams often tell of an event that is going to happen, and when it comes true, they believe. Promises connected to a vital need in their lives, whether physical or spiritual, as a response to their prayers or not, as an event that happened one day without them expecting it. Revelation in dreams can be *relationality*, interconnection of humans and 'other-than-humans' (Trowsell et al., 2022), beings that, at times, are described as God's messengers, someone who comes bringing answers and sense-making of the complex (and often very painful) realities they live (Querayazu, 2021, p. 886).

The following two testimonies were collected in a community about four hours' drive from the city of San Cristobal. It is a community with very high levels of religious intolerance. In 2015, I met one of its members who had been expelled with a group of 20 families who converted in a period of a year. Their homes were destroyed, their lands taken, and they were forced to live in a shelter for several months. After years of negotiation (when I saw them again in 2021), they were able to return to their communities but with many restrictions in newly purchased land where new homes are being built. Yet, the situation is tense with their Catholic neighbors. They have been forbidden to share the gospel with any more people from the community; the visitors they have also are limited and have to be handled with discretion. They cannot host parties nor large events, which saddens them because they wish to welcome Christians from other places to worship together. When I visited the community, I was asked to sit in the back of the car and look down. I tasted, for a moment, what the *hermanos* in *comunidad*

feel on a daily basis. I felt what it is to be ontologically insecure; I experienced what security as a *thick signifier* is, positioned as an individual among groups in the *context* of "a wider order of meaning" that defines threats and how one relates to one another framed in structural relations (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 744-745, paraphrase mine). One where the Catholic majority, although *anxious*, has the advantage for despite being Indigenous people dealing with the discrimination that comes with their race and skin tone (Perez, 2017, p. 40), in their community, they decide on the basis of religion, who gets access to the resources, and more, the right to be, to remain in the same space, and often, they get to decide who lives. Therefore, Indigenous Protestants experience a double (triple in the case of women) layer of subalternity. One showed when the *hermanoleader* of the group, sitting as copilot, looked nervous as soon as we entered the community. People gathered around the car to look inside; they looked upset we were there and they treated us with suspicion, but they let us pass.

When we finally arrived at where the *hermanos* lived, we felt relief; we felt safe in *their terms*, a place where they could worship Jesus openly and live him out the best they could. Remembering the *symbolic interactionist* point of view, conversion is seen as a change in the way individuals see inwardly and outwardly, themselves, the world around them, and God, interpreting everything from the lenses of their new religion, which also changes their identity and makes them different (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 39). Moreover, their new identity in Christ makes them *feel* different and inspires them to pursue to be more than different, *better* people. Loving neighbors, loving their enemy, which they have shown on several occasions, such as when the same people who persecuted them later asked for their help to fill up an application for a temporary work permit in North America.

Persecution brings hardships, but, at times, unexpected advantages. As people are forced to leave their community, they engage at some point in their pursuit for justice with non-Indigenous and even non-Mexican Christians. People with whom, in communal worship and other activities, they gain understanding and experience in areas that are otherwise hard to know if they had stayed in their Indigenous community all the time, such happened with Christian Aboriginal Australians creating new networks beyond their kin (Swain & Rose, 1988, p. 261).

Despite all this 'international' experience, when we arrived at the community of the *hermanos*, one could see what this Indigenous Protestantism is about. Humble homes in the hills, with the fog of the day, mud under the feet, and constant rain. They share everything, even the rooms where they sleep, while their homes that were destroyed by the community are being rebuilt. Women cook together on the patio in a big pot where whatever ingredient they have available is added to the soup. One person brings corn, another one potato, etc., while the others make the tortillas. Chores are also distributed, and everything feels natural (for them). The children are held and watched by everyone; it is difficult to know who are the actual parents. The atmosphere is joyful and peaceful. Their native language is Tojolabal, and the families that shared their stories of conversion often used the help of one of them to do a live translation in Spanish for me.

'Tomas' is a member of this group, but he is also the pastor. He is one among other Indigenous Protestant leaders I met who became the pastor without any kind of formal training. His role as pastor was given by the Protestant group and humbly accepted by him as a divine "calling",= after years of hard work and service. Tomas is a fervent evangelist; he has a teachable heart and simple manners, and although he cannot share the gospel with his neighbors because he has forbidden to make any religious proselytism in the community (a prohibition that is a

violation of religious freedom), he does not fight, he rather goes by foot to other places, farther away, to people who live in even higher levels of social exclusion. In one of these communities that have been touched by Tomas' devotion, I could talk to a family who had converted less than a year ago. One man heard the gospel when he migrated to the United States, and one of them when he was a temporary worker in the city of Tuxtla. These experiences were how they first knew about Jesus, but it was through Tomas' evangelistic efforts that they believed. Two of the men from this community shared how dreams were a crucial element in their conversion experience. The following is from a man who was in his 50s. He was the first to accept Jesus, and after him, his wife, and then daughter and son-in-law converted, each one at different times.

Tuve una revelación, donde Dios me decía un día, en la noche, que ese camino donde voy no voy bien, y entonces me dijo que debía parar porque si seguía en ese camino no puedo regresar bien. Y en eso faltaban dos días para que yo aceptara a Jesús. Pero me vino a ver algo así como una persona con vestido blanco, y me ofreció que creyera en Dios. Y luego hermanos, al otro día, Dios me mandó a otra persona que me iba a traer palabra, Dios me dijo que lo aceptara... eran como las 3 de la mañana cuando yo estaba despierto analizando este sueño, pensando, qué será esto. "¿Mujer, que será esto?" a cada rato salía de mi casa a ver quien estaba llegando, me iba para allá y para acá, pero no llegó en ese momento. Entonces llegó las 6, las 7, las 8, entonces le dije a mis hijas. Y es que nosotros tenemos la costumbre de ir a la milpa, y les dije vamos. Pero yo no sé por qué estaba muy contento, empecé a llorar. Y luego entonces fue como a las 9, o 9:30, y pensé, ya nadie va a venir, entonces me fui ahí al rinconcito de la casa, y fue en ese momento que estaba cantando, afilando mi machete, y en ese momento yo ya no miraba las horas, pero de repente no sé de donde salió mi hermano [an Indigenous evangelist]. Y

cuando él tocó el alambrado en ese momento no sé que vino en mi, empecé a llorar, empecé a gritar [llanto] y es que le dije "¡Eres tú el que iba a venir! ¡Este es el que mandó Dios!" Y empezamos a platicar en ese momento y ahí acepté a Dios.

God revealed to me one day, it was evening, that the path I was walking was wrong and needed to stop because that path would not let me return well. This was two days before I accepted Jesus. It was a person wearing white, offering me to believe in God... next day, God sent another person saying that somebody was going to share the Word of God, offering me to accept it. It was three in the morning when I was awake, analyzing my dream, and thinking about what it could be. I asked my wife, "Woman, what this could be?" I went out of the house to check if someone was coming. I was moving from one way to the other, but nobody came at this moment. It was 6 am, 7 am, at 8 am, I told my daughters to go to the cornfield because this is what we do. I do not know why I was already so happy, so much I started to cry. At about 9 or 9:30, I thought that nobody would come, so I went to a corner of my house. I was singing, sharpening my machete; at that moment, I was not even looking at the clock anymore. Suddenly, my brother came out. He touched the wire fence. I don't know what came to me that I started crying, I began to shout [sobs], and I told him, "It is you, the one who was going to come! You are the one that God sent" and we started talking, and at that precise moment, I accepted God.(Ponciano, personal communication, Las Margaritas, 2021)

This conversion can be seen with an *intellectual* approach people converting aiming to find the *meaning* of life (Robbins, 2004) and find their "true identity" (Corr, 2007, p. 191). The testimony states, "the path I was walking was wrong", he expresses the distress of seeing time passing by

without the one bringing "the word of God" and the following rejoicing when "the one that God sent" came and he accepted his message.

After Seeing a Drastic Positive Change in a Family Member

Conversion points to *relationality*, to connectedness, mostly, do not happen in isolation. To exist they need relationships (Wijngaarden, 2022). When a person believes in Jesus and lives their faith in the Protestant tradition, they exercise relationality, as they remain deeply implicated in the lives of others and come into being with and for the other (Drichel, 2019, p. 6). In the stories shared, commonly, the conversion starts with a family member who shares the *gospel* and their *testimonio*, the public profession of a faith journey and relationship with God (Gilden, 2019), with the rest. Insisting they join in church services or receive support in prayer for specific needs. Praying and fasting for a family member to come to Christ is expected, although it may take a while for the person to accept: *"I used to cry out to Him 'How I wish to see my parents at your feet, Lord.' I think that my brothers and I prayed and fasted for almost a year until my parents converted...now all of us are Christians"* (personal communication, San Cristobal, 2021).

Prayers alone are not enough for conversion; the person has to demonstrate a change of character and bad habits. Conversion can provide a person with a renewed sense of worth. Some of the testimonios I heard were from women who were physically abused by their spouses who turned into "good men" after believing in Jesus. The following testimonio is from a young woman who heard the gospel from her father, the first Protestant convert in her family. She shared how she witnessed her father's change of behavior:

Yo no quería ir [al templo protestante] porque era muy católica. Tuve mi primera comunión y mi confirmación allá en la iglesia... mi papá como era catequista católico fue

quien me enseñó la doctrina. Él se emborrachaba. Cuando se vino nosotros lo seguimos cada domingo a la iglesia católica... Cuando él se cambió, no nos gustó. Tanto fue el enojo, que lo critiqué y me burlé muchas veces de él. Ahora me estoy arrepintiendo de lo que hice, pero igual no entendía. Mi papá nos decía siempre de Dios y que hay un mejor camino. Tengo un hermano de 27 años que no quería oír. Cuando hablaba mi papá, mi hermano ponía a lo más alto el volumen de su grabadora de música para no escucharlo. Nosotros no hacíamos eso, pero tampoco queremos escuchar lo que nos decían. Le decíamos a mi papá: 'Vete tú con tu Dios, nosotros también tenemos nuestro Dios.' Pero gracias a mi papá, que nunca dejó de orar por nosotros.

I didn't want to go [to the Protestant temple] because I was very Catholic. I had my first communion and my confirmation there in the church... Then, my father as a Catholic catechist, was the one who taught me the doctrine. He used to get drunk. When he came home, we followed him every Sunday to the Catholic Church, because that was what he taught us. We didn't like it when he converted. We were so angry that we often criticized and mocked him. Now I'm regretting it, but I still didn't understand. My dad would always tell us about God and how there was a better way. I have a brother of 27 years old who didn't want to listen to him. When my dad spoke [shared the gospel with him], my brother used to turn up the volume of his music recorder so he wouldn't hear... We used to tell my dad: "You go with your God, we also have our God." But thanks to my dad, who never stopped praying for us. (personal communication, Lazaro Cardenas, 2017)

Sometimes, conversion happens while grieving the death of a family member because people are hurting and they need to be comforted; they may not care if it comes from someone from a different religious tradition. 'Carmela', a woman in her 60s, shared her story. Among all the groups I could talk to, she belonged to the one that was experiencing the worse difficulties at the moment. The community had blocked their access to current water and they had little electricity. The taxis were forbidden to offer service to the Protestants; thus, they had to walk long distances, even elders, sick people, or during the storms. They were also forbidden to trade; they could not sell their products, just buy, and they could not access government grants as whenever they visited the local government office, the agents, who were Catholics, refused to let them submit their applications. Things were hard; they were impoverished, and getting desperate, and with the passing of time, things just got worse for Protestants in their community. I talked to Carmela and another four *hermanos* in a small room with a sheet metal roof next to the patio where the Protestant community often gathered to pray, worship, and have fellowships. Carmela dealt with health issues; she was a small and thin woman, and she looked tired and sad about the situation. She shared, in detail, what they had been going through, and she got angry as she talked about it, yet, when I asked her about how she came to believe in Jesus, her face lightened up:

A mi tiene 9 años que me acerqué el Señor, por la muerte de mi nieto. Mi esposo era malísimo, decía que yo me largara, porque es evangélico mi hijo mayor, era el único, y gracias a Dios por eso... y ahí tuvo su niño mi nuera y donde que no le dieron chance que lo enterraran en el panteón [por ser evangélico su papá] y bajaron todos los hermanos de...[una comunidad vecina] y lo velamos en mi casa porque estaba fresca mi nuera [recién había dado a luz]... Y ahí me convertí al escuchar los cantos, las palabras que nos

vino a decir el pastor, y ahí acepté al Señor, callada mi boca, lo acepté, sin decirle a mis hijos, y mis hijas, porque yo estaba solita, yo y mi hijo mayor nomas creímos el evangelio.

9 years ago, I came closer to the Lord because of the death of my grandchild... My husband was very mean, he used to tell me to leave...My first born son was Evangelical, he was the only one in the family, thanks God for that... [his wife]My daughter-in-law had her child, and when he died, they [the community] did not let them bury him in the cemetery [because his father was Evangelical]. All the brothers came along from [a neighboring town], and we held the funeral at my home because my daughter-in-law had just given birth. There, I converted, after listening to the songs and the words that the pastor came to share with us. I accepted the Lord and kept quiet, without telling my children or daughters-in-law, because I was alone. Just me and my son believe in the gospel.

This is when I see how faith can bring ontological security, the psychological security of the self, providing answers to existential questions even while dealing with other insecurities. Conversion can come at a time when the person is vulnerable, such as when grieving a loved one or experiencing a great loss of another kind. One may wonder if the person would have accepted a different religious choice if it was not for such circumstances present, yet, the awareness and commitment towards the chosen religion, shows its "genuineness", if one may say, in persecution. Although at the moment of conversion, accepting Jesus gave them a sense of hope and inner peace, the troubles of life, the suffocating religious discrimination in the community, and the constant violation of their human security may invite them to renounce, to stop believing

as their social situation most likely would get easier. Nevertheless, they persist through the trials, years, and further losses.

Overcoming Addictions and Alcoholism

Alcoholism is a repeated problem in Indigenous communities. The consumption of alcohol is connected to the frequent religious festivities of the Catholic tradition. People are introduced to *el trago* (the consumption of alcohol) from an early age. In places like San Juan Chamula, one can see women carrying their offering of posh or pox (a type of rum) to the temple and stopping to wet their finger in some posh to give it to their babies. Toddlers and children drink a little more as a way to get used to it. Alcohol consumption, as one would expect, leads to addiction and daily consumption, not only during religious festivities. Alcoholism brings with it other problems, such as domestic violence and poverty, since people use their salary to purchase alcohol instead of the basic home supplies for their families. The prominent Protestant tradition in Chiapas discourages alcohol consumption, considering it "*los orines de Satanás*" [Satan's piss]. Jacorzynski (2017) narrates the conversion of Indigenous people in a town in Chenalhó Chiapas, finding that "he also learned that the *pox*, traditional alcoholic drink made with sugar cane that was drunk in traditional festivities was actually *k'ampukuj* (Satan's piss). This warning became the favorite argument in the fervent preaching among neophytes because, since the "*Poxwar*", Indigenous Traditionalists could take away from the *mestizos* the monopoly of its distillation, distribution, and sale. A drink that became emblematic in the quotidian life in Los Altos de Chiapas."³¹ Thus, the *pox* works as a religious element in the Catholic festivities; it also

³¹ Original quote in Spanish "Aprendió también que el *pox*, la bebida alcohólica tradicional de caña que se bebía en las fiestas tradicionales era realmente *k'am pukuj* (la orina del diablo). Esta última advertencia se hizo el blanco predilecto de las predicas fervientes de indígenas neófitos, pues a partir de la llamada guerra de *pox*, los indígenas tradicionalistas lograron apartar a los mestizos del monopolio de su destilación, distribución y venta, bebida que se volvió emblema de la vida habitual en los Altos de Chiapas"

has strong political qualities in its control for its production and distribution; and social, as it encompasses the pride and joy of the community for being a product made in Chiapas.

Nevertheless, for Protestants refusing to engage with the pox in any matter, the symbol of its destruction is more prominent.

I met 'Noe' in 2017 when I visited his community with a Mexican missionary to deliver some corn grains that had been given as donations from a church in another state. Noe is a short and strong man with copper skin, he wears a hat and a big smile, and he surprised us with his agility in walking from hill to hill without apparent exhaustion. He was quick to serve and aid at any given chance, and, on another occasion, he did not shy away from participating in playing with the piñata. I would not have suspected that he was a heavy drinker:

Pues de mi tuvo compasión el Señor porque yo era un borracho... yo quien sabe que tenia qué comí que tenia una solitaria, me dio, perdone la palabra, me dio diarrea, Estaban bien guachito, bien flaco, tronaban mis huesos de lo flaco que estaba. Mi mamá me llevó con una yerbera, me sentía bien un rato pero volvía... era una medicina con aguardiente... y yo que era borrachito... fui muy malcriado, estaba avergonzado, le tuve que pedir perdón a mis vecinos y a Dios, hasta que lo acepté, en la hora de mi bautizo me arrepentí, me solté mi cuerpo, y confesando en el bautizo, con la Palabra de Dios, ¿usted ve,? hasta ahorita, solo así me sanó el Señor.

Y le decía a mi mamá, y ella que era una gran católica hasta la muerte, llegaba a mi casa con un cuadro así grandote de San Isidro, y me decía "Ven a celebrar con nosotros, ¡Ya deja tu religión!" pero yo le dije "Mamasita, no, no puedo" Y es que por causa de ese aguardiente, eran como orín del demonio, cuanto dañé a mis hijos, cuanto dañé a mis vecinos. Pero cuando me arrepentí, jamás volví...

The Lord had compassion on me because I was drunker. [Also] I do not know what I ate that I had a tapeworm, I had, excuse me for the word I am gonna say, I got diarrhea. I was so skinny, so scrawny, my bones used to crack, that thin I was. One day, my mother took me with a herbalist, I felt fine for a while, but it came back... it was a medicine with liquor, and I was already a drunker, I was a brat, I was ashamed. I needed to ask to forgiveness to my neighbors, and to God. Until the day I accepted Him, on my baptism hour, I repented, I surrendered my body, I confessed [my sin] in the baptism, with the Word of God, you see? until now, just like that, the Lord healed me.

I was telling my mom, she was a committed Catholic until the day she died. She used to come to my house carrying a big frame with the framed painting of Saint Isidro. She said, "Come to celebrate with us. Leave your religion!" but I told her, "Mamasita, no, I can't" Is that because of the liquor, that I call the devil's piss, how much hurt I caused to my children, to my neighbors! But when I repented, I never went back...

If one considers the hurt, indebtedness, health problems, and domestic violence that alcoholism has caused among so many Indigenous peoples, labeling alcohol as "Satan's piss" is not exaggerated. Yet, it may also carry a spiritual component; thus, drinking alcohol is not only for the practical implications that it makes in one's life; drinking alcohol is allowing the devil to come in. People I talked to shared how their family members could stop drinking when they accepted Christ. They attribute God to this "miracle".

Para mi [creí porque] vi el cambio en mi vida y la vida de mi familia, de mis hijos. Cuando estaba yo en el mundo [antes de ser cristiana] con mis hijos, de veras, hermanita que ahorita estamos como si nada, pero en el mundo, como era antes eran

problemas, trago pues casi perdidos estaban mis hijos. Pero ahorita le doy gracias a mi Señor porque ahorita lo estoy disfrutando...

Nos sacó del vicio, de todo lo que antes. Pero se cambio lo veo diferente. Se quieren no digamos bien, no, pero se quieren, ya no hay tanto pleito, sí es diferente. Ahí estamos con la bendición de Dios... siendo santificados.

For me [what made me believe is], He changed my life and the life of my family. When I was in the world [before being a Christian] with my children, truly, sister, now we are living as if nothing happened, but in the world, before all was trouble, drinking [alcohol], my children were almost lost. But now, I thank my Lord because now I am enjoying...

He took us out of the vice, from all that was before. I see we are different... we love each other, let's say not well, no, but we care for each other, there is not so much arguing, yes, it is different. Here we are, with God's blessing... being sanctified...

(Rosa, personal communication, San Cristobal, 2021)

Children's Conversion. When Mom and Dad Believed...

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope"

(Romans 15:4)

Her name is 'Aurora', I met her in 2013 when I travelled to Chiapas representing an NPO bringing donations to Indigenous communities. During an event with a religious freedom advocacy group, while adults were sharing *testimonios* and taking workshops, children were doing arts and crafts and taking Bible School. I saw Aurora; we smiled at each other and

exchanged a few words. I saw her again in 2017, in a parade where children of persecuted Christians were being dressed up as from other countries that have had similar experiences as theirs. The aim was to conclude a series of lessons that they had to learn that persecution is all over the world and encourage children to be aware of it, sympathize with other people's pain, and feel less alone in their suffering. Aurora was in this parade, dressed up like a girl from Pakistan, carrying a flag, smiling. The last time I met her, in 2021, she was not a child anymore, but a young woman carrying a baby (that was not hers); she was less shy and more confident in her manners. This time, we talked for about an hour and she helped me by providing simultaneous translation from Tojolabal to Spanish for me to record the testimonies of women in her community. At some point during the time we spent together, she took up a cell phone and started to sing worship music in Tojolabal. Children gathered around her to listen to her, as she had a beautiful voice. When she finished, I asked her about it, and she said that the voice in the recording was her sister, and she ran inside the house to give me a DVD with her recordings for me to keep. Aurora sang another worship song in Tojolabal, and I sang one in Japanese. She shared her story with God. *"When mom and dad believed, we had problems with the Catholics"*. She was about five years old when her father accepted Jesus. He shared the gospel with her mom, and although she was very reluctant in the beginning, fearing the reaction from the Catholic neighbors, *"my dad prayed a lot for her until I believed"*. Her uncle and other family members also converted. One day, the Catholics burst into their homes and started to chase them with machetes. Aurora saw her uncle being chased after by a man with a machete, and people in the community threatened to kill them one day. Soon, all of the Protestants, including Aurora and her family, were expelled from the community; they lived in tents and a shelter for several years. Aurora was doubtful of God, and she questioned *"how He could let the Catholics get their way"*.

She was very scared and lived with fear for many years. Until one day, in one of those Bible schools³² she was attending in San Cristobal, she read the story about putting on the Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) and *felt* that God touched her heart, and she understood that she did not need to live in fear anymore.

Stories like Aurora's reassure me of the relevance of the use of the post/decolonial approach, for it sees the *transformation* of the formerly colonized nations, *attacks* the status quo, and *questions* what has been defined as what is believed and taught as true (Young, 2016). What makes Indigenous people like Aurora, to feel "free from fear"? A faith that followed the next generation. Children see the faith in their parents' lives, and they are affected by it, for good and for bad. Among the persecuted families, children belonging to Protestant families experience mockery and ostracism at school, where sometimes the teacher is the one making fun of them in the classroom. At times, they are denied access to school lunches when vendors refuse to sell to them, thus, they must find a way to always bring a homemade lunch; otherwise, they risk not to eat. It is a rejection and mistreatment that follows them on their way to school, in the streets, with people gossiping about them when they pass by or other kids throwing stones at them. Yet, despite all these, if at home they see an example they wish to follow, they start growing an interest in believing in Jesus as well. Nevertheless, it takes a personal experience with God for them to make the choice themselves at some point. Conversion is a personal decision and experience, as someone once told me, "*God does not have grandchildren, just children*".

³² Some Protestant churches have a children's department that prepares Bible lessons and activities for kids. With time, such service has evolved from child care, to something that feels more like a kid's church. Children pray, sing worship songs, learn a Bible lesson and do a fun activity that could reinforce what they learn. Some Bible schools call "escuela dominical" or "escuelita biblica" are provided at larger Christian events where people from various churches attend. This was Aurora's case.



Figure 8. My hosts, an Indigenous Protestant family with their children in the kitchen.

Bible Available in Indigenous Languages

Bible reading and hearing in Indigenous languages has been crucial for evangelization and spiritual growth in Indigenous communities. The interpretation of the Bible is encouraged in the Protestant tradition (Mt. Olivet, 2008). Knowing the Bible in their mother tongue helps believers to have the independence to grow in their faith and find comfort and guidance in their daily lives, and to *indigenize* it to fit the local. Reading the Bible, specifically the Old Testament, has allowed believers to find equivalent elements for giving their tithe³³ and offering. While in the cities and western contexts, these would be given as money, among Indigenous peoples, it is given in kind. A family I met was giving chickens, turkeys, and a portion of their crops as their tithe, which they will bring to be used in church events or projects aiding vulnerable groups.

³³ *Tithe is the one-tenth part of one's income, paid as a voluntary contribution to the church (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Tithing is God's ordained, found in the Bible in the book of Leviticus 27:30. The tithe should be given cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7) as an act of faith and reverence to God, the giver, who is not taking 10% of what a person owns, it is allowing one to keep 90% of what is His. Among Indigenous Protestants I notice they take this command seriously, as they feel that not giving their tithe would be like stealing from God.*

Furthermore, having access to the Bible allows believers to feel in constant communion with God, even if they cannot attend church. Especially those living in communities far away from the temples that cannot afford to travel so often. An elder shared:

Ahorita no me fui [a la iglesia] pero luego si voy.

La primera vez que escuché del Señor... estaba bonito, fue ese Jesús, pues.

Escuchando, sí. No me entra en la oreja el español, nosotros hablamos otra lengua el tzotzil... así escuchamos La Palabra.

Jesús me quitó la tristeza. Yo ya no tengo a mi esposo, pues. Ya estoy solito yo.

Aquí están mis nietecitos, mi familia. Yo estaba triste porque extrañaba a mi viejito. Pura lloradera era... [llanto]... poquito a poco, hacemos mi comida, ahora sí estoy tranquila...

Today, I did not go to church, but sometimes I go. The first time I heard about the Lord, it was beautiful. It was Jesus. Listening, yes... is that I cannot understand Spanish, we speak another language, Tzotzil, and that is how we listen to the Word of God.

Jesus took away from me the sadness. Is that I do not have my husband. I am alone. Here are my little grandchildren, my family. But I was sad because I missed my old man very much. I was just crying all the time [sobs]... little by little. We make the food, and I am calmer...(Esperanza, personal communication San Cristobal, 2021)

While in Western-style churches, the sermons are frequently shortened for "effective" purposes (Fries, 2021), in Indigenous communities, Church services can last half a day, with various hours of preaching and worship in Indigenous languages. As mentioned, commonly, home churches proliferate having a pastor as someone who did not receive formal training in seminaries or by any specific Christian denomination. The pastor is often a believer in Jesus with a strong faith

that showed care for his neighbors, traveled long distances, prayed for them, and shared the gospel. The recognition is given by his community, who gives him the role of pastor, even when their lack of education makes them feel unworthy of the position. A pastor living outside San Cristobal shared how God gave him a dream to empower him with literacy to endure the mission:

[Tuve una] visión, primero cuando estaba orando dije al Señor que me gustaría evangelizar. Estaba orando al Señor y una noche en sueños apareció Dios en la cabecera de mi cama, "siervo", dice, "no llores, ya veo tus lágrimas, te voy a enseñar la Biblia". Yo siempre tengo mi Biblia y eran como las cinco de la mañana cuando empecé a soñar, apareció un varón de ropa blanca que estaba parado pero no vi su rostro, solamente sus pies, entonces me dijo: "lee San Lucas 5:13", cuando amaneció empecé a leer la Biblia, luego leí San Mateo 18:20 luego leí otro, San Juan 14:6, con los tres versículos ya empecé a leer la Biblia. Primero empecé en la lengua tzotzil luego en español y después entré al seminario, así la leí la Biblia y gracias a Dios, soy Apóstol.

I had a vision, first was praying to the Lord, and one night, in my dreams, I saw God in my headboard. He told me: "Don't cry, I see your tears, I'll teach you the Bible". Then he told me: read Luke 5:13. In the morning, I started reading the Bible. I read Matthew 18:20, then I read another, John 14: 6, and with those three verses, I started reading the Bible. First, I started in the Tzotzil language, then in Spanish, and then I went to the seminary, so I read the Bible and thank God now I'm an Apostle. (pastor José, personal communication, San Cristobal, 2017)

Final Thoughts

The message compiled in this dissertation would never be sufficient to convey the pain and loss that Indigenous Protestants have endured in rejection from their neighbors and families who were unable to accept their religious choice. Among those groups still living in their communities, they had fear and tension around when we came to visit. Seeing them, yet, full of thankfulness for having friends around, showing the progress they have made so far in rebuilding the houses that were destroyed by their Catholic neighbors. With people living in cramped shelters, one could see some nostalgia for their lost homes, the open air, the animals, and the cornfields. The heartbreak was remembering those who abruptly showed up at their door and sent them away, and the smiles that came remembering also that in the middle of all, God protected them.

In all of the cases, before Protestants are expelled, deprived of their possessions and lands, or killed, they are given the chance to stay in the community by: a) signing a document where they say they renounce their "new religion" or that they will stop engaging with the "sects"; b) paying the stratospheric fines established by the community or through the *Asamblea Comunitaria* for having "changed from religion" and not contributing to the fiestas; c) promising they will leave this "other" religion and be Catholics again. For the converts, doing this is extremely difficult and painful, for they feel that they would betray their Lord, the one who "saved" them and gave them "life". In cases where the first converts are already experiencing persecution, being ostracized from the community, and denied of government benefits and basic services, more people keep converting. Indigenous people are conscious of the cost it may bring to convert; they are aware of the risks, and yet they convert, they say "yes". They give their reasons:

Porque ya habíamos dicho que sí y si nos hubiéramos echado para atrás de nada serviría porque dice la Palabra de Dios "¿a dónde iremos si solo Dios tiene palabra de vida eterna?" Si nos hubiéramos echado para atrás iríamos de vuelta al vicio, al sufrimiento, y nosotros tratábamos de seguir adelante. De todos modos en la lucha pero gracias a Dios le agradezco a Dios, por mis hermanos. Estamos sufriendo, especialmente el agua. ..

Because we have already said yes, it would've been worthless to back out because the Word of God says, "Where would we go if only You have words of eternal life?". If we had turned back, it would be going back to the vice, the suffering, and we were trying to move forward. Anyway, we are struggling, but thank God, and I thank God for my brothers. We are suffering still, especially because of the lack of water... (Francisco, personal communication, Venustiano Carranza, 2021)

La mera verdad no es como antes, que estábamos en el rancho, está más amplia la tierra, allá teníamos libertad de todo, pero eso no ayuda a nada. Ahorita pues aunque estamos aquí encerraditos, pedacitos, pero vale mucho porque estamos felices, estamos contentos. Hay paz, hay gozo. Hoy fuí a escuchar la palabra de Dios, ahorita ya regresamos pues estamos contentos con mis hermanos, estamos felices.

True, it is not the way we used to live, in the farm, the field is vast, and there we have all freedom, but just that helps for nothing. Here, well, even though we are locked in tiny spaces, it is still worth it because we are happy and content. There is peace and joy. Today I went to listen to the Word of God, and we have just returned together because we

are content, me and my family in Christ, we are happy... (Rosa, personal communication, San Cristobal, 2021)

Digo, vivíamos tan mal antes y tristes,
pero ahorita consideramos que lo está pasando es poco, no importa que
suframos golpes, maltratos, discriminación, abusos y muchas otras cosas más,
porque cuando estábamos en el mundo sufríamos muchísimo. Ahorita que estamos
con Cristo, sí hay aflicciones y tristeza, pero cuando buscamos a Dios como que ahí
encontramos la paz. Como claramente lo dice nuestro Señor Jesucristo: “Mi paz os doy”:
Esto es verdad, Él nos da paz en nuestro corazón, por lo que nos hemos mantenido firmes
hasta ahorita, que es lo único que queremos.

*I mean, we lived such a bad life before, we were so sad. But right now, what's
happening to us is nothing in comparison. We can take the beatings, abuse,
discrimination, and many other things because being in this world mean suffering. Right
now that we are with Christ, we sometimes have afflictions and sadness, but when we
seek God, we find peace. As our Lord Jesus Christ clearly says: "I give you my peace":
This is true. He has given peace to our hearts, that's why we still stand firm, and that's
the only thing we want.* (Tomas, personal communication, shelter in San Cristobal,
2015)

From an intellectualist approach, conversion "allows people to comprehend and live
meaningfully in a changed world" (Robbins, 2004, p. 86). Whilst ontological security is "the
condition that obtains when an individual has confident expectations, even if probabilistic, about
the means-ends relationships that govern her social life" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 345, as cited in

Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020, p. 878). This definition is very similar to the Biblical concept of *faith*, which is understood as "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1, NIV). One could compile the various reasons that Indigenous people gave for believing and keep believing in Jesus as a source of satisfaction to their ontological security. That, in moments of religious intolerance, has been more important than the mere physical safety that they had before converting. Although they, of course, need and want their rights to be respected and the basic services restored in their homes, they conclude that just material satisfaction is not enough to keep on living.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Introduction

Christianity is the largest religion worldwide, and Protestantism is the second largest form of Christianity (Bada, 2018). Still, Christian persecution is underreported, especially by mainstream media. In 2009, the International Society of Human Rights estimated that Christians were the victims of 80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world (Philpott, D., & Shah, T. S., Eds., 2018). Overall, the global number of Christians facing persecution for their faith reached staggering levels, exceeding 100 million in 2014 (Persecution 2015, in Mahendra, 2016).

Religious persecution can also take the form of sectarian conflicts between people of the same faith. Mexico, which has the second largest Catholic population in the world (Liu, 2013), has been, alongside the rest of Latin America, shifting its religious identity to Protestantism (Wormald, 2014). Yet, this increase of converts does not occur without opposition. In Mexico, 3 out of every 10 people are discriminated against for professing a religion different from Catholicism (CONAPRED, n.d.). Most cases of religious intolerance have happened towards the growing Protestant minority (Blancarte, 2018), and in their most cruel form in Indigenous communities, have manifested in various degrees and forms of violence, from the burning of temples and homes to expulsion, rape and murder (CNDH Mexico, 2016, pp. 62-63; Rivera, 2014, 2019; Henriquez, 2011; various actors, *personal communication*, 2015, 2017, 2020). Ways that the religious majority (among them, local authorities) use to coerce Protestants to give up their religious choice include forcing them to re-engage with Catholic festivities such as *fiestas patronales*.

This thesis analyzed how the hostilities towards Protestants are not recent, but rather rooted in the history of Mexico, the state-Catholic Church relations, and the construction of the Mexican identity. It analyzed the perspectives that exist towards Protestants in Mexico, particularly in academia, while putting in context the cases of religious persecution in Indigenous communities and their personal experiences through the sharing of their *testimonios* of conversion to and the endurance of their faith.

This research asked the following questions: What is Subaltern Christianity? What is the relationship between conversion and *human (in)security* in Indigenous communities of Chiapas? And, why do Indigenous People convert to Protestantism in present postcolonial times?

In response to these inquiries, this dissertation argues that religious intolerance, with special emphasis on Protestants, has its origins in Spanish colonization. It also suggests that a broadly postcolonial approach to human security that encompasses ontological security allows one to see the relationship between conversion and human insecurity in Indigenous communities in Mexico as it brings into the argument the importance that emotions play in the conflict. Finally, by centering the voices of Indigenous converts, this research tells of Protestantism not as an imposition or manipulation but as a choice, the fruit of powerful personal experiences.

In the intellectual process of coming up with these answers, my thesis sought to contribute to *Rethinking Peace* (Hinton A. L. Shani G. & Alberg J. 2019, p. xx) by highlighting an underside of Chiapas. As Nandy puts it, the ignored, exiled, and museumized subjectivities (Nandy, 2019, p. 5), or in this work, Indigenous Protestants, as subalterns are excluded, but are not entirely silent (Spivak, 1988). Thus, rather than speaking *for* them (Beier, 2002, p. 87). I presented them, instead, as subalterns that "emerge" and tell with their own words about their experience and

"everyday agency" (Richmond, 2019) as a religious minority living in the most religiously diverse and intolerant Mexican state.

This research used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to contribute to justice for a subgroup whose concerns have been widely unaddressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) among a Community of Color: Indigenous Protestants. Overall, based on the discussions made by the Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), this dissertation addresses the racialized and specific political condition of Indigenous Protestants, centering their voices in this research (Dolores, 2019). It observes them, with the intersecting roles of race (Indigenous-indigeneity) and religion (Christianity-Protestantism), participating in mutual reshaping and constant manifestation, as the title of this dissertation highlights.

As an interdisciplinary work, this research used proposals made by Anthropology of Christianity and Conversion while engaging with methodologies developed by Indigenous scholars (Smith, 2021; Younging, 2018; Wilson, 2008), to be consistent and respectful towards Indigenous experiences and knowledge. This is instead of using *extractivism*, which steals, takes without consent, thought, or care, as it "removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning" (Simpson, 2017, p. 75). This research chose *relationality* (Tynan, 2021), understood as profound reciprocity, relationship, connecting with Indigenous people and their *pluriversal relationality* (Trowsell, Behera & Shani, 2022), with the people, their land, and the spiritual realm manifested through their dreams and prayers. All of these were generously shared in their *testimonios*, quoted vastly in the case study.

This dissertation also took a broadly postcolonial human security approach (Shani, 2017), which encompasses ontological security, to illustrate how the challenges of a world with

multiethnic, multi-religious, and multicultural perspectives are an opportunity to develop strategies that protect and empower all humankind.

What is Subaltern Christianity?

Committing to a doctoral program in Peace Studies emerged from the immense inspiration and insights I have absorbed from non-Western Christians over various decades. Mentors at the Graduate School also encouraged me to refine and expand on my research on Indigenous Protestants, with whom, while sharing in their spaces and homes, in the midst of their struggles, oppression, and scarcity, and learning with and from them in academic and religious settings, I have observed a particular type of Christianity. I wanted to call it *Subaltern Christianity*, formed by believers in Christ "subject to the activities of the ruling groups" (Gramsci, 1934-35, as cited in Hoare & Smith, 2003), defined by an intersection of class, gender, 'race,' culture, and religion, which behave differently depending on the exact historical context (Green, 2011, p. 395, as in Bracke, 2016, p. 845). Subaltern Christians are believers in Christ whose prayers, as "Liturgies from Below" (Carvalhaes, 2020), tell of the harsh realities they live in, which many of us can only attempt to imagine. The discussion in this thesis provides sufficient elements to elaborate the following definition of Subaltern Christianity that incorporates the insights given by most of the authors we engaged with in the respective chapter:

Subaltern Christianity is lived by subaltern agents that, in retroversion, re-evaluate and adapt their traditional practices (Sahay, 1990; Rambo, 1993), to express their faith in Jesus Christ through their Indigenous *cosmologies* (Shani & Behera, 2022). In plurilogue (Stermann, 2007; Behr & Shani, 2019) and accompaniment (Horst, 2015) with Western Christianity, Subaltern Christians are healing from colonialism in reconciliation with their

indigeneity (Twiss, 2008; Robinson, 2021). Through reading and interpreting the Bible in their native languages, they are following a process of decolonization that allows them to see themselves through the eyes of their Redeemer (Conchacala, 2021; Solano, 2015). Subaltern Christians are conscious of their responsibility as gospel sharers and agents in their Creator's work, participating actively to improve their contexts (i.e., Red Road Project) despite frequent neglect or oppression, often from more privileged believers. Subaltern Christians commonly exist in contexts as a religious minority or a group at a political disadvantage and, therefore, struggle to find spaces where they can be heard. They grieve and need people's support (Ata, 2022); nevertheless, they lean on God's faithfulness (Carvalhaes, 2020).

To come up with such a definition for Subaltern Christianity, this dissertation examines various scholarly definitions of religion, debriefing that in academic work, God has been *avoided* (Plate, 2021) for being *disruptive* and an unstable category (Mizruchi, 2001, xii, cited in Henking, 2021). At times, religion has been seen too widely, such as when it is considered something from the *consumerist culture* (Lofton, 2017), since work, or *workism*, is one of the gods of our times (Thompson, 2019). Nevertheless, this dissertation points to the importance of re-evaluating the markers of religiosity, expanding them to consider that for some believers, including Christians, their faith is not a religion but a *relationship*. From this angle, it was more accurate to define religion based on Eliade (1959, p. 11; 1979, p. xiii, 1958, p. xi, cited in 1987 p. xv):

Religion is the experience of the *sacred* that gives human beings a sense of *reality*, *meaning*, and *truth*. One in which often the conception of *transcendence* (an experience

beyond the ordinary or physical level) or the belief in a life beyond this life is strongly present and influences people's considerations for action.

The Protestant tradition corresponds to this definition of religion. Protestantism was born in Germany in the fifteenth century, following the teachings of the priest Martin Luther. Luther disagreed with various practices of the Catholic church, including its multiple ways to achieve salvation. Luther focused instead on salvation based on Paul (Romans, 1:17): salvation as something that cannot be earned, for being a work of divine grace, an undeserved favor (Hillerbrand, 2022, paraphrase mine). Overall, although Protestantism has grown as a Christian tradition of many denominations, in general, they believe in *sole fide*, salvation by grace through faith alone, and *sola scriptura*, giving prime authority to the Bible (Ryrie, 6 February 2016), encouraging individuals' private study and interpretation of the Scriptures. All these aspects are relevant to the case study, for although Indigenous Protestants convert by believing in Christ, without ascribing first to any specific Protestant denomination, the aspects of their new religious identity are better expressed in it. Thus, as they make community with other like-minded individuals, attend Protestant temples, and become divided when they experience religious intolerance from their Catholic neighbors, they, at some point, self-identify as *Evangélicos*; a term that, although it has been used by other scholars researching Chiapas, was not used in this dissertation, for *evangélicos* in Chiapas are not ascribed, nor similar, to the Evangelical (often right-winged) movement in the US. In Latin America, Evangelicals merely refer to non-Catholic Christians (Stoll, 2002, cited in Jungblut, 2015). Thus, this work used the more general term Protestants/Protestantism to avoid confusion and doctrinal arguments.

It is from this experience of Indigenous Protestants that this dissertation proposed to see Protestantism beyond the West. Despite its origins and the necessary acknowledgment of how Christian missions, in the context of colonialism and imperialism, "ridiculed Indigenous beliefs, called customs into question, undermined self-confidence, eroded respect for traditional authorities, and consequently stimulated political or social conflict" (Porter, 1997, p. 367), Protestantism has since expanded apart from that harmful experience. It has been *indigenized* (changed to fit the local culture), existing in higher numbers in non-Western contexts, and in 2010 nearly 87% of the world's Protestants lived outside of Europe in the global south, Africa, Asia (Earls, 2017), and Latin America (Sahgal, 2017). From these lenses, we see not only Protestantism but Christianity as a whole, as an experience that is lived across time, countries, ethnicities, and academic discourses. Indigenous Christianity exists, and there is something to learn from it. Christianity is not "white". It was made white through Colonialism (Jennings, 2010), a "whitening" that works more like a shadow over the richness and depth of the Christian faith. Thus, bringing Betancourt's insights, when scholars go beyond Western Christianity, facing cultural diversity, the narrowness of their normal discourse is exposed, for "cultural diversity and *interculturality* announce the sublime infinity of The Word, which diversity pressure makes explode cultural borders, sending theology [and social scientists] to a perpetual exodus" (Betancourt, 2006, p. 57, English translation and emphasis mine).

Addressing Indigenous peoples' knowledge with inferiority is not particular to colonialism. It is a consistent "Apartheid of knowledge" (Delgado & Villalpando, 2002), the epistemological racism that exists within the mainstream research community, which portrays people of color as deficient and judges the scholarship produced by Scholars of Color as biased

and non-rigorous." (Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2002, 169, citations omitted in Perez, 2009, p. 641).

Overall, to expand the standard view towards non-Western Christianity, this dissertation used first a *post/decolonial* approach, an "intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance" (Bhambra, 2014, p. 120), developed to challenge the Western ideal and question what we believe as true. To revise the various manifestations of Christianity among vulnerable groups, the *subalterns* specifically, who are defined as those who are always subject to the activities of the ruling groups (Gramsci, 1934-35 in Hoare & Smith, 2003), inhabiting a space of difference, with limited or no access to cultural imperialism (Spivak, 2004).

This work argues that subalterns, such as Indigenous people (Pandey, 2010), have endured consistent attempts to be silenced and erased. Nevertheless, their resilience, fight, and perseverance have safeguarded their existence, protected their identity, and kept their voices heard until accessing "the center" by becoming lawyers, politicians, public servants, and so on. Technology has allowed Indigenous peoples to comment and educate non-Indigenous people about their culture, especially through social media (Rice, 2016; Korff, 2022). Some others do it through scholarly work where Indigenous people have denounced with academic rigor the way social racism penetrated and was legitimized in the law (Williams, 2005) and reproduced in the approach taken by various disciplines and sciences, such as Anthropology (Parsons, 2022; Pollock, 1996), a discipline that has developed fields that were greatly useful for this dissertation: Anthropology of Christianity and Anthropology of Conversion. Drawing on these fields, this dissertation demonstrates some first steps that have been taken to appreciate the study of Christianity and to see non-Western Christianity and Indigenous Christianity not as a

secondary phenomenon of underlying political or economic change (Keller, 2006), but rather honor the experiences and contributions of Indigenous peoples who have made Christianity part of their culture in the same way the West did long ago, for "Christian thinking has *always* carried other selves within it" (Canell, 2006, p. 26, emphasis mine). One should see the many kinds of Christianity reflected in the plurality of nations and groups across the globe and specify which one we are dealing with when doing research.

In this change of discourse that invites one to understand and hear how Indigenous people live Christianity, this dissertation presents *Indigenous theology*, 'faith seeking understanding' (St Anselm, 1033-1109), emphasizing the one done by Indigenous converts. While rejecting the destructive ways that Christianity was presented to them, Indigenous peoples engage in personal and constant study of the Bible. They often put effort into making culturally appropriate translations of the Scriptures for indigenous peoples to read and interpret from their perspective. Bible reading enhances Indigenous people's understanding of the divinity (Solano, 2023) and allows them to see God manifested in their culture and their Oral Tradition, often allowing them to re-embrace their Indigenous identity, to recover their names, and as mentioned in the section about 'indio', to see who they are, rather than who colonialism desired them to be (Woodley, 2023).

Subaltern Christianity highlights some elements that are relevant to the case study. Indigenous Protestants in Mexico, as a religious minority with political disadvantages, are commonly vulnerable to the violation of their human security. The following subsection will elaborate on this more.

Religion and Human Insecurity in Mexico

The large number of Indigenous Protestants expelled from their communities tells of a problem of security and religion that led me to ask the following research question: *What is the relationship between conversion and human (in)security in Indigenous communities of Chiapas?* This question, however, could not stand alone without considering Mexico's colonial past, something that I realized when preparing the historical background for this dissertation. It was important as well to analyze the *testimonios* that provided details about the ways Indigenous Protestants experience human insecurity. Therefore, my complementary research questions are: a) *What is the relationship between Mexican colonial history and the present religious intolerance?* b) *To what extent is human insecurity experienced among Indigenous Protestants in Mexico?* c) *What are some of the main actors in the issue of religious intolerance in Mexico?*

Religious intolerance towards Protestants in Mexico is a national issue. One cannot treat religious intolerance in Indigenous communities without considering the centuries in which Catholicism worked with the state to endorse hostility towards any sign of religious diversity. For this case study, it is decisive to notice, specifically, the mechanisms they used to seal religious intolerance toward Protestants into the Mexican identity.

Nowadays, in states where Protestantism is present in the highest numbers, there is also strong opposition documented, particularly in Indigenous communities. In Chiapas, thousands of Indigenous Protestants have been expelled from their communities (Rivera, 2014) at the hands of the Catholic majority and, at times, with state actors' complicity (Mundaca, 2023; *personal communication*, 2015, 2017, 2021).) Thus, this research attempts to make a *revisionist* history of Mexico (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 5). It exposes the comforting narrative that portrays Catholic manifestations as "Mexican" culture that, however, invisibilizes religious minorities and

the cost they have paid to exist in a context in which only Catholicism can express itself freely. From the Counter-Reform policies implemented during the Spanish colonial times, the Spanish Inquisition banned any reading material that could call to question solidarity with the Catholic religion (the Bible included), and persecuted any signs of religious diversity, being towards Jews and "Lutherans" (people from any Protestant tradition), the cases registered that got public punishment and torture (Greenleaf, 1981, as cited in Bastian, 1990; Freyre, 1949). The religious monopoly continued and was established in the Mexican constitutions, proving that independence from Spain did not bring freedom of worship, conscience, or speech. The 'emancipation' of people in Mexico, specifically Indigenous people, was led by *criollos*, heirs of European thought in which religion (one religion) would be tolerated as far it did not interfere with the political economy and theory that would allow them to continue to rule over the colonized (Mignolo, 2013). A colonialist logic also influenced Protestantism, with the first wave of U.S. missions exhibiting racist attitudes towards Mexicans. They refused to grant them autonomy and self-sufficiency within their own church context (Mision Mundial, 1990). This led to a rupture that resulted in the creation of independent Mexican Protestant churches. Despite the struggle, these churches nurtured a social movement that actively supported the Mexican Revolution (Mendoza, 2023; Baldwin, 1990). A nationalist attitude among Mexican Protestants contradicted the claims made by the Catholic press, which accused them of being *Yankees* (Mendoza, 2023). The next wave of U.S. missions, arriving between 1948 and 1953, embraced the need for cultural adaptation and allowed locals to lead their own congregations. This approach resulted in numerous successful conversions, but these new converts faced harsh intolerance from the Catholic Church as well. This intolerance was recorded in the words of Archbishop Luis Maria Martinez, who called for a "*Guerra Santa*" (Holy War) against the

"sects" (CNDH, 2002, p. 38). Mexicans were instructed to treat Protestants with rejection and disapproval through magazines, leaflets, and messages delivered during the liturgy among the Catholic parishioners. The devotion was latent; thus, violent actions of religious intolerance practiced by the Catholic Church towards the growing Protestant minority happened across Mexico through killing, lynching, and burning of temples (CNDH, 2002, p. 30, 85; Barocio, personal communication, 2017; pastor Castelazo Tuxtla, personal communication, 2015).

This religious intolerance towards Protestants persevered in such a way that it remained a part of the Mexican identity, sentencing Protestants to invisibility and neglect (Monsiváis in CNDH, 2002, p. 37). Thus, while in the cities, Protestants experience hostility and family ostracism as part of their daily life (CONAPRED, n.d.), and in many rural areas and Indigenous communities, Protestants experiencing persecution were not allowed even to exist: yet they did, with extreme fear, and want. Having water services cut by the Catholic majority, they went thirsty. While traveling long distances to get water, because locals refused to sell it to them, and taxis would refuse them service, the Protestant minority grew exhausted and sick. Having been forbidden to trade in the community anymore, they became hungry and ashamed, unable to provide for themselves and their children (see Chapter 5).

Conversion and Human (In)security in Indigenous communities of Chiapas

The human security approach, defined as the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from fear and want (CHS, 2003), emerges as a significant framework in discussions about religious intolerance in Mexico. This dissertation discussed various approaches to human security, starting with security considerations, which focused on protecting the state before the individuals. Nevertheless, this dissertation proposed the use of a *broadly postcolonial* approach

to human security (Shani, 2017), where non-physical elements such as individuals' identity and culture, are recognized, as well as the centrality of religion in a postcolonial *subjectivity* and the rich *plurality* of understandings of "security" and "the human". For this subjectivity the broadly postcolonial approach to Human Security presupposes *ontological security*, the psychological security of the self, 'security as being' (Giddens, 1991), which invites us to pay attention to subjectivity, such as emotions, which are often insufficiently addressed when studying conflict.

The history of Chiapas describes the various moments and reasons that led to Indigenous insurrection. This research argues that Indigenous communities were not entirely harmonious and became increasingly hostile after Protestant evangelization. However, attributing this hostility solely to evangelization would oversimplify their experience. Instead, religious diversity in Chiapas revealed a long-standing intolerance towards Protestants, one that had been cultivated for centuries and remained dormant until it had the opportunity to surface.

Studying religious intolerance in Chiapas with a postcolonial human security approach that incorporates ontological security helps us see that "analyzing security as a thick signifier thus makes us realize how structural conditions of insecurity are intimately linked to the emotional significance of identity mobilization" (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 745). The case study presented in this dissertation shows two groups of Indigenous people who, by belonging to two different Christian traditions, possess different senses and sources of security where their emotions play a crucial role. When an Indigenous person in the community becomes Protestant, the Catholic Traditionalists feel they can no longer trust them, as they do not understand or accept their desire to change what they have been doing and believing for generations. The majority will confront the Protestants to attempt to bring them back to what they know and

understand. Some Catholics will do this out of concern, for they know the Protestant converts well; they are friends, family, or neighbors. Nevertheless, Protestants will confront Catholics in their determination to keep their new expressions of faith. In this way, religious intolerance can be a *response* to ontological insecurity (from Catholic Traditionalists) and a *source* of it (for Indigenous Protestants).

Human insecurity is experienced among Indigenous Protestants to this extent: As Protestants increase in number, so does anxiety among Traditionalists who resolve to *securitize subjectivity* in which "hate becomes the link among the present, the future, and a re-created past" (Kinvall, 2004, p. 755), and they will show this through threats, fines, physical aggression, rape, the expulsion of Protestants, and other actions that violate their human security in the broadest sense. The religious majority will "restore" or protect what makes them feel ontologically safe by destroying the religious minority (i.e. forced re-conversions or murder) and its manifestations of faith (i.e. the demolition of their temples). The Catholic majority will attempt to force Indigenous Protestants to redefine the way they engage with the sacred, and often, their attempts will come with the active participation of state actors (i.e. *presidente municipal*, *agente auxiliar*) who will send the police to arrest them, or at times will even be among the crowd that expels them.

Outside of their ancestral lands, Indigenous Protestants are forced to live in the cities, often in shelters, in which "a space of protection turns into a space of risk" (Witteborn, 2012, p. 427). Indigenous Protestants live at the expense of government support, without clarity of how long they will remain there and with the constant fear that if the government stops paying the rent of the spaces they use, they will have nowhere else to go. This way, the government has the power to decide whether or not people can live with dignity. Indigenous Protestants seem to be

disciplined by the government instead of being protected. The government misunderstands their real needs, and when acting or cooperating to relocate Protestants, fails to fulfill its responsibility to protect their right of freedom to worship, and instead seems to forget about them. Rather than coming up with a lasting solution that could give expelled Indigenous Protestants back a place to live with dignity, the government stopped paying the rent of the shelter spaces altogether, as was the experience of several groups of expelled Indigenous Protestants. This usually happens whenever new government officers come to power and decide not to carry on with specific duties their predecessors were fulfilling.

Religious intolerance as a collective fruit

This subheading points to the complex group of actors that play a part in the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas. A complementary question asks, *who are some of the main actors in the issue of religious intolerance in Mexico?* Furthermore, in all acts of hate and violence perpetrated towards Indigenous Protestants on religious grounds, one could first identify the perpetrators of such actions. On the ground, the situation is more complicated, and in order to understand and come to the results expressed here, this research combined the use of bibliographic materials, but also a collection of *testimonios* of the survivors of religious persecution as well as interviews with several people that have had some degree of involvement with the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas: local journalists, Protestant Pastors, religious freedom advocates, NPO representatives, and Catholic priests, among others (see Methodology section for details).

Religious intolerance in Chiapas is severe, and to a great degree is due to the involvement of the state. Local state agents provide material support to the perpetrators of religious violence (i.e.,

through the use of local police and the borrowing of prison cells) or ignore the pleas of Indigenous Protestants demanding religious freedom (i.e. they allow the Catholic majority to block Protestants access to government programs).

This thesis argues that although Mexico is officially a secular state, it is such with some caution. In part, this is because every time the privileges and political influence of the Catholic Church were limited, there were war responses with remarkable support, such as in *Guerra de los Tres Años* (1857) and *La Cristiada* (1926). Moreover, it is also due in part to the state actors' Catholic religious affiliations, which cause state agents to agree or be willing to support Catholic concerns, whether by action or omission. These conditions explain why in Chiapas, even though over 50,000 Indigenous Protestants have been expelled since the first registered cases of religious intolerance in the 1970s and the consistent persecution, the local government responses have been very mild. They yield to perpetrators' demands, pay fines, buy the land they took away from the Indigenous Protestants, or do nothing (see Chapter 5). At times the local government, such as the *presidente municipal*, is among the crowd that shows up at the door of Indigenous Protestants on the day they are expelled from the community; and at other times, their presence comes with the use of the local police who apprehend Indigenous Protestants and put them in jail, often under false accusations.

Another group of actors whose role has been important in the issue of religious intolerance has been the Catholic authorities, including local and federal branches to different degrees. This dissertation shows the nuanced works of regular Catholic clergy throughout history. Religious orders like the Franciscans considered Indigenous people worthy of receiving a higher education (liberal arts, theology, religion, medicine, and painting) in *el Colegio de Tlatelolco*, which opened in 1536. They also translated sections of the Bible into Indigenous

languages. De Las Casas (1550) advocated for individual freedom for Indigenous peoples, considered it a God-given right and fought unceasingly for them to be considered and protected as humans. In the fight for the Mexican independence in 1810, the priests Morelos and Hidalgo raised their voices and took up arms to fight for the abolition of slavery and equality regardless of race (P. Montreal, 2010). In present times, we have Catholic-based NPOs defending human rights and protecting vulnerable groups, risking their lives daily, facing organized crime and authorities' corruption.

Nevertheless, regrettably, specific political, economic, and religious interests have vastly prevailed. The *Colegio* was shut down under the excuse that Indigenous people were *unfit* and *indecent* to take on European tasks and that educating them would transform them into "dangerous beings" (Mathes, 1982); the Bible translations in Indigenous languages were forbidden and burned (de León Azcarate, 2015). Morelos and Hidalgo were excommunicated, tortured, and executed by the High Clergy for being "Lutherans, Calvinists and Judaizers atheists" (arquidiocesismexico.org.mx, n.d.). To date, Catholic Human Rights entities, as valiant and influential as *Frayba* in Chiapas, insist on ignoring (and at times, condemning) the pleas for justice and peace made by Indigenous Protestants to exercise their freedom of worship in their communities (see chapter 5). One could argue that there is no perfect religious tradition. Nevertheless, it highlights the role and responsibility of the Catholic church for reproducing a narrative that portrays Protestants as a threat when they are paired with paramilitary or other suspicious figures that must be treated with contempt by the community for doing precisely the same that Catholics do during their religious festivities: making "noise" and making their message known.

According to the Mexican National Census, INEGI 2020, in Chiapas, 53.9% of residents are Catholics, and 32.4% are Protestants, the latter of which continues to increase in numbers. The role of the Protestant churches is also relevant in the issue of religious intolerance. A handful of Protestant-based religious freedom advocacy groups and NPOs exist. If there were a more widespread active and joint participation of urban Protestants advocating for religious freedom in Indigenous communities, the pressure towards the government and the Catholic majority would contribute to speeding up the response to the justice plea of persecuted Indigenous Protestants. As subaltern Christians, they grieve and need support; instead, they are often taken advantage of for fraudulent legal support, causing more financial loss in the process.

Indigenous conversion: The *decision* to be different

Since becoming a college student, every time I read materials about Chiapas, or talked to academics doing research about it, I encountered various impressions, mostly negative, regarding Indigenous people becoming Protestants. I noticed that whether it was scholarly work or "personal opinion", they all lacked inclusion of the perspectives of the converts themselves.

Thus, to answer the question of *why Indigenous People convert to Protestantism in present postcolonial times*, this dissertation compiled the *testimonios* of the conversions of Indigenous peoples who had survived (and often still endure) religious persecution, and their clear statements of the personal process that led them to *decide* to believe in Jesus.

The first studies conducted on religion in Mexico, Chiapas included, had a unfavorable view of the spread of Protestantism in Indigenous communities. There was concern that the penetration of Protestant religious groups was part of the United States' imperialist strategy to destabilize and cause trouble in Indigenous communities (Fabregas, 1991, as cited in Rivera,

2005, p. 45, 47; Rus & Wasserstrom, 1979). The *Frayba* Human Rights Center stated that the Mexican government was supporting Protestants to diminish the authority of the Catholic Church with the plausible purpose of implementing the USA's recommendation against the theology of liberation (1996, p. 36, par. 3.). Other scholars argued that to defend the "cultural identity" and protect "human rights" the expulsion of the Protestant "sects" and the prohibition of their preaching was necessary because they were disrupting the "normal" course of life (Estrella; Fabregas, cited in Monsivais, 2002, p. 26). Protestantism in Chiapas was worrying and considered an expression of successful (modern) colonial expansion (Rivera, 2005, p. 39). These claims, however, can be shown to be faulty when confronted with the reality experienced in Indigenous communities (Bastian, 1997) and must be contested, for they deny the agency of individual converts (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007, p. 16). Indigenous peoples are not mere victims of historical forces. They are individuals who evaluate and make their own religious choices.

Furthermore, this case study shows that Indigenous peoples, and not foreign missionaries, are the main actors evangelizing in their communities, and they do it with the use of the Bible in Indigenous languages and with the conviction and desire to bring to their families the same hope they found in Jesus. I collected the conversion *testimonios* of over 45 intergenerational Indigenous Protestants from different communities to share their perspectives on this issue. Their testimonios show them reclaiming their voices and telling, in their own words, why (in present postcolonial times) they converted to Protestantism. Through powerful, timely, and profoundly intimate experiences, they decided to believe in Jesus. They experienced "miracles" that came at the right time and moment, and that responded to personal needs. At moments when they felt there was no hope left and the pain in their bodies, and sorrow in their hearts weighted heavily, they prayed, or others prayed for them, and they healed:

"At around two in the afternoon, we visited Jose Martinez, a fifty-year-old brother, and his wife, Remedios, who asked us to pray, for she had a very strong illness, half her body was numb, she had to walk with help from her daughter-in-law. Most of our people started to spread the Word that she had healed, and could now work and wash her clothes" (pastor, San Cristobal, personal communication, October 2015, San Cristobal)

At times, the faith of Indigenous Protestants is *relational*, the interconnection of humans and 'other-than-humans' (Trowsell, Behera & Shani, 2022), divine beings: an angel, God, or Jesus, who spoke to them in prayer or their dreams, telling them the truth about them and what they needed, and then provision came:

"God revealed to me one day, it was evening, that the path I was walking was wrong and needed to stop because that path would not let me return well. This was two days before I accepted Jesus. It was a person wearing white, offering me to believe in God... next day, God sent another person saying that somebody was going to share the Word of God, offering me to accept it...suddenly, my brother came out. He touched the wire fence. I don't know what came to me that I started crying, I began to shout [sobs], and I told him "It is you, the one who was going to come! You are the one that God sent" and we started talking, and at that precise moment, I accepted God." (Ponciano, personal communication, Las Margaritas, 2021)

Other conversions followed after months and even years of family members praying for their loved ones. Converts demonstrated a change of character, leaving behind self-destructive habits (i.e. alcohol addiction or domestic violence), and their constant acts of kindness and love

towards people turned these to believe that what they preached could be true. Thus, they believed as well:

"I didn't want to go [to the Protestant temple] because I was very Catholic... my father as a Catholic catechist, was the one who taught me the doctrine. He used to get drunk... We didn't like it when he converted. We were so angry that we often criticized and mocked him. Now I'm regretting it, but I still didn't understand. My dad would always tell us about God and how there was a better way... We used to tell my dad: "You go with your God, we also have our God." But thanks to my dad, who never stopped praying for us." (personal communication, Lazaro Cardenas, 2017)

Overall, the *testimonios* showed how faith could bring ontological security (the psychological security of the self), and provide answers to existential questions even while dealing with other insecurities. Conversion can come at a time when the person is vulnerable, such as when grieving a loved one or experiencing a significant loss of another kind. Conversion can be experienced by the children of Indigenous Protestants, who find in Jesus the source to feel "free from fear and want", and witnessing and experiencing the religious persecution of their parents' religious choices can cause them to believe as well, finding in their new faith a source of comfort and safety.

The stories of Indigenous Protestants reassure me of the relevance of the use of the post/decolonial approach on the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas, for it showcases the *transformation* of the formerly colonized nations, *attack* the status quo, and *question* what has been defined as what is believed and taught as true (Young, 2016). This approach also shows

how in *conversion seen with an intellectual* approach, people convert intending to find *meaning* in life (Robbins, 2004) and find their "true identity" (Corr, 2007, p. 191). This identity is one to which they can hold tight, even through persecution. For Indigenous converts, believing in Jesus *transcends* to the life beyond this life, this "temporary suffering is worth it":

I mean, we lived such a bad life before, we were so sad. But right now, what's happening to us is nothing in comparison. We can take the beatings, abuse, discrimination, and many other things because being in this world means suffering. Right now that we are with Christ, we sometimes have afflictions and sadness, but when we seek God, we find peace. As our Lord Jesus Christ clearly says: "I give you my peace.": This is true. He has given peace to our hearts; that's why we still stand firm, and that's the only thing we want. (Tomasa, personal communication, shelter in San Cristobal, 2015)

Significance

This research shows the relevance of studying Indigenous Christianity more deeply. Through bibliographic work, and most especially through conversation with a wide range of actors in the issue of religious intolerance in Chiapas, it identifies them as men and women who have religion at their core. It is not only Indigenous peoples for whom there is not a binary division of matters (i.e. civil, religious); instead, *all* things are interconnected. Religion is relevant for state actors (who are sometimes persecutors) and NPOs, who, despite having official positions as neutral figures exercising duties to protect all individuals' human rights, are exposed as not being neutral in reality.

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right (UNDHR, Article 18, 1948). As a religious minority, Indigenous Protestants are a marginalized group that faces discrimination and persecution based on their beliefs. This research aims to raise awareness about the injustices they continue to endure, and while highlighting (and encouraging everyone to acknowledge) the relevance that religion has for all actors involved (state and non-state), contributes to creating legal frameworks and policies that protect individuals from religious-based discrimination and violence.

As countries such as Mexico take further steps toward religious advocacy and actively contribute to nurturing a society that embraces religious diversity and pluralism, the coexistence of people from different belief systems will be possible. Furthermore, as the divide between Catholics and Protestants decreases, it will be plausible for both Christian traditions to end sectarian conflicts and instead work together to promote tolerance, justice, peace, and understanding among diverse Indigenous communities in Mexico; thus promoting *dialogue* and understanding how to mitigate (and not inflame) conflicts arising from religious intolerance.

This research contributes to Human Security, showing the impacts of religious intolerance on individuals' lives. At the physical level, Indigenous Protestants are paralyzed in their economic activities and have blocked access to basic services and government programs. They are led to further levels of social exclusion and poverty when their bodies are wounded through violence, murder, and rape, or they are placed in shelters in the city, far away from their ancestral lands, the corn fields, and other natural elements at the core of their indigeneity. From a broadly postcolonial approach (Shani, 2017), this research sees the subjectivities within religious intolerance. For Indigenous Protestants believing in a higher *truth*, Christ, and devoting oneself

to Him alone gives *meaning* and answers to existential questions (ontological security). For the Catholic majority and *caciques*, seeing the converts no longer participating in their religious festivities nor buying alcohol causes them anxiety (ontological insecurity), defining religious plurality as a threat (Kinvall, 2004). Overall, this research shows how the mere protection of the body (exercised by the state when placing Indigenous Protestants in shelters outside their communities, in the city) is not sufficient to make people feel "free from fear and want.". It presents, based on their *testimonios*, what it would mean for Indigenous people to feel secure: to stay in their ancestral lands or a similar ecosystem, with the freedom to worship according to their new religious choice.

This dissertation is also relevant for Indigenist research, as it centers on the voices of Indigenous Protestants reclaiming ownership of the narrative about them. It challenges and disrupts colonial legacies that have paired "tradition" with a particular religion, Catholicism, by showcasing the diverse ways of knowing, being, and believing within the Indigenous Protestant subgroup. Furthermore, this research emphasizes the importance of respecting, trusting, recognizing, and protecting Indigenous peoples' religious decision-making, even when this ruptures imaginary or widespread conceptions that people may have about their indigeneity.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation took an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the issue of religious intolerance among Indigenous people in Chiapas, Mexico. It aimed to answer the following research questions: What is Subaltern Christianity? What is the relationship between conversion and *human (in)security* in Indigenous communities of Chiapas? And, why do Indigenous People convert to Protestantism in present postcolonial times?

This study explores the intricate historical relationship between the Church and State, highlighting how Catholic hegemony, often supported by state agents, has suppressed religious diversity since colonial times. It examines how the state, under the pretext of protecting Mexican identity and traditions rooted in Catholicism, has contributed to the ongoing insecurity faced by religious minorities.

The case study examines the ongoing religious intolerance towards Indigenous Protestants in Mexico, usually linked to social and political factors, emphasizing the religious dimension through testimonios of conversion and fidelity among persecuted Indigenous Protestants in Chiapas, Mexico. By using an interdisciplinary approach, it explores the various sources of human insecurity that these communities face, suggesting that emotions play a significant role among both Indigenous Protestant converts and their persecutors. A broadly postcolonial approach to human security, which incorporates ontological security by analyzing subjectivities, reveals the relationship between conversion and human insecurity. At the core of this analysis are the testimonios of Indigenous converts, which highlight the profound, intimate experiences of choosing Protestantism as an act of agency rather than an imposition.

The title, *Subaltern Christianity. The mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism*, proposes to see Christianity from the subalterns' experience. Subalterns are those who are always subject to the activities of the ruling groups (Gramsci, 1934-35 in Hoare & Smith, 2003),

inhabiting a space of difference with limited or no access to cultural imperialism (Spivak, 2004). Subaltern Christians, specifically, are believers in Christ, from often non-Western cultural contexts, yet have a faith bigger than many. For despite the loss (of life, of land), the further oppression (justified in political speeches, and even from Christian entities), and the generational trauma inherited from colonialism, they rise, and they persist. They grow in their faith (read the Bible, pray), redefine, and reconcile with who they are. They decolonize themselves.

In the case study, we see Indigenous peoples deciding to make a new religious choice, leaving Catholicism and its religious expressions (*fiestas patronales*, drinking of alcohol); they adopt a new way of life and belief that is better expressed in Protestantism. A Protestantism that expresses uniquely with Indigenous converts studying and interpreting the Bible, living out their faith in Jesus through their indigeneity: In the breaking of tortilla and chayote, beans and fire stoves, traditional dances, and worship in Indigenous languages, we see the *hermanos* coming to *el templo* wearing their Indigenous dresses proudly. We hear the Bible, in *tojolabal*, *tzotzil*, and others, thought in sermons that are told at a slow pace, prioritizing *relationality* under a roof that was collectively built and preserved by them. We see Protestantism and indigeneity being mutually reshaped.

The Literature review explored some of the various ways to see religion. In academic circles, God has been avoided, instead relying on the 'rational' and the 'explainable' (Plate, 2021). Scholars have refrained from religion for its 'disruptive classification' that changes and develops depending the time and the culture (Mizruchi, 2001, xii, cited in Henking, 2021) being, therefore, a historical product (Koch, 2021), an imagined and biased term (Plate, 2021). At times, religion is seen widely, it can be anything that has been appropriated from the consumerist culture (Lofton, 2019) that compels one to worship a sports team, a music idol, or a seasonal item. Thus,

as everyone worships something, work, as *workism*, has become, for many, a "falsifiable God", yet "the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose" (Thompson, 2019, cited in Hess, 2023).

As diverse as the definitions of religion could be, specific markers of religiosity established by scholars may invisibilize religious plurality for some people would not self-identify as religious but 'spiritual' (Cruz et al., 2008), such as many Indigenous Protestants in this case study who consider Christianity not as a religion, but a *relationship* with Christ. Among all these discussions on religion, this dissertation considered the one proposed by Mircea Eliade, for whom religion, despite being never "pure" as it is a human experience affected by multi-elements, it has the notion of the sacred. One that implies believing in the being, meaning, and truth (Eliade, 1985).

The literature review also deepened into the categories and approaches used to define Indigenous peoples, their historical struggle, and how they have been addressed in the postcolonial approach as subalterns. Indigenous peoples as subalterns have survived the multiple attempts to destroy and silence them, whether physically or in their identity, when they were forced to renounce their indigeneity to fit into colonial categories of civilization and colonial filters of Christianity.

Subaltern Christians are living proof of how colonialism did not always win, as it could not destroy the subalterns nor rob their agency for the gospel. Subaltern Christians believe in Jesus because they learned to reach out to Him without (colonial) intermediaries and without renouncing their Indigenous identity. Reading the Bible in Indigenous languages is a precious tool for their growth and spiritual strength. While they are living in a world that, to a great degree, still lives in the structures and mindset inherited from Colonialism, Subaltern Christians struggle to make their voice heard, but they are neither silent nor unmoved. They believe in

possessing dignity and rights as God's children regardless of their contexts, often saying otherwise. Thus, they also tend to be involved in projects that aim for justice and solidarity with the oppressed, working to improve their contexts.

The perseverance of Indigenous peoples through the passing of time and their outspoken claims done over and over, have finally penetrated the academia. Efforts made to a great degree, by Indigenous scholars, who have contributed to build upon academic work that engages more with non-Western approaches and realizes *pluriversality* and *relationality* (Trownsell et al., 2022), aspects that, as this case study shows, characterize Indigenous peoples' views. Being revelation in dreams, visions, and engagement with *other-than-humans* (spiritual beings), alternate, yet valid enough aspects to consider in their decision making as a religious minority with tremendous disadvantages.

Indigenous perspectives are relevant and bring a fresh and much-needed contribution to social sciences including International Relations, Peace Studies, and Anthropology to address race and Christianity with a indigenous angle. Thus, particularly when researching Indigenous peoples, one should follow Indigenous research methods aiming to develop work that is not *extractivist* rather *relational*, and maintains a high level of commitment and accountability with Indigenous peoples.

This work explained how the use of colonial categories, such as *indio*, are powerful and discourages their continuation, for being "like a loaded weapon" that perpetuates a logic of dominion and discrimination towards Indigenous peoples. Coloniality is present and still affects people's perspectives and policymakers in the way they address Indigenous issues. Thus, Indigenous peoples are not included sufficiently in the decisions that affect them, often because

they are infantilized, considered not mature enough, or knowledgeable enough to know what is best for them. A discriminatory perspective is also exposed in the case study.

The case study of religious intolerance among Indigenous peoples in Chiapas showed the deep and complex relationship between religion and state, more specifically, the Catholic Church and the Mexican government. One that started as a marriage of convenience in colonialism being the missionaries important bridges with the natives and the state, a provider of resources and military protection. It shows the Catholic Church as a diverse body made of individuals with perspectives that often opposed the decisions taken at high levels, such as regarding the way to relate and appreciate Indigenous peoples, at times considering and working with them as fellow humans and with the right to access to education and the Bible equally. Perspectives that did not prevail due the rigid religious structure that prioritized political and economic pursuits. That included the legitimization of religious intolerance towards Protestants, partly as a religious zeal and partly as an instrument to prevent foreign influence from disturbing their order.

Nevertheless, with Mexico as an independent nation from Spain, frictions gradually developed, with people and political figures favoring a government that would not depend on nor privilege the church as much. Finding instead, a resistance that caused civil wars (*La Guerra de los Tres Años*, *La Cristiada*) proving the strong influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico. The Mexican state learned to proceed more prudently. Hence, this dissertation argued that such history directed the path to the way the Mexican government would relate to the Catholic Church and in the case of the government officials, to favor the Traditionalists in Indigenous communities, even in the face of religious intolerance.

Furthermore, despite the Mexican government's claims to be working with Human Security as a pillar of social development (23 March, 2023), in reality, the colonial and historical

inheritance rooted in the Mexican identity weighs heavily for it to do not commit in the protection of the right of Indigenous Protestants to live "free from fear and want" in their communities. Thus, we find not only the state but Catholic leaders, urban Protestant churches, and society in general responding with lukewarmness to the persecution of Indigenous Protestants, even in the face of the most severe expressions of it that are impacting the next generation. The typical responses to the issue of religious intolerance in Indigenous communities minimize Indigenous people's suffering, seeing their claims as exaggerated, not truthful, or deserving of such treatment.

At a deeper level, in Indigenous communities, religious diversity is experienced as a threat to *ontological security*. On the side of the (Catholic) Traditionalists it comes as an anxiety towards the unknown, towards a religious experience that ruptures with the community structure experienced in *fiestas patronales*. Although Protestantism helps to solve social issues such as alcoholism, considering alcohol as 'Satan's piss', the interruption of its consumption and any involvement with the *fiestas* brings economic loss and political control to the caciques who provide the supplies for the festivities with long-term loans given to the Catholic faithful. Thus, when Traditionalists turn their anxiety into hate towards Protestants and attempt to *securitize subjectivity* (Kinnvall, 2004) by forcing them to "volver a ser catolico" (re-convert to Catholicism), they will find support and force with the caciques and the local government officials, who are commonly part of the Traditionalist majority.

Furthermore, despite all the pressure, violence, and violation of human security that the Protestant minority experiences, they tend to persevere in their faith, for their very personal experiences of conversion and "new life in Christ" provides them with ontological security. An

inner peace, hope for the future, and joy that fuels their days, and colors their existence, even when they are forced into deeper levels of social exclusion by the Catholic majority. This dissertation argues that despite the convergence of political and economic elements in the issue of religious intolerance, religion is primary. Indigenous peoples know what they want and how they want it. The Traditionalists want their friends and family who became Protestants to go back to the way they used to be, and they will do whatever they can (and even they should not do) to make them do it in order to feel ontologically secure. Protestants will, however, remain in their new faith, for they have found a "higher truth" and reason for living, a different source of ontological security, Jesus, one that gives them what was lacking in them and prevented them from living fully, happy and free of addictions and anger. They want to live their new faith in their ancestral lands, exercising religious freedom side by side with their Catholic neighbors. The *testimonios* of conversion show a recollection of very intimate religious experiences that illuminate the various ways Indigenous peoples experience Christianity, having a revelation in dreams and miraculous healing as common elements in their journey to salvation. These personal experiences, lived first by mostly Indigenous evangelists, insert the gospel in Indigenous communities in family and neighboring circles, expanding further as the Protestant experience talks personally to more individuals who decide to convert too. Therefore, we can see, all around Chiapas, Indigenous people converting to Protestantism, living their faith in Jesus the native way. In churches where, everything happens in a community, in one big group with everyone included. In a less rigid structure, traditional dance, reading, singing, and praying in Indigenous languages go on for hours without an agenda. Having lactating mothers breastfeeding freely and children included without the shushing from annoyed adults. A church that brings faithful people from communities far away, excited to be together, joyful to be part of a big community of

believers from around the world where *indio* is no more. Just *hermano*, Indigenous hermano (Bastian & Guerrero, 2005).

Overall, this dissertation sought to introduce Subaltern Christianity, its practical implications, and healing steps from the coloniality we still live in and still wounds us.

Although the answers to the research questions posed here, are addressed in detail in the *Findings* chapter, I consider that this dissertation does not bring as many answers as questions. I hope, however, that it works as a provocation for further research, from myself and others, in humbly engaging with Indigenous subgroups. May this dissertation be, as a mustard seed, the beginning of something wider and more solid.

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APPENDIX

Logo de la institución a la que pertenece la investigadora responsable		Carta de motivos de investigación con indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa, para su aprobación de divulgación por parte del contacto representante
Título de la tesis de Doctorado		Original en inglés: <i>"Subaltern Christianity. The mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism"</i> Traducción al español: <i>Subalternidad Cristiana. La mutua reconfiguración de indigenismo y Protestantismo.</i>
Nombre de la investigadora responsable		Silvia Luz González Márquez
Nombre del contacto representante		Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Lugar y Fecha		San Cristóbal de las Casas, Diciembre, 2021

Recolección de testimonios de indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa en Chiapas.

Descripción
<p>1. Motivos de la investigación:</p> <p>La presente investigación de doctorado tuvo el objetivo de recolectar testimonios de primera mano, entre <i>indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa</i> en varias comunidades del estado de Chiapas durante los años 2015, 2017 y 2021. Dicha investigación se hizo de carácter científico, y sin fines de lucro, deseando contribuir en las siguientes áreas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Sumar esfuerzos en la lucha por la libertad religiosa en comunidades indígenas de México. b) Exponer el punto de vista de los mismos conversos evangélicos indígenas. Sus luchas frente a la intolerancia religiosa, su experiencia personal respecto a la respuesta de parte del gobierno y otros actores responsables en la problemática que viven; así como sus historias de fe y perseverancia. Todo esto, más allá de los supuestos académicos e históricos. <p>2. Metodología:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Realización de entrevistas semi-estructuradas, y recolección de <i>testimonios</i>, entre grupos de indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa. Los lugares de dichas entrevistas variaron con base en la disponibilidad y conveniencia de los participantes y colaboradores de esta investigación: casas particulares, albergues, oficinas, y comunidad indígena. b) Los datos fueron primordialmente recolectados en forma de audio, quedando en grabaciones. De forma secundaria, se tomaron algunas fotografías. <p>3. Forma de divulgación de datos:</p> <p>Los datos recolectados para esta investigación de doctorado serán divulgados confidencialmente. Primordialmente, de forma escrita en la tesis de doctorado, en artículos y presentaciones de carácter académico y/o de defensa de libertad religiosa. Bajo esta misma línea, de manera secundaria, parte de los audios serán reproducidos. Toda divulgación de estos datos se hará conservando en total anonimato a los participantes, y sin brindar detalles que faciliten su identificación.</p> <p>La investigadora responsable:</p> <p>Se comprometo a cumplir con lo expuesto en este documento, abierta a comunicación con los participantes y sujeta a respetar sus deseos respecto a la divulgación de sus <i>testimonios</i>.</p>

Logo de la institución a la que pertenece la investigadora responsable		Carta de motivos de investigación con indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa, para su aprobación de divulgación por parte del contacto representante
Título de la tesis de Doctorado		Original en inglés: "Subaltern Christianity. The mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism" Traducción al español: Subalternidad Cristiana. La mutua reconfiguración de indigenismo y Protestantismo.
Nombre de la investigadora responsable		Silvia Luz González Márquez
Nombre del contacto representante		Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Lugar y Fecha		San Cristóbal de las Casas, Diciembre, 2021

El contacto representante aquí firmante, corrobora que:

1. Los participantes que brindaron la entrevista y/o testimonios fueron informados y que accedieron a su divulgación por los motivos aquí expresos.
2. La investigadora principal se presentó con honestidad y claridad respecto a sus orígenes, afiliación, y motivo de su visita.
3. Los participantes colaboraron de manera libre, sin retribución económica alguna de parte de la investigadora responsable.

De acuerdo a lo descrito en este documento, los abajo firmantes, declaran la veracidad de lo dicho, y corroboran que los participantes, indígenas evangélicos sobrevivientes de persecución religiosa, brindaron la entrevista y/o testimonios aprobando su divulgación.

Contacto representante:




Maria Dolores Hernández Bonifaz
Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Directora

Datos de contacto de la investigadora responsable		
Nombre, Cargo, Teléfono y Correo Electrónico	Firma	Fecha
Silvia Luz González Márquez Candidata a Doctora en Estudios de Paz por la International Christian University, Tokio, Japón. sluz.gonzalez@gmail.com +8180-8872-1170		Diciembre, 2021

Logo of the institution to which the principal researcher belongs		Research motives with indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution. Permission of publication by the contact representative.
PhD Thesis Title		Original title: "Subaltern Christianity. The mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism" Spanish Translation: <i>Subalternidad Cristiana. La mutua reconfiguración de indigenismo y Protestantismo.</i>
Principal Researcher's Name		Silvia Luz González Márquez
Name of the Contact Representative		Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Date and Place		San Cristóbal de las Casas, Diciembre, 2021

Compilation of *testimonios* of indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution in Chiapas.

Description
<p>1. Research motives: This Doctoral research aimed to collect first-hand <i>testimonios</i> among indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution in various communities of Chiapas in 2015, 2017, and 2021. This research was made with scientific character and without commercial purposes, wishing to contribute in the following way:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Join efforts in the pursuit of religious freedom in indigenous communities of Mexico. b) Expose from the point of view of indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution, their fight against religious intolerance, personal experience about the government responses, and other responsible actors in the problems they face. Overall, to show their stories of faith and perseverance go beyond academic and historical assumptions. <p>2. Methodology:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Conducting interviews and collecting <i>testimonios</i> among groups of indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution. The places for these varied based on the availability and convenience of the participants and partners of this research: private homes, shelters, offices, and indigenous communities. <p>The data was mainly recorded as audio. Additionally, some photos were taken.</p> <p>3. Manner of Disclosing the data: The collected data will be treated and disclosed confidentially, mainly as a written text in the principal researcher's Doctoral Dissertation or published in scientific articles or religious freedom advocacy documents. Additionally, portions of the audio will be played in this same way. All data will be disclosed to preserve the anonymity of the participants without revealing details that could disclose their identity.</p> <p>The principal researcher: Is committed to fulfilling what is stated in this document, open to communication with the participants, and willing to respect their wishes regarding disclosing their <i>testimonios</i>.</p>

Logo of the institution to which the principal researcher belongs		Research motives with indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution. Permission of publication by the contact representative.
PhD Thesis Title		Original title: <i>"Subaltern Christianity. The mutual reshaping of indigeneity and Protestantism"</i> Spanish Translation: <i>Subalternidad Cristiana. La mutua reconfiguración de indigenismo y Protestantismo.</i>
Principal Researcher's Name		Silvia Luz González Márquez
Name of the Contact Representative		Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Date and Place		San Cristóbal de las Casas, Diciembre, 2021

The contact representative signing here verifies the following:

1. Participants gave their interview or *testimonios*, informed, and agreeing to its disclosure for the motives stated in this document.
2. The principal researcher introduced herself honestly and clearly regarding her origins, affiliation, and visit motives.
3. The participants collaborated freely, without financial retribution from the principal researcher.

The people signing below verify this document's statement, corroborating that the participants, indigenous Protestants survivors of religious persecution, gave their interview or *testimonios* agreeing with its disclosure.

Contact representative:

SIGNATURE

Maria Dolores Hernández Bonifaz
Misión 21 Gramos AC.
Director

Principal researcher's contact details		
Name, affiliation, phone and email	Signature	Date
Silvia Luz González Márquez PhD Candidate in Peace Studies at <i>International Christian University</i> , Tokyo, Japón. sluz.gonzalez@gmail.com +8180-8872-1170		December 2021