Guatemalan Catholics and Mayas: the Future of Dialogue

by Michael K. Duffey

It hardly bears commenting that the first evangelization of the native peoples of the Americas was unfortunate in many respects. The abuse of forced conversion is reflected in Pedro de Alvarado's assault on the Mam Mayas in the highlands of Guatemala in 1525. Alvarado issued a stock Spanish ultimatum: "Let it be known that our coming is beneficial because we bring tidings of the true God and Christian Religion ... so that you might become Christians peacefully, of your own free will; but should you refuse the peace we offer, then the death and destruction that will follow will be entirely of your own account."1

The Mams refused, and death and destruction did follow, as it had for the Mixtees, the Zapotees, the Tzotzil Mayans of southern Mexico, and the neighboring Guatemalan kingdom of the K'iche' Mayas (the Guatemalan department in which they live is often Latinized as "Quiche"). Within a decade and a half, Spanish expeditions subdued most of the other Mayan strongholds in the Guatemalan highlands.2

Coerced conversion had mixed results. Carmack, Gaseo, and Gossen describe Christianity as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, Mayan religious beliefs. While many were baptized and attended religious services, Mayas understood Christianity in terms compatible with their own cultures. "Over time, new prayers, new images, new songs, new penances, and new festivals were adopted whereas many of the old practices were abandoned. But there was never a sudden and total substitution of a new faith for an old."3

Gustavo Gutiérrez laments the tragic Christian-Mayan religious encounter through centuries of conquest. Unlike Paul's approach to the Greco-Roman world that was "attentive to the religious values to be found outside Christianity," sixteenthcentury Spanish missionaries regarded the peoples of the Americas as belonging to a "socially and culturally inferior world."4

The Modern Catholic Church and the Mayas

In the mid-twentieth century the Guatemalan Catholic Church was still intent on the Mayas' adherence to Eurocentric Catholicism. A program called Catholic Action was introduced to reevangelize the Mayas.5 The small number of foreign priests who served the indigenous communities enlisted hundreds of Mayan lay catechists to conduct Bible studies and sacramental preparation. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) challenged the church to reconsider its own mission in postcolonial regions of widespread impoverishment and political repression. The meeting of the Latin American Catholic bishops at Medellín, Colombia (1968), and the World Synod of Catholic Bishops (1971) called on the Catholic Church to overcome the systemic injustices deepening the poverty throughout Latin America. Recognition of the right of peoples to dignity and freedom was dawning throughouta Latin America. Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation Evangelization in the Modern World affirmed that "above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness." Evangelization, he wrote, is most effective when Christians "show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good." Furthermore, "The Church . . . has the duty to proclaim liberation to millions of human beings as well as of assisting the birth of this liberation, giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization."6

The church's promotion of lay leadership was producing social and economic awareness among the impoverished Mayas. Lay leadership became a source of grassroots projects for economic, health, and social improvements among Mayas. Cooperatives were formed and supplemental income projects undertaken with the aim of ending the debilitating annual migration of Mayas from the highlands to coastal areas, where they worked for low wages in unhealthy conditions harvesting cotton, sugarcane, and other export crops.
By the late 1970s indigenous highland communities found themselves in the middle of Guatemala's civil war. Thousands of Mayas, along with priests, pastoral workers, and catechists, were massacred. In 1980 Bishop Juan Gerardi suspended operations of the Diocese of Quiche after several hundred church workers were murdered and several attempts were made on his own life. With the exception of a single foreign missionary, no church leadership was present in the diocese for two years. In 1983 the church began the task of accompanying returning survivors and assisting in their resettlement amid continuing sporadic military assaults. That year Pope John Paul II made the first of his three visits to Guatemala. Addressing an indigenous audience, he said: "The Church . . . knows the social discrimination you suffer, the injustices that you bear, the serious difficulties you have in defending your lands and your rights, the frequent lack of respect for your customs and traditions. . . . The Church wants to stay close to you and to raise her voice in condemnation when your dignity as human beings and children of God is violated."8

In the early 1990s the Guatemalan bishops demonstrated substantial support for Mayan renewal. In 1992 Guatemalan Bishop Gerardo Flores described the task facing the church: "If Puebla [the 1979 meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference] saw the face of Christ in the Indian, then Santo Domingo [the 1992 meeting] will usher in a period when people can think beyond the disfigured face to embrace a fully rounded and robust new actor with a great contribution to make to all humankind."9

In 1992 the Guatemalan bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled "500 años sembrando el Evangelio" (Five Hundred Years Sowing the Gospel). The letter allowed the Catholic Mayas to recount their own tragic history. They spoke of "the violation, abduction, prostitution, and robbing of our mother earth" and of her defilement for economic profit, violating "the life of God and life of his children."10 Banished from the land, forced to work as slave laborers or for slave wages, "we indigenous have lived, thus, without a mother." For five hundred years outsiders have used every means - including religion - "to intrude upon, weaken, and divide the indigenous communities." The ongoing theft of indigenous lands by powerful economic elites is, they contend, at the root of today's indigenous crisis, since it is the land that nurtures both people and culture.11 The intruders had no concern for the "common good, justice, and growth" of the indigenous peoples but regarded them as "negotiable products, commodities of capital and profit." Sons were taken away to become plantation laborers or soldiers, and daughters were pressed into domestic service. Destruction of families and communities resulted from poverty, violence, forced emigration, and religious proselytizing.

The bishops affirmed Mayan values and expressed the desire to begin intercultural dialogue. They pledged to promote an "authentic evangelization - [one that] has not yet taken root - that does not divide communities, and that does not fail to recognize the sense of God and power of the spirit" already present in the culture and "beating in the heart of the Mayas." They affirmed that the incarnation reveals the "closeness of God the Father and Mother, and the reign of life, justice, freedom, peace, and love in the world of the indigenous of this continent." Jesus is God's prophet who defends the dignity and life of the little ones, is servant and friend of the poor and oppressed, and is initiator of reconciliation and unity. The church must be a "mother to the impoverished Mayas, promoter of their cultural values, and defender of their rights." The church must commit itself to "the urgent and radical changes that God demands in his world," joining the Mayas "to work together to promote peace and inaugurate the reign of justice, life, liberty, and love."12 After five centuries of Eurocentric Catholicism, the Guatemalan Catholic Church seemed poised to accept the challenge of entering into a genuine interreligious dialogue.

Mayan Renaissance and Catholic Response

Despite centuries of efforts by missionaries to uproot Mayan religious beliefs and practices, the Mayan cosmological vision continues to provide the center of Mayan life. A history of resistance to cultural oblivion flowered in the 1990s with a Mayan cultural renaissance. While the Catholic Church has acknowledged its past sins against the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the question is whether real interreligious dialogue is yet occurring. The Mayan cosmovision has met with resistance from conservative clergy and bishops.13 Rigoberto Perez, a Guatemalan priest who has worked for two decades with K'iche' and Ixil Mayas, notes that some bishops are distrustful of Mayan initiatives and want to control the outcome. Perez reports that "some clergy fear [the Mayan cosmovision], and others don't understand it."14
While the Catholic Church has supported the renewal of Mayan cultural rights, its willingness
to embrace the religious worldview and practices of the indigenous is less clear. K'iche' Mayan
Wuqub’ Iq’, originally a Catholic priest who now identifies himself solely as a Mayan priest,
notes that the bishops at first supported inculturation but gradually became uneasy with the
approach of the small group of European and Mayan Catholic priests exploring inculturation.15
At present, Bruce Calder writes that the future of Catholic-Mayan relations is "a work in
progress" in which "the Maya are now capable of creating their own agenda and of operating
on their own . . . [having] a voice in a society in which they have been marginalized for almost
five hundred years."16

What will be the future relationship between the Catholic Church and the Mayas? Virginia
Garrard-Burnett describes three different Mayan responses to Christianity. The first response,
of which Wuqub’ Iq’ is representative, seeks to return to an older Mayan culture shorn of
Christianity. Garrard-Burnett observes: "For some Mayan activists, the conflation of cultural
rights and religion demanded an outright repudiation of Christianity. . . . [The Peace Accords]
opened a social space for Mayan spiritual leaders to break off their ties with Christianity and
return to an autochthonous spirituality they believed retained its pre-Christian essence." These
activists seek to "decolonize" Christian narratives and "reposition them in a Mayan cosmo
vision" in order "to invert and reinterpret the power relations and identity issues implicit in
the Christian project . . . [so that] Mayas are not subordinated to Ladino interests."17 They
complain that the Catholic Church has yet to engage in a dialogue among equals. Some have
left the Catholic Church to return to their indigenous roots. Wuqub’ Iq’ observes that, although
the Guatemalan Catholic Church has championed the cultural rights of the Mayas, its support
of Mayan religious views and ritual practices is less clear. Wuqub’ Iq’ charges that "dialogue"
from the Christian side has always been a strategy to Christianize the Maya, to understand
them in order "to ensure that [indigenous culture] draws closer to the fundamental principles
of the Christian faith."18

The second response Garrard-Burnett describes is that of inculturationists seeking a
"Mayanized theology" that would "fully universalize Christianity by consciously framing
Christian beliefs within the conceptual structures . . . of Mayan cosmovision."19 Presbyterian
Kaq'chikel theologian Antonio Otzoy writes: "At Puebla [the 1979 bishops' meeting] we
indigenous peoples were recognized by the Latin American bishops as the suffering face of
Christ in the Americas. We were deprived of our lands, ignored and pushed aside in the
juridical and political reordering of colonial society. . . . What today's bishops fail to recognize
is that the practices of the conquest continue today: we are being robbed of our unique
identity. We are asked to desist from being ourselves."20 Otzoy is giving voice to centuries of
injustice still not remedied. He calls for space in which the Mayas can develop and fully
express themselves, "in their music and art, spirituality and family relations, and oneness with
nature." Garrard-Burnett characterizes a genuine "inculturation theology" as a dialogue that
seeks to "incorporate [Mayan] spiritual values as much as possible into a Christian scheme,
but [that] also demands a reexamination of fundamental Christian images, symbols, and
archetypes through the lens of traditional Mayan cosmovision(s)" in order to "identify points of
potential conjuncture" between European and indigenous systems of organizing all realities
that make up the world.21

The third and oldest response was for Mayas both to participate in their own rituals and to
maintain Christian identity, blending religious cultures. Sixteenth-century missionaries unable
to directly instruct the faithful in myriad villages installed a medieval institution called
confradias, a brotherhood of elders tasked with directing the veneration of village patron
saints and organizing fiestas on saints' feast days. Confradias combined veneration of the
saints with Mayan veneration of spirits and ancestors. Confradias also held political authority
and maintained an indigenous social structure. By the mid-1950s, however, the confradias had
lost religious and political power to Catholic Action catechists. Catholic charismatics also
appeared about the same time. Confradias, catechists, and charismatics, however, have not

Mayan Beliefs

In 2001 K'iche' Mayan priests published the Pixab' ("Code of Conduct"), which presents the
traditional religious, moral, and juridical teachings of the K'iche' Mayas - a departure from the
historical secrecy with which Mayas were forced to guard their beliefs and rituals. The
publication of the Pixab' is an opportunity for interfaith conversation. Below is a brief summary of its main themes.

One God. The Pixab' asserts that the early missionaries' accusations of polytheism conditioned Mayas not to speak of the "diverse, multidimensional, and multirepresentational" ways in which God interacts with the creation. Hunab Ku’ (hunab = "unique"; Ku’ = "God") is the only God, the CreatorFormer and Life-Giver. The most common title for Hunab Ku’ is "Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth." The notion is foreign that Hunab Ku’ "govern[s] the world from above, not as a horizontal divinity in which many elements participate and in which cosmic energy plays an important role."22

The world. God is the beating heart that enlivens everything.23 The natural world is not divine, but in it the divine will is actively manifested. The cosmos and the earth are God's preeminent revelations. As the Pixab' describes the creation, "Everything created is alive and has purpose. Everything that exists has an energy that sustains it. . . . Nothing exists by chance. Nothing is dead, everything is alive. From this arises the conception of the sacredness of the world."24

Respect for the earth. The Pixab' affirms that "nature does not belong to the human being; rather, the human being belongs to the earth" and that "life doesn't belong to the human being, but to 'Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth,' to the Ancestors, and to nature itself."25 Human beings must understand their relationships rightly by showing "profound appreciation and respect for things because of their usefulness in life."26 It asks, "Could any human being exist without air, water, fire /light, the earth?"27 All of life is to be organized in gratitude for the harmony of the created order. Giving thanks is the central means by which harmony is maintained. Mayas are taught to give thanks for the rain, sunlight, land, the sowing and the harvest, health, and harmonious community.

The human vocation. The day of the Mayan calendar on which persons are born determines how they will serve the community through the aptitudes they receive. Vocations are exercised on behalf of the community and maintain the world's harmony. The sense of self is first of all communally and historically embedded. The Pixab' describes the various vocations associated with the days of the Mayan calendar: for example, leaders, healers, interpreters of the law, midwives, philosophers, and spiritual guides. The Pixab' notes that at birth every person receives a nawal ("spirit" or "soul") to assist in actualizing the particular purpose for which he or she is born into the community. Nawals are described as "companion spirits" of "Heart of Heaven, Heart of Earth" who help to guide the lives of human beings. The nawal is one's true and immortal being.28 Mayas do not reveal their nawals for fear that they might be stolen.

The ancestors. For the Mayas, the boundaries separating the spiritual and material worlds, and the living and the ancestors, are porous: "When the ancestors depart this life, they remain close at hand, in the mountains, rivers, clouds. We are surrounded by the spirits and will be welcomed into the spirit realm at death. At death we return to the hills, valleys, and mountains. We will dwell in space and time. We will travel in the wind and be in the rain, the fog, and the clouds."29

Ancestors have important contributions to make to the living. For example, they help to determine the vocation given to each person. Carlos Berganza notes that the reevangelization efforts of Catholic Action discouraged belief in the spiritual role of the ancestors, in effect attempting to break the connection between the living and the spirit realm. He describes a meeting between Mayan Catholic priests and Mayan priests in which the latter expressed "resentment about the damage done to their culture by outsiders by the attempts to steal the soul of Indians by cutting the connection to ancestors."30

Cosmic harmony. Garrard-Burnett summarizes the "three central elements of Mayan spirituality" as peace with the deity, peace with the natural world, and peace with other people.31 All natural elements "are part of a harmonious whole." All "are connected, interdependent, communicating with one another, and affecting one another. So arises the need to learn to live together in community, both in the community of spirits and the social community."32
For Mayas, restoring broken human harmony is essential. The Pixab' describes the process of repairing the damage that transgressions inflict on the community: "In life and especially in the resolution of conflict, a principle of forgiveness is observed among the Elders. It consists in granting forgiveness to someone who has committed some crime, but only when he shows a change of attitude or behavior and agrees to make restitution for the damage done by the violation of a norm."33

While these teachings are only a summary of the Pixab', they represent essential aspects of Mayan theology and cosmovision. Resources like the Pixab' are essential to religious dialogue.

Interfaith Dialogue and Inculturation?

Questions remain regarding the Catholic Church's future dialogue with the Mayas. Is the intent to engage in interreligious dialogue, or is it merely to inculturate Christian ways in Mayan cultural forms? I would argue that Christian and Mayan religious beliefs diverge because they are undergirded by differing cosmologies. For example, is Hunab Ku' to be understood as a personal God experienced as love? Is Jesus Christ the consummate source of knowledge of God? Is divine revelation also mediated through Mayan spiritual guides? Are they comparable to the biblical prophets? What is the relationship between free will and the determination of vocation by the day of the calendar on which one is born? What sort of mastery ought humans to have over the earth? These are questions for religious dialogue.

Interfaith dialogue clarifies differences and similarities between different cosmologies. Dialogue opens the way for shared values, making interfaith projects possible that meet the common challenges of human communities. When both the Mayan cosmology and Christian beliefs are sympathetically received, dialogue is possible. In this spirit Christians can proceed to inculturation - how best to express Christian beliefs in Mayan terms. Guillermo Cook expresses the interfaith task from the Christian side as "simply to make the biblical text available . . . [and] to be open to learn, in this case from the peoples of Abia Yaal [Central America], how to read 'the book of life' - the book of Creation."34 The process goes both ways, of course, meaning that if Mayan beliefs are accepted, the conversation becomes how best to express Mayan beliefs in Ladino Christian terms.

A visual image of religious dialogue might be that of a bridge. The moorings at each end are the cosmologies and religious beliefs held by each group. The span is built from each side by study and dialogue. When the bridge is completed (although it requires continual renovation), the bridge builders are able to cross over, understanding each other's world views sympathetically, and be moved to incorporate one another's wisdom into their own worldviews. Then the conversation can turn to inculturation - how to worship and live in a way that is satisfactory to both. Jean-Marie Hyacinthe Quenum, S.J., a theologian of inculturation who works in an African context, argues that inculturation is not the juxtaposition of two religious worldviews but a "new creation that does justice to both indigenous culture and Christian faith."35 The bridge itself has the possibility of becoming a "new creation" transcending both traditions.

A prerequisite for bridging is always freedom - a far cry from the spirit of the early missionaries, who were ready to use force in trying to convert the Mayas. Christopher Chiappari argues that an important form of Mayan liberation is the religious freedom through which "the bridge to the other culture will become stronger and broader, favoring coexistence and complementarity over competition and conversion."36

But animosity and alienation among some Mayan intellectuals remain, reflecting the inadequacy of interreligious dialogue to date. Wuqub' Iq' is surely correct that "in a dialogue both sides must take part as equals" and that there must be "mutual respect, not predetermined outcomes, and freedom of choice for all."37 Dialogue has been problematic in the past. But the future will tell whether genuine interfaith dialogue can, in Garrard-Burnett's words, "incorporate [Mayan] spiritual values as much as possible into a Christian scheme," while at the same time "demand[ing] a reexamination of fundamental Christian images, symbols, and archetypes through the lens of traditional Mayan cosmovision(s)."38

In 1999 Bishop Julio Cabrera of K'iche' asserted that the Mayan cosmovision enriches the Catholic Church. He acknowledged the wisdom and vitality of Mayan cultures, noting the
values of harmony and equilibrium in the Mayan cosmovision, which manifest a deep respect for the Creator, for mother earth, and for all human beings. Cabrera recognized the Mayas' care for land and nature, their strong sense of community and family, their respect for elders and ancestors, and their preservation of customs and traditions. He laid out a pastoral plan intended to bridge cultures by committing the church to supporting Mayan communities "in conserving, renewing, and enlivening their cultural identity" and continuing the process of becoming an "autochthonous church" - that is, a church springing from the Mayan culture itself. Cabrera is one of several Guatemalan bishops who have expressed a desire for a new dialogue, one I would characterize as interreligious dialogue that may move to a dialogue about inculturation.

The question remains: will conversation bring Mayan religious revelation and Christian revelation to contribute to a more profound level of understanding - a "new creation" - that fosters greater respect, justice, and peace for all Guatemalans?