One Town, Many Heavens: Religious Plurality
And Conflict in Santiago Atitlán

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Introduction

In 1984 a church growth planner from Overseas Crusades Ministries claimed, “Latin America is a Catholic region, but there’s no reason to assume that this need always be so. It could become an evangelical region at some point in time. I believe that if...Guatemala becomes the first predominantly evangelical nation in Latin America, it will have a domino effect (Stoll 1990:75) Conversion to Protestantism has spread quickly across Latin America for varying reasons. Some factors contributing to this change given by Liliana R. Goldin and Brent Metz include: economic changes, violence, the popularity of political leaders, natural disasters, and alcohol use or abuse (Goldin and Metz 1997:61). The majority of the towns that surround Lake Atitlán in a predominantly Maya area of Guatemala are demonstrative of this trend. For example, a study in the 1960s indicated that a third of the population of San Pedro La Laguna had converted to Protestantism, while numbers from the 1990s indicated that half of the population was Protestant (Paul 1968:134, Petrich 1998:89-90). And while Santiago Atitlán was considered to be one of the more traditional towns around the lake in the 1960s, by the 1990s a third of the population claimed to be Protestant (Douglas 1968:272, Carlsen 1997:16-17). One Maya woman from Guatemala claimed that factionalism that has developed as a result of religious plurality in Maya towns is dividing their communities (Fischer and Hendrickson 2003:242).

The purpose of this study is to examine whether the factionalism and conflict that has been the result of religious plurality in various Maya towns, including Santiago Atitlán, is still dividing the community. Using family as a metaphor for community I will explore the nature of the relationship between family members that are not the same religious affiliation as one another, focusing on the relationship between those who identify themselves as Catholic and those who identify themselves as Evangelical. I also will investigate residents’ general impressions of whether conflict exists in families where not all individuals are the same religion and what factors may influence these impressions. This topic is significant because community and “an all-pervading and meaningful belief system” (as well as land and “an attachment to place”) has historically contributed to Maya survival and identity through repeated cycles of conquest by preventing them from being completely integrated into the national and global economy and culture (Lovell 1988: 27, Coe 2004:59, 242)

The main concepts that I will explore in this paper are religion, family, relationships between family members who are not the same religious affiliation, and community. Before beginning my research, I hypothesized that family members who were not the same religious affiliation as one another would have conflicting points of view, strained relationships, and would attempt to separate themselves from one another. I felt that in general community members would feel that there was conflict within families where all the members were not the same religious affiliation even if they themselves were not in such a situation.
I expected older individuals, individuals who went to church more frequently, and Evangelicals to be especially vocal about conflict with members of their family that did not share the same religious affiliation as them or about other families that had people of different religious affiliations in them. The following section will give a brief historical background of the Maya and religion in Guatemala, particularly in the Lake Atitlán area, as well as a brief description of Santiago Atitlán today. Section Three will present the data I have found regarding religious plurality and conflict in Santiago Atitlán and an analysis of that data. Section Four will present my conclusions and ideas for future research.

Section 2: Historical Background and Santiago Atitlán Today

There are around 7 and ½ million Maya living in the world today, with heavy concentrations in Chiapas, the Yucatan, and Guatemala. In order to understand the contemporary Maya it is important to have a basic understanding of their history. Maya civilization emerged between 400 and 300 B.C. (marked by the building of large cities and the beginnings of hieroglyphic writing and the calendar) in a high culture area termed “Mesoamerica,” a region encompassing the southern Central Plateau of Mexico and Yucatan and the highlands and Pacific lowlands of Central Guatemala and western Honduras and Nicaragua. The area is generally defined by advanced architectural constructs such as pyramids, ceremonial centers, and ball courts, a highly organized religion with an elaborate priesthood and system of rituals, advanced agriculture based on maize, beans, and squash, established trade networks, and the working of metals. Groups such as the Olmecs, Toltecs, Maya, and Aztecs resided in this area. Various groups in this region were in regular contact with one another, spreading ideas and practices that often led to similar belief systems and traditions.

A belief that developed in these areas, including that of the Maya, was the idea of a continual cycle of creation and destruction (Coe 2004:211). In oral tradition the present world had come about following the destruction of the old worlds and their inhabitants (Evans 2004:34). Often pyramids were built one on top of the other, such as the Templo Mayor in Central Mexico, to represent the continual regeneration and renewal of the world. This means time was not linear, but occurred in cycles and humans were essential elements in this cosmic process, for if rituals, prayers, offerings, and sacrifices were not performed at the right time the world may have ceased to exist (Coe 2004:211). Accordingly, religion played a central role in daily individual and community life.

The middle lowland Maya area went into decline around 900 AD for reasons still unknown today. This led many groups to move northward to the Yucatan area, while the K’iche, Kaqchikel, and Tz’utujil Maya eventually made their way to Lake Atitlán and the surrounding region in the highlands of Guatemala (in the Southern Maya area) between the tenth and eleventh century. They set up temples, plazas, and administrative complexes and warring between these groups was commonplace even until the arrival of the Spanish (Szybist 2004:34).

Spanish Contact

Beginning in the late 15th century and following the Reconquest of Spain, a holy war fought by Christian armies to rid Spain of the “evil” Muslim Moors, the Spaniards came to the Americas in search of wealth and
glory and to spread the Christian faith (Burkhart and Gasco 2007:151-2). They established their first settlement on the American mainland in 1519. Most settlements were placed near sources of natural resources or large indigenous populations that could be used for labor, or in the case of Panama, where there existed a strategic transit point for trade.

In 1524 the Spanish conquistador (conqueror), Pedro de Alvarado, along with Aztec and Tlaxcalan warriors from the recently conquered Central Mexico area invaded the Guatemalan highlands, a predominantly Maya culture area. When Alvarado arrived in the Lake Atitlán region, the Kaqchikel sided with the Spaniards in order to defeat the K’iches. Eventually, the Kaqchikels rebelled against the Spanish due to the excessive tribute and work imposed on the indigenous population. Resistance was common throughout the highland area. However, the Tz’utujil and other groups remained loyal to the Spanish, which allowed the Spanish to control the uprising and complete the military conquest of the area. Still stiff Indian resistance and little gold found in the Guatemalan-Chiapas highlands to satisfy the Spaniards, permitted Indians in these areas to be under less control by the Spaniards than areas with significant natural resources such as the Aztecan areas in Central Mexico, allowing Indian culture to prevail (West and Augelli 1989: 235-240, Petrich 1998:50-55).

By the mid-sixteenth century the Christian Franciscan and Dominican orders were established in the Lake Atitlán area and reducciones (reductions) were instituted that concentrated the Maya Indians in the region (Kaqchikels, Tz’utujils, and K’iche’s) into smaller areas in order to make them easier to govern and convert to Christianity (Morgan Szybist 2004:14, 79, Petrich 1998:58). Alvarado’s invasion and success was understood by the Maya as the destruction of the old world that then ushered in a new one with a new patron deity, Christianity’s Jesus Christ (Christenson 2003:295) The story of Christ’s death and resurrection paralleled the story of the death and resurrection of the Maya maize god, which fit well into the cyclical worldview of the Maya (Coe 2004:244). While most residents did convert to Christianity this religion took on distinctly Maya characteristics, forming a hybrid religion sometimes referred to as folk Catholicism.

One resident of the lake area claimed that the Catholics came in but the Mayas incorporated the old gods and made the ritual their own (MacDonald 1991). Cofradías, or confraternities, were one way the Maya, as well as other indigenous groups throughout Latin America, accomplished this syncretism. While established by the Catholic Churches, these religious brotherhoods (made up of indigenous members) were in charge of the celebration of particular saints through rituals, offerings, and public ceremonies allowing them to take on a degree of indigenous character (Burkhart and Gasco 2007:214). Religion remained a central focal point of daily life, as ancestral ritual (often performed by cofradía members) and prayer were necessary to ensure the regeneration and renewal of the world, just as in Pre-Columbian times. The cofradía system took on even greater importance in the religious life of the lake area in the 19th and 20th century when the number of Catholic priests was reduced due to the Church’s desire to have them residing in higher populated areas (Morgan Szybist 2004: 21, 88). Folk Catholicism has elements that, while not to be considered “pristine,” pre-Columbian traditions have distinct roots in that period which do not have Orthodox Catholic counterparts such as the Deer Jaguar Dance. [In the dance the local deity Martin, who provides for the generation of life in the world, transforms into his animal counterpart (common Mesoamerican belief that humans and gods could transform into an animal counterpart, usually for religious
ceremonies), the deer, who “carries on his back the power of life.” Participants in this dance are dressed in jaguar and deer costumes, with the principal deer dancer being the substitute for Martin and the costume being the body of the god in his animal altar ego. The principal deer dancer is eventually ‘killed’ and is taken to an altar as a ‘sacrificial offering.’ In a subsequent ritual the nab’eyesil, or priest-shaman, dressed in the garments of Martin represents the deer of Martin who offers his life so that the world can be reborn. Once he has been “killed” the nab’eyesil holds his arms out as though he were Christ after he was crucified, although this pose could also be representative of the resurrection of the maize god, as Christ and Martin (both of whom offer renewed life) have been conflated in the form of a maize deity. Once the dance has been completed the world is new and the rain will come so that the maize will grow (Christenson 2001:157). Generally, folk Catholics promote informal education based on the teaching of the elders and the maintenance of religious festivals with music, food, and alcohol, while they reject the use of modern medicine (Petrich 1998:9,141). Today these individuals compose a minority of the population (Christenson 2001: XIV).

President Barrios first opened Guatemala to Protestant missionaries in the late 19th century (Carlsen 1997:117). These groups have used the town of Panajachel as a home base for the region since 1920 (Hinshaw 1968:78.) Protestants (Evangelicals) promote school education, self and familial aggrandizement, and modern medicine, while they reject traditions (such as the expense of the cofradía and its associated religious festivals) that they perceive as bad. They are also against the ritual or casual consumption of alcohol (Petrich 1996:97-9, 140-1; Stoll 1990:49).

Catholic alternatives also emerged, such as the Catholic Actionists, Catechists, and Charismatic Catholics. Members of Catholic Action support tradition but are against the excessive expense and drinking of alcoholic beverages associated with the cofradía system and its religious festivals. They also support the education of women (Douglas 1968:256). [1] The Catequista (Catechist) Movement seeks to remove Pre-Columbian traditions from Indian religion completely seeing them as pagan and evil. Instead they promote an Orthodox Catholic faith (Carlsen 1997:124). Another alternative is the Charismatic Catholics who desire to put an end to the cofradía system Little 2004:194). Some of their church services are similar to those of Protestant sects with music, dancing, and participation by the congregation Fischer and Hendrickson 2003:02).

According to one informant in Santiago Atitlán, before there was only one church, the Catholic Church, and everyone who went to church went there. Feliciano Pop, a resident of San Pedro claims that, “Before, there were no religions here.” [Feliciano is a 77 year-old Tz’utujil speaker.] While there are differing opinions as to whether “religions” refers to Protestant sects, or both Protestant and Catechist sects, the plurality of the statement underlines the various religious divisions that exist within the community. Another informant joked that there are 22 heavens in Santiago Atitlán because there are 22 Evangelical churches. Intense factionalism has arisen within the majority of communities, as these divisions are most often incompatible (Petrich 1996:80; Hinshaw 1968:81.)

Residents of the lake area have been continually reminded of rivaling religious sects. During the fiesta of San Pedro in 1956 rival groups used loudspeakers to share their doctrines and try to persuade members of the community to believe their proclamations (Paul 1968:138). More recently, in San Antonio Palopó
Evangelicals and Catholics broadcasted their messages throughout the night, as residents were out at the bars or elsewhere (MacDonald 1991).

Both Protestants and Catholics have considered traditional costumbre to be evil and members of the cofradía who carry out these traditions as the Devil’s instruments (Carlsen 1997:125). Many Protestants feel that Maya religious specialists are witches that will cause harm to other people and they are strong critics of “idols” like Maximón that could be considered paganismo (paganism) (Fischer and Hendrickson 2003:77; Carlsen 1997: 13, 157). They see everything connected with the past as inherently bad (Petrich 1998:140). An Evangelical preacher claimed that to the Evangelicals everything is new and the past is gone. Many Catholic Mayas try to conform to Orthodox Catholic doctrine, which generally conflicts with folk Catholicism, as it has elements that have a Pre-Columbian heritage and the cofradía system that often operates independently of the Church (Fischer and Hendrickson 2003:77; Little 2004:193). On the other side, some residents from Santa Catarina Palopó who often participated in traditional practices called the Protestants “crazy,” “lost,” or “evil (Little 2004:256).”

In some cases destruction, crime, and violence has resulted. In 1950, three priests of the Catequista movement (a movement that had sought to remove Pre-Columbian traditions from Indian religion) went to the cofradía in Santa Cruz and destroyed the god/“idol” Maximón’s head and stole two of his masks. A ban on Maximón worship followed and it wasn’t until 1953 that a presidential decree allowed worship to resume. One informant from Santiago Atitlán told me that Evangelicals had taken a rock from the old Tz’utujil capital of Chuitinamit believed to have been used for sacrifices and had used it to build a house. He also showed my friend and I a rock that had been plastered over by Evangelicals who did not want people to see the ancient drawing underneath. Another informant claimed that this plastering process was also occurring in the part of the Catholic Church in Santiago Atitlán that is being renovated and that the altar that has Maya symbolism on it is no longer being used. Yet another informant from Santiago Atitlán told me that Maya ceremonies were now being performed in secret because the current priest does not like the Maya religion. Strangely, despite seemingly similar doctrine, Robert S. Carlsen reported that some of the most violent divisions in the 1990s were between the various Protestant sects in Santiago Atitlán. Demonstrative of this maliciousness is the fact that the pastor of the Pentecostal ELIM Church had bodyguards at his side the majority of the time (Carlsen 1997:13, 124-5; Stoll 1990:210). However, an Evangelical preacher reported to me recently that there are no problems between the Evangelical churches.

While clearly there are many subdivisions within the Catholic and Evangelical categories and potential conflict between these subdivisions as presented above this paper seeks to take a step back and evaluate the overall nature of the relationship between those who identify themselves as Catholics and those who identify themselves as Evangelicals. I have chosen these two categories based on information I have received from several interviewees that these are the two dominant religions in Santiago Atitlán. The following section will present the data I have found relating to conflict in families where this religious duality is present and the general perception of conflict when not every family member is of the same religious affiliation. Before moving to this section it is important to provide a brief description of the study site.

Santiago Atitlán is one of the largest towns around Lake Atitlán, hosting a population around 40,000. It is 136 square kilometers in size and sits at an altitude of 1592 meters above sea level (DePaz 1997:80). It is
located on the eastern side of a small bay on the southwestern side of the lake. It is surrounded by three volcanoes, two to the east of the town and the other on its western side across the bay.

The majority of people in Santiago Atitlán speak Tz’utujil as their first language and most people speak at least some Spanish as well. I have heard many who speak a mix of the native tongue and Spanish. Some individuals are learning how to speak English. I know of at least one school where English is being taught. I would imagine the reason for this relates to the need for work outside of the town, as unemployment is a problem here according to several informants. Also, the heavy influx of tourists on a daily basis, many who are English speakers, makes the desire to learn English even greater as there is heavy interaction between artesanía vendors, hotel and restaurant employees, transportation workers, and tour guides.

Most of the tourists shop in the stores located by the docks in the Canton Tzanjuyu. There bags, rugs, clothing, jewelry, wood sculptures, paintings, and other crafts can be found. Many also go to the Catholic Church in the center of town. There is a big market around the park area on Fridays and Sundays, which also draws the attention of many tourists. Despite the size of the city, there are only a few hotels in town, such as La Posada, Turicentro Tiosh Abaj, Hotel Bambu, Hotel Chi Nim Ya, Hotel Tz’utujil, and the Hospedaje y Restaurante Rosita, reflecting the day-trip excursion type of tourism that dominates in Santiago. There are many Internet cafés, mainly in the business districts. Santiago Atitlán is also well known for the tours to shaman and traditional Maya birthing ceremony tours and visits to Maximón, the Catholic Church, and ancient ruins across the bay.

Fishing and farming were the traditional trades of Santiago Atitlán. Now coffee and vegetables such as tomatoes are the primary crops. Artisan crafts are also important to the economy because many are purchased by foreign visitors (Morgan Szybist 2004:45). On market days one can see both local products and foreign products, some of which are sold by traveling merchants. The principal economic activities of residential areas seems to revolve around small tiendas that sell food, toilet paper, soap, shampoo, phone cards, etc. They are the most prevalent type of business in neighborhood areas. There are also some small fruit stands, cafés, metal and wood working shops, and some small jewelry stores. The local economy for the most part lacks big business and instead is dominated by small time entrepreneurs. The fire department, the police station, the post office, the mayor’s office, community telephones, many local businesses, and a health center are located near the plaza.

Most women in Santiago still wear traditional traje, including the huipil and corte. Huipils often have flowers or birds embroidered on them. Many tie a belt around their cortes and a lot of women carry what looks like a woven scarf. Many older men still wear the men’s traditional dress such as the striped pants that sometimes have animals like birds embroidered on them. They usually have a belt that holds these pants up and wear a cowboy type hat as well. Most younger men wear western dress such as T-shirts, jeans, and ball caps.

Most individuals seem to have a religious aspect to their lives. Almost everyday one can hear music and singing from the numerous churches throughout the town. Evangelical churches are dispersed throughout the community whereas there is one large Catholic Church in the center of town and five smaller Catholic centers. There is even a Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, and Charismatic church in town. Religious bumper stickers, T-shirts, and art can be seen throughout the town. Even names of some of the many tiendas in
town have a religious base. One Catholic informant said that the people in Santiago are OK to be without things like food because they feel it is only necessary that they have a pastor.

**Research Methods, Data, and Analysis**

The research methods I used in this project were: interviews with community members, cognitive mapping, quantitative surveys, free-lists, participant observation, and time allocation. Data collected while in Santiago Atitlán includes:

**Interview Data**

Five out of seven interviewees who were asked which religion they felt was the strongest religion in Santiago indicated that it was the Evangelical religion. Two of seven indicated that the Catholic religion was the strongest. Other interview data will be presented within the analysis section as a mode of supporting data from the results of the survey data. Some interview data was incorporated into Section Two of this paper.

The following data is derived from the results of a survey performed by eighteen informants about religious plurality in the family and conflict:

- Four out of eighteen informants are Catholic. The rest are Evangelical.
- All families that had members of different religious affiliations were composed of Catholics and Evangelicals. Eight of eighteen participants indicated having family members that were not the same religion as them.
- Twelve out of eighteen informants believe that in general there is conflict when members of a family are not all the same religion.
- All Catholic informants believe that in general there is conflict when not all members of a family are the same religion.
- Eight out of fourteen Evangelical informants believe that in general there is conflict when all members of a family are not the same religion.
- Half of male informants believe that in general there is conflict when family members are not all the same religion. Three-fourths of female informants believe that in general there is conflict when family members are not all the same religion.
- Seven out of ten informants whose family members are all the same religion believe that in general there is conflict when all the members of a family are not the same religion. Four of these seven informants indicated knowing families where there are members of different religious affiliations within the same family.
- Five informants out of eight informants from families where members are not all the same religious affiliation indicated that in general there is conflict when all members of a family are not the same religion.
- Two out of three individuals who go to church 4-6 times a week feel that in general there is not conflict in families where not all members are the same religion.
- Seven out of ten informants who go to church 1-3 times a week feel that in general there is conflict when members of a family are not all the same religion.
- Three out of four informants who go to church less than once a week feel that in general there is conflict when members of a family are not all one religion.
- One informant who never goes to church feels that in general there is conflict when members of a family are not all one religion.
Four out of eight informants with family members that are a different religion than them live with members that are a different religion than them. Two of these informants that live with members of different religious affiliations than themselves believe that in general there is not conflict in families where all the members are not the same religion.

Two survey participants 40 years-old and above think that in general there is conflict when there is religious plurality in a family whereas two participants 40 years-old and above do not think that this is the case.

Four out of eight informants who have family members that are a different religion than them indicated spending equal time with members of their religion and those of a different religion than them. These four indicated that in general there is conflict in families where all the members are not the same religion. Three out of eight indicated spending more time with members that were a different religion than them. Two of these three don’t think that in general there is conflict in families whose members are not all the same religion. Only one indicated spending more time with members of the same religion as them. This informant does not believe that in general there is conflict when all members of a family are not the same religion.

No informants who have family members that are a different religious affiliation than them indicated having a bad relationship with these members. Although there was one informant who did not list some of her family members that were a different religion than her and therefore did not indicate whether it was a good or bad relationship. Two out of five informants who had converted did not answer the question about whether they had a good or bad relationship with members of their family that were a different religion than them.

**Analysis**

Four informants in the survey are Catholic and the rest are Evangelical. Based on information I have received in interviews and a map drawn by an informant there are from one to five Catholic churches in Santiago Atitlán and anywhere from 17 to 45 Evangelical churches in Santiago Atitlán. Five out of seven informants not included in the survey who were asked what religion they felt was the strongest religion in Santiago Atitlán indicated that it was the Evangelical religion. Two of seven indicated that the Catholic religion was the strongest. One interviewee named Juanita, a 41 year-old Catholic, claims that people in Santiago like the Evangelical religions because they are very expressive. The people in Santiago are extremists and fanatics she says. The larger number of Evangelical churches and the perception of its dominance over the Catholic religion may explain the larger percentage of Evangelicals in the sample population for this survey. The fact that all families that have members that are not all the same religion in the survey are composed of Catholics and Evangelicals relates to the fact that these are the two strongest religions in Santiago Atitlán as well.

Catholicism used to have a religious monopoly on the town of Santiago Atitlán and yet the Evangelical religion has now appeared to overpower Catholicism and has led to religious plurality in the home. In order to gain an understanding of the motivations for conversion I asked community members what were some of the reasons people convert to another religion. One of the reasons given me by several interviewees for conversion to the Evangelical religion relates to economic problems.

Marta, a 23 year-old Catholic, claims that one of the tactics used by Evangelical religions to convert people to their religion is by giving money to people who are having economic problems. For example, one interviewee named Pablo, a 42 year-old Catholic who married an Evangelical and now goes to her church, told me that in the past the priest of the Catholic Church, Padre Francisco, would give money to those who
could not afford to pay for things like a coffin for a deceased loved one or even a house. He would go to the U.S. and tell people that residents in Santiago Atitlán did not have things like shirts and houses and people would give money in the collection to help. He says now that if he dies and his family doesn’t have money the pastor of the Evangelical church that he attends with his wife would give money to help pay for things needed for the funeral. “Es respeto” [That is respect], he says. He says that now the current priest does not respect people and would not do something like that. Another informant, a 25 year-old Catholic named Simon, said that the poor sister-in-law of his uncle receives food donations from the Protestant church. He said that while the Catholic Church almost always only gives corn to those who are poor the Protestant church gives things like corn, beans, meat, and fish. He believes that people are more likely to go to these churches because of this difference even though the sister-in-law of his uncle has claimed that the food donations are not sufficient. Rosa reiterated this belief. She said that sometimes people will leave the Catholic church and join the Evangelical faiths because they have problems and the pastor of an Evangelical church will come and tell them that they will find more peace in their church. I asked if this meant economic problems and she said sometimes because of this and also sometimes because people are sick (Jorge, a 70 year-old Catholic, claims there is a lot of disease in Santiago Atitlán because of the flies). She said that in other places and sometimes in Santiago Atitlán the churches will give food donations and money every month and sometimes people will go to these churches for economic help. She said that the only churches in Santiago that do this are the Alpha y Omega and the El Buen Pastor Evangelical churches. She said that her church has been able to give help once every two or three years when it has North americans, but El Buen Pastor is always constructing houses for people because it has money from the United States. She said that the pastor of the El Buen Pastor is always connected with groups of people in other places. He will help a person who is in his church build a house for those people who have land but no house and will give money for those who want to study but don’t have the money. She claims Alpha y Omega bought some land and built a large place that houses 50 or 60 families now and that they always have help.

Another reason for conversion has to do with the rules of different religions. Sometimes if one cannot follow the rules of a certain Evangelical church they will be expelled from the church according to Juanita. Other informants claim one may prefer to change to another religion on their own because they don’t like something about the one they are in, such as rules regarding women. An Evangelical preacher told me the story of one of his friends who was studying to be a Catholic priest in Sololá. He said that he used to smoke a lot and then felt as though he would need to be an example to the people that he was preaching to and not smoke anymore. He said that he talked with the priests about not doing the things that they preach to the congregations not to do such as drinking and smoking but the priests still drank and smoke. His friend decided to become an Evangelical pastor instead because they don’t drink or smoke.

Sometimes people will convert because their parents did not have them baptized when they were younger. Other times individuals will change their religion because of pressure from family members and on occasion because they get married to someone that is a different religion than them.

Samuel told me that it is hard to find families where everyone is not the same religion because usually if the parents are one religion they will bring their kids up that way and they will stay that way. But an Evangelical preacher with whom I spoke said that there were many converts in Santiago Atitlán and almost
half of the informants in my survey indicated having family members that were not the same religion as them. Clearly, families that have members that are not all the same religion are prevalent.

Given that 2/3 of informants from the survey indicated that in general there is conflict when all members of a family are not the same religion indicates that there is at least a public perception that conflict does exist in such a circumstance. Juanita, who comes from a family where not everyone is the same religious affiliation, said that the largest conflict that arises when there is religious plurality within the home is when for instance a Catholic and an Evangelical marry and have kids. Because there is no agreement between parents as to what their children will be it is likely that their kids will become atheist she says. When it comes time for the children to choose what religion they will be they do not want to upset one or the other parent by choosing one religion over another so instead they decide to become atheist because it is easier. She said that this is cause and effect and that it is seen in many families. Another interviewee who has family members that are not the same religion as her and who is dating an Evangelical, that she jokingly claims is because there are just so many of them and so she doesn’t have a choice, said that there is a constant fight between Catholics and Evangelicals over what is best, but says that the biggest problem has to do with what the kids will become. Pablo claimed that when he has kids they will first be Catholic because it is the number one religion in the world. It would be interesting to know how his Evangelical wife feels about this. I asked the Evangelical preacher if there was always conflict after, for example, when a girl and a boy who are different religions get married or if the conflict is reduced as time goes on. He told me that if there is conflict at the beginning there is always conflict, that it is linear.

While all Catholic informants claim that in general there is conflict when all members of a family are not the same religion only a little over half of Evangelicals feel this way. I would suggest that this relates to the fact that Catholics are probably more frequently targets of evangelization making it more likely that they would perceive conflict. Simon gave an example of this type of conflict between members of families that are different religions. He said that the brothers and sisters of his Catholic grandfather are Protestant and that they have tried to convince him to become Protestant because they see the Catholic faith as associated with drinking and witchcraft.

Also, Catholics may generally perceive more conflict because often when an individual converts they leave behind the older Catholic religion, at least this is the case according to Rosa, and therefore Catholics may perceive more conflict. As an example, one interviewee, a twenty year-old Catholic named Mercedes, told me that often there is conflict when the parents of a family are Catholic but the kids are not. When Pablo’s Catholic parents found out that he and some of his siblings were in the Evangelical churches they would not give them food and threw their clothes and bags in the street. They would tell them that if they liked that church so much they should get food from them. His mom would ask why don’t you respect me. He said that it was customary to react this way in the past. However, Pablo still claims to be Catholic and that he never has or will formally convert. In fact, Pablo said that there was a fight between him and his Evangelical siblings over where to have the service for his father’s funeral, either in the Catholic Church or in the Evangelical one.

Lastly, Catholics may be more prone to suggest conflict because of marriage patterns. Several interviewees indicated that often there is conflict when two people of different religious affiliations get
married. Sometimes there is a confrontation between the couple’s families and sometimes this conflict has to do with where they will go to church after they are married. Juanita claims that usually it is the Catholic who converts when a Catholic and Evangelical get married. She claims this is because the Evangelicals follow exactly what their pastor says and therefore they have stronger feelings about the ways they think things should be. For example, a 22 year-old interviewee named Katarina is married to an Evangelical, even though her family is Catholic. She told me when she got married to an Evangelical there was not a problem or conflict because her mom respects everyone. However, she said that her spouse’s family whose members are all Evangelicals only wanted Evangelicals. I asked her what religion she was and she told me she was a little bit of both, but she goes to the ELIM church once a week. When I asked what religion her kids were she told me that they could decide when they got older. To make a stronger argument it would have been better to have a larger number of Catholics represented despite the fact they appear to be heavily dominated by the Evangelical religion. Also, this last example may also be explained by gender norms in Santiago Atitlán addressed below.

While survey data showed that half of male informants indicated that in general they thought there was conflict when not all family members were the same religion, three-fourths of women indicated this belief. This result may be explained by gender norms. When I was at a bakery with a friend we were talking to a worker there named Ana about women and beauty. She said that when a couple from Santiago goes into the bakery the guy always orders for her and that she doesn’t get to choose. Ana said that she sells clothes and shoes as well and that it is the same situation. The woman doesn’t decide but rather the man does. Later when I was talking to Rosa about religion a similar theme appeared. I asked Rosa if she thought that many people in Santiago changed their religion when they got married and she said that she didn’t think so. She said that Catholics are always with groups of Catholics and that here in Santiago they usually marry each other. She said that it was rare for a Catholic to marry someone that is not Catholic and that it was much easier for Christians (Evangelicals) to be with Christians. But then she told me that here when you get married, “es el hombre quien manda”...“porque él da todo el dinero” [It is the man who commands...because he gives all the money]. She said for example that when she got married her spouse’s family gave 20 thousand quetzals for her dress, for her shoes, for her clothes, for the clothes of her parents, for the party and so they decided where they would get married, when, by which religion, and what religion the two want to be. It is always like this. She said for example that when she got married her family didn’t no what food they would have or what they would drink, nothing. Pedro’s family was in charge of doing everything. “Si tu esposo es Católico, tú tienes que ir allá...si tu esposo es Evangelico tú tienes que venir a la iglesia con él... y vivir a su casa.” “Tengo vivir en la casa de su mamá o su papá...siempre es así.” [If your husband is Catholic you have to go there...if your husband is Evangelical you have to come to the church with him...and live at his house. I have to live in the house of his mom and dad...It’s always like this.] A similar example was given me by an Evangelical preacher. He said if a girl is Evangelical and a boy is Catholic and they fall in love and want to get married there could be problems. If her father does not approve then they will run off together without getting married which he says is a problem. He said that a girl may think that she can change the boy to be an Evangelical, but she can’t command him and so she has to go to the Catholic church instead. However, there are exceptions as both Jorge and Pablo are Catholic and have Evangelical wives and a 31 one year-old Evangelical woman with whom I spoke is married to a Catholic. But
perhaps, because women are expected to change their ways for the man they are more likely to perceive
conflict in a situation that might require them to do so. To make this hypothesis more conclusive it would
have been better had I had an equal (or fairly equal) number of male and female informants. I had 6 males
and 12 females in my survey population.

The survey results showed that about equal percentages of those whose family members are all of the
same religion and those who have family members that are not the same religion as them (70% and 63%)
believe that in general there is conflict when all family members are not the same religion. This shows that
whether one comes from a family that is all one religion or whether an individual has family members that
are not the same religion as them one often perceives conflict in such a situation.

From the available survey data it appears that the more often an individual goes to church the less
likely they are to indicate there is conflict amongst families where not all the members are the same
religion. However the numbers are so small in this sample it is hard to be entirely conclusive.

From the survey data it does not appear that living with family members of a different religious
affiliation affects whether one believes there exists a general conflict when not all family members are the
same religion. Half who lived with family members of a different religion indicated a general conflict in such
a situation whereas the other half did not. Age also does not appear to influence whether one thinks that in
general there is conflict when there is religious plurality in the home. I had thought that older individuals
(40 years-old and above) would be more likely to think that there is conflict in such a situation but two
participants 40 years old and above indicated that there was conflict whereas two participants 40 years old
and above did not indicate that this is the case. Occupation and education level do not appear to play a role
in determining whether one thinks that there is conflict when family members are not all the same
religion as well.

Within the survey data the individual who spends more time with family members who are the same
religion as him does not think that in general there is conflict when all family members are not the same
religion. He may not experience conflict very often if he is usually with members of his family who believe in
a similar way as him. Similarly, two out of three individuals who indicated spending more time with
members who were a different religion than them do not believe that in general there is conflict when not
all members of a family are the same religion. Spending more time with people of a similar viewpoint to one
another may make conflict seem less likely as well. All that indicated spending equal time with both
indicated that in general there is conflict when all family members are not the same religion. Spending equal
time with people of multiple viewpoints may allow them to see the potential for conflict more easily than
those individuals who predominantly see one viewpoint.

Interestingly, in the survey no individuals who had family members that were a different religion than
them indicated having a bad relationship with these individuals. I question whether the idea of conflict in
families where members are not all the same religion is more a perception than a reality. However, because
some individuals did not answer the question about whether they had a good relationship with these
individuals makes me wonder whether they did not want to admit that there was a bad relationship with
these individuals, especially to a stranger, and so purposely did not answer. Also, some informants for
similar motivations may not have been completely honest in their responses.
Two informants provide examples where conflict may not be a problem between family members. Pablo, who had not been given food when his parents learned that he had been in an Evangelical church, claimed that now parents would rather their children go to Evangelical churches than be in the streets fighting, doing drugs, and drinking. Now it’s free to choose what one wants to be, he said. This statement seems to carry some weight given that shortly after this conversation I saw my first fight in the streets. A couple weeks later I heard another fight in the streets. I asked Rosa what had happened and she told me that some drunks were fighting in the street and that drunks always fight. I myself have seen an Alcoholics Anonymous in town and met several of the town drunks that walk around the plaza.

Other individuals have talked about problems in Santiago Atitlán. Jorge said that now in Santiago there are men who impregnate many women, fights, and people kill other people. Juanita told me that there are many bad things that happen in the streets and kids see these things happening and are likely to repeat them. She claims that there is a lot of abortion here and that many sexual acts take place in the streets and she says she’s seen this twice herself. I myself have seen many young couples kissing in the streets, although never anything involving sex. Juanita told me that there is a problem with pornography on websites in Santiago as well.

The Catholic and Evangelical church sermons even address issues such as these making them seem even more relevant. At church one Sunday the Catholic priest talked about the presence of death, violence, pornography, problems in the family, etc. That same Sunday the pastor of one of the Evangelical churches in town talked about violence, sickness, injustice, death, pain, war, and poverty and how people question why these things exist. Problems in Santiago Atitlán are clearly on people’s minds. Pablo’s argument may be correct in believing that families would prefer that their members be in a church, no matter which one, rather than the alternative and that today people are free to choose what they want to be. Although Juanita and Marta feel that the churches should do more to prevent such things from happening Pablo’s argument appears to be the case in Rosa’s story.

I asked when Rosa converted to Protestantism and she told me that she had gone to a Protestant school but that she had always liked to go to church. She said that when she was 15 she was accepted into the El Buen Pastor church, but that her parents were Catholic so they did not go. When she was 16 she got married to Samuel (who is Evangelical) and because she had already been accepted into the Evangelical faith she got married in the Evangelical church. Samuel has always been Evangelical since his birth because his family has always been Evangelical. I asked her if she thought that there were problems when a Catholic left the Catholic religion and she said that she didn’t think so. She said that she hadn’t heard of anyone having problems and that it was an individual decision and that if someone wanted to change they could and if not then that was fine too. She said that she didn’t think that there were many problems. I asked if her family was mad and she said that when she told her father that she wanted to get married that he said that it was fine because he knew that Samuel’s family went to church. Rosa said in the case of her family there are not problems over religious differences especially since her parents only go to the Catholic Church every now and then. She said that if a family were more devout Catholic there might be a problem.

Demonstrative of the good relations that are possible between family members that are different religious affiliations is when Rosa’s dad helped her and Samuel when they were in a lot of debt. Samuel was
not paid for his work for three months because there was not any money. She said that her father had loaned them four thousand quetzals to help them out during this time. Their debts are now paid off with the exception of the loan from her father, but he said that they could pay it back little by little. Sometimes Samuel even helps him sell medicine (this is what her father does for a living) in some other towns around here during the week. Also, Rosa’s mother went with her to the doctor when she wasn’t feeling well and even cooked and delivered a meal for her when she got put on a special diet. She is over at her family’s house at least every weekend when her father is in town and sees her siblings and mother even more frequently.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the two strongest religions in Santiago Atitlán are the Evangelical and Catholic religions, with the former one appearing to dominate the latter, despite Catholicism’s previous monopoly on the town. Many residents have converted to another religion because of economic problems, disease, rules and norms that they were unable to follow and no longer desired to follow, lack of baptism into a church by their parents, family pressure, and marriage. There are many converts in Santiago Atitlán and almost half of the survey population indicated having members in their family that were not the same religion as them.

Two-thirds of survey participants indicated that in general there is conflict when not all family members are the same religion. All Catholic informants indicated that in general there is conflict in such a circumstance while only a little over half of Evangelical participants indicated that this was the case. Reasons for a greater perception of conflict may relate to the fact that they are more frequently targets of evangelization and that there is a higher tendency for individuals to convert from the Catholic religion. To make this argument stronger it would be better to have a larger number of Catholic participants in the survey despite the significantly larger number of Evangelical churches in the area.

Half of the male survey participants said that in general there is conflict when there is religious plurality in a family whereas three-fourths of female participants indicated that this was the case. Females may be more likely to perceive conflict because they are expected to change their religion to that of their husband if it is not already the same as his. However, it would have been better to have equal or fairly equal numbers of male and female participants to have a better understanding of this relationship.

About equal percentages of survey participants whose family members are all the same religion as them and those who have family members that are not the same religion as them feel that in general there is conflict when there is religious plurality in the family. This shows that whether one comes from a family where there is religious plurality or not there is a general conception of conflict when not all family members are of the same religion.

According to the available survey data it appears that the more often an individual goes to church the less likely they are to perceive conflict in families where there is religious plurality. However, the numbers are so small that it is difficult to be entirely conclusive.
Living with family members that are a different religion, age, occupation, and education level do not appear to have much weight in determining whether an individual believes that there is conflict in families where not all members are of the same religious affiliation.

Those individuals in the survey population who spent more time with family members that were the same religion as them and those who spent more time with family members that were a different religion than them were less likely to indicate that there was a general conflict in families where there are people of different religious affiliations than those individuals who indicate spending equal time with family members that were the same religion as them as with those who were a different religion than them.

No survey participants who have members of their family that are not the same religion as them indicated having a bad relationship with these members. Perhaps, conflict is more of a perception than a reality. Although some participants did not answer this question on the survey and others could have not been completely honest. Perhaps, they might have been uncomfortable sharing this kind of personal information with a stranger.

Some informants claim that as long as members of the family are going to a church they don’t mind which one and that it is more of an individual choice as to what religion one wants to be. Rosa’s case is an example of how family members who are not the same religion can still have a close relationship free of religious conflict.

In viewing family as a metaphor for community it appears as though religious plurality has caused many divisions within the community that most individuals view as a means for conflict. However, in some cases this study has shown that those of different religious affiliations can maintain good relationships with one another. Community members should look to these cases as testimonies that conflict between those of different religious affiliations is not inevitable and that religious tolerance can provide a basis for community unity. This unity is important since community has contributed to Maya survival and identity throughout the centuries.

Endnote


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