

From Plantations to Churches: The Human Relationship to Environment and Space in Chiapas since the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This article reviews environmental changes in Chiapas in the second half of the twentieth century to better understand how perspectives and interactions with space and places are changing. Using both analytic and philosophical approaches, this work examines two Canadian religious sources from the Provincial Archives of Alberta. The first source is a written account of a 1978 trip by four Canadian Oblate missionaries to Chiapas, in which they comment, from their perspective, on social, economic, cultural, political, and spatial changes affecting the indigenous populations of the state. In the same dossier, a tourist map these missionaries had in their possession showcases exactly what they criticize. The second source comes from the same archives but records a 1989 trip by four lay and Jesuit missionaries. This account presents their perspective and interpretation of the similarities between Canada and Chiapas, as well as their perspective on applying to Canada the spiritual model of assistance they found in Chiapas, pairing both resistance to spatial and environmental change with Samuel Ruiz's fervor for defending indigenous' rights. Finally, this article attempts to understand how major changes in spatial paradigms affect local identity and cultural and economic relations with the environment, and how spiritual missionary work can become a form of resistance to these harmful changes.

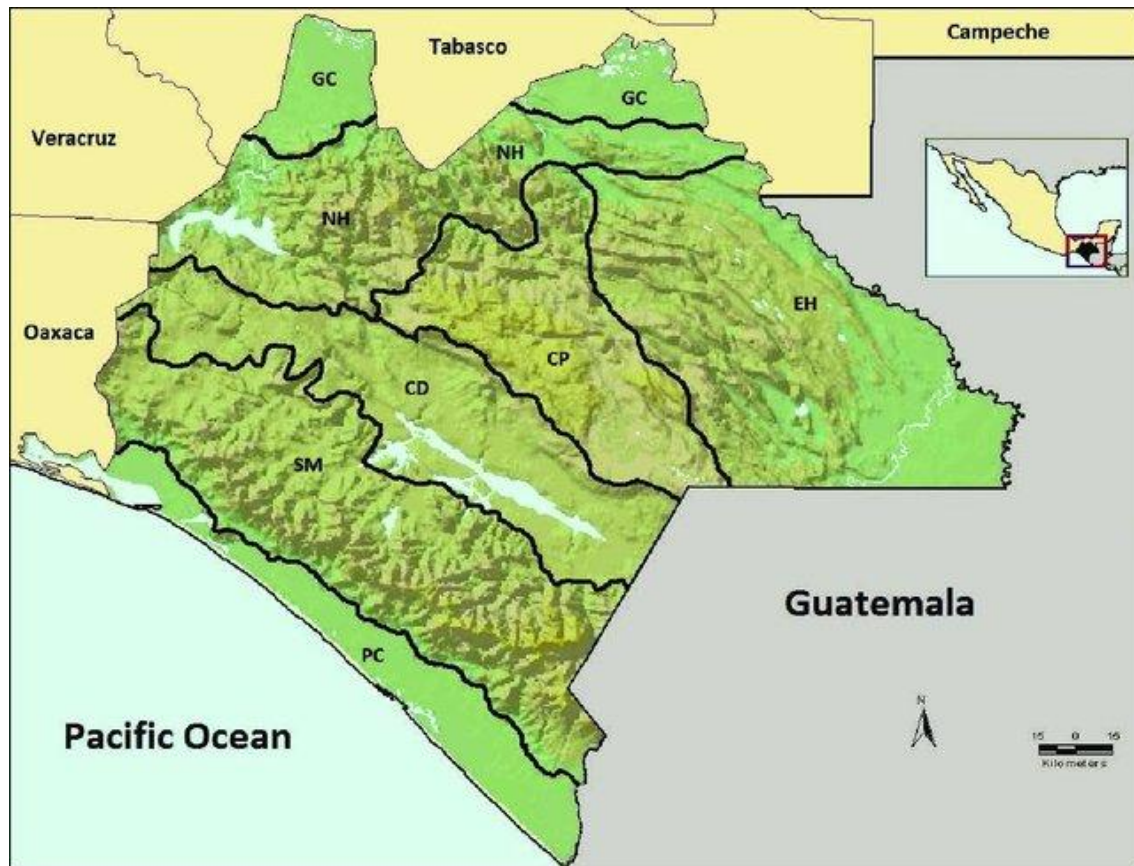
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Introduction

Historically, the physical and environmental characteristics of the Mexican region of Chiapas have remained unchanged for a long time, despite human colonization. This region, typically on the margins of the Mexican periphery, is divided by the Sierra Madre de Chiapas in the south and by the northern and eastern highlands to the North. Between these two mountain ranges lies a natural basin. There lies a geographical depression known as the Central Depression of Chiapas. However, this seemingly peaceful valley is surrounded by mountains with significant volcanic activity. Beyond the mountains to the north, on the edge of the Yucatán Peninsula, lies a large tropical forest that has become a refuge for some of the oldest Mayan ruins. This tropical region of Mexico, and its jungle, is characteristic of its easternmost territories: dense forests,

humid conditions, diverse fauna, and abundant flora. Lastly, on the southern side of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas lies a long corridor of fertile plains stretching along the Pacific coast.

Figure 1 – Physiographical Regions of Chiapas, Mexico



Source: Slightly modified from Breedlove (1981) and from Johnson et al. (2010)¹

While the population of Chiapas is still predominantly indigenous today, the arrival of larger numbers of non-indigenous people in the early twentieth century set in motion a long process of land development and increasingly intensive extraction of its natural resources. The indigenous people of Chiapas, descendants of the Maya, have a special relationship with the land that is not necessarily reflected by these new neighbors. Their cultural identity is defined primarily by their communal use of the land: their agricultural practices provide a starting point for this reflection and bear witness to their particularly rural and isolated way of life (Vayssière, 2001, p. 93–95). Moreover,

¹ The abbreviations are as follow: GC = Gulf Coastal Plain; NH = Northern Highlands; EH = Eastern Highlands; CP = Central Plateau; CD = Central Depression; SM = Sierra Madre de Chiapas; and PC = Pacific Coastal Plain. In Jerry D. Johnson et al., "The herpetofauna of Chiapas, Mexico: composition, distribution, and conservation", *Mesoamerican Herpetology*, vol. 2, no 3, September 2015, p. 275.

the advent of globalization and free trade within a neoliberal framework has reversed this paradigm of communal landownership. In many instances, the indigenous people of Chiapas have become “prisoners” in their ancestral territories due to the arrival of large multinational corporations that capitalized on waves of expropriation linked to the systematic extraction of agricultural and primary resources. This, in turn, threatens indigenous identity and its cultural foundations. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the growing instability of this territory and the major changes to its environment have become increasingly apparent, raising important questions regarding the evolution of people’s relationship with the natural environment.

Then, how have environmental changes affected the natural landscape and the indigenous population’s situation in Chiapas since the second half of the twentieth century? How does the industrial, modern, and liberal mindset affect the perception and representation of space and its people? Finally, how did the Catholic Church in Chiapas react to mitigate the negative effects of those changes, how did Canadian missionaries react to this model, and why was it important for them to do so?

I argue that environmental degradation pushes the indigenous peoples of Chiapas to adapt, forcing them to leave behind certain traditions pertaining to their historical relationship with the environment. These changes to their environment are interpreted according to the paradigm of the period, largely due to the pressures exerted by the intellectual representations of the environment promoted through neoliberalism, colonialism, capitalism, and globalization. In turn, spiritual perceptions come into conflict with these pragmatic points of view, leading to new social, economic, and cultural responses to environmental change. Indeed, local cultural identity, perception of space, and interaction with the environment are profoundly shaped by cosmological insights and religious interpretation. These dimensions underwent major changes in twentieth-century Chiapas, spearheaded by liberation theology under Bishop Samuel Ruiz García.

This study first analyzes, drawing on an interdisciplinary approach combining environmental studies and religious history, the major modifications that have taken place in the environment of Chiapas since the second half of the twentieth century through a brief review of the changes to the hydrographic network, soil fertility, and tree quality. This helps to understand the underlying social, economic, and cultural impacts of those transformations and the forms of resistance, notably through the adaptation of agricultural practices developed to respond to environmental change.

From this perspective, it is essential to understand the direction the Catholic Church took in Chiapas, notably through the work of Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, because the Catholic Church accompanied and helped the indigenous people preserve their cultural identity in the face of foreign influences and of actors acquiring their land and their labor. From this point of view, liberation theology provides a framework of resistance to similar socio-economic problems that brings together the Catholic Church and indigenous peoples within a new model of cooperation. It is therefore highly relevant to consider the viewpoint of Canadian missionaries, Oblates and Jesuits, who visited Chiapas during this period, as they provide valuable insights into the human aspects of the socio-economic and cultural transformations brought about by globalization, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism among the indigenous population through their foreign and transnational perspectives.

Methodologically, this research presents a case study based on a general account of the changes in Chiapas written by three Canadian Oblate missionaries in 1978, namely René Fumoleau, Louis Ménez, Camille Piché, and Aurore Larkin of the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, through their travel notes found in the Oblate Fonds at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. The final part of the analysis focuses on a subsequent trip made by four Canadian lay and Jesuit missionaries. Heavily influenced by the 1978 trip, their travel notes highlight the many similarities between the indigenous people's situation in Chiapas and Canada. Furthermore, these missionaries used a 1972 German tourist map of the region, also found in the archives, with numerous interesting depictions of the environment that illustrate how Chiapas became, in the minds of foreigners, a projection of multiple social, economic, and political contexts. Lastly, their conclusions suggest that using a spiritual framework like Samuel Ruiz's *Teología India* in Canada would be beneficial in supporting Canada's First Nations in their quest to resist government infringement on indigenous peoples' lands.

Another objective of this article is to offer various insights that help understand the different spatial concepts at play when analyzing both environmental and socioreligious factors. The following reflections draw on Swiss scholar Paul Zumthor's philosophical interpretation of space in his book *La mesure du monde: représentation de l'espace au Moyen Age*. Although Zumthor's views concern the medieval era, his concepts surrounding the perception of spaces and place provide a very interesting framework for this analysis. For him, space represents something "lived" more than "seen" because it emerges from our biological adaptation to the Earth: our senses allow us to see

mountains, but also to touch trees, smell rain, taste crops, and so on. In this way, humans have an individual perception of space, but it all becomes relative and social when populations come together (Zumthor, 1993, p. 22). Shaped by languages, flowing through art, and imagined in mental images, spaces are initially classified by individual perception, but they are mostly defined and understood socially as higher collective constructions. Therefore, divergences in social, economic, political or cultural ideas give rise to different viewpoints that creates an intellectual spaces, whose variety is nearly infinite, whether one is discussing perceived macrocosms or microcosms: a capitalist idyll or a communist utopia, a Catholic ethic or an Islamic moral, urban streets or country roads, a popular play or a bourgeois act; this, “my living room” is also “your lounge” through someone else’s eyes. What this means is that areas created to reflect someone’s definition and construction of spatial belonging can have the opposite meaning for someone else even though they are profoundly similar. As evident as this might seem, it is extremely important to understand these contradictions, because in Chiapas, something we might interpret as minor somewhere else becomes a major clash between ideologies, between heaven and hell, between neighbors and foreigners, between friends and foes, and lastly, between profits and survival.

When the Scenery Melts, and the Trees Wither: Ecological Degradation in the Region

The most vital resource for all life is water. Ecosystems and human settlements bloom around freshwater sources, but what happens when those change? The evolution of the hydrographic network surrounding the Zanatenco River from 1961 to 2013 is clear (Arellano-Monterrosas and Ruiz-Meza, 2019, p. 251). There are frightening conclusions to draw from this example: rainfall is becoming increasingly scarce, and historical patterns in the region are reversing. Humid zones are becoming gradually drier, and dry zones are becoming progressively humid. The impact of this new dynamic on local farmers is dramatic because, on the one hand, it makes modern irrigation systems in previously dry zones useless and, on the other, traditional irrigation systems in previously wet zones prove highly inefficient and require enormous investments for adaptation. In a certain sense, local historical and cultural points of reference for these changing humidity levels are now lost and require people to readapt to the land.

The intensification of agriculture in the region plays a major role in the amount of time that land is left fallow. Furthermore, it is understood that deforestation is a response to increased population density and, subsequently, to the growing demand for natural resources that provide subsistence for the region's indigenous peoples. Moreover, "deforestation rates in Mexico during the second half of the 20th century are considered to be among the highest in the world" (Ochoa-Gaona and González-Espinosa, 2000, p. 29–37). Given this reality, the fallow period is becoming shorter, and in some cases, fallow land is no longer left fallow. The soil often has little access to natural water sources for irrigation, thereby limiting agricultural production. Furthermore, some lands in Chiapas are geologically unsuited to intensive agriculture. Ultimately, all these factors converge to explain the intensification of soil erosion. They also reflect an environment that is primarily inhabited by indigenous peoples and is undergoing profound changes due to population growth.

Agroforestry is one such practice that addresses these problems directly. It involves "reforestation, conservation of natural resources, and diversification of production" (Soto Pinto et al., 2017, p. 104). This farming system is becoming more important in Chiapas because it promotes indigenous subsistence. Generally, this system is well-suited to marginal conditions and environments, characterized by "limited land, restricted funding, occasional technical support and, beyond that, limited documentation" (Soto Pinto et al., 2017, p. 103), while promoting farming systems that are in line with traditional practices and more efficient. Their study evaluates the quality of certain trees on land that has been occupied for 20 years by indigenous farmers who live within this agroforestry system. It quickly becomes clear that the quality of the trees depends on the type of environmental management applied to agricultural and forest areas. In fact, the complementary management of these two spaces ultimately improves the socioeconomic situation of farmers in Chiapas. This new type of management also constitutes a response to larger issues such as globalization and neoliberalism.

From Homeowners to Tenants: Changes for Farmers in the Central Highlands

In the face of these environmental changes, the traditional farming system, the milpa, is increasingly under threat in the municipalities of Huistán and Chanal in the central highlands (Ochoa-Gaona and González-Espinosa, 2000, p. 19). In 1990, this traditional system was used on one-third of Chiapas' agricultural land. Changes in

farming practices “play a major role in the dynamics of landscape fragmentation” (Ochoa-Gaona and González-Espinosa, 2000, p. 21). In addition, funding provided by the Mexican government to modernize agriculture has greatly contributed to the marginalization of small farmers in mountainous regions. The erosion of this traditional system has major consequences for the social and cultural activities of indigenous peoples and, more fundamentally, for their identity.

Indeed, Jean Meyer, in his book *Samuel Ruiz en San Cristóbal*, elaborates on key elements that allow us to characterize indigenous identities in a comprehensive manner. His contextualization is highly relevant and addresses in detail the realities of the agrarian world since 1960. He identifies a gradual but evident division that began with the colonial conquest: “the republic of the Spanish and the Indians” (Meyer, 2000, p. 41). The latter are scattered across the territory and are linguistically and geographically disunited. Jan De Vos asserts that the region’s evolution in the second half of the twentieth century followed two axes. The first is “the colonization of space by landless peasants,” and the second concerns “the use of its resources by private companies, first, and then by governments” (De Vos, 2002, p. 11). This thesis, according to which the territory is appropriated by foreign actors, is also supported by a source taken from the pamphlet on the First Indigenous Congress of Chiapas in 1974:

Dado que muchas de nuestras tierras son pobres y erosionadas, tenemos que salir temporalmente a alquilar tierras ajenas como medieros (pagando la mitad de la cosecha al patron) tambien salimos a las fincas cafetaleras donde roban nuestra fuerza de trabajo, nos dan sueldos de hambre y recibimos mal trato... es el famoso problema de los enganchadores (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).²

This congress was organized by Bishop Samuel Ruiz García to improve the situation of indigenous peoples. The 500th anniversary of the birth of Bartolomé de Las Casas became a key moment, a catalyst for the political consciousness of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas (Favre, 2002, p. 1271). There, they could express the social and economic problems that plagued them. This description of their reality mainly reflects their social context: the indigenous people are fundamentally agrarian in a region in ecological decline. They find themselves in a territory that they consider to be deteriorating, as they describe their lands as already “poor and eroded” in the early

² Since much of our land is poor and eroded, we must leave temporarily to rent other people’s land as sharecroppers (paying half the harvest to the owner). We also go to coffee plantations where they steal our labor, pay us poverty wages, and treat us badly... This is the famous problem of indentured laborers (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

1970s. In addition, these lands no longer legally belong to them, as the neoliberal system ties them to coffee plantations owned by foreign “bosses.” Indigenous peoples are thus moving from a situation of relative freedom on their land to economic servitude. Among the topics brought up at the First Indigenous Congress, the indigenous peoples agreed that they must take ownership of agricultural land and transform it to meet their needs. This represents a desire to take a stand against foreign capitalists who are appropriating the land and using it to produce commodities rather than allowing it to serve the local subsistence needs.

Thus, it is logical that indigenous peoples would shape their farms and plantations according to their needs: they would modify the traditional organization of farms or plantations to survive. This reorganization of agricultural space also represents a new form of spatial resistance by creating an economically alternative space. That is, a form of indigenous resistance to neoliberal pressures, marginalization imposed by the Mexican government, and globalization, which is gradually destroying the traditional backbone of the milpa and the cultural landmarks of the Chiapanecas. Therefore, farms and plantations are spaces of subsistence as much as they are spaces of spiritual resistance and cultural assertion. However, the liberalization push of the 1980s makes it clear that the Mexican government sees the environment of Chiapas from a capitalist perspective, as a territory that must be exploited to export its products (Alvarez, 2018, p. 337–362).

In 2005, Chiapas was the Mexican state with the highest rates of economic marginalization and poverty (Fletes Ocón, 2009, p. 164–169). This economic disparity is geographical, and it stems from the settlement pattern in this region. This explains why, in 2005, 19% of the population of Chiapas lived in the three cities of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Tapachula, and San Cristóbal de Las Casas. However, 52% of the population of Chiapas lived in rural areas; this population was spread across 19,237 settlements with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants. This demographic disparity is a direct consequence of changes in the pattern of human settlement in the territory. This demographic marginalization is the result of agrarian policies, variations in territorial productivity, and social demands. It is in this context that polarization in the agrarian system has increased. We find “smallholdings alongside large agricultural estates” (Fletes Ocón, 2009, p. 165). This dynamic is particularly evident in the southern region, which is characterized as a coastal corridor: the east specializes in agricultural exports and the west in tourism. This division is profoundly significant in terms of “identity and power

processes” because it creates a rift between the two regions based on economic performance (Fletes Ocón, 2009, p. 165).

If “space is a social construct, linked to the physical environment and represented in scientific or imaginary terms” (Fletes Ocón, 2009, p. 165–166), Mexico’s historical reality favors a socio-economic approach to the scientific interpretation of space. Indeed, space in Mexico is perceived primarily from its center and then outward to the regions. This was the case with Aztec centralization around Mexico-Tenochtitlan, with the Spanish colonial system of delegation through caciques that allowed the authorities to focus on Mexico, Puebla or Veracruz, with Mexican president Porfirio Díaz’s opposition between an innovative demographic center and its supposedly non-modern peripheries, and finally with the continuity of this approach, even when efforts were made to break with tradition, during and after the Mexican Revolution (Lavallé, 2018, p. 57–70; Kennett and Marwan, 2015, p. 3; Brumfiel, 1996, p. 453–462; Paré, 1973, p. 20–23; Pro Ruiz, 2006, p. 27–48; Oropesa, 1995, p. 38).

In addition to the challenge of local adaptation to changes in indigenous communities, there are also issues arising from migration. Population movements in Mexico became more frequent towards the end of the twentieth century (Clot and López Arévalo, 2016, p. 2–6). The migratory movements that characterize Chiapas are numerous and motivated by various factors. For example, there are recurring migrations to plantations, the colonization of the Lacandon Jungle in the east, and migrations from Guatemala that transform the state of Chiapas into a destination and a transit point (Nolan-Ferrell, 2021, p. 153–178). First, the highlands workforce “was made up of indigenous workers from the mountainous region of Chiapas (Los Altos)”. They arrived at the coffee plantations “hooked in” through debts and alcohol by unscrupulous recruiters at the service of plantation owners” (Renard, 2011, p. 151). This pool of laborers could move outwards to other, more economically dynamic regions like Soconusco (Clot and López Arévalo, 2016, p. 6). From 1970 onwards, the gradual specialization of this migrant labor force redirected workers towards economic opportunities in specific areas like hydroelectric dam construction and oil exploitation in the surrounding areas. This shift from one economic area to another caused labor shortages in the initial regions, which were filled by Guatemalan migrants who could easily be exploited (Renard, 2011, p. 151).

Regarding the eastern tropical part of Chiapas, still unaddressed in this article, and international migration in that area, Valentine Losseau’s article on the evolution of

the Lacandon indigenous peoples' perception of space is important. This space, defined roughly as the Lacandon Jungle, was increasingly regulated and even taken over by governmental environmental policies in the late twentieth century (Losseau, 2015, p. 19). These policies brought about numerous changes in the local socio-cultural identity through crude and superficial representations of the Lacandon peoples. In short, these factors mean that tourism companies perceive eastern Chiapas as a trinity composed of indigenous peoples, ruins, and forests. This perception is also conveyed to tourists and foreigners, but the most interesting aspect of this situation is the indigenous response to this phenomenon: they use this distorted representation to promote their region in ways that meet tourists' expectations (Losseau, 2015, p. 26–28).

Through these changes, the population of Chiapas loses the theological and political perspective that traditionally linked them to their natural environment. Moreover, the social hubs of communities tend to shift toward cities: “this revival of long-distance trade will make the city the center of social life [...] the city emerges amid the tension between progress and deterioration, between a dying order, that of the feudal structure, and an order that has not yet found its form, that of the emergence of the nation-state” (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 40). However, this new interpretation of urban space that emerged with industrialization offered a positive perception of city life: it provided better living conditions, better services, and “better mechanisms for managing and controlling the vagaries of natural cycles” (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 40). Due to this change in the perception of the city, “fluid and large-scale migrations from the countryside to the city” took place during the twentieth century (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 41). The modern city then fits into this industrial system as a “technology of capital” (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 41–42).

If we combine these new perspectives, the city is a thriving technological hub of commerce protected against “Mother Nature”. However, under the pressures of capitalism, liberalism, and globalization, cities become geopolitical areas to be controlled by markets and big companies seeking monopolies, resources, and labor (Harvey, 2004, p. 41). As geopolitical centers for individual and economic interests, cities experience “a more continuous and accelerated flow of capital towards increasingly complex and extensive urban infrastructure, at precisely the moment when companies with fewer and fewer ties were seeking to take advantage of the benefits offered by these types of investments” (Harvey, 2004, p. 43). As Eduardo Galeano argued, capitalist oppression then becomes not only international, but also national (Galeano, 1981, p. 84–185). It is,

in part, these factors that reinforce the anthropocentric perception of space by human beings. In the case of Chiapas, part of the population lives in cities, but the majority, especially indigenous peoples, live in rural areas. This creates a dichotomy between these two spaces: the urban world is modern, and the rural world is traditional. This perception, often adopted by researchers and foreigners, is also reflected in the way the population perceives the space in which it lives.

In summary, the process of capitalizing on the land gradually leads to a breakdown of humans' relationship with the land when they transition from agriculture to industry (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 39–42). The nature of humans' desire to produce and extract natural resources changes drastically in this transition. The increasing use of scientific production techniques and technologies gradually erases the ancient relationship that humans had with their environment. In an industrial system, instead of ensuring their subsistence, humans seek to conquer and contain “the latent threat of nature's seemingly uncontrollable destructive force” (Montoya Gómez, 2009, p. 40). If some foreigners take part in the creation of this perspective through investments, how and why does the clergy of Chiapas seek to alleviate these rapid changes in the relationship between the land and its inhabitants?

Religious Upheaval and Perception of the Environment

Jean Meyer's book offers a good starting point for understanding the next topic. He contextualizes religious life in Chiapas in four stages beginning with the Mexican Revolution in 1910. He begins by demonstrating the growing tensions between the Catholic clergy and the Mexican state, starting with the uprising of an indigenous leader in the early days of the Mexican Revolution (Meyer, 2000, p. 21–26). This indigenous leader, named Pajarito, was an important catechist for the young Francisco Orozco y Jiménez. Orozco y Jiménez was Bishop of Chiapas from 1902 to 1912 before becoming Archbishop of Guadalajara. Accused by the state of inciting the indigenous people, the clergy of Chiapas was persecuted during the Cristero War from 1926 to 1929 and again from 1933 to 1940. In fact, these factors help explain what Meyer characterizes, in a second phase, as “a Church without clergy, a Church of the catacombs” (Meyer, 2000, p. 25). The situation of the Catholic Church in Mexico in 1940 was dire. At that point, the Church had to be completely rebuilt, both in terms of its structure and its personnel.

However, the glaring absence of a Catholic religious sphere in Chiapas opened the door to rival churches. The subsequent establishment of foreign churches greatly influenced the social situation in Chiapas in the second half of the twentieth century, creating a new kind of religious space. According to Meyer, this period of religious change partly explains the resurgence of Catholic efforts in the region. He also argues that missionary efforts in the 1960s were a response to the historical context. This phenomenon can be explained, in part, by the Cuban Revolution, the electoral victory of Christian democracy in Chile, and the “progressive militarization of the continent”. Meyer also notes the importance of major changes within global Catholicism, such as the promulgation of the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* and the Episcopal Conference of Medellín.

More specifically, there has also been a paradigm shift in how Christians interact with and interpret the Catholic faith in Latin America. The missionary efforts of the 1960s were shaped in part by liberation theology. Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, reflects on these changes in detail in his book *Liberation Theology: History, Politics and Salvation*. Gutiérrez argues that Christian thought in Latin America at that time was centered around a spiritual praxis that diverged from the traditional interpretation of Christian charity and focused primarily on critical reflection (Gutiérrez, 1974, p. 6–35). This questioning surrounding the concept of liberation introduces a theme that appears frequently in the major reflections of the clergy at that time. The historical convergence of several papal encyclicals, the Episcopal Conference of Medellín in 1968, and the Second Vatican Council is crucial to the Catholic community’s reflection on the concept of development aid. This concept was one of the means, albeit not without its problems, developed to reduce socio-cultural injustices in the world. In short, the lack of a religious organization of society, linked primarily to the Cristero War and Mexico’s anticlerical background, would shape a small part of the clergy that was influenced by liberation theology.

In the same period, Latin America saw the number of evangelicals increase, dramatically, reaching between 5 and 20% of the population in many countries in response to political developments, such as the democratization of Argentina, or economic developments, such as the Lost Decade of the 1980s (Lewis, 2004, p. 224–254). During this period, the approach of the Protestant churches was called ‘the option for the poor’, a provocative response to the Catholic movement with the same name: in

poorer regions, adherence to evangelical movements was stronger, and such was the case in Chiapas.

In this context, the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the region broke the Catholic monopoly on spiritual matters. Thus, spiritual matters also became a source of social conflict when the church was the only place to offer clean water in a locality. In 1963, the village of Nuevo San Juan Chamula was founded as part of an agricultural expansion program, and from 1974 to 1976, there was a marked increase in the expulsion of evangelical families from the highland region (Chavarochette, 2020, p. 186–190). This problem stems from the settlement of several sociocultural groups in this village: most of the settlers are Catholic, but there are also many Protestants, and large waves of people from the Guatemalan exodus further alter this social landscape.

This socio-cultural melting pot is even more relevant when we understand that the region's indigenous people organize themselves culturally and socially around water (Chavarochette, 2020, p. 190–201). Since the wastewater treatment system installed by the Mexican government is outdated, the population turns to other sources of water. The first source is the town hall's water pump. The second source of water was established in 2008 in a Presbyterian church. These two sources of drinking water represent two different ways of perceiving space. The town hall provides water for the community, but it receives little government funding, and the quality of the water leaves much to be desired. The Presbyterian Church, on the other hand, attempts to privatize drinking water to encourage conversions. Furthermore, in this precarious situation, conflicts over access to clean, fresh water are commonplace in Chiapas, and this trend is not limited to the village of Nuevo San Juan Chamula. Villages are reorganized: the expulsion of religious outcasts creates a new division of religious space. Thus, spatial organization can be based on religious affiliations and cause underlying social tensions as much as it can ease burdens pertaining to basic human rights.

Syncretism between Traditions and the Trinity

The socio-political organization of indigenous peoples by the Catholic clergy, and especially by Bishop Samuel Ruiz García, reflects a major shift in the paradigm of spatial perception. In response to the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council, Samuel Ruiz sought to incorporate indigenous cultural space into the clergy's services by providing ethnographic studies to the missionaries working in his diocese

(Gollnick, 2008, p. 132–135). Ruiz strove for the emancipation and the self-determination of the indigenous people and did so by incorporating indigenous beliefs into the practice of Christianity, both by training indigenous clergy and by juxtaposing indigenous beliefs with local pastoral rites (Nollet, 2026, p. 38–81). These efforts were concretized in 1974, during the First Indigenous Congress, when the four main Mayan cultural groups organized themselves to share their problems, mostly relating to basic human rights and access to the land (Monroy García, 2020, p. 17–27). Above all, the union of divergent indigenous identities around a common issue gave them a new social identity based on culture and ethnicity. This changing social reality overturned the perception of indigenous groups as disunited and isolated in their local communities and instead fostered a common organization based on historical roots and a new connection to orality within this new social space (Gollnick, 2008, p. 132–135). We can thus see a change in the way indigenous peoples perceive the territory. However, an important distinction must be made. There is a continuity of pre-Columbian practices, but with the involvement of the Catholic clergy, there is also a break in these practices. The result is a way of interpreting space according to both traditional spirituality and Catholic conceptions of nature. Perception is then a symbiosis of contemporary and traditional elements.

Canadian Missions to Chiapas: Mapping Representation Through Cartography

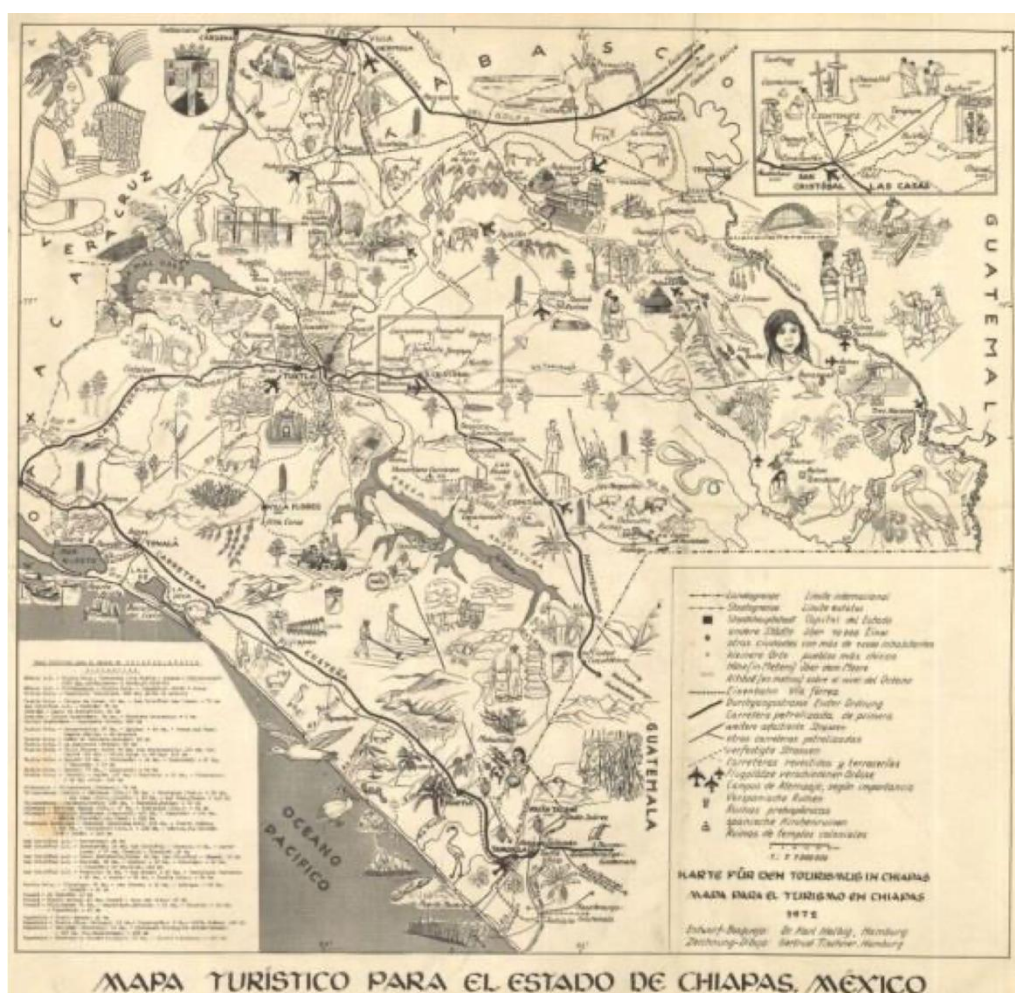
Before trying to understand why some Canadian missionaries decided to visit Chiapas, it is worth considering this German tourist map from 1972, which was used by one of the two groups of Canadian missionaries and says a lot about how the environment was interpreted at the time.

The most prominent elements are undoubtedly the farms and plantations. Salient features of the territory have also been highlighted by the German authors of this map through what is depicted and what is not. The central plateaus are dotted with logging operations, mixed with agriculture and plantations, probably showing farmers adapting the milpa to survive. There is a noticeable emphasis on modern agricultural techniques: we see fallow lands, tractors, and large plantations that provide insights into the adaptation of indigenous peoples.

In the face of these violent jolts that threaten the traditional agricultural way of life, colonialism, globalization, and neoliberalism act as strong catalysts for change.

Resistance to these alterations can take the form of the reorganization of farms as alternative spaces in response to liberal demands, and faith also plays a role in resisting foreign capital: Samuel Ruiz was one of the signatories of the Porto Alegre Manifest, signed in 2005 at the World Social Forum, proposing alterglobalism as an alternative to neoliberalism (Canet and Guay, 2006, p. 1–3). In Chiapas, international fair-trade groups for coffee producers were mostly organized by the Catholic Church (Otero, 2006, p. 10). Although faith, when organized to alleviate socio-economic problems, can help reduce inequalities, it does not change the opulence of the huge hacienda with a copious fountain drawn on the western side of the map.

Figure 2 – Touristic map of the State of Chiapas in Mexico in 1972



Source: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Missionary Oblate of Marie Immaculate Fonds, Province of Grandin, Box 534, File 8164, document named "Chiapas, Mexico visit, Camille Piché", 1978, p. 88–89.

The agro-export corridor on the Pacific coast is laden with depictions of cattle, coffee plantations, banana trees, numerous bales of cotton, milk bottles, and finally, workers in indigenous garments making up the workforce (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]). The representation of produce ready to be shipped away shows that it is more than just an agrarian production area; it is also a space of transition, an intermediary space between the hinterlands and the foreign supermarket, fueled by the sweat and blood of the workers. The eastern part of the coastal corridor is laden with railways and airports; infrastructure is “a tool for controlling space, dominating populations and exploiting resources” (Bouchard, 2023, p. 1). In contrast, in the west, the coastal area seems to be reserved for tourism, as indicated by the names of cities and areas, like Laguna de la Joya and Boca del Cielo. Fifty years later, the beaches at Boca del Cielo are still full of hotels, villas, and restaurants.

On that map, carefully placed between the towns of Venustiano Carranza and Las Rosas, is a factory that probably represents the San Francisco Pujilic sugar mill. Fed by the surrounding miles of sugarcane plantations, this industrial sugar mill is one of the most competitive in the region (Aguilar-Rivera et al., 2012, p. 214). It draws a clear distinction between its urban setting and the fields that supply it: on average, more than a million sugar cane stalks were harvested annually to feed the mill between 1993 and 1998 (Haley, 2000, p. 14).

Finally, a seemingly innocuous drawing is striking. We see that a forklift truck harvesting logs in the hinterlands has been added to this map. The most important feature is that it is located directly next to the most important Mayan ruins in the region, namely the ruins of Palenque. The margin on the right of the tourist map used by the missionaries says a lot. An illustration of an indigenous woman represents the Lacandon Jungle and the indigenous people living there. Isolation in the jungle is much more pronounced than in the west: fewer roads, no railways, and only a few air links. Tourism is the main means of travel in this region. The Mayan ruins, including the ruins of Yaxchilán, Tzendales, and Bonampak, are important tourist attractions in the region. Today, ecotourism is practiced there, and it is now much more environmentally focused. For example, numerous trails wind through the natural parks of the Lacandon Jungle. In a testimony, a local resident aptly describes the importance of tourism in this region:

It's a good thing that [my Lacandon companions] live with tourists. I think that if they didn't live with tourists, they would continue to work [their milpa], or they would continue to cut down trees, yes. They would have

continued to cut down trees, or I don't know what they would have done. (Losseau, 2015, p. 39).

Thus, tourism responds, in a way, to the issues raised previously. It is primarily a parallel form of land use and is well represented in the eastern part of the map above. It shows how representations of exoticism and indigenous people's identities can become commercialized.

The 1978 Oblate Mission

The organization of the first section is not random. Environmental degradation mixed with economic hardships led the Catholic Church in Chiapas to act and help the indigenous people face the loss of historical markers relating to the environment and the transformations of identity that this loss also brings. In 1978, a group of four missionaries, René Fumoleau, Louis Ménez, Camille Piché, and Aurore Larkin, set off for Mexico with the aim of meeting Samuel Ruiz. Having worked in the Northwest Territories in Canada, on the border of the Beaufort Sea, they encountered environmental, social, and economic changes similar to those in Chiapas. In the 1960s and 1970s, before the trip to Chiapas, Fumoleau, Ménez, and Piché gradually diverged from the traditional hierarchical control promoted by the Canadian Catholic hierarchy to help communities at the grassroots level (Nollet, 2026, p. 93–111). On a regional scale, they did so, as Ruiz did in Chiapas on a broader scale, out of a desire to protect indigenous rights from foreign influence, from the excesses of capitalism, and from massive changes to the natural environment, a vital component of their cultural identity. Notably, they helped multiple indigenous communities, like Fort Rae, Fort Smith, Fort Franklin, Fort Resolution and Hay River, lay the foundations for economic cooperatives to sell handicrafts, wood and fish, at a fair price. These cooperatives were also important on the political scene because they became, in some cases, extensions of and meeting places for the Indian Brotherhood, a political group keen on promoting equality between Whites and Indigenous peoples.

Most importantly, in the early 1970s, the federal government of Canada and American oil companies put forward a pipeline project passing through the heart of Dene and Dene-Tha lands in the Northwest Territories. Criticism from Indigenous communities led to the creation of a royal commission of inquiry into the situation, known as the Berger Commission. In response, some of the more progressive bishops of

the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops helped found a Christian coalition, named Project North, to support Indigenous claims during this commission (Czusdi-Vallée, 2023, p. 156). Ultimately, thanks to this organized resistance, amplified by the political organizing work done by the Catholic Church in Dene communities, the oil companies' project was initially delayed by the imposition of a ten-year moratorium, an objective dear to this coalition (Czusdi-Vallée, 2023, p. 59).

Indeed, René Fumoleau, Camille Piché, and Louis Ménez campaigned against this proposed oil pipeline in the Northwest Territories alongside Project North. Given the fragility of the environment in the Canadian North, that project would have caused problems for wildlife habitats, and the Dene and Dene-Tha peoples depend on this fauna both to sustain themselves and to preserve their cultural legacy. The major difference, as Paul Sabin so eloquently points out, is that, unlike the exploitation of petroleum in southern Mexico, there was a legal avenue to openly oppose and take action against the extraction and exploitation of hydrocarbon resources on indigenous lands in Canada (Sabin, 1995, p. 17-20). This commitment to help the First Nations of Canada was not, however, enough for the Oblate missionaries because it did not address the roots of injustice, which is why numerous documents on liberation theology were found in the archives belonging to this small group of rebel clerics. Even though these missionaries prepared this trip in advance to radically change the framework of their interactions with the indigenous peoples, they went much further than adapting their work and context to liberation theology. In their critique, the environmental aspects of the mission appear profoundly inseparable from social, economic, cultural, or political commitment.

At the end of their trip to Chiapas, they drew several important conclusions that directly correlate with the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada. First, in Mexico, they say:

A pipeline is being planned to bring oil from the rich oil fields of Chiapas to U.S.A. Markets. The poor are being expropriated by rich land owners who use the army. In Tabasco the cost of living has gone up 300% since the oil exploration began. The exploration of oil and of natural resources by large companies create more poverty among the poor in Mexico as well as the U.S.A. or Canada" (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

Indeed, just two years before their mission, in 1976, the state company Petróleos Mexicanos discovered oil in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco: resisting farmers were violently repressed by the Mexican army to ensure the safe extraction of this black gold (Sabin, 1995, p. 17-20). Thus, there is a direct link between the situations surrounding

pipeline projects in Canada and Mexico. Second, they point out that the army intervenes to protect the interests of American consumers over those of the indigenous people (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]). In the province of Quebec, in eastern Canada, the 1990 Oka Crisis occurred when investors attempted to purchase ancestral Kanien'kehá:ka lands to build a golf course (St-Amand, 2010, p. 81–93). When the Indigenous people blocked the roads to protest, a police officer was killed, and the Canadian government decided to send in the army to besiege the reserve. Third, they say, “deforestation serves to supply the American markets at a ridiculous price” (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]). In the 1980s, Camille Piché’s work noticeably shifted towards environmental problems, showing how inseparable the commitment to environmental preservation is from the spiritual mission. Indeed, he campaigned against the construction of pulp and paper mills to prevent deforestation on Indigenous lands in northern Canada (Nollet, 2026, p. 144–147). They also criticize the working conditions for Indigenous people in the agricultural sector of Chiapas, which are appalling; ever since the Indian Act of 1876, Indigenous peoples in Canada have been placed on First Nations reserves, tracts of land where their marginalized and peripheral situation still constitutes a problem in the twenty-first century (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

Finally, the justifications for and solutions to these problems are clearly stated by the missionaries. On the one hand, the situation of oppression is the same for indigenous peoples across the Americas; therefore, missionary work must be socio-economic before being cultural:

“Social and economic conditions are more important than racial divisions. The world is not as much divided between Black and White and Yellow people as it is between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, oppressors and oppressed. The oppressed people speak the same language all over the world, they do not ask for charity anymore, but they demand respect for their rights. The policy of integration and/or assimilation for the Indians is a failure in the U.S.A., in Canada, as well as in Mexico” (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

On the other hand, because the situations of oppression are so alike in this international system, resistance through pastoral work must also be international. This is the closing argument of these missionaries regarding the relevance of this Mexican model for Canada’s indigenous peoples:

There can be no theology without analysis; without organization – not any kind – but with those people interested in liberation – a reflexion of every moment which helps total understanding. Politics are important. We have to understand its role. To develop a Wholistic approach [...] This kind of movement has to be transnational. A movement of autochthonous churches –

because we have to fight a system which is transnational in confronting the capitalistic system. We must raise the consciousness of injustice (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

The 1989 Jesuit Northern Native Missions

Ten years later, four other Canadian missionaries, including Denise Nadeau, a lay missionary, and the Jesuit Michael Murray, arrived in Chiapas with two other as yet unidentified missionaries; they also drew useful conclusions that echo the deliberations from the first trip. They provide profound insights into missionaries' relations with their mission environments, transnational networks, and the methods needed to work in an indigenous context. The correlation between the two trips is not trivial. From 1985 onwards, Denise Nadeau worked alongside René Fumoleau at the Denendeh Seminary, a theological college created to teach priests how to adapt to the harsh realities of indigenous life in Canada (Nadeau, 2020, p. 17–30).

The first point the missionaries bring up in the written conclusion of their trip is the problem of changes to agricultural life through agrarian reforms and the gradual relegation of indigenous peoples to the margins, like the selva, a land that is not necessarily the most hospitable for large-scale farming (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.])³. In their text, they acknowledge these struggles and point out that since “there have been no significant political movements representing the people so the only way they could express themselves politically was through religion” (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]). Moreover, “at the level of the reality of their lives, people lived and still live in a situation of marginalization and exploitation, and are denied basic human rights like paid work, health care, and education” (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

Faith, using Samuel Ruiz' model of interaction with indigenous peoples through Christian base communities, catechesis, and social development projects, has become a powerful way to raise awareness of injustice and alleviate its worst effects. As the missionaries themselves sum it up, faith needs to be lived through the socio-economic context (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]). Land and environment, being essential parts of this context, then become crucial areas of spiritual work for a society that has profound cultural links to its environment. Finally, even though this group initially set out to

³ The documents concerning the 1989 trip are filed in the 1978 folder, reflecting the missionaries' subsequent collaboration with members of the 1978 mission.

understand the role of indigenous deacons in Chiapas and the training they had received, the missionaries came back with something much more meaningful and practical:

What we discovered in Chiapas was a different way of being church than we had known here in Canada. The history, present reality and context of the diocese [...] have helped to shape a unique pastoral practice amongst native people. Our journey raised important challenges to our work as well as provided a framework with which to assess some of our own pastoral practices (P.A.A., 1978, [s.p.]).

Indeed, as soon as the group came back to Canada, Mike Murray and Denise Nadeau tried to share these conclusions with three Canadian bishops working in mostly indigenous regions. Nadeau argued that “white Christian solidarity with Indigenous people was being redefined” in the 1980s (Nadeau, 2020, p. 47-50). For her, environmental struggles, as she had seen through Project North, were an integral part of this new mission for the Church to better understand indigenous peoples’ realities, because for her:

“the entire European imperial project had been as much a Christian mission venture as it was a way of getting the raw resources that Europe needed [...] unless mission addressed colonialism, the power imbalances inherent in the church structures, and the damage the church has done, nothing would change (Nadeau, 2020, p. 47-50).

Conclusion

In Chiapas, since the second half of the twentieth century, rapid changes in water networks, the gradual erosion of soil fertility, and swift deforestation have increased the need for arable land. With the spatial landmarks of the local population being erased, these severe changes to the natural landscape have affected the indigenous population’s social, economic, cultural, and political situation and pushed them further toward marginalization. Furthermore, foreign actors perceive and represent Chiapas through industrial, modern, capitalist, and liberal perspectives as a peripheral region ripe for the extraction of natural resources, like wood, coffee, and fruits. Also, investments by the government have detrimental effects on regional identity and the unequal distribution of the means of production, further deepening the economic disparity between Spanish cities, imagined as a refuge against environmental issues, and indigenous farms, difficult and remote terrains where one is at the mercy of nature. As the value of space and place is mostly interpreted and determined according to economic and scientific paradigms,

there is a divide between Mexican space and indigenous space. The latter represents the margins of Mexican society. This context alienates the indigenous peoples and portrays them crudely as an alterity harmful to economic growth, unless they remain a passive workforce for plantations or modify their identity to satisfy an exotic image portrayed by the Mexican government to stimulate tourism.

To adjust, the indigenous people adapted their agricultural practices while trying to keep as many traditional elements as possible, because a great part of their cultural identity revolves around their relationship with the environment. This socio-economic adjustment in reaction to the disruption of traditions brought by liberalism, colonialism, and globalization also becomes an area of cultural resistance in a clash between subsistence and profits. On the sidelines of these changes, the Bishop of Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz García, a figurehead of a new type of liberation theology aimed at helping the indigenous peoples achieve self-determination and emancipation, helped the indigenous people organize and unite around the need for basic human rights and recognition. At first, this tutelage sought only to bring indigenous people together to better understand their situation, but the indigenous people quickly united and created an alternative economic space, with the help of missionaries, using fair-trade practices and cooperative organizations. Thus, as traditional environmental landmarks fall, new ones are created through syncretism and adaptation of traditional practices, meaning that faith brings new relationships with the environment.

Finally, in Canada, indigenous peoples face a very similar situation of structural oppression. With threats to their environment brought about by projects to develop a pipeline on indigenous land, Catholic missionaries already committed to helping local communities saw the approach developed by Samuel Ruiz as an enticing model to adopt, adapt, and apply in Canada. Thus, they set out to travel to Mexico to draw firsthand conclusions about the similarities with their situation, discovering an entirely new way to interpret faith. In indigenous missions, this new interpretation roots faith in the socio-economic context, which is in turn greatly modified by environmental changes. Working for environmental justice, as the Canadian missionaries pointed out, is useless unless they are also working against a colonial perception deeply ingrained in a concealed colonial mindset. If they want their mission to be truthful and effective for indigenous peoples, they must first orient it towards themselves and some of their peers to rethink their original cultural perceptions of what space, place, and environment really mean.

DAS PLANTAÇÕES ÀS IGREJAS: A RELAÇÃO HUMANA COM O MEIO AMBIENTE E O ESPAÇO EM CHIAPAS DESDE A SEGUNDA METADE DO SÉCULO XX

Resumo: Este artigo examina brevemente as mudanças ambientais em Chiapas na segunda metade do século XX para compreender melhor como as perspectivas e as interações com o espaço e o lugar evoluíram. Utilizando abordagens analíticas e filosóficas, este trabalho analisa duas fontes religiosas canadenses: uma proveniente dos Arquivos Provinciais de Alberta e a outra de um diário missionário. A primeira fonte é a conclusão escrita de uma viagem realizada por quatro missionários canadenses a Chiapas em 1989, na qual eles comentam, a partir de suas perspectivas, as mudanças sociais, econômicas, culturais, políticas e espaciais que afetaram as populações indígenas do estado. Utilizando um mapa turístico contemporâneo em posse desses missionários, este artigo busca compreender como as principais mudanças nos paradigmas espaciais afetaram a identidade local e as relações culturais, espirituais e econômicas com o meio ambiente. A segunda fonte provém do testemunho de Ron Macdonnell na revista missionária de Scarboro Foreign Missions, em Ontário, após a erupção do vulcão El Chichón em 1982. Este relato apresenta suas perspectivas e interpretação do evento, bem como as reações e perspectivas dos povos indígenas que ele auxiliou durante a crise.

Palavras-chave: Teologia da libertação. Samuel Ruiz. História transnacional. Resistência espacial. História indígena.

DE LAS PLANTACIONES A LAS IGLESIAS: LA RELACIÓN HUMANA CON EL ENTORNO Y EL ESPACIO EN CHIAPAS DESDE LA SEGUNDA MITAD DEL SIGLO XX

Resumen: Este artículo examina brevemente los cambios ambientales en Chiapas durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX para comprender mejor cómo evolucionaron las perspectivas y las interacciones con el espacio y el lugar. Mediante enfoques analíticos como filosóficos, este trabajo analiza dos fuentes religiosas canadienses de los Archivos Provinciales de Alberta. La primera fuente es la conclusión escrita de un viaje realizado por cuatro misioneros oblatos canadienses a Chiapas en 1978, en la que comentan, desde sus perspectivas, los cambios sociales, económicos, culturales, políticos y espaciales que afectaron a las poblaciones indígenas del estado. Utilizando un mapa turístico contemporáneo en posesión de estos misioneros, muestra exactamente lo que critican. La segunda fuente proviene de los mismos archivos, pero presenta un viaje similar realizado en 1989 por cuatro misioneros laicos y jesuitas. Este relato presenta su perspectiva e interpretación de las similitudes entre Canadá y Chiapas, así como las perspectivas de aplicar en Canadá el modelo de ayuda espiritual que encontraron en Chiapas, vinculando tanto la resistencia al cambio espacial y ambiental como el fervor de Samuel Ruiz por defender los derechos de los indígenas. Finalmente, este artículo busca comprender cómo los principales cambios en los paradigmas espaciales afectaron la identidad local, las relaciones culturales y económicas con el medio ambiente, y cómo el trabajo misionero espiritual puede convertirse en una forma de resistencia a estos cambios perjudiciales.

Palabras claves: Teología de la liberación. Samuel Ruiz. Historia transnacional. Resistencia espacial. Historia indígena.

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