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**Published on** H-Socialisms (February, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

The *National Catholic Reporter* of March 6, 1968, reported that members of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, popularly known as Maryknoll, had no need for a revolution in Guatemala. This statement followed the expulsion of four Maryknoll nuns and priests from Guatemala on December 27, 1967, for having connections to local guerrilla forces. Father John Breen, the Maryknoll superior in Guatemala, had written to the Maryknoll superior general, Father John J. McCormack, that the deported Maryknollers were only voicing their personal opinions and that meddling in the politics of any country was not in keeping with the spirit of the Maryknoll community. Over one hundred former members of the Guatemalan Maryknoll community signed this letter, in which they claimed that the four expelled Maryknollers were completely mistaken about the actual situation in the country.

Bonar L. Hernández Sandoval’s *Guatemala’s Catholic Revolution: A History of Religious and Social Reform, 1920-1968* explores the intersection of missionary activity and socialist politics. The period from 1920 to 1968 was an eventful time for the Vatican, Guatemala, and world politics. Especially relevant to the story told here were the Second Vatican Council and the events that comprised the Guatemalan Revolution. Because it is impossible to cover all this in a slim volume, Hernández Sandoval points only to areas where missiology and socialism meet. The four expelled Maryknollers were not the only Catholic missionaries concerned with social and political change within Guatemala. Hernández Sandoval provides the larger context of missionary contributions within Latin American social and political spheres that were often highly “polarized and militarized” (p. 2).

Throughout this book, Hernández Sandoval emphasizes the schism between the leadership of different Catholic parishes that supported conservative, anti-communist, and even military governments, and the missionaries who worked directly among the citizenry and who defied prevailing structural and political restraints and at times participated directly in armed altercations and struggles. Hernández Sandoval argues that the Catholic Church addressed social and political challenges and made reforms part of a “broad transnational approach that spans the five decades from the 1920s to the 1960s and moves beyond, but does not discount, national boundaries—in the process re-constructing the ideological and institutional connections between Rome and Guatemalan Catholicism.” By following this process, Hernández Sandoval can “uncover the origins of progressive Catholicism” (p. 3).
Hernández Sandoval argues that religious institutions both influence and get influenced by their social and political environments. For him, religious change is best studied through a transnational perspective, with emphasis on the historical connections between religious institutions and activities, in this case, the connections between the Roman Catholic Church and its Guatemalan counterparts. He traces the revival of Guatemalan Catholicism to the period between the two world wars and shows that European and North American missionaries were instrumental in the initial stages of that revival, a movement that began in the Guatemalan mountains amid the indigenous Maya population. With this focus, Hernández Sandoval depicts the power and influence of the Vatican and the Europeanization of the Latin American churches.

Hernández Sandoval argues that the Vatican was central to fostering church-state relations in a manner reminiscent of colonialism, mainly by increasing its reach in the countryside and helping to revive the highland church. Catholic practice proved to be much different, and more nuanced, than either the church’s theology or its official ideology. And the complex interplay of priests and laypeople explains the unique aspects of Latin American religiosity, costumbre, or “the umbrella term used to describe the constantly changing mixture of Christian and indigenous religious beliefs and practices” (p. 10).

By distancing the Mayan from indigenous priests, the Maryknollers contributed to the fragmentation of the indigenous Maya community. This fragmentation became significant during the Guatemalan civil war from 1960 to 1996. A crisis of identity and sovereignty overtook both the church and the indigenous community, overshadowing the Guatemalan Catholic movement. Both priests and Mayans were drawn into the subsequent militant struggles. Hernández Sandoval highlights the situation of Father Stanley Francis Rother, an Oklahoman who had become a senior church official in Guatemala. On July 28, 1981, he was shot to death at age forty-six (and declared a saint by Pope Francis in 2017).

Because Hernández Sandoval views the Catholic Church as “a source of reform in twentieth-century Guatemala,” his analysis “moves beyond characterizations of religious institutions and the beliefs and practices that support them as mere reflections of politics or economic phenomena” (pp. 12-13). By examining the proactive roles of the Catholic missionaries, he brings to light socioeconomic developments that they helped create in the Guatemalan highlands. This meant “the integration of Maya communities into the socioeconomic landscape nurtured by Cold War anticommunism and capitalist development” (p. 14).

The Catholic Church’s developmental approach, however, suffered under a US-sponsored military government. As a result, some priests disassociated from the Vatican and joined the armed resistance, albeit all in the name of Christ. They could not reconcile the church’s nonpolitical stand with their own humane concerns for the local population. This is where missiology met socialism. Because Hernández Sandoval relies primarily on documents drawn from the church, his study emphasizes the Vatican’s perspective of the Guatemalan Revolution. He assures readers, nonetheless, that his book reconstructs the shared “cultural and social world created and occupied by missionaries and indigenous communities” (p. 17).

The Catholic Church in Latin America has a checkered history of conflict with the state. Hernández Sandoval weaves an engaging narrative of this conflict and the persecution of the church that resulted in its declining power. He also portrays the phoenix-like resurgence of papal power in Latin America, particularly in Guatemala, and shows how this revival displayed an unapologetic social and political activism of the priests. Guatemala’s Catholic Revolution belongs to the rare genre of books that study the interplay of state politics and religion within religious institu-
tions. What makes this study intriguing is that it is based on the official standpoint of the church.

Hernández Sandoval’s account is also a brief history of the various reform and revival movements within the Guatemalan Catholic Church. He brings to light the merits and dangers of clerics getting involved in political activities. The mixture of politics and religion can be dangerous enough; it becomes absolutely deadly when entered into by the guardians of organized religion. The tensions between the church and the state in Guatemala in the early twentieth century led the Vatican to envision “an apolitical Church whose members ... would accommodate and, if possible, negotiate with the state ... and devote themselves to the re-Christianization of society” (p. 31). By “re-Christianization” the Vatican meant the conversion to Christianity of non-Christians.

Over time, local religious practices were altered, and conflicts with the indigenous religious practitioners, the costumbristas, “took the form of a protracted struggle in which engagement—which brought together a history of compromise and adaptation at the parish level—became the norm” (p. 100). Reminiscent of the religious-political tensions of missionary Buddhism, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka and Tibet, Guatemala’s Catholic Revolution highlights the tensions within the Catholic Church because of its stand against communism elsewhere.

This book does not restrict itself to the portrayal of church-state conflicts in Guatemala but also delves into the tensions between the Vatican and Guatemalan priests on account of the latter’s disobedience, alternative moral practices, and redefinition of a sacrament-based Christianity. Guatemala’s Catholic Revolution problematizes issues regarding the imposition of non-native or foreign cultural practices by religious authorities and the adaptation of indigenous practices by rigidly organized religious bodies. In India, for instance, Catholic missionaries sometimes adopt Hindu religious practices—like the waving of lights, wearing instances of cultural inclusion whereby Christianity remolds itself within Indian society. Thus, the carefully planned adoption of the indigenous practices is projected as something natural.

Finally, Guatemala’s Catholic Revolution touches on the beginnings of liberation theology as propounded by Gustavo Gutiérrez, and in this aspect the book further documents the evolution of Christian doctrine in Latin America as it synthesized preexisting religious traditions that occur when missioners mix with indigenous populations. This volume includes an extensive bibliography on the Catholic Church in Latin America and contains useful information for anyone interested in archival research regarding Catholicism, missiology, religious studies, liberation theology, the history of the Catholic Church, Latin America and the Cold War, and Latin American history in general.
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