

Religious Competition, Conflict, Accommodation, and Dualism
in a Modern Maya Town
Seth Procter
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Jay Levi
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Abstract

In this paper I seek to answer the question, “what role does religion play in San Andreas Xecul?” Xecul is home to three religious groups—Catholic, Evangelical, and Costumbre. It looks at how these diverse groups are able to peacefully co-exist when they so often fail to do so in other communities. This paper looks at the way that these religious groups share some practices, overlap in both membership and creed, and continue in a parallel manner, which rarely pits them directly against one and other. However, their co-existence cannot be accurately assessed without examining conflicts, which inevitable arise. This paper examines the trends in S.A. Xecul in comparison to Santiago Atitlán and Panajachel a more religiously polarized Maya towns and San Juan, a similar town.

Introduction

“Of course members of the congregation practice costumbre in addition to attending Catholic mass, however I do not know any sacerdotes Maya” –Phivio Cifuentes, the Catholic reverend in S.A. Xecul.

“Evangelicals come here to pray to San Simón, but they are the Evangelicals from other towns, and the Evangelicals from Xecul go to other towns to practice costumbre.” –Don Rafael, the current cofrade in the second San Simón cofradia in S.A. Xecul.

“Evangelicals and Catholics really are not all that different. We both pray to the same God and use the same Bible; the only difference is that we use saints.” –Pedro Alejandro Cux Xim, a lifetime Catholic and a member of the church’s financial council.

These quotes demonstrate the high level of tolerance between different religious groups in S.A. Xecul. Many anthropologists have written about the relations between religious groups, most studies have explored differences, division, and opposition between each of the three major religious groups in Guatemala—Catholic, Protestant, and costumbre (Carlsen 1997; Sexton 1978; Bastian 1993; Burnett 1989). However, I find that in S.A. Xecul there is a generally higher level of tolerance between different religious sects, however that is not to say that there is not religious competition and discord. In this paper I am going to discuss, first, the ways that Catholicism, Protestantism, and costumbre co-exist peacefully due to a high level of religious accommodation. I will also address the ways in which these groups occasionally clash, often for the same reasons articulated by Carlsen, Sexton, Bastian, and Burnett.

Methods

I entered the field planning to study the relationship between ethnicity, religion, mode of occupation, and material wealth. However, upon preliminary examination of the community I determined that these were either not variables or they would be too difficult to measure. There is virtually no ethnic diversity; according to town statistics less than 0.5% of the population is Ladino, the rest is of indigenous descent. About 80% of the town is Catholic, which is synonymous with Costumbrista. The other 20% is Evangelical. While religious difference existed it was not clear cut and it was difficult to get people to talk about their differences. Mode of occupation remains a viable variable, but it would take much more time than I have to measure. Material wealth is most closely related with working in the United States.

I expected to find that Evangelicals would value and possess more material wealth than Catholics. I also expected to find that those practicing costumbre would be

agricultural workers, less concerned with material wealth, and potentially with prejudices against wealthy people. I encountered a study done by Linda Goldin in Apolunga that aimed to categorize people as more or less traditional and correlate this with their religion and mode of occupation. First, she had much more experience in the community before attempting a survey, which was administered by locals in Kiche'. Second, her results did not reveal the correlations that she expected and I hypothesized above (Goldin 1992).

I chose to move into a more in depth study of the religious organizations and their functions in the town. This is a pertinent subject to approach in Xecul because everyone is religious and believes very strongly in their faith. However, many people could not explain the role that religion plays as a social institution in their community.

To understand the function of religion I conducted interviews—both formal and informal—with ordinary worshippers, leaders, and observed religious ceremonies. During the month of February, 2006, I interviewed a sacerdote Maya, a cofrade, the Catholic reverend, a member of the financial council in the Catholic Church, and a group of Evangelical missionaries, in addition to ordinary citizens. I observed a Catholic mass, an Evangelical mass, an Evangelical Bible study session, a Maya ceremony, worship ceremonies to San Simón, a Baptism and a Catholic wedding party.

I encountered some original skepticism from people who were worried about talking to a foreigner, especially when I carried a pad of paper. Many people changed their manner and became more reserved when I began taking notes. However, by the end of an interview most people were very open and excited about the subject. I found that some people were more interested in delivering a lecture on their faith rather than answering the questions that pertained directly to my project. Everyone was very appreciative to have me attend their ceremonies and take an interest in their religion.

I expected to find a clear divide between Evangelicals, Catholics, and Costumbristas. I thought that there would be quite a bit of opposition and criticism of the other groups. However, I found that distinctions between each religious group were complicated by the cross-over and dualism, especially from Christian faiths to Costumbre. People were hesitant to divide the town into groups according to religions, but once they did they often held negative stereotypes of the other groups, as I expected.

Discussion

Inter-faith Relations

As I became acquainted with S.A. Xecul there were two themes that became apparent in nearly every interaction, people in S.A. Xecul feel passionate pride in their strong faith in God and their community. Whether, I spoke with a Catholic, a Protestant, or a costumbrista they all would counter my offerings of thanks with the phrase “Dios primero.” As a sacerdote Maya explained to me this is because they believe that God is the one who gives everything; our personal interactions come only with the blessings of God, therefore we must thank him first and foremost before other mortals. The passionate pride in the community is further demonstrated by people’s excitement to show off and explain their community. I was frequently asked by almost complete strangers, “what do you think of S.A. Xecul?” or “Do you like it here?” They eagerly wait a positive response, which they would often embellish with their own opinions of the town. Furthermore, almost all women still wear traditional *corte*; again many people were eager to point out the animals of the women’s corte, which are unique to S.A. Xecul.

The similar passions of many citizens result from dominate presence of the Catholic Church in S.A. Xecul. The town government statistics indicate 80% of the

urban population is Catholic. The reverend concurs and believes that this is also the proportion of Catholics in the *aldeas*. Because of its large membership and central role in community events the Catholic Church tends to be a unifying organization in the town. As Bastian observed, "Catholicism proved to be the essential cohesive factor for these fragile nationalities (1993: 36)." Guatemala today is still a nation trying to reconcile 36 years of government genocide, the overt scars of violence in S.A. Xecul have been, for the most part, covered, but many still suffer from poverty, alcoholism, domestic violence, corruption and unemployment, putting S.A. Xecul in a somewhat precarious position (Field notes Feb 8th 2006).

Thus far Protestant churches have only been able to convert one fifth of the population a relative small number in comparison to the other parts of the country (Sexton 1993; Carlsen 1997). Sexton examines one possible explanation for this, "Protestantism is most likely to gain a following where (first) competing Catholicism lacks sufficient personnel, (second) facilities, or (third) interest to serve the local population (Sexton 1993: 280)." First, there is not competing Catholicism in S.A. Xecul. Catholic Action probably did not gain a large following in S.A. Xecul because of the strong presence of *costumbre*. Catholic Action is opposed to the practice of *costumbre*, therefore it loses many followers in strong *costumbrista* communities (Sexton 1993: 284). Furthermore, the Catholic congregation has raised sufficient funds to hire their own reverend since the 1940s.

Second, the Catholic Church has sufficient facilities; the church building is the largest building in town. It occupies a prominent position on the West side of the central plaza opposite the municipal building. The front is painted bright yellow and adorned with 270 figures. Its physical position and conspicuous appearance parallel its role as the most important social institution in town. It is not only the Church of most

inhabitants of Xecul, but also the organization responsible for some of the most well known events in most citizens' lives—baptism, first communion, marriages, and community wide holiday celebrations are all sponsored by the Catholic Church.

Third, in the municipality, mass is held daily—7-8am every weekday, 7pm on Wednesday, 8pm on Saturday—and twice on Sunday, at 7am and 10am in a beautiful church located on the central plaza. The reverend also travels to each aldeas, some of which have their own Catholic Church, to give bimonthly masses. The first sermon I observed began with the reverend saying “only out of every six people in the world is Catholic, this is not enough, and we need to work to raise that number (Field notes Feb 5th 2006).” There clearly is a dedication within the Catholic Church to maintaining its membership

While the competition between Catholics and Evangelicals could breed animosity it has not, for the most part. Burnett observed how at one time was a “major deviance from accepted social norms to join a Protestant church (1989:137).” One missionary remarked to me that, “it is very difficult to win converts in S.A. Xecul because of family pressure. When the rest of the family is Catholic (as the often are in S.A. Xecul) it is very hard for an individual to convert (Field notes Feb 21st 2006).” While Catholicism is hard to escape from because of its central location, there are still good relations between Evangelicals and Catholics. For example, a women's group in town, Poder y Fuerza, is an inter-faith group, that proceeds without religious conflict between members. Some Catholics are even able to acknowledge the similarities between their faith and that of the Evangelicals. They realize that they have the same God and use the same Bible (see introduction quote #3).

One might imagine a greater conflict between costumbristas and Christians, however this is not the case. Everyone acknowledges that costumbristas and Catholic

are the same people much of the time. There are some people who practice only *costumbre* and others who practice only Catholicism, but they are the exceptions. Even sacerdotes Maya often attend Catholic mass. And the reverend acknowledges the presence of *costumbristas* among his congregation (see introduction quote #1).

Greater opposition arises between Evangelicals and *costumbristas*, however on close examination it becomes apparent that there is a contradiction between Evangelical rhetoric and practice. Evangelicals are very clear that “there is one word of God and one way to worship God (Field notes Feb 21st 2006).” This means that the participation in Maya ceremonies is not permitted, however I spoke with a *cofrade* and a sacerdote who claimed to have had their services solicited by Evangelicals. Other Catholics claim the Evangelicals practice *costumbre* too, but I could not find an Evangelical who would admit to practicing *costumbre*.

Whatever the inter-religious relations are it is clear that *costumbre* is alive and well in S.A. Xecul. Every morning and evening one can look up into the surrounding mountains and see the smoke of various ceremonial fires. Official statistics on the number of citizens who practice *Costumbre* do not exist. The town data on religion only counts Catholics, Evangelicals, and others (town report). The omission of *costumbre* from official statistics strongly mis-portrays the religious situation in S.A. Xecul, however it prevents them from having the divide out *costumbristas*, which would be a difficult task as they often are the same as those attending masses.

Similarities– Names, Places, and Practices

The most famous Maya ceremonial site in Xecul is called *Capilla de Calvario*. It is located about 10 blocks up the hill to the north-west of the central plaza. There is a small Catholic shrine with a yellow façade, which resembles that of the Catholic Church on the plaza. Right next to the Catholic place of worship is a very large Maya alter.

There are very frequently fires going on here, and sometimes as many as three or four at one time. Everyone in town who talks about sacred sites first mentions *Calvario*. This site represents the proximity of Catholicism and costumbre. The undeniable reality that the two are practiced physically side-by-side parallels the way that many individuals practice them side-by-side in their spiritual life—going first to Catholic mass and then a Maya ceremony.

Calvario is not the only ceremonial site that demonstrates the proximity of Catholicism and costumbre, the surrounding mountains are filled with Maya alters, very often prominent rock features, which almost always feature a cross. However, there are two distinct types of crosses present in Xecul; there is a Maya cross and a Christian cross. The Maya cross is an equilateral cross, often decorated with mystically significant figures. On the Christian cross then horizontal beam crosses the vertical one above its midpoint making the shape of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The Maya cross existed long before then Spanish Catholics arrived here just over 500 years ago, but when they came they brought their own version of the cross, which has come to be used along with the Maya cross at traditionally sacred sites. The Maya cross is important to the Maya mystical world-view because it can be easily inscribed in a circle, which is a Maya representation of perfection.

Maya ceremonies today not only use a Christian cross, but very often include Christian prayers, showing the way the that two religions have developed together. This dualism makes it even more difficult to differentiate because costumbristas are using Catholic forms of worship in their service, which makes it hard for a costumbrista to denounce Catholicism and makes it easier for a costumbrista to fit into a Catholic environment. Ceremonies differ from Catholic services in the way that prayers are said and, in fact, are more similar to Evangelicals. When there is more than one person

running the ceremony they will often pray at the same time as the Evangelicals do during their services

Churches have also adopted traditional items from the community. The reverend gives mass wearing a white robe decorated with a pattern traditional to S.A. Xecul. Also during the mass singing is accompanied by a marimba, by far the most popular instrument in S.A. Xecul. This was of embracing the local community, not only makes it easier for community members to join the church, but attaches the church to the community in a way that prevents controversy

The town's patron saint, San Andreas, is another example of the fusion between Catholic and costumbre. Typical of many town's patron saints he was found up in the mountains at a location that continues to function as a Maya alter. Every year for his saint's day the San Andreas Aposto cofradía holds a procession that descends from the mountain from to the Catholic Church. In fact, other parts of the celebrations show the blending of costumbre and Catholicism. The dance of the monkeys is a popular part of the festivities. The dancers spend a month living in the mountains like animals—not bathing and finding whatever they can to eat in the mountain. They come back for the celebration symbolically dressed as animals for a symbolic celebration in front of the Catholic Church. The dance of the monkeys is, of course, not a Catholic celebration, but an event derived from the community, which has become incorporated with a Catholic celebration.

Religious vocabulary reveals further similarities between them. Each group has their own name for God; the Catholics call him Dios, the Evangelicals call him Jehovah, and the costumbristas call him Ajaw. However, they all call him God, Dios, at times and he serves nearly the same function for all of them. Evangelicals and Catholics, of course, both use the same Bible. Today costumbristas generally acknowledge the Popol

Vuh as their religious text. However, while speaking to a Catholic, who happened not to practice costumbre, he referred to his Bible as “pop vuh (Field notes Feb 23rd 2006)”. In the literal Kiche’ translation popol vuh means book of council, however it is commonly known as the Maya book of council, a reference that I believe this man did not realize that he had made. Evangelicals call their leaders pastor almost invariably, however Catholics have a few names. Catholics refer to their religious leader as pastor, reverendo (reverend), or sacerdote (a Spanish word meaning priest). Interestingly, Maya religious leaders are invariably called sacerdote with few making the distinction and calling them sacerdote Maya.

Cofradías and the Civil Religious Hierarchy

When the Spaniards conquered the Guatemalan Highlands, they brought with them Catholicism. In an effort of govern and spread the word of God the Spaniards imported a civil religious cargo system from Spain. In the cargo system one man would serve for a year as the cofrade, during which time he would be the chief political officer in the town in addition for being responsible for the patron saint’s celebration (Carlsen 1997: 22). After the separation of church and state cofradías were reduced to ceremonial organizations, although they very often remain very important ones, however in S.A. Xecul they are of minimal importance, which downplays the confrontation between the Catholic Church and cofradías that occurs in some towns (see Carlsen 1997). “It is hardly surprising that both Catholic and Protestant detractors of the Old Ways have equated Maximón with Satan (Carlsen 1997: 24).” However, this is the case only for a few Catholics and not all Protestants in S.A. Xecul.

In S.A. Xecul there are three *Cofradías* outside of the Catholic Church—two the San Simón and one to San Andreas Aposto, the patron saint of the town. There are 11 cofradías in the church, but they function like church associations as part of the

congregation, rather than separate organizations with their own leadership and purpose. There is a dispute between the two *cofradías* to San Simón. Everyone agrees that one is “fake,” while the other is “real.” One explanation is that the owner of the “fake” one was one a *cofrade* in the one and only *San Simón cofradía* in Xecul, but when it came time for him to give up the effigy he refused and when he was forced to give it up he cut a piece off of the mask of the real one and created his own San Simón.

In most *cofradías* the *cofrade* is responsible for a large annual celebration on the saint’s day. The *cofrade* is responsible for organizing a procession, constructing a structure in which the saint rides during the procession, and throwing a large party for all members of the *cofradía* and other members of the community. The celebration includes dancing, music, and dancing, however in Xecul the *cofradías* do not throw very large celebrations.

The San Andreas Aposto *cofradía* throws a party, but the town is already celebrating at events sponsored by the San Andreas Aposto *cofradía* housed in the Catholic Church, which is free from traditional Maya influence. The fake San Simón *cofradía* does not have a procession, although more worshippers come to visit him on his saint’s day. The real one has a procession and party every year, but it is a celebration mostly for the members of the *cofradía* and their friends and family, not a whole community event.

Community Functions

The Catholic Church holds a virtual monopoly on large conspicuous events and common coming of age rituals. Baptisms, first communion, weddings and church holidays are all held in the Catholic Church and spill out across the central plaza as large parties of family members move from their place of worship to a house to continue celebrations. Most families are all still attend the Catholic Church, as do their

friends, so there is very little rivalry between family members or bride and groom about where or what type of ceremony should take place

While these family celebrations include a significant portion of the town, they are tiny compared to the town-wide celebrations for Church holidays, especially the town's patron saint's day. The town, of course is named for San Andrea Aposto. The celebration in his honor lasts from November 26th through December 1st. Festivities features bands playing in the central plaza every night, dancing, thousands of dollars of fireworks, a processions through the entire town, and the *Reina Indigena* contest. All events are well attended and it is impossible for anyone living in the municipality not to at least pass through the celebrations.

Costumbristas, being generally the same as Catholics, participate in these ceremonies. Even those who are not Catholics do not have a strong religious conviction that prevents them from participating. After all, Catholic celebrations are intended to honor God, a value that *Costumbristas* share with Catholics.

Evangelicals are generally opposed to the worship of saints and excessive celebration, but they are a small enough groups that their absence is not missed, nor do they put a significant opposition. This is important because in some towns there are strong divisions between Evangelicals and Catholics over ceremonies (Carlsen 1997). Neither Evangelicals nor costumbristas hold large celebrations that could cause a disturbance in the town.

Divisions

The small Evangelical congregations are a point of contention for Catholics. There are still many Catholics who remember when the community was virtually completely Catholic and lament the loss of community the religious fractionalization brings. Because Evangelicals are not all from the same sect there is even greater

fractionalization then simply between Catholic and Evangelical, but also between the small Evangelical sects, which sometimes are not any larger than 10 members. There are only three Evangelical churches in S.A. Xecul. The largest mass was attended by only 83 people. The other two churches draw smaller crowds. Most of the Evangelical churches also arrange Bible study sessions, which are often advertised on small signs hanging over the doors of some houses.

Carlsen experiences a more severe version of this in Santiago Atitlán, a community that is much more Evangelical than S.A. Xecul.

“The community is now severely fractionalized according to religious affiliation. The primary actors in that fractionalization are Atitlán’s Protestant population, with some of the most vicious fractionalization occurring among Protestant sects (1997:18).”

In S.A. Xecul I did not encounter the competition between Evangelicals, but the Catholics were quick to level that accusation. The largest reason for the complaint was not religious, but social.

The Catholic Church also operates with a mission to help the community with material needs, in addition to spiritual needs. There are groups within the congregation responsible for making house visits to the sick and elderly to bring them food and pray for them. The most prominent among these groups is *Las Madres Christianas*. They are known for their work around the New Year, when they make most of their house calls. The financial council of the church has also considered creating a parish pharmacy, so that they could help needy parishioners with their medical needs, however they have not been able to realize this project for lack of funds. Evangelicals do not perform similar functions.

Due to the small size of congregations, the lack of funds and fragmentation Evangelicals are unable to make a coordinated effort to realize a community project

However, there is some action to help the community by teaching reading, but they do not perform community services like the Catholic Church does.

Places and Modes of Worship

Nowhere are the differences between Catholics, Evangelicals, and Costumbristas more pronounced than in their places of worship. They each take what is quintessential to their religious experience and emphasize it as much as possible in their decorations and sermons. These also happen to be the items for which they receive criticism from the other religious groups.

The inside of the Catholic Church features more than a dozen figures of Christ and various Saints. Evangelicals often criticize the Catholics for praying the saints rather than God. They see this as a sacrilegious disobedience to the work of God, however Catholics are quick to explain that they are not actually praying to the saints, but they are using them to teach the like of Jesus Christ and honor God. Again, they are making sure to put God first.

A ceremony will begin with the careful construction of the fire at one of the Maya alters. After smoothing earth, which will consist mostly of ashes from previous fires, the *sacerdote* will begin by drawing some combination of crosses and circles in the dirt, which he will then outline in sugar. He will then proceed by layering the other materials the burn paying close attention the achieving balance in what he lays down. The last layer will consist of candles. Before lighting the fire the *sacerdote* prays to Ajaw facing each of the four cardinal directions.

Sacerdotes are often accused of being witches who go into the mountains to do evil. Orthodox Christians believe that they are praying to deities, earth lords, and sometimes even the rocks where they hold their ceremonies. However, a sacerdote will

explain that the ceremony, the rocks and any figures are all simply ways of honoring God. They insist that he comes first and they honor him above anyone else.

Evangelicals claim to have a pure faith, clean from drink and nature worshipping. They generally are not criticized for the validity of their faith, but they are often work in opposition to the customs and history of the communities in which they operate. They are against ceremonies and celebrations for the most part because they believe that they put saint, drinking, and excess when they should be putting God first. These differences can be identified by most people in the community, but they do not cause intense social division, like they do in some other communities.

Sexton's comparative study of Panajachel and San Juan provide a possible explanation for this (1993). In Panajachel, the more Evangelical community there is was much greater division, whereas in San Juan there was less conflict between the two groups. In Panajachel there was more direct competition because the Evangelical population has reached a size at which their presence effected the Catholic congregation, but they were still not a unified group. In San Juan there was still such a Catholic majority that they could carry on much as they has previously. S.A. Xecul is more like the latter because 80% of the population remains Catholic, the Catholic Church can continue to function much as it has for centuries.

Evangelio

When Christians advocate conversion in S.A. Xecul they have to be calling for people to leave another faith because there is virtually no one who does not profess to one religion or another. Catholics frequently preach the importance of the *evangelio*, however they are not gaining converts from the Evangelicals or really winning any converts at all. However, they already are 80% of the population leaving them few people, except for recent converts to Evangelical sects to try to win back.

The Jehovah's Witnesses represent one of the smaller evangelical sects in Xecul, but they are representative of the way that evangelicalism is spreading through Xecul. The Xela congregation has been coming to Xecul for about ten years now. They now have a group that meets regularly on Tuesday evenings for Bible study and on Sunday afternoons for a service. The Xela congregation, in conjunction with the Xecul Jehovah's Witnesses, does a lot of door-to-door recruitment with the objective of reaching everyone in town. Most of the people who do door to door work and a combination of Guatemalans based in Xela and Americans also living in Xela.

There are a few speakers mounted on elevated wooden poles, which are used to broadcast Evangelical services during the week. The one near my house begins at 6.00am on Sunday morning. They also broadcast on Wednesday and Friday evenings. They feature a mix of singing and Bible passages followed by a sermon. This is a common practice among Evangelicals in other towns too (Carlsen 1997:15).

Costumbristas do not mount any formal attempt to recruit followers. *Costumbre* is something that has always been in the community and will continue as long as there are *sacerdotes*, however *costumbre* may die out as Evangelicals continue to win more power in the town. Despite the work of all Christian groups to win followers there is surprising little bitterness toward each other.

Conclusion

Everyone is passionate about their religion in S.A. Xecul, a sacerdote spent more than two hours explaining what it is to be a sacerdote after I told I made one simple inquiry. A Catholic gave me an hour lecture on the life of Jesus Christ followed by a full length feature film on the same subject. An Evangelical pastor introduced me to the congregation at the beginning of his sermon. However, people seem to keep their faith

more on a spiritual level that does not complicate inter-faith relations. Churches regularly fill up and people attend meetings on all days of the week.

In conclusion to his introduction to the various religion and religious conflicts of Santiago Atitlán Carlsen concludes that, “in short, on ecological, sociopolitical, and socioreligious grounds, recent existence in Santiago Atitlán has been, if not chaotic, certainly dysfunctional (1997:18).” This is far from the case in S.A. Xecul, where three religions co-exist with minimal conflict. So, why doesn't S.A. Xecul suffer the same way that other towns do?

S.A. Xecul has a high level of religious accommodation and tolerance inspired by incorporation of religious practices from the other groups. This is especially true between Catholics and costumbristas, who have negotiated a peaceful co-existence over the centuries. By now costumbristas could not easily remove all of the Catholic symbols that have been incorporated in their ceremonies, nor could the Catholic Church break its tacit agreement to permit the practice of costumbre without losing a significant portion of its membership. What has not a negotiated mutual co-existence is covered up by the dominance of the Catholic Church. Evangelicals are the newest addition to the religious mix in S.A. Xecul. They are changing the organization of the community, but they are not yet a large enough group to upset the balance. Celebrations for San Andreas still cover the town for days and *cofradías* freely parade through the streets. For now S.A. Xecul is a intensely religious without overt conflict, however the growing Evangelical population will at some point require the social-religious structure of the town to be renegotiated like is happening in Santiago Atitlán, Panajachel, and many other communities all over Guatemala where the roles of Catholicism, costumbre, or Evangelicals have radically shifted.

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