The Catholic church has had an impact on Maya culture since the sixteenth century. This can be seen in the churches it constructed in many Maya communities, the many saint images in them, the invocation of Jesus, Mary, and the saints in traditional Maya ceremonies, and the Maya insistence on the Catholic mass and the baptismal ceremony performed by a Catholic priest. The Maya incorporated these elements into their own worldview, with its distinctive concepts and logic, which changed their meanings from those of Catholic orthodoxy. At the same time, the Maya perceived that these imported Catholic elements still required the services of the Catholic priest, for reasons seen in the previous volume (Early 2006). This accounts for the continual Maya desire for his presence in their communities into the twentieth century.

The suppression of the church by liberal governments beginning in the nineteenth century resulted in the almost disappearance of priests from
Maya communities. With a change in the political climate, the church began to recover around the middle of the twentieth century and to reestablish its presence. But soon thereafter the Catholic worldview underwent changes that resulted in the church taking a more active role in Maya communities. To adequately understand Maya communities in this period, it is necessary to understand the presence and impact of Catholicism in them, regardless of one’s personal evaluation of that presence. This involves understanding the changing worldview of Catholicism, its presentation to the Maya, the Maya perceptions of it in terms of their own worldview, and the consequent communal actions resulting from these perceptions. This is the intent of this book.

The Questions of the Research

Both Maya culture and Catholicism are defined by their theologies as the foundations of their worldviews. Catholicism’s missionary activity has sought either to attract or to impose its worldview on those with different worldviews. Among the Maya, the consequent interaction has taken place for over four hundred years. The previous volume examined the topic from the early Spanish efforts to evangelize the Maya in the sixteenth century to the relationship in the early twentieth century. This volume continues the research for the Maya of Guatemala and Chiapas during the latter part of the twentieth century. The four main questions are: What were the conditions in Maya communities around the mid-twentieth century when the church returned to them? How did the Catholic Church present itself to the Maya then and in the following decades? How did the Maya perceive these presentations? What activities took place in Maya communities as a result of their perceptions?

To answer these questions, this research presents a synthetic view of the principal trends of the interaction during this period. It does not pretend to be a comprehensive historical work on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Maya in these areas. It takes an anthropological look at the dynamics of the interactions between two religious systems when incarnated in reality. This distinguishes an anthropological approach from that of systematic (dogmatic) theology that examines the formal characteristics of religious systems, abstracting from their insertion into reality. The research draws on and synthesizes the writer’s research as well as ethnographic and historical accounts of specific topics by others. The significance of individual events can be better understood when seen in a relational context and longitudinal perspective. As much as possible, the
Map 1. Ecclesiastical Structures of Chiapas and Guatemala—the three dioceses of Chiapas and the twenty-two departments of Guatemala that form the boundaries of two archdioceses, ten dioceses, and two apostolic vicariates. Beginning in the western part of the country, they are: 8 Huehuetenango; 17 San Marcos; 14 Quiché, with its three distinct geographical zones; 13 Quezaltenango and 21. Totonicapán (archdiocese); 15 Retalhuleu and 20 Suchitepequez; 19 Sololá and 3 Chimaltenango (single diocese); 1 Alta Verapaz and 2 Baja Verapaz (single diocese); 7 Guatemala and 16 Sacatepéquez (archdiocese); 6 Escuintla; 18 Santa Rosa; 10 Jalapa, and 5 El Progresso, and 11 Jutiapa (single diocese); 22 Zacapa and 4 Chiquimula (single diocese); 9 Izabal (a vicariate possibly prior to becoming a diocese); 12 Peten (a vicariate).
study uses quotations where Maya themselves speak about their actions and reactions.

**Outline of the Presentation**

The various parts of the book answer the four main questions. To understand Catholicism’s impact on Maya communities requires prior knowledge of these communities, especially their worldviews. Part II answers the question: What was the culture of Maya communities at mid-twentieth century? It is often described as a culture sunk in poverty. But it is necessary to understand how the Maya viewed their poverty, the causes of it, its structure, magnitude, and the resulting crisis as exemplified in the frontispiece. The rest of the book describes the efforts of both the Maya and the Catholic Church to overcome this crisis.

Part III poses the question: Around the mid-twentieth century, following the liberal suppressions of the Catholic Church, with what worldview did it return to Maya communities and how did the Maya first interpret it?

Part IV asks: In spite of the acceptance by some Maya of an orthodox Catholicism, what problems did they have with that worldview and what was the reaction of the Catholic Church? The problems were not restricted to the Maya, but systemic throughout Catholicism. This part looks at the theological evolution of Catholicism that took place at Vatican Council II, at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, and in local Maya dioceses that initiated Catholic Action and the liberation movement as an answer to the Maya crisis.

Since these movements were based on biblical theology, part V examines the Bible as a cultural document, and Maya reflections on it. It asks: How did biblical reflections help to raise Maya social consciousness and empower social action to confront their crisis?

Part VI inquires how this aroused social consciousness was a factor in some Maya Catholic communities engaging in armed insurrection against the Mexican and Guatemalan governments, even as other Catholic communities rejected this course of action.

Part VII examines the other direction of the Maya-Catholic interaction. What impact did the experience of working with the Maya during their crisis have on the worldviews of non-Maya Catholic priests and nuns?

Part VIII returns to another aspect of the Maya crisis: the doubts about the Maya traditional worldview raised by the subsistence aspect of the crisis. Given the persistence of the Maya worldview in the background of many Maya Catholics, this part looks at attempts to formulate a Maya
Christian theology based on the traditional Maya worldview. It would become the basis of an autochthonous Maya Catholic Church.

There is a rough chronology underlying these questions. The Maya crisis had been building for many years. Its results are examined as of 1950. The renewed presence of the Catholic Church began in the 1940s in Guatemala, and in the 1960s in Chiapas. Prior to and during this same period, a crisis had been building within institutional Catholicism itself that paralleled the Maya crisis. The institutional reaction to that crisis reached Guatemala in the late 1960s and 1970s, Chiapas in the 1970s and 1980s. The armed rebellion in Guatemala was a long, drawn-out conflict that reached its greatest intensity and Maya involvement in the late 1970s and first part of the 1980s. The short-lived insurgency in Chiapas took place in 1994. While the Teología India movement had its beginnings in the 1970s, the attention of the Maya and the church was focused on the pressing issues of social justice, so that the movement began to formalize only in the 1990s.

Catholicism was not the only alternative to which the Maya turned during their crisis. But it had a long history of contact with the Maya, and at the time of its renewed presence, it was the predominant alternative. While some Protestant groups had a presence among the Maya going back to the nineteenth century, their numbers were small. Later, especially after the 1976 earthquake, various evangelical groups entered the Maya area in force (Bogenschild 1992; Garrard-Burnett 1998). The same is true for other religious groups. In reaction against all types of missionary activity, some Maya intellectuals initiated the pan-Maya movement, a revitalization effort seeking to reestablish the traditional Maya worldview (Fischer and Brown 1996; Montejo 2002; Warren 1998, 2002). Except for an occasional mention, this research abstracts from these other alternatives in an effort to keep the task within manageable limits.

The Importance of Worldview

Like the previous volume, this research emphasizes worldviews and their evolutions. When dealing with problems of change of an indigenous group, there is a tendency to dwell on political and economic factors. These are seen as forcing change on a minority group, with little agency on their part. Analytically, this tendency looks at religious worldviews with Marxian glasses, as a passive superstructure determined by political and economic factors. This problem arose in the nineteenth-century studies of European culture stemming from the rise of capitalism. Marxian analyses explained its origins using an analytical model of economic and political factors. It
was presented as a comprehensive metaphysic, thereby excluding all other explanations. Max Weber saw this shortcoming and insisted on the importance of worldview as an additional important explanatory factor. To confirm this position, he produced his famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. There is a dialectical relationship between worldview and socioeconomic structure demanding that both receive attention.

A somewhat similar situation has arisen regarding studies of the Maya experience during the last half of the twentieth century. While the importance of political and economic factors can never be discounted, an analysis restricted to these factors alone has serious shortcomings (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). It downplays the agency of the Maya themselves and their worldview in determining how they react to the pressures confronting them. This study emphasizes worldview, while political and economic factors have been described at length by other writers. They will be referred to here only in summary form.