

Evangelical Proselytizing

*Missionaries, missionaries, go and leave us all alone . . .
We've got a God of our own.*

—Floyd Westerman, J. Curtiss

Throughout the Americas, fundamentalist Christian missionaries, often called evangelicals, have proselytized for many years among both rainforest tribal people and highland agricultural Indian communities. Their aggressive missionary work has had a widespread impact in the Amazon basin, the highlands of southern Mexico, western Guatemala, Ecuador, and around Lake Titicaca between Peru and Bolivia.

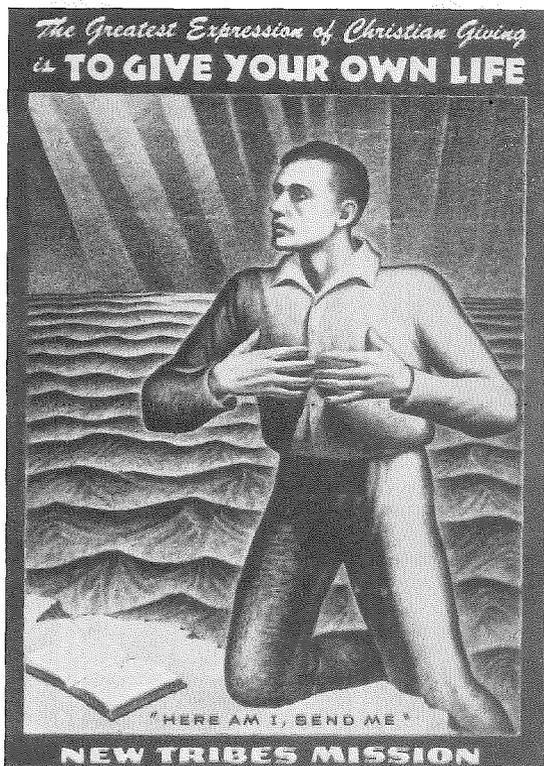
According to David Stoll, a North American who has conducted extensive research on evangelical proselytizing among Indian people, conservative Protestant missions have surpassed the Catholic Church in influence among many tribal people. By reaching the last and the smallest groups, evangelicals hope to fulfill a prophecy in the Christian bible and bring a second coming of Christ.

The misnamed Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), one of the largest of such evangelical organizations, has worked in 370 native languages in South and Central America. SIL, which raises funds in the United States under the name of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, has tried to

avoid opposition to its work by entering countries as linguistic scientists. It has secured contracts from national governments to conduct linguistic work and then proselytized among the communities to which it has gained access.

The more fundamentalist New Tribes Mission operates in 79 languages. It has often been criticized for its zeal in attracting nomadic hunter-gatherers to more settled lifestyles without protecting them from the consequences of cultural disruption. In recent years it has pursued contacts with Yuqui, Ayoreo, and Ache bands in Paraguay and Bolivia and with Macu and Jaarua in Colombia.

The legacy of evangelical missions is complicated. Many Indian organizations angrily reject them, tiring of their paternalism, of the pressure to adopt evangelical beliefs, and of the disparity in wealth between the missionaries and themselves. The conservatism of evangelical groups has often stood in the way of Indian communities defending their right to land and other resources. Yet, there is also an underlying basis of support for the missionaries in some communities. The missionaries are sometimes more reliable providers of schools and health clinics than governments, and where the Cath-



olic Church is allied with local elites against Indian interests the evangelicals sometimes provide welcome support. The following articles describe relations between evangelicals and Indian communities in various areas of South and Central America.

Ayoreo Deaths In Paraguayan Chaco

Late last year in Paraguay missionary activities of the New Tribes Mission caused conflict between Indians which resulted in five deaths and four injuries. According to *Hoy*, a major Paraguayan newspaper, a group of Ayoreo Indians who are a part of the New Tribes Faro Moro mission went into the forest in search of Totoviegosode, other Ayoreo Indians who have refused to abandon their traditional lifestyle. The Totoviegosode ambushed the New Tribes converts, resulting in deaths and injuries. News of the incident was first reported on the Mennonite radio station ZP30, which led other media in Paraguay to suspect that the Mennonites, large landowners with a history of antagonism to Indian people, had distorted the news to protect New Tribes proselytizing.

A Catholic priest in the area, Father José Sanardini, blamed the New Tribes Mission for the deaths of the Ayoreo. He said, "It is possible that there is a relationship between the New Tribes missionaries and large landowners who covet land where the Totoviegosode live."

According to a report by the Ayoreo Project, which is sponsored by the Indigenist Association of Paraguay, missionaries first contacted the Ayoreo Indians in 1967. In addition to bibles, they also supplied rifles and traps, encouraging the Indians to become professional hunters. The missionaries acted as middlemen in charge of the commercialization of skins and administrators of the income generated from the project.

By 1971 Ayoreo people had begun approaching the Mennonite settlements in the Chaco in search of work, marking the transition from independent life to rural workers. By 1974 it was no longer possible to make a living from hunting and more Indians became wage laborers subjected to low pay and subhuman treatment.

Project Ayoreo provided the following description of the area on the periphery of Filadelfia where some Ayoreo live: "The place has no shelter and no bathrooms. During the summer thousands of flies accumulate around the encampment, and during the winter the Indians sit very close to each other by the fire and cough all night long.

"In the mission itself, the missionaries practice a simple plan. They force the Indians to obey a rigid work discipline. They cannot rest before the day ends. They cannot drink *tereré* [a traditional tea] during work hours. The routine is reinforced with biblical readings about sobriety, hard work, family, and property in order to make them work harder for the bosses."

