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Published in:
Religions

DOI:
[10.3390/rel14121520](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121520)

Published: 08/12/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bom, K. L., & Monroy Soto, J. E. (2023). Juan Sepulveda and the understanding of the syncretic characteristics of Latin American Pentecostalism. the case of classical Pentecostalism in Guatemala. *Religions*, 14(12), Article 1520. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121520>

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Article

Juan Sepulveda and the Understanding of the Syncretic Characteristics of Latin American Pentecostalism: The Case of Classical Pentecostalism in Guatemala

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Abstract: This article presents the case of Guatemalan Pentecostalism as a highly relevant expression of Latin American Pentecostalism that helps to clarify the debate about the syncretic nature of Pentecostalism. We use the Guatemalan case to test the thesis of Juan Sepúlveda, a Chilean Pentecostal historian and theologian, who explains the success of Latin American Pentecostalism in light of its syncretic character. His argument about the syncretic character of Pentecostalism is based on the Chilean case. Paying attention to its historical development, we present Guatemalan Pentecostal theology in relation to traditional Mayan culture and religion and in relation to popular Catholicism and traditional Latin American Protestantism. Specific attention is paid to the espoused theology of Pentecostal pastors as they provide an account of indigenous Pentecostals' lived faith. Finally, we answer the question: Does Juan Sepulveda's approach (still) provide an adequate framework for the theological assessment of possible syncretic characteristics of (Latin American) Pentecostalism? The Guatemalan case indicates ways to improve certain limitations of Sepúlveda's approach, such as its static understanding of culture and its exclusion of the theological understanding of syncretism.

Keywords: syncretism; Latin American Pentecostalism; Pentecostalism; Latin American; Juan Sepulveda; Guatemala



Citation: Bom, Klaas, and Jonán Monroy-Soto. 2023. Juan Sepulveda and the Understanding of the Syncretic Characteristics of Latin American Pentecostalism: The Case of Classical Pentecostalism in Guatemala. *Religions* 14: 1520. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121520>

Academic Editors: Marius Nel and Mookgo Solomon Kgatle

Received: 20 November 2023
Revised: 5 December 2023
Accepted: 6 December 2023
Published: 8 December 2023



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1. Introduction

Researching syncretic characteristics of Pentecostalism is a delicate enterprise. Despite many scholarly attempts to relativize the concept of syncretism, many Pentecostals worldwide (still) alarmingly associate it with idolatry. In this article, we focus on Latin American Pentecostalism and the perspective of the Chilean theologian, Juan Sepulveda, on its relationship to its cultural context. Sepulveda was one of the first, and probably the most influential, Pentecostal theologians from the continent to argue in favor of a proper cultural contextual understanding of Pentecostalism, in his case Chilean Pentecostalism. He, with the help of the theology of Paul Tillich, formulated a general 'Pentecostal principle' in relation to cultural embeddedness. Here, we first critically assess Sepulveda's approach by examining its theological core and its consequences in relation to understanding the syncretic characteristics of (Latin American) Pentecostalism. Subsequently, we will present another Latin American case, Guatemalan Pentecostalism, to see if Sepulveda's approach is helpful for understanding its relationship with traditional Maya culture. In the final section, we draw conclusions and answer the central question of our article: Does Juan Sepulveda's approach (still) provide an adequate framework for the theological assessment of possible syncretic characteristics of (Latin American) Pentecostalism?

However, before turning to Sepulveda's work, we need to be more specific about syncretism in relation to Pentecostalism. Anthropologically, the globalization of Pentecostalism is related to indigenization and homogenization. Following Joel Robbins, the first refers to its ability to adapt to contexts, while the second refers to the replication of

Pentecostal doctrines, rituals, etc. (Robbins 2004, pp. 117–18). This does not mean that indigenization is unrelated to doctrines, rituals, or the like. Robbins himself gave many examples of how indigenization among the Urapmin includes rituals and is directedly related to doctrinal issues (See for example (Robbins 2017, pp. 29–52)). We link what is called indigenization to discussion about syncretism in Religious Studies. According to Kurt Rudolph, Gerardus van der Leeuw's use of syncretism was very influential for the modern conceptualization of syncretism. Van der Leeuw's approach is mainly historical, and from his perspective all religions are syncretic: "Every historical religion is not one, but several; of course, not in the way that it could be the sum of its different forms, but rather in that the different forms have grown together into this form". Van der Leeuw mainly understands syncretism as a "transposition", that is "a change in the meaning of a manifestation in the dynamics of religions, whereby the form remains the same" (Rudolph 2016, second page part 2). Rudolph underscores a new development in Hendrik Kraemer's elaboration of syncretism. Kraemer argues that the "'unconscious', historically conditioned syncretism of all world religions is to be distinguished from those consciously open to the amalgamating syncretism of 'paganism'" (Rudolph 2016). According to Rudolph, Kraemer "revived the old theological usage of syncretism in the service of apologetics" (Rudolph 2016). Although much more should be said about this discussion and its further development, the distinction between a historical perspective and a more specifically theologically informed understanding of syncretism offers an important lens for the study of Sepulveda's perspective and the broader debate on syncretism and Pentecostalism.

2. Sepulveda's Understanding of the Syncretic Nature of (Latin American) Pentecostalism

Juan Sepulveda is a Chilean Pentecostal theologian. Since the 1990s, he has substantially contributed to the study of Pentecostalism with articles and books, mainly in English and Spanish. His PhD thesis presents his most elaborated case studies concerning syncretism in Latin American Pentecostalism. These case studies of Pentecostal engagement with the Mapuche (in the central south-eastern part of Chile and Argentina) and the Aymara (in the northern part of the country) provide opportunities to discuss how Pentecostal missions relate to mainline Protestant ideas about syncretism, as reflected in the work of the traditional protestant missions in Latin America. He argues convincingly that "anti-syncretism has been a central motivation for the presence of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 347). The Evangelical mission was, and sometimes still is, justified by the understanding of popular Roman Catholicism in Latin America as deeply syncretic: "In affirmative terms, this motivation expresses itself in the calling to present to the Latin American people the 'pure' Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 348).¹ However, according to Sepulveda's analysis, the evangelical justification of such missions hides its own syncretistic character. Here, Sepulveda refers to unarticulated presuppositions of (mainly) North American cultural values such as rationality, education, and democracy, which are implied in this evangelical understanding of the Gospel (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 349). Sepulveda also mentions the theological influence of the theology of Karl Barth, for example through Kraemer, on this idea of 'purity' (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, pp. 355, 361).²

According to Sepulveda, the Pentecostal missions to the Aymara and the Mapuche show that this idea does not dominate the Pentecostal engagements with those communities. For example, in the Aymara case, understanding of the Bible does not appear to be dominated by the idea of (Western) rationality. Instead, it underlines the role of the local community in the acceptance of the pastor and therefore the understanding of the gospel. Sepulveda argues that the first steps of Pentecostalism in Chile show that the Pentecostals transmitted the Christian faith in the *mestizo* popular culture in such a way that it was "made almost unrecognizable for missionary Protestantism. A new form of syncretism had been born... and further changes occurred when it reached the heart of the ethnic minorities" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 364).

In further elaboration of his perspective, Sepulveda argues that syncretism is part of human existence, and it is therefore crucial to learn how to live with it. As Rudolph, he distinguishes between a descriptive understanding of syncretism in the history of religion and a theological understanding which is in the twentieth century and is especially expressed by two Dutch Protestant theologians influenced by Karl Barth, the already mentioned Hendrik Kraemer and Visser't Hooft (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 374). Sepulveda presents a critical evaluation of this theological understanding. He rejects the 'narrow' definition of syncretism as a "deliberate and illegitimate mingling of religious belief or practices" put forward by Kraemer and Visser't Hooft as a typical "idealistic approach of Religion as its development was totally unrelated to the wider historical and cultural processes" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, pp. 384–85). Sepulveda suggests a different understanding of syncretism, from a cultural perspective in which the human being is understood as a meaning maker. What he calls the syncretic process is the building of a new identity in a specific socio-historical crossroad situation. This is not merely a religious endeavor, he argues, "but involves the whole of culture" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 389). Sepulveda pleads for a theological (and thus normative) evaluation "once a concrete case of syncretistic process had been analyzed as objectively as possible". However, such an evaluation cannot be made from an absolute standpoint because God has his own way "to speak to each human community fully in its own particularity. Also, "because we have received the Gospel through a long-lasting process of translation, that is through the many steps of a long syncretistic process. Therefore, there are no absolute criteria for evaluation". He defends the use of the term syncretism because it "makes us aware of the cultural condition of our own presuppositions" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, pp. 395–96).

The theological core of this understanding of syncretism is based on Sepulveda's understanding of the Incarnation: "Incarnation is the biggest syncretistic event ever" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, pp. 389, 395). Here, Erasmus' understanding of 'syncretic' as the ability to adopt many roles appears foundational: "Erasmus, therefore, discovered the 'uniqueness' of the Christian faith, as it were, in the fact that the ineffable nature of God the father is revealed, but at the same time hidden, in the particularity of the roles by Christ" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 415). Therefore, according to Sepulveda, the claim of absoluteness of 'the way' of Jesus, and, consequently, any (cultural) form of Christian faith, lacks firm ground because the presence of God always stays hidden. "The language of Incarnation, however, allows for the disruption of the supposedly 'natural' development of things; it allows for the possibility of God's intervention in history, of change, of the unexpected, of transformation" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 420). However, this implies that there is no complete apprehension of "'the thing in itself' (. . .) Revelation does not overcome our being *naturaliter syncretista*, our syncretic condition" (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 428). Sepulveda's understanding of the Incarnation motif appears to be dominated by the ideas of revelation and knowledge. He focuses on the negation of the unmediated access to God and argues that we are in a constant process of interpretation and discernment. According to Sepulveda, this means that the New-testamentary 'Christocentrism' is the key to a Theocentric theology of creation and the pneumatologically understanding of God's work in creation and the world's religions (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, pp. 421–29).

This understanding of a human being as *naturaliter* syncretical is used by Sepulveda to resist the claims of (knowledge of) absolute truth in theology and the Christian faith, especially those from Western Christianity. Sepulveda presents his resistance as typical of a Pentecostal approach in his article about what he calls the Pentecostal Principle. In this text, he is in search for "the profoundest meaning" of "modern Pentecostalism" (Sepulveda 2003, pp. 13–28). Analogously to Tillich's Protestant principle, formulated as a rejection of the absolutization of any institutional or political mediation of Christian faith, Sepulveda argues for the rejection of any cultural absolutization of the Christian faith as the Pentecostal principle (Sepulveda 2003, p. 14).³ In the development of his argument, Sepulveda put this hypothesis to the test with a study on the origins of Chilean Pentecostalism. However, Sepulveda's test appears to be a complex one. The key players in Sepulveda's historical

reconstruction are North American Methodist missionaries, and the main agent in the beginnings of Chilean Pentecostalism, William Hoover, was not someone who facilitated the indigenization of the church. Additionally, the most prominent explanation for the change in the North American missionary engagement that contributed substantially to the birth of Chilean Pentecostalism is rooted in the changing social reality of the Methodist Church in the United States of America (Sepulveda 2003, pp. 22, 25). Notwithstanding this historical situation, Sepulveda argues that the practices of the revival that brought the Chilean Pentecostal churches into being support his claim that the North American cultural clothing of the gospel was clearly rejected by this initiating movement of churches. This opened the door to including more elements from popular Chilean culture in these churches, as is testified by the missions among the Aymara and the Mapuche mentioned above. Therefore, the Pentecostal practices show the rupture away from the dominance of the principles of Anglo-Saxon missions and from the absolutization of the North American cultural dominance in Chilean Protestantism (Sepulveda 2003, pp. 25–28).

Assessment of Sepulveda's Approach

Sepulveda would be the first to admit that his understanding of syncretism should be assessed from its contextual situation. We mention some of these contextual influences without denying the originality of Sepulveda's work. We start with his PhD thesis at the faculty of Theology at the University of Birmingham where Sepulveda obtained his doctorate. The understanding of Intercultural Theology and its background in German theology and philosophy, as developed by his supervisor Ustorf and Pentecostal Studies pioneer Hollenweger, marks this understanding of syncretism. As Werner Ustorf himself argues (Ustorf 2011), their understanding of Intercultural theology is a Western project, and it has its roots in typical Western, sometimes even German debates (See also (Benno van den Toren 2015)). In Sepulveda's case, this is evidenced by the priority given to anthropology and culture in the understanding of syncretism. Hollenweger's emphasis on the origins of Pentecostalism as the revelation of its theological core is directly taken up in Sepulveda's article on the Pentecostal principal. The necessity of mediation, which Sepulveda maintains, is linked with the typical European or Western modern epistemological conviction of the impossibility of direct access to the source of knowledge. On the other side, Sepulveda also connects naturally to Latin American liberation theology, with a similar background in European epistemological theories and the prioritization of the social reality. The way the priority is given to the anthropological in Sepulveda's thesis makes it clear that the theological is built upon a social scientific understanding of culture and human beings as the meaning maker. The dominance of Western theories also comes to the fore in the role that the case studies play in his entire dissertation. The interesting studies of Pentecostal engagement with the Aymara and Mapuche people make it clear how what Sepulveda sees as syncretism works out in these indigenous Pentecostalism. However, these case studies do not contribute to the chapters about the conceptualization and the theological understanding of syncretism. Therefore, understanding indigenous Pentecostalism is dependent on the hermeneutical and normative frameworks from the West.

Sepulveda found the theological understanding of syncretism, as "helping the Gospel to become flesh for the Greek, for the Roman, and so on", in Erasmus' understanding of the transmission of the Gospel (Sepulveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 423). From this perspective, Sepulveda builds a second layer on the first layer of the above-mentioned understandings from modern Western epistemology and the priority of social sciences, e.g., anthropology. Theology comes in when the dominance of cultural perspective is accepted, which of course implies that knowledge of God itself is culturally mediated. Syncretism is made essential to human beings as a consequence of its foundational understanding of humans as meaning makers. However, the foundational idea of (cultural) mediation is theological in itself. Denying all 'direct access' to God, and making mediation a (creational) necessity, seems more typical for a Thomist or Kantian approach than for a typical Protestant or Pentecostal one. In traditional Protestantism Scripture is certainly a privileged place to hear God's

voice. This is confirmed and strengthened in Pentecostalism, where the Spirit is not only heard but also felt in the body and experienced in Spirit baptism, divine healing, and so on. It seems that Sepúlveda's rejection of absolute claims about truth and God, by making cultural mediation foundational, results in a conflict with the characteristic 'directness' of communication with God as lived by many Pentecostals. Sepúlveda's preference for traditions, etc., seems at odds with the strong emphasis on experiences by Pentecostals. The next section on Guatemalan classical Pentecostalism, and the theological perspective of the lived faith of indigenous Pentecostals by some of their pastors, should clarify if Sepúlveda's approach is helpful for a theological understanding of it.

3. The Case of Guatemalan Pentecostalism

The beginnings of Latin American Pentecostalism are associated with the revivals in Chile and Argentina in 1909 and in Brazil in 1910. Its exponential growth has attracted the interest of scholars who have proposed reasons for its success. In the emerging field of Pentecostal Studies, sociologist Emilio Willems, attending to the Brazilian case, was one of the first to pay attention to Latin American Pentecostalism. Willems focused on the transition and adaptation from rural to urban and modern life (Willems 1967). Christian Lalive d'Epinay painted Pentecostalism as a refuge for the masses that allows them to live in a new society and thus overcome a state of social anomie (Lalive d'Epinay 1969). In the early nineties, David Martin argued that Pentecostalism functions as an entry strategy for neoliberal economies in Latin America (Martin 1990). Theologically, Walter Hollenweger, who dedicated much of his career to the study of global Pentecostalism in Brazil, Mexico, and Chile, is the most outstanding pioneer. He concluded that Pentecostalism expresses its theology through orality, songs, dances, and emotions and that its growth is closely related to the influence of traditional African religion in Pentecostalism (Hollenweger 1972; Hollenweger 1997, p. 1).⁴ With cultural and religious perspectives, Sepúlveda continues in the line of Hollenweger and argues that Pentecostalism in Chile took advantage of the cultural mix of indigenous peoples (Sepúlveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 192). In short, for more general perspectives on Latin America, Pentecostal studies have paid attention to the cases of Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. Alongside this broad spectrum, the study of Guatemalan Pentecostalism can contribute to the understanding of Latin American Pentecostalism.

3.1. Arrival of Christianity in Guatemala

With the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese in Latin America, Catholicism established itself as the hegemonic religion of the conquerors and the conquered. The conquerors not only brought a new religion but also a new language and culture. Put briefly, it was a new way of living. In Guatemala, Catholicism maintained a monopoly on the 'religious market' (Chestnut 2003, pp. 55–85; Chestnut 2010, pp. 91–103) during the colonial era (1524–1824). However, the establishment of Catholicism did not mean the eradication of indigenous culture and religion but rather the adaptation of traditional religion with catholic wrapping. In the words of Pentecostal scholar Nestor Medina, a "mixture of symbols and practices containing indigenous Mayan and Western European Christian religious elements" (Medina 2017, p. 2).

According to Andrea Althoff, the colonial Catholic Church was not interested in converting the indigenous people. A real understanding of the Catholic faith and the transformation of the lives of the indigenous people was not essential. What was essential was the establishment of its spiritual and economic monopoly in favor of the rich Spanish and non-indigenous people at the expense of the indigenous (Althoff 2014, p. 56). However, Althoff's harsh and general judgement does not consider the alternative approaches of missionaries like Bartolomé de las Casas. Nevertheless, specifically in Guatemala, the scarcity of Catholic services in indigenous communities led to a popular Mayan Catholicism that combined Catholic teachings with popular indigenous religiosity. McCleary and Pesina show how the so-called *cofradías*, religious brotherhoods instituted to maintain Catholic rituals and buildings, also played a fundamental role in the preservation, revival, and

expansion of the Mayan-Catholic religion through the planning and financial support of the festivities of the patron saint and the main Christian celebrations. An example of this is the worship of Maximón or San Simón, a festival celebrated on the Day of the Dead (el Día de los Muertos) and Mayan celebrations.⁵ In summary, the *cofradías* have fostered and maintained a mixed popular religion (McCleary and Pesina 2011, p. 1; Althoff 2014, p. 327).

The hegemony of Catholicism in Guatemala was severely affected by the arrival of Protestant missions. In 1873, the Congress of the Republic issued a decree that allowed religious freedom. This policy, along with others established by the liberal government of General Justo Rufino Barrios, sought to open the country to international investment and the arrival of European and North American immigrants. By promoting religious freedom, immigrants could practice their faith, build temples, establish social projects, and thus contribute to the country's modernization (Dary 2019, p. 87). Barrios was convinced that the Catholic Church was guilty of the economic and cultural tardiness that Guatemala was suffering. To achieve progress, breaking the hegemony of Catholicism was mandatory (Martin 1990, p. 91). However, Barrios also wanted to gain control over the indigenous communities of the west (Garrard-Burnett 1989, pp. 127–42). Barrios promoted the arrival of the Presbyterian Church (1882), and this mission was later followed by the Central American mission (1896), the Nazarenes (1901), the Society of Friends or Quakers (1902), and the Primitive Methodists (1921) (Zapata 1982, p. 101; Garrard-Burnett 2009, pp. 37, 50; Medina 2017, p. 2). However, although the institutional and social power of the Roman Catholic Church was affected by the entry of Protestantism, its hegemony in Guatemalan society is, for a substantial part, still in place until today.⁶

3.2. Rise of Pentecostalism

On 15 November 1916, missionaries Charles Furman and Thomas Pullin arrived in Guatemala under the sponsorship of the United Free Gospel and Missionary Society of Pennsylvania. They joined Alberto Hines and his wife, independent Pentecostal missionaries who went to Guatemala in 1910 (Garrard-Burnett 2009, p. 67; Zapata 1982, p. 126). Due to a missionary agreement to distribute geographic space for missions and maintain respect between Protestant missions, potential Pentecostal missionaries could not establish churches in the east of the country, only in the west: the indigenous and mountainous region of the country. The traditional Protestant missions focused on the upper-middle-class Ladino society, while the Pentecostal missionaries dedicated themselves to the indigenous people of the west who were socially and culturally marginalized, poor, and working class (Garrard-Burnett 2009, pp. 55, 67–69). Pentecostalism therefore established a new Christian engagement with Maya tradition in the country. In 1921, during a vacation and promotional trip in the United States, Furman stopped being a missionary of the Missionary Society due to financial problems. He returned to Guatemala as a missionary of the Primitive Methodist Church (Zapata 1982, pp. 101, 126).

A proper Pentecostal revival took place on Wednesday, 13 April 1932 when the Methodist church of Totonicapán, a city in the west led by Charles Furman, lived the typical Pentecostal experience called 'Baptism in the Spirit' accompanied by bodily signs such as speaking in tongues, dances, tears, groans, healings, and more (Zapata 1982, pp. 126–27; Garrard-Burnett 2009, p. 69). Virginia Garrard-Burnett recognized Furman's role in the revival by introducing Pentecostal practices to Methodist meetings, specifically speaking in tongues and faith healing (Garrard-Burnett 2009, p. 69). Marcos Son, a witness to the revival, described that the people in Totonicapán, accustomed to quietness, were shaken by the supernatural phenomena that accompanied the Holy Spirit on his descent that night; the believers danced and spoke in tongues, glorifying God (Marcos Son Turnil n.d., p. 20; Zapata 1982, p. 127).

The revival spread throughout the villages and towns in the western region, resulting in the establishment of several churches. Between 1921 and 1935, Furman and Pullin established seventeen churches, of which seven had indigenous pastors. Including indigenous people in pastoral work was novel since none of the other Protestant churches

allowed indigenous people to occupy that leadership position (Garrard-Burnett 2009, p. 71). Despite the growth of the Methodist churches led by Furman and Pullin, the experience of Spirit baptism and its bodily signs did not please the Primitive Methodist mission in the United States. The mission required Furman to sign an agreement to stop preaching Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues. Instead of signing, Furman resigned from the Methodist mission in September 1934 (Garrard-Burnett 2009, p. 69). A month later, Furman joined a small American Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God of Cleveland, TN. Shortly after his resignation, fourteen Methodist congregations that had experienced the Holy Spirit revival joined the Church of God (Zapata 1982, p. 127). These were the beginnings of the Full Gospel Church of God of Guatemala, the first Pentecostal denomination in the country. With the rise of Guatemalan Pentecostalism, and the arrival of the Church of God, more Pentecostal denominations came to the country. Currently, the Church of God and the Assemblies of God are the largest classical Pentecostal denominations in the country. They have established biblical and theological education seminars for their ministers, social aid centers such as orphanages, and other social programs. Pentecostalism in Guatemala emerged in peripheral and indigenous contexts that required tenacity in a suffering, demoralized, and economically and politically underdeveloped society (Wilson 1998, p. 145).

It is also worth mentioning that along with the classical Pentecostal denominations such as the Church of God and Assemblies of God, Guatemalan Pentecostalism also includes the (1) Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (CCR) that emerged in 1973 as the result of charismatic retreats led by Father Harold Cohen in Guatemala City (Thorsen 2016, p. 215). The CCR achieved official approval in 1986 but with caveats due to its fundamentalist reading of the Bible and the display of excessive emotions (Thorsen 2016, pp. 215–17). And (2) the neo-Pentecostal churches, which emerged in 1959 following the division of established Protestant churches and the sponsorship of neo-Pentecostal agencies from the United States (Althoff 2014, pp. 279–95; Zapata 1982, p. 160). Finally, the research on religion in Latin America conducted by Pew has demonstrated that Guatemala is one of the Latin American countries with the highest rate of Christians (Pew Research Center 2014). According to *Prensa Libre*, a well-known national newspaper, the population is 45% Catholic and 42% Evangelical, specifically Protestant Christians, mainly Pentecostals (Dary 2019, p. 86; Thorsen 2016, p. 217). Pentecostalism, in its three waves, is strong in many churches and believers.

3.3. Practices and Beliefs of Indigenous Guatemalan Pentecostals

When explaining the popularity of Pentecostalism among the indigenous population in Guatemala, Garrard-Burnett offers two reasons: autonomy in leadership and worship. Such autonomy was not only reflected in indigenous pastors, but each congregation could define its methods of worship, music, and, to a certain extent, its theology as long as it seemed to remain within the dictates of the Spirit (Garrard-Burnett 2009, pp. 72–73). This autonomy confirmed that cultural adaptation was encouraged within the first Pentecostal churches. Anthropologist Claudia Dary also considers “syncretism and cultural parallelism” to be reasons for the growth of Guatemalan Pentecostalism. For Dary, the emotional expression of Pentecostal services is similar to that of popular Catholicism. She quotes Richard Waldrop, a missionary for the Church of God in Guatemala, saying that Pentecostal worship meets physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. It is no coincidence that Pentecostalism is strong among the indigenous communities in the west of the country (Dary 2019, p. 90). We now focus on some practices and beliefs of indigenous Pentecostals.

In order to deepen knowledge of what Dary calls syncretism, we turn to some of the interviews from our large-scale research among indigenous Pentecostals from western Guatemala (Monroy-Soto 2021).⁷ Since we are specifically interested in the espoused theology (Cameron et al. 2010, pp. 53–56) of Pentecostal churches, we focus on three pastors as they provide an account of indigenous Pentecostals’ lived faith. We bring them into the discussion to help clarify the theological aspect of Sepulveda’s approach. Do they

perceive so-called syncretic practices and how do they evaluate them? The following is a report of three semi-structured interviews with three *Mayan K'iche* (young pastors) of the Church of God who work in the west of the country among indigenous Pentecostal churches and communities. Their names are Denilson Hernández, Emerson Elias, and Elías Ajanel. Denilson is a coordinator of the Department of Mission and Evangelism in the region of Quetzaltenango. He oversees local church planting efforts. Emerson is a pastor in a local church in a village called El Rodeo near the city of Quetzaltenango. Elías is an assistant pastor in two local K'iche churches and is planting a church in the Ixil community in the region of Quiché.⁸

Concerning the practices of indigenous Pentecostals, Denilson says that in Cajolá, a community composed of the *Mam* ethnic group, it is customary to find bags with water placed at the doors of houses. He explains that believers do it to “prevent evil spirits from entering their homes”. Although the church in Cajolá has taught that it is mandatory to stop this practice, Pentecostal believers argue that quitting the practice would strip away their own indigenous identity. Denilson explains that the Pentecostal believers of Cajolá maintain this practice at home while attending Pentecostal services to worship God. Emerson, pastor of a local church consisting of Ladinos and Maya K'iches, mentions the practice of placing flowers on the altar. While believers argue that the flowers are to make the temple beautiful, he sees it as a “practice with indigenous roots mixed with Catholicism”. The use of flowers would have passed from indigenous Mayan religions to popular Catholicism and would then have found a place in indigenous Pentecostalism. This makes sense since, as stated above, Protestantism has been scarce in the indigenous western region. Rebeca Son, a witness to the Pentecostal revival in Totonicapán, says that “the Pentecostal believers of indigenous race came from the Catholicism that dominated the region” (Monroy-Soto 2021, p. 86).

Denilson also mentioned the services that Pentecostal believers conduct in the mountains. A well-known mountain is the *burned hill*, where Pentecostals conduct worship services. When Denilson asked why they worship God on the hill, they responded: “We have encountered God on the hill through healings and liberations”. This response refers to a real encounter with God through their experience in nature. They buy flowers and then climb the mountain to give them as an offering to thank God. Denilson finds a parallel with the Mayan religion. Mayan priests also climb other mountains, such as the mountain and lake called *Xicabal*, and carry flowers to worship the gods of water and nature. Denilson states, “While the Mayan ancestors worship the gods using flowers, in the same way, the Pentecostals climbed the mountains carrying flowers to worship God”. For Denilson, this reflects the indigenous belief that divinity dwells in nature. The use of flowers is also present among the Ixil ethnic group. Elías describes Ixil believers praying with a bunch of flowers in their hands “because they believe that flowers have power”. They also have the custom of praying for healing while sprinkling flower petals on the sick. In this case, flowers are a concrete means to make God’s healing power present through contact with the flowers. Elías expresses some astonishment (or uneasiness?) when explaining that Pentecostal believers usually fast for three days. They fast for the first two days in the evangelical Pentecostal temple, but then spend the third in the Catholic temple. When asked why they fast in the Catholic temple on the third day, Elías responded: “They say that the Catholic temple is the house of God; it has power because God is there”. Elías identifies this as syncretism. According to him, these mixed practices and beliefs make discipleship with new converts complicated, and it slows down the evangelizing mission.

Concerning beliefs, for Denilson the believers of Cajolá are aware of the existence of the spiritual world and affirm it by placing a bag of water at the doors of their houses. Emerson says that both in the church which he pastors in San Carlos Sija and in the church of Olindepeque, where he was converted to Pentecostalism, Pentecostal believers encourage respect and value for nature. This makes sense since most of them “are farmers and also because nature provides wood for the fire”. This reflects the Mayan belief that God (gods) gives nature to human beings for their benefit (Morales 2010, p. 289). Elías mentions

the personal struggles that the Ixiles have in Quiché. According to him, the Ixiles “have personal fights with the devil to cast him out of their lives, their homes, and even the streets”. In doing this, they affirm their belief in the spiritual and in its intervention in the material world. Elías goes beyond description to offer a critical evaluation. To Elías, indigenous Pentecostalism in Quiché is “syncretic and ecumenical because, in addition to the heritage of the Mayan religion, they organize prayer groups among Pentecostals, Catholics, and charismatics”.

This makes it clear that Guatemalan Pentecostalism has roots in a mixture of the traditional Mayan religion and popular Catholicism. The pastors’ espoused theology reflects three crucial elements. In the first place, at a cultural level the pastors accept the (indigenous) culture of the people involved. They understand the typical forms and expressions, such as the use of water, flowers, and mountain cults, as being intimately linked to the indigenous Pentecostals’ cultural identity. While Denilson and Emerson do not offer an explicit theological evaluation, they do take seriously the views of indigenous Pentecostals who claim, for example, that God is on the mountain. They do not see these practices and beliefs as a danger or threat but rather as a cultural expression of the fact that God is present. This implies a Christianization of these practices to worship the Christian God. Therefore, this cultural acceptance results, secondly, in a favorable theological judgment. The pastors recognize the genuineness of indigenous Pentecostals’ cultural practices and beliefs since the former do not criticize the latter’s perception of God in nature as pantheistic or animistic. Instead, the pastors recognize that indigenous Pentecostals have real encounters with God through their practices and beliefs. Therefore, they do not understand believers’ experiences as only or merely cultural but also, and mainly, as theological. Although this second step is not very explicit, it is a crucial element of their espoused theology. Its importance comes to the fore when it is compared to Sepúlveda’s presentation of the missionary perspective that rejects indigenous culture. The pastors’ perspective shows they link culture and theology by the way they handle this issue. The espoused theology also bears a third and critical element. Elías expresses a less affirmative judgment when he criticizes the cultural expression of indigenous Pentecostals as syncretic. He perceives their practices and beliefs as obstacles to growing in Christian faith (discipleship). This implies that he recognizes indigenous believers as Pentecostal Christians and accepts their entrance as sisters and brothers in the community of faith. However, it is important to notice that Elías’ criticism is provoked by the use of the Roman Catholic church and the claim that this is the house of God. Elías’ criticism shows the typical evangelical uneasiness with what is seen as the syncretic dimension of Roman Catholicism and his desire for the change in Pentecostal believers through discipleship. This links to Robbins’ opinion that transformation and cultural change are proper to the way Christian faith is appropriated, specifically in Pentecostalism (Robbins 2017). We therefore conclude that the pastors offer some important keys to understanding the way in which they deal with cultural and theological questions related to the indigenous Pentecostals. Their espoused theology shows acceptance of cultural identity and their theological appreciation of it without denying the importance of cultural transformation.

4. Conclusions

The above allows us to enter into dialogue with Sepúlveda’s approach on the cultural and theological. First, concerning culture, Sepúlveda rejects the idea of the existence of a pure gospel, indicating that all ‘incarnations’ of the gospel are cultural. In the article about the Pentecostal principle, it becomes clear that from Sepúlveda’s perspective the pure culture option for Latin American Pentecostalism is specifically represented by the perspective of Northern American protestant mission. However, in the Guatemalan case another cultural reality appears to be dominant: that of popular Roman Catholicism. This helps us understand that Sepúlveda’s focus concerning culture is dominated by the Northern American missionary ‘gaze’. The espoused theology of the Guatemalan pastors show that this gaze is not decisive (anymore?) for their theological evaluation of the indigenous

Pentecostals, even when these pastors are part of the classical Pentecostal Church of God denomination, with strong roots in Cleveland Tennessee. Strangely enough, popular Roman Catholicism does not play a major role in Sepúlveda's cultural analysis. However, given the religious context in most Latin American situations the idea of Latin American Creole Pentecostalism should not be limited to the indigenous aspect; it should include the popular Catholic element as well. Therefore, when exploring contextual theology in Latin America, it is mandatory to consider both the indigenous and the Catholic and their complex interconnections (See for example [Rösing \(2006\)](#)). Opening up Sepúlveda's somewhat closed horizon of protestant missions not only implies that Latin American Pentecostalism should be seen as part of a broader inner Christian ecumenical discussion, but also helps us acknowledge that once the idea of a pure culture has been left behind, there is still a cultural question to be answered. Recognizing the cultural characteristics of every representation of the Christian faith is just the beginning of a quest to relate to what Sepúlveda would call the different culturally mediated forms of Christian faith.

Anthropologist Joel Robbins can be of help here. When discussing the relationship between Christian conversion and cultural change, [Robbins \(2017\)](#) explains the change in the understanding of the concept of culture from a modern to a postmodern understanding of culture. The first is focused on the continuing character, that which endures through time, while the postmodern approach understands culture as subject to changes.⁹ Robbins presents a version of culture that emphasizes the cultural values that organize other elements and shape the lives of those who belong to that culture. Using the case of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, Robbins argues that while Christian conversion implies radical cultural change, it is also true that previous traditional elements still persist in the Urapmin experience. This leads him to propose that Christianity is a secondary culture since it comes into tension with the previous culture of its converts. This establishes a duplex cultural formation that explains the coexistence of Christian values with traditional ones ([Robbins 2017](#), pp. 47–49).¹⁰ Conversion means changing values, ideas, forms, and content. This explains, for example, why the Guatemalan Pentecostal pastors recognize the indigenous believers as genuine Pentecostals not only from a cultural but also from a theological perspective. Understanding their espoused theology from a fluid understanding of culture provides the opportunity to see how they make a link with theology. This is in contrast to the more classical idea of culture espoused by Sepúlveda.

This brings us to our second point. Sepúlveda separates the cultural from the theological, making the first foundational for the other. Although his incarnational hermeneutics is a theological legitimization of the priority of the cultural, this does not make the cultural theological. The point of departure is the human being as the meaning maker. The result of this priority is that theology is reduced to a cultural activity of meaning making. This principal decision clarifies why Sepúlveda cannot make sense of the idea of 'direct' contact between God and the human being, a reality to which Pentecostal testimonies abundantly refer. The priority of the cultural is an obstacle to understanding the divine initiative and human receptivity. It is interesting to see how this is contrasted in the espoused theology of the pastors. The recognition and acceptance of the cultural identity of the indigenous Pentecostals is exactly based on the fact that they participate in a shared experience of God in the church. Being part of the community and sharing in worship in which their testimonies about their experiences of God (in healing, in praise, and tongues) are received appears to be foundational. These sisters and brothers are accepted as members including their cultural identity. This context of shared faith and life in the Spirit also provides justification for the theological decision that their indigenous cultural forms are not against but in service of this faith. Precisely because of this theologically informed cultural acceptance, there is also the expectation of growth in sanctification. The critical assessment of pastor Elías is completely in line with acceptance of the proper cultural identity and its theological function. Also, here it is the work of God, in this case of ongoing transformation, which inspires the expression. As Robbins makes clear, the acceptance of cultural diversity does not contradict the longing for transformation, which is traditionally linked with discip-

ship. Instead of making a (static understanding of) culture of the foundation for theological meaning, the theological reality of life in the Spirit unites both cultural identity and the deep desire to grow in faith and to be transformed.

We conclude by answering our central question: Does Juan Sepúlveda's approach (still) provide an adequate framework for the theological assessment of the possible syncretic characteristics of (Latin American) Pentecostalism? We think Sepúlveda's approach is still valuable because of its recognition of culture as a fundamental element for understanding the syncretic character of Latin American Pentecostalism. Syncretism, in the sense of making use of non-Christian culture in the expression and transmission of Christian faith, is indeed inevitable and already broadly present in the Bible, for example. However, his conception of culture needs to be corrected by a more fluid and less rigid understanding that recognizes the constant change in cultural forms and values, often based on intercultural exchanges. The theoretical underpinning of Sepúlveda's approach is biased by epistemological and conceptual principles of classical Western modern thought. Sepúlveda's understanding falls especially short in making culture the foundation of theology. It requires recognition of the foundational importance of theology for the understanding of the proper role of God in culture without necessarily the claim of a pure culture. Here, one of the tasks of pneumatology comes to the fore. Therefore, syncretism is not only an inevitable characteristic of faith but also a point of departure for transformation. The critical perspective of many theological approaches should therefore be welcomed, not because it presupposes a 'pure culture' but because it helps us to understand culture transformational as part of the eschatological dynamics.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, K.B.; Methodology, K.B. and J.M.-S.; Formal analysis, K.B. and J.M.-S.; Investigation, J.M.-S.; Writing—original draft, K.B. and J.M.-S.; Writing—review and editing, K.B. and J.M.-S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ We may add that the mission of Catholic Charismatic Renovation (CCR) is sometimes motivated by a similar idea about popular Roman Catholicism. See Klaas Bom, "I feel the presence of God in my tears" (Bom 2015).
- ² (Juan Sepúlveda Gonzalez 1996, p. 355). More specifically on the authority of the Bible and its cultural understanding, see p. 361. 'Evangelico', translated as 'Evangelical' is a popular term in Latin America to refer to all kind of non-Roman Catholic, mainly protestant churches and Christians.
- ³ Absolutization is understood both in its (German) idealistic and its (Classical philosophical) ontological meaning.
- ⁴ From now we refer to (Hollenweger 1997) as *The Pentecostals*.
- ⁵ Maximón or Saint Simon is a pagan saint who can curse people, give wealth, and resolve conflicts. For more information see the work of James Rodríguez on <http://www.mimundo-fotorreportajes.org/search?q=san+sim%C3%B3n> (accessed on 18 October 2023).
- ⁶ We identify its influence in national and local celebrations; Roman-Catholic celebrations are still dominant on the calendar.
- ⁷ These interviews form part of our broader research among the indigenous Pentecostals of Guatemala that has been conducted since 2021 and are part of Jonan Monroy's PhD research. See (Monroy-Soto 2021).
- ⁸ We use real names since the interviewees agreed to have their names published.
- ⁹ See a different but related perspective in Schreiter (1997), who distinguishes between static and dynamic understandings of culture.
- ¹⁰ (Robbins 2017, pp. 47–49). The idea of Christianity as a secondary religion is elaborated and related to theological authors like Kwame Bediako in (Bom and van den Toren 2010).

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