

**Disaster Evangelism:  
Religion as a Catalyst for Change in Post-Mitch Honduras**

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*Although religion clearly plays an important role in framing the way people interpret and cope with disasters, religion is virtually absent in policy debates and disaster reconstruction planning. Researchers have also tended to neglect the role of religion as a source of emotional and social support, and a vehicle of community building and group and individual identity for affected populations. This paper examines the connection between post-disaster resettlement and reconstruction, and the changing religious beliefs and practices of the women and men of Morolica, a town in southern Honduras swept away by the floods caused by Hurricane Mitch in October 1998. In Morolica, rates of conversion to Evangelism increased after the disaster, as several Evangelical missions collaborated with the local population on the reconstruction of their community. My data indicate that women and men had different reasons for being attracted to Evangelism, and that conversion entailed a*

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*transformation of the social norms and proper behavior that was different for each gender. Furthermore, these conversions can be understood as gendered survival tactics in a context of dislocation and catastrophic loss. Given the multiple and complex processes taking place in Post-Mitch Honduras in general, and Morolica in particular, I suggest that survival strategies and religious conversions are gender-differentiated, and need to be explored within a framework of shifting political ecological conditions, religious pluralism, and displacement.*

**KEY WORDS:** Religion, Gender, Survival Strategies, Vulnerability, Honduras.

### **Introduction**

Analyses of religious beliefs are rarely integrated in most policy debates and disaster reconstruction planning. Researchers have also tended to neglect the role of religion as a source of emotional and social support, and a vehicle of community building and group and individual identity for affected populations. However, it is clear that religion plays an important role in framing the way people interpret and cope with disasters. People's understanding of the ultimate origin of disasters might indeed influence the levels of vulnerability in the affected region. For instance, if catastrophes are believed to be caused by supernatural forces—God's punishment—disaster preparedness and recovery efforts may emphasize religious activities—prayer, rituals, observance of religious precepts—rather than physical disaster management measures.

Religion is an integral element of people's ideological as well as material realms of life and, in the ways in which it affects women/men and human/environmental relations, it has clear implications for the vulnerability or resilience of the population. Religious systems inform the ways people perceive themselves, others and nature, not just their conceptions of divinity. Furthermore, religion establishes a set of acceptable beliefs and behaviors and articulates a system of social and spiritual rewards for those who conform, and of negative sanctions for individuals or groups who deviate from what is religiously or socially permissible (White 1967, p. 1204). Consequently, the spiritual, social and ecological dimensions of disasters are better understood as linked together, affecting and being affected by the way women and men think and act.

In this paper I discuss the connection between post-disaster resettlement and reconstruction and the changing religious beliefs and

practices of the population of Morolica, a town in Southern Honduras swept away by the floods caused by Hurricane Mitch in October 1998. In particular, I examine the factors that might account for the increasing rates of conversion to Evangelism among Morolican survivors, and discuss the impact that this shift to Evangelism is having on their gender-differentiated survival strategies.

This article is part of a much longer analysis of post-disaster reconstruction impacts on gendered livelihood strategies among Morolican survivors. The bulk of the research was carried out from July 1999 to July 2000, with an additional follow-up visit in the spring of 2003. The main unit of analysis was the individual women and men of Morolica. Although a number of methods were used in the larger study—focus groups, map and activity calendar drawing exercises, stakeholder analyses, gender analysis activity profiles—most of the data presented in this article derive from questionnaires administered to 101 individuals. For sampling purposes, I assigned a number to each of the families listed in a roster of all the inhabitants of the community—1,615 people at the time this research was carried out—and selected every third number resulting in a random sample of 101 families. I interviewed 52 women and 49 men. Questionnaires were comprised of questions regarding productive, reproductive and community activities before and after Mitch, questions about attitudes towards relocation, questions about prioritization of needs, and questions about religious beliefs.

I begin my analysis by providing a summary of the impact of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras, the destruction of the town of Morolica, and the subsequent events that led to the resettlement of the community to a new location in March of 2000. I then describe Evangelical religious life as practiced in Morolica, and discuss the possible reasons for the differential conversion to Evangelism by women and men. Finally, I present some concluding remarks on the links between gender, religious affiliation, vulnerability, and resilience.

### **Background**

Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Central America in October 1998, is considered to be one of the worst natural disasters to hit this area in recorded history, only surpassed by the Guatemalan earthquake of 1976, which resulted in a death toll of 25,000. Mitch, as a natural phenomenon, had a twelve-day life span—from October 21 to November 1—and turned out to be one of the most deadly Atlantic hurricanes in recent times. Hurricane Fifi, which killed up to 10,000 people

in September of 1974, was the most recent hurricane to inflict comparable damage in Central America (Haggerty and Millet 1995, p. 43; UN 1999). The catastrophe that Hurricane Mitch provoked was the worst disaster ever experienced at a national level in Honduras.

When Hurricane Mitch devastated Southern Honduras most of the population was already living in chronic poverty and facing severe resource constraints (Stonich 1993). Families in the Municipality of Morolica, located in the southern Department of Choluteca, were extremely poor, and illiteracy rates, infant mortality rates, and undernutrition levels were reportedly very high even before Mitch (Ayuda en Acción 1998).

On October 30 and 31, 1998 lashing rains born of Hurricane Mitch transformed the lazy, 12-foot-wide Choluteca River, on whose banks Morolica was located, into a mile-wide torrent of mud, boulders, automobiles and tree trunks that overran the community. Although the town disappeared, swept away by the rivers, amazingly its inhabitants did not. In effect, of a population of 1,615 only 12 people died—one family of 9 and one family of 3 who did not evacuate. By next morning it was clear that the site of the 175-year-old town of Morolica could never be inhabited again.

Morolicans lived in tents for approximately two months. In January of 1999 most residents moved to a shantytown of makeshift shacks in a hamlet known as El Tejar, which is part of the Municipality of Morolica, just down the hill from what later became Nueva Morolica, the relocated community. In February of that same year townspeople and construction workers cleared the site chosen for the relocation of the community, and construction of the 312 new houses began in late March of 1999. The new community was built by the women and men of Morolica themselves, under the supervision of professional construction foremen.

The first 100 houses, built with funding from CAM (Central American Mission), were completed in September 1999. On September 13, an inauguration ceremony attended by representatives from CAM, ASIECAH (*Asociación de Iglesias Evangélicas Centro Americanas de Honduras*; Association of Evangelical Central American Churches), and the central offices of the Association of Evangelical Churches from Dallas, Texas, was held in Nueva Morolica. The remaining 212 houses were built with funds from Malteser, a German Catholic humanitarian agency. Final relocation to Nueva Morolica began in March of 2000. By the summer of 2000 most Morolicans had relocated to the new site.

Community life in Nueva Morolica was marked by a shift away from Catholicism to Evangelism. While it is clear that the rates of conversion to Evangelism increased in Morolica after Hurricane Mitch, it

is difficult to determine whether this shift was provoked by the active proselytizing of the Evangelical missions, or whether the conditions of post-disaster displacement and reconstruction simply accelerated a process of transformation that had begun before the hurricane (Oliver-Smith 1977).

### **Disaster evangelism**

“The hungry man has no ears”, says an African proverb (Shorter 1994, p. 7). In other words, “[o]ne cannot expect someone who is starving, or numbed by pain, for example, to be convinced by verbal argument” (ibid.). Material needs have to be tended to first before the Evangelical message can be understood. In principle, this notion refers to the Gospel’s imperative to “feed the hungry and minister to the suffering”. Universal love should not only be preached, but also practiced, some Evangelical missionaries claim. Evangelical interest in helping the victims of wars and natural disasters, however, has sometimes led to a form of bribery, promising material advantages to those who embrace the Gospel. Such strategy may even be justified in certain fundamentalist circles on the grounds that material prosperity is a reward of faith (Shorter 1994, p. 19). Conditioning aid in such a way could easily produce “rice bowl Christians”, converts whose main interest in the new religion is receiving the material advantages. The original term “rice bowl Christian”, which emerged during the Evangelical involvement in China, Vietnam and Cambodia, has been transformed to “corn Christian” when applied to Mexican and Central American converts for whom economic benefits or rewards are the primary reason for Evangelical commitment (Bowen 1996, p. 137).

The Evangelical missions in Honduras are “well aware of the relation between social stress, the resources at their disposal to alleviate it, and interest in their religion” (Stoll 1990, p. 11). It could be argued that these groups are engaged in what has been sarcastically termed “disaster Evangelism”. “Drawn to wars and natural catastrophes, evangelists hand out food, set up medical clinics, help rebuild communities, and train leaders to start churches” (ibid. p. 12). Two of the best known sociologists of Protestantism in Latin America, Emilio Willems (1967) and Christian Lalive D’Epinay (1969), agree that interest in Evangelical Protestantism is frequently related to how uprooted the population is, a finding that seems to predict the success of “disaster Evangelism”. For example, colonizers of frontier areas and recent migrants to cities are known to be particularly receptive to Evangelization efforts. For peo-

ple whose lives have been torn apart by war, poverty, or natural disasters, Evangelism provides a new source of meaning that helps them make sense of their situation (Stoll 1990, p. 13).

One of the first occasions when the practice of “disaster Evangelism” was widely recognized was the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala. When the earthquake killed thousands of people, it also shook the survivors’ confidence in their old religious faith. Helping them reconstruct their lives after the catastrophe was the now familiar legion of Evangelicals. The Guatemalan earthquake illustrated the advantages of Evangelical involvement in humanitarian and development assistance. Evangelical conversion in Guatemala increased from 8 percent a year before the disaster to 14 percent after it. Relief work is such a prevalent practice that Latin Americans often complain that Evangelicals are in fact “buying” converts (Stoll 1990, p. 13). This very sentiment was often expressed by numerous Catholic Morolicans, somewhat alarmed by the growing number of people who attended Evangelical services.

### **Religion as a catalyst for change in post-mitch morolica**

Evangelical missionary work in Honduras has been spearheaded by the Central American Mission (CAM). CAM was organized in November 14, 1890 by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, a pastor of the First Congregational Church of Dallas, Texas. During the 1888 Niagara Bible Conference at Niagara, New York, Mr. Scofield learned that, except for a small Presbyterian mission in Guatemala, there was no organized Protestant work in Central America. Further enquiries revealed that, while the European Protestant missionary societies considered the evangelization of Central America to be the responsibility of the United States, the mission boards of the large US Protestant denominations claimed to be unable to undertake Evangelical work in Central America. When CAM was created in 1890 Costa Rica was to be their first objective. CAM’s work in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador started in 1896, and in Nicaragua in 1900 (Winn 1964, p. 8-11).

Evangelical Protestantism, as practiced in Honduras, can be defined as a tradition distinguished by three main beliefs, including the complete reliability and final authority of the Bible, the need to be saved through a personal relation with Jesus Christ, often expressed in terms of being “born again”, and the importance of spreading the message of salvation to every nation and person (Stoll 1990, p. 3). Evangelicals place heavy stress on the source of authority. They also emphasize the

divinity of Jesus and the necessity of having a personal faith in Him in order to achieve salvation (Bowen 1996, p. 6). Additionally, their world-view encourages individualism, industriousness, and sobriety, and even a measure of upward mobility. However, not a lot is heard about social justice. This contrasts sharply with the ethical values of humility and service generally promoted by the Catholic tradition.

Another fundamental characteristic of the Evangelical world-view is its exclusivism. This refers to their conviction that their faith is the only true faith and that all others are therefore heretical and dangerous or, at best false and misguided (Bowen 1996, p. 127). In Morolica, this religious exclusivism was most clearly and forcefully directed against Catholicism. Morolican Evangelicals did not consider Catholics to be real Christians and expressed this belief frequently and in no uncertain terms by referring to non-Evangelicals as “*los no Cristianos*” (non Christian) and “*los no bautizados*” (not baptized). Although exclusivism also characterizes Catholic ideology, I never heard a Catholic Morolican claiming that other religious affiliations were false or misguided.

Unlike Catholics, Evangelical Morolicans do not believe in Purgatory. There is no intermediate stage between Heaven and Hell; one either saves oneself through personal faith, or condemns oneself to eternal damnation through disobeying Evangelical teachings. One core objection of Evangelicals is that Catholics have a misguided faith in religious figures other than Christ. Honduran folk Catholicism, as is common in most parts of Latin America, is characterized by its focus on and devotion to a variety of Saints, some of the most notable of whom are female—like the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico and the Virgin of Suyapa in Honduras. Evangelicals contend that Catholics practice idolatry by worshiping images rather than having a personal relationship with Christ. In condemning this tradition, Honduran Evangelicals reject a central element of national identity and further deprive women of positive female role models. Interestingly, some recently converted Evangelical women refused to give up their devotion to the Virgin, claiming that “*no hay nada malo en rezarle a la Virgencita*” (there is nothing wrong in praying to the Virgin.)

The final goal for Evangelical Morolicans is the reformation and transformation of individuals through a personal relationship with Christ rather than the reform of social institutions and practices. For Evangelicals, personal transformation through religious conversion is the only way society can be reformed. In return, followers are asked faith and obedience, which even the humblest of folk can offer.

Evangelism’s appeal in Morolica has perhaps been influenced by the failure of the Catholic Church to respond to the needs of its constituency.

For instance, there has never been a resident Catholic priest in the entire Municipality. Before Mitch, a priest from Choluteca—the Capital of the Department where Morolica is located—used to visit Morolica every week for Sunday mass. After the destruction of Morolica, Catholic religious services were presided by a local delegate, a poor elderly peasant who, although well loved and respected by the community, did not have the energy, training or resources to compete with the much more active and savvy Evangelical pastors. To become a Catholic priest requires years of training, education, and resources often not available to Honduran peasants. In contrast, one can become an Evangelical pastor in less than a year. Morolican Evangelical pastors were local men who came to live in the community and prayed along with their congregants.

Pre-Mitch Morolica used to have two churches: a Catholic church and an Evangelical church. The Catholic church housed the statue of San José, the Patron Saint of Morolica, which was lost during the Hurricane. Both churches were destroyed by Mitch, along with everything else in the community. The Catholic church was completely swept away by the floods, to the point that no part of the building remains visible. However, the roof and part of two walls of the Evangelical church are presently the only recognizable structure of the old community. Morolicans placed special importance on this fact, and, while many lamented the loss of the Patron Saint, some took it as a divine sign that their faith in Catholicism was perhaps misplaced.

In contrast to the imposing Evangelical temple that now dominates one of the main streets of Nueva Morolica, built with funding from the Central American Mission, a very rudimentary open-walled structure is used *en lieu* of a proper Catholic church. Two years after the destruction of Morolica, the community was still in discussions with Catholic religious authorities in Choluteca to get permission—and funding—to build a new Catholic church.

Morolican Evangelical religious life was primarily enacted in the congregation. The Evangelical *cultos* (religious services) held nightly in Morolica were far from the hell-fire-and-damnation speeches I had expected; instead they were highly participatory ceremonies, with clapping, singing, group prayer, and supplication for daily needs. There were frequent references to Hurricane Mitch as a divine punishment for Morolicans' "many vices and sins". Yet, in sharp contrast to this severe discourse, group singing, shouting, hand-clapping, and praying lent a hypnotic, rhythmic air to the *cultos*. Most congregants described the *cultos*, as "*muy alegres*" (very joyous) and continued laughing and singing as they headed home after the services.

A common way of asking someone whether she or he had converted to Evangelism was “*vos aceptais a Cristo?*” (Do you accept Christ?). For Evangelicals, this question highlighted their personal relationship with Christ. However, many Catholics found the way that question was phrased rather annoying—if not downright devious and underhanded—since, in order to proclaim their faith in Catholicism, they were implicitly forced to claim that they had not “accepted Christ”.

Post-Mitch Morolica appeared to become more “Bible- and Christ-oriented”. The pastors promoted the universal tradition of owning one’s own Bible—indeed, Bibles were among the items donated to Morolicans by the Evangelical missionary groups—and bringing it to every service. When the pastor preached, he constantly cited Bible passages to support his arguments, which all were urged to consult. Many congregants claimed to be more engaged and stimulated by reading the Bible themselves, as opposed to traditional Catholic masses in which the priest reads out loud to the attendants, who remain passive spectators. It is important to note that, since a number of women were illiterate, they could not fully participate in the *cultos*, as they were unable to read the Bible. A positive consequence of the Evangelical Church’s emphasis on Bible-reading is that they actively promoted literacy programs, which complemented the Sunday study groups.

Evangelical groups not only provided the congregants with spiritual and emotional relief, but also assisted them in a material sense. Because donations were frequently distributed at the religious services—such as school supplies, toys and clothes donated by the many Evangelical missionary groups that visited Morolica—people’s attendance could be interpreted as an attempt to improve the material—as well as the spiritual—well-being of their families.

On the other hand, Morolican Evangelical pastors promoted an unquestioning acceptance of the poor’s constraints on their continuous negotiations for survival. This was evidenced by their preaching that individual salvation and well-being were to be achieved solely through prayer and individual efforts. Corruption, evil vice, idolatry and disrespect for authority were, they alleged, distinctive features of Morolica before Mitch. These were the reasons offered by the Evangelicals as sure causes of the disaster. Such reasoning did not prevent many followers from pointing out that Pre-Mitch Morolica’s location, on the floodplain of two rivers, might have been a factor that contributed to its destruction. To this, the pastor responded that the Lord had simply taken advantage of natural features to carry out His mission.

### Religion and gender in morolica

Traditionally, most disaster research and management efforts have rarely given priority to the role that gender relations play in shaping the interaction of human groups and their environment, and the differential constraints and opportunities that women and men face in disaster reconstruction and resettlement situations (Bolin, Jakson and Christ 1998; Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998; Fotherhill 1998). More recently, a growing body of literature has been produced that clearly illustrates the theoretical as well as the practical significance of adopting a gendered approach to the study of disasters (Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998; Paolisso, Ritchie, and Ramirez 2002). Following this perspective, a number of studies are available that suggest that the capabilities and constraints facing the Honduran population in their efforts to rebuild their disaster-stricken communities are clearly gender-differentiated (Gomáriz Moraga 1999; Delaney and Schrader 2000; Olivo-Díaz López 2002; Paolisso, Ritchie, and Ramirez 2002). While there is evidence indicating that patterns of religious conversion are also gender differentiated (Bowen 1996), analyses of the interconnection among gender, religious affiliation, and social change in disaster situations are rare (Olivo-Díaz López 2002).

In his decade-long study of Evangelism in Mexico, Bowen (1996) concluded that for men, conversion and commitment entailed a radical break with the social norms and traditional behavior associated with masculinity. Drinking, gambling, avid interest in sports, social life organized around bars, and the frequenting of houses of prostitution are all predominantly male recreational pursuits in Mexico—all practices considered unacceptable behavior by Evangelical standards. Although women were expected to change as well, the typical transformation required of them was not as dramatic as that expected of men. Nor were transgressions of the female “vices” of make-up and *telenovelas*—soap operas—considered as serious as the predominantly male “sin” of drinking, for instance. Given these differences, Bowen’s findings that, in Mexico, fewer men than women converted to Evangelism, and fewer males in the second generation remained committed to the new faith, are hardly surprising (*ibid*, p. 120).

For Morolican men, conversion to Evangelism meant a reworking of their ideas about proper male behavior, placing an emphasis on individualism, competition, and personal success. Ascetic practices—that is, rejection of “worldly pleasures”—raised the question of whether Evangelical affiliation was related to economic and social improvement.

The general consensus was that conversion to Evangelism might result in greater accumulation of wealth through less spending on “vices”, as well as to increased literacy because of the Evangelical emphasis on Bible-reading. It is important to note that Morolicans did not generally associate “worldly pleasures” and “vices” with Catholicism—even though Evangelical pastors frequently did in their sermons. Morolicans did, however, lament the absence of a resident Catholic priest and were saddened by the fact that, almost two years after the Hurricane destroyed their old community, no new Catholic church had yet been built.

Pre-relocation data indicate that 26.9 percent of the women and 10.2 percent of the men in Morolica reported being Evangelical. The percentage of Catholic women was 71.2, while that of Catholic men was 85.7. The percentage of non-believers was relatively small for both genders—1.9 of females and 4.1 of males. I must distinguish here between “conversion”, which implies transformation in ideology or worldview, and “affiliation” which indicates having been baptized. The data refer to the number of women and men who had been baptized as Catholics or as Evangelicals before the Hurricane. These data seem to indicate that Morolican women had been more attracted to Evangelism than men even before hurricane Mitch. Morolican women also appeared to be more religious than men in general, as suggested by the smaller percentage of non-believers. The most frequently mentioned reasons for the increasing interest in the Evangelical faith included preference of the participatory preaching style of the Evangelical Church to the more structured format of Catholic ceremonies; being persuaded by the pastors; economic reasons; rejection of vices; and, primarily among women, the hope for a more harmonious family life.

In 1999, 11 people were baptized as Evangelicals—3 women and 8 men. By July 2000 eight more people—four women and four men—had already started making arrangements to be baptized as soon as the ceremonies could be scheduled. Evangelical authorities estimated that baptism rates had increased dramatically after Mitch. It would have been interesting to compare post-Mitch figures with pre-Mitch baptism rates. Unfortunately, all church records were destroyed by the hurricane, along with everything else in the community. No Catholic baptism took place in Morolica in this time. The priest that used to visit Morolica every week for Sunday mass stopped doing so after the disaster, and the local delegate that had been presiding over Catholic services since then did not have the authority to celebrate baptisms.

When I mentioned that the number of baptisms celebrated after the hurricane appeared to be rather small, the Evangelical pastors pointed

out that, because of logistical difficulties, it had been impossible to organize any more ceremonies. They also claimed that the increasing attendance at religious services was a more clear indication of the growing interest in the Evangelical faith. Indeed, Evangelical Morolicans used the term “*miembros de la congregación*” (members of the congregation) to refer to those who attended Evangelical religious services regularly whether they had been baptized or not. Furthermore, the large majority of former Catholics who attended Evangelical *cultos* with regularity considered themselves to be Evangelicals even if they had not been baptized as such. No records on religious attendance were kept, but my own observations indicate that the number of daily participants usually ranged between twenty and fifty, including the children.

Women seemed to be attracted to Evangelism in larger numbers than men. Female attendance to Evangelical *cultos* was noticeably higher than male attendance, with women being much more likely to attend mid-week services as well as those on Sundays and special occasions. Morolican women saw Evangelism as a new avenue to personal satisfaction and accomplishment. Traditionally, women’s roles have been less socially fulfilling than those of men. There were fewer other venues for social interaction available to them. Evangelism provided women with alternative ways to achieve individual prominence and social participation beyond their domestic sphere. Furthermore, women have been able to hold only low ranks in the folk Catholic hierarchy. In contrast, Evangelism offered greater personal participation and prestige for women because it allowed them to hold higher offices. Some recently converted Morolican women claimed that Evangelism was less structured and more egalitarian—“*hay más igualdad*”—than Catholicism. Others added that they preferred what they perceived as the more participatory and engaging instruction of the pastors. In effect, many women commented that the singing, clapping, and group activities integral to Evangelical services provided an enjoyable diversion. Some women were drawn to the Evangelical faith because, they hoped, it would “cure” their husbands and partners of their former vices. Some claimed that family life had become “*más tranquila*” (more harmonious) after their conversion. One female convert explained that life was better since her husband converted saying: “*ya no me pega*” (he no longer beats me).

I mentioned to one of the Evangelical pastors that many women—and some men—attended my focus groups very regularly, also claiming that they were “*muy alegres*” (very joyous). I suspect that the pastor resented the implication that these women and men would attend any

social gathering, Evangelical or otherwise, mainly because of entertainment purposes. Although pastors admitted that women tended to be more responsible and diligent in the performance of their duties, males were usually chosen to the highest offices. Pastors justified their preference arguing that men symbolize respect and authority, as exemplified by the all-male apostles. "Herein lies the essential appeal of the Evangelical doctrine that the man is to be the head of the household, just as the pastor guides his church and a male God wisely and justly rules over all" (Bowen 1996, p. 126). Thus, Morolican Evangelical women are subordinated to their husbands and partners and, in turn, both females and males are subordinated to the male pastors. Indeed, male authority in the Evangelical faith is absolute.

Similarly, female equality is far from being a basic tenet of the Catholic worldview. In Morolica, male authority is manifested at all levels of family and community life, regardless of religious affiliation. However, Catholic Morolicans seemed to justify female subordination as a matter of "*costumbre*" (custom or tradition), rather than as a dictum of their faith. This distinction is important because practices based on tradition can more easily be changed than those that are enforced as religious prescriptions. Nevertheless, although women of both religious affiliations were clearly underrepresented at the frequent community meetings celebrated in Morolica, Evangelical women tended to be much more vocal and assertive than their Catholic counterparts. However, it is difficult to establish a clear causal relation between Evangelism and increased female self-assuredness. Most of the Evangelical women who attended these meetings tended to be unmarried, wealthier, and better educated than the Catholic women, all factors that could potentially influence their attitudes independently from their religious affiliation.

### **Religious pluralism, vulnerability and displacement**

In my study of post-disaster relocation in Post-Mitch Honduras religion emerged as a powerful factor that shaped the way people interpreted and coped with disasters. Morolican Evangelicals preached that the causes of the catastrophe were the corruption, evil vice, idolatry and disrespect for authority that, they claimed, characterized Morolica before Mitch. Evangelicals believed that they, as "true Christians", would be spared from further tragedy. Catholics' constructions of the disaster did not include notions of the hurricane as God's punishment for Morolicans' alleged misconduct. Nevertheless, their attitudes towards future disasters were similarly characterized by

their acceptance of what they considered to be God's will ("*Dios dirá*"). These interpretations frame the way people cope with disasters, and might influence whether reconstruction efforts will emphasize physical disaster preparedness measures. People's priorities regarding disaster management measures might, in turn, influence future levels of vulnerability in the community.

Data collected on people's priorities with regards to their new community reveal that the large majority of both women (88.5 percent) and men (93.8 percent) agreed that acquiring a new house was their primary concern. Finding employment was mentioned by only 1.9 percent of the females and 6.3 percent of the males, while improving community services—water, electricity, telephone, waste disposal—was considered a priority by 1.9 percent of the women and none of the men. Interestingly, few of the women (7.7 percent)—and none of the men—mentioned relocation to a safer site as one of their priorities. No significant difference was noted between the responses of Catholics and those of Evangelicals. In other words, since both Evangelical and Catholic Morolicans accepted disasters as "God's designs", rebuilding their community on a less risk-prone location might not have seemed a necessary step to reduce their vulnerability to future hazards.

While geological and hydrological studies conducted on the new site confirmed that it was unlikely that Nueva Morolica could ever be destroyed by a flood like the one that destroyed the lost community, other potential sources of risk are conceivable—i.e. mudslides and landslides on the very eroded mountain slopes that surround Nueva Morolica. Prior to their final resettlement to their new community Morolican survivors had lived in shelters in a nearby hamlet known as El Tejar, in an area that did suffer serious damage during Mitch. In fact, during the 1999 wet season, torrential rains damaged several shacks and completely destroyed a bridge that connected El Tejar with Nueva Morolica. Access to Nueva Morolica from El Tejar was impossible for days, which delayed work at the construction site. Nevertheless, most people regardless of gender, age, class, or religious affiliation expressed their resignation to accept "God's designs" to send them another catastrophe, if that was His will.

Whatever people's justification for their apparent lack of interest in disaster preparedness measures, the fact is that disaster mitigation was never part of the reconstruction discourse. As a result, no emergency committees were organized, no evacuation procedures were practiced, no warning signals were agreed upon. This total lack of disaster preparedness potentially reduced Morolica's resilience to future hazards.

On the other hand, the fluidity with which Morolicans crossed religious boundaries does point to the pragmatic approach they adopted in their struggles to reconstruct their lives after the disaster. For instance, it was not uncommon for some Catholic women—and a few men—to attend Evangelical *cultos* with certain regularity. These people did not necessarily express an interest in converting to Evangelism, but participated in the ceremonies because they enjoyed them, because nothing else was available, and because they too wanted to collect the donations distributed at the Evangelical *cultos*. On the occasions when a Catholic mass was celebrated they also attended that service. It was, however, far less common for Evangelicals to attend Catholic ceremonies. Although the Evangelical church clearly filled some important social and spiritual gaps in Morolica, the fact that people moved back and forth between religious practices suggests that the various groups met their needs only partially.

Shifting religious affiliations among Morolican women and men can be seen as responses to their recent experiences of catastrophic loss and displacement. With virtually their entire resource base and infrastructure destroyed, shifting religious affiliations became an emotional, social and practical response to pressing community requirements, as well as their own individual emotional and material needs. Mobility across religious institutional boundaries in Morolica can, therefore, be understood as part of a set of social and physical survival strategies. Additionally, these shifting affiliations illustrate the ways in which people experience, construct, and contest their collective and individual identities in disaster situations. A poor elderly Morolican woman described her recent interest, or “*curiosidad*” (curiosity), in Evangelism saying: “*estoy probando*” (I am experimenting). Her entire world was wiped out as Morolica was flooded both by the rivers and by the numerous Evangelical missionary groups that visited the community. Without committing to conversion, she felt that perhaps it was time to “*probar algo nuevo*” (try something new).

Clearly, the boundaries between religious institutions in Post-Mitch Morolica were permeable and flexible. Future Evangelical growth will hinge on the degree to which non-Evangelicals are willing—or induced—to shift their religious allegiance to the new faith. It has been argued that religious conversion is linked to two important factors. First, conversion is typically brought on by circumstances that produce a radical realignment of beliefs, attitudes, and identity. That is, conversion requires a dramatic personal change on the part of converts. The destruction of Morolica and the subsequent relocation of the community could very well have precipitated such dramatic changes. A second factor is the degree to

which the transferred allegiance may be regarded as voluntary or self-directed, as opposed to being manipulated or caused by others. Ultimately, the growth of any religious group does not only reflect its success in recruiting new members, but also its capacity to retain the commitment of its converts and their offspring, the next generation. (Bowen 1996, p. 11-12). Evangelical pastors in Morolica certainly devoted a great deal of thought, time, and effort to the development of effective methods of evangelism, recruitment, and persuasion. In fact, familiarity with these methods is part of the standard training of Evangelical pastors.

### Conclusions

The significance of the case of Morolica lies in what it reveals about the ways women and men cope with overwhelming destruction and change caused not just by catastrophes or post-disaster resettlement schemes, but also by the efforts of powerful religious and humanitarian institutions.

The reasons for conversion to Evangelism in Post-Mitch Morolica are not easily generalizable. They include economic reasons, being persuaded by the pastors, rejection of vices, and preference for the participatory preaching style of the Evangelical Church to the more structured format of Catholic ceremonies. Some of the new conversions could be understood as survival tactics in a context of dislocation and catastrophic loss. For instance, the economic assistance provided by the Evangelical groups in Morolica helped to reduce the immediate material vulnerability of the population. Evangelism however, might have been contributing to increase the vulnerability of Morolica at a deeper, ideological level. Evangelism, as it is preached in Morolica, promotes the idea that one can change the course of history by changing consciousness—in contrast to a perspective that considers that material conditions shape consciousness—and therefore justifies the perpetuation of inequitable social systems. Evangelicals exhort themselves and their followers to concentrate on improving themselves rather than working for structural change. The Gospel, they preach, can liberate Hondurans from the “chains of sin”. Advocates for social justice, however, might argue that the chains that restrain poor Hondurans are not those of sin, but the chains of misery, discrimination and oppression.

The success of a mission in recruiting outsiders may not necessarily result in a comparable capacity to retain the commitment of its new members (Bowen 1996, p. 11-12). Future trends of religious affiliation in Honduras as a whole, or in any of the many disaster-stricken com-

munities such as Morolica where Evangelical groups are proselytizing, cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. Follow up studies need to be conducted to investigate whether rates of conversion and commitment to Evangelism among Morolican women and men continue to be on the increase after the community has become more self-sufficient, and its members are less dependent on the material assistance provided by the Evangelical missions.

The case of Morolica also suggests that religion may play a crucial role in disaster preparedness, mitigation and recovery. In spite of the recent destruction of their community—indeed, the entire country of Honduras—neither Catholics nor Evangelicals seemed to consider disaster management as one of their first priorities, which could potentially increase their level of vulnerability to future hazards. However, while Evangelicals attributed the disaster to a punishment from God, Catholics seemed simply accepting of God's designs. Many more Catholics than Evangelicals were willing to concede that the vulnerable location of the site of Pre-Mitch Morolica, on the floodplain of two rivers, might have been a contributing factor to its destruction. Further research is needed to explore the implications of the various explanations of the ultimate origin of disasters offered by different religious views.

Researchers, policymakers, and relief and reconstruction planners should pay increased attention to the interconnection between disasters, gender and religious beliefs. In Morolica, gender was central to positioning women and men vis-à-vis the religious authorities working in the community, and in determining people's access to the assistance provided. Findings show that the rates and reasons reported for conversion to Evangelism were different for each gender, further underscoring the importance of considering gender and religious differentials in any study of disaster and social change. Clearly, increased attention to the role of gender could inform disaster mitigation programs intended to empower the vulnerable, particularly women, to make their lives more resilient against hazards and crises of all kinds. However, the incorporation of gender issues into disaster and relocation research is a recent development. Early disaster literature tended to either ignore women altogether, or to portray them as vulnerable victims in need of special assistance. Women were frequently typecast as hapless victims, or as "tearful and exhausted mothers struggling to get a bucket of fresh water for their children or standing passively in relief lines" (Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998, p. 6). This concept, however, has been increasingly questioned in more recent studies (Bolin, Jackson, and Christ 1998; Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998; Fotherhill 1998; Paolisso, Ritchie, and Ramirez 2002). While it is undeniable that women are fre-

quently more vulnerable to disasters than men, by virtue of the subordinated position that females occupy in many societies, it is crucial to start considering women as assets, instead of just victims. Focusing on women's status as dependents, and excluding them from decision-making in post-disaster relief and reconstruction processes is myopic and misguided (Enarson and Hearn Morrow 1998, p. 6-7). It is also important to acknowledge that not all women are equally vulnerable and that many factors, including their religious beliefs, influence women's position in society and, consequently, their vulnerability to disasters. Disaster mitigation programs designed to make vulnerable populations more resilient against future disasters need to examine gender-differentiated patterns of authority, resource allocation and decision-making, including those arising from religious beliefs, if the needs of everyone, female and male, are to be fulfilled.

The future of Morolica, or that of the members of other affected communities in the region, cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. However, it is indisputable that enhancing people's resilience to future disasters will not be accomplished without addressing both the precarious socioeconomic and environmental condition of the country, and the material, psychosocial, and spiritual needs of its women and men. As Fordham and Ketteridge pointed out, "[i]n crisis there is also opportunity" (1998, p. 94). The case of Morolica is part of a growing number of studies on post-Mitch Honduras (Gomáriz Moraga 1999; Delaney and Schrader 2000; Olivo-Díaz López 2002; Paoliso; Ritchie, and Ramirez 2002) which suggests that a better understanding of the gendered dimensions of post-disaster interventions is an important step towards the difficult task of reconstructing human settlements, social relationships, and religious systems, and an essential move towards "rising from the ashes" (Anderson and Woodrow 1989).

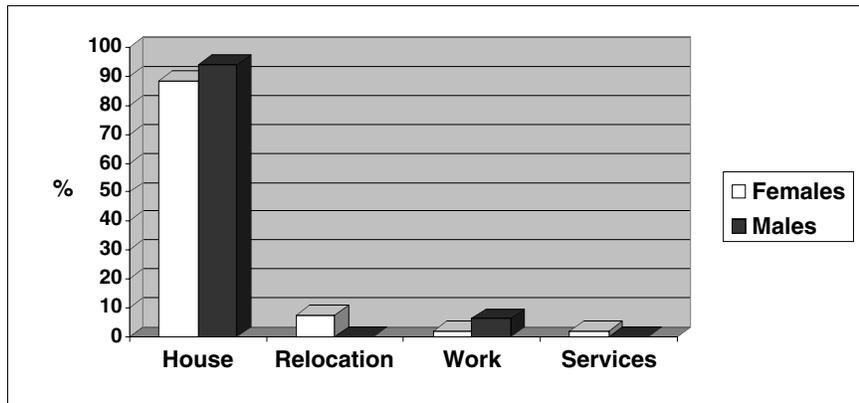
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**Figure 1. Prioritization of Needs. Source: Own Data.**



**Writing Disaster:  
Autobiography as a Methodology in Disasters Research**

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*Research in social science has increasingly moved towards emphasis on egalitarian relationships in the research process; attempting to explore and break down the traditional divide between “researcher” and “researched”. With this more reciprocal relationship comes acknowledgement of positionality, intersubjectivity and the need for the “researched” to gain a substantial voice in the research process. In this paper, autobiography is explored as a possible method through which those affected by disasters might be empowered within a research process that is traditionally replete with power imbalances. Such personal accounts of disaster, which draw upon the experiences of the author as the defining characteristic, are not recent developments in disasters research; this paper explores the roles of personal accounts through the letters of Pliny the Younger, as well as the key role of autobiographical data in Islamic environmental histories. The Mass-Observation Archive, held at the University of Sussex in the UK, is used as an example of the scope and limitations of this research method in contemporary disasters research. It is concluded that, in some contexts, autobiographical research has significant potential in enabling those exposed to disaster to have a greater input into the ways their perceptions are recorded, thereby allowing them to have ownership of the research process per se, as well as the practical response to it, for example culturally sensitive mitigation strategies.*