The Yucatec Maya Bible: “Piercing as Far as the Division of Soul and Spirit”

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Throughout most of the 20th century, most of the literature in circulation in Yucatec Maya was evangelical, specifically Biblical scriptures translated by U.S. Presbyterian missionaries and Maya converts. These Yucatec Maya scriptures were intended as a method of religious conversion, but became a pathway for deeper cultural transformation.

Yucatec Maya words were repurposed to introduce new conceptions of the self and the body, reconfiguring Maya subjectivities and their orientation to the world. Yucatán had been host to some of the earliest Protestant missions in Latin America. Widespread hostilities toward Protestants and rising anti-clerical sentiments within the Mexican government, resulted in the 1930s in a new strategy on the part of foreign missionaries.

They repackaged themselves as scientific linguists (Summer Institute of Linguistics) and literacy educators, promising to teach indigenous people to read. These missionary-linguists struggled with ways to communicate Protestant conceptions of souls, belief, salvation, and repentance in the Yucatec Maya language. They imagined the Word of God as, in the Book of Hebrews, a sword “sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow.”