

Essays

Birth of a New World Religion

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Reconquest and Religious Purification

Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand's 1492 conquest of Granada marked the end of the Christians' centuries-long battle to wrest control of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims and the acceleration of their religious purification of Spain. Based in part on her belief that Jews, Muslims, and other nonbelievers had to be converted to Christianity, the Queen sanctioned the Spanish Inquisition and, by 1499, began a program of forced baptisms among the Muslim population. Within three years, all Muslims in Granada who had not converted to Christianity were ordered out of the city, just as the Jews had been in 1492. These religious purification policies would have long-lasting consequences not only for non-Christians in Spain but also for the indigenous people of the Americas.

After Columbus returned from the New World, Isabella claimed the indigenous people as her subjects and ordered that they, too, be converted to Christianity. Pope Alexander VI supported the queen by declaring the lands that Columbus discovered to be the lawful property of Spain, thereby sanctioning Spanish efforts to colonize the territories and convert the people. Over the next century, as Spanish conquistadors subdued the indigenous populations, wave after wave of Catholic missionaries flooded the Americas to carry out Spain's mandate. Unfortunately for the Spanish, the people of the New World had their own deeply held beliefs.

The conversion of the Indians to Christianity was stated to be the principal aim of the Spanish conquerors, but we have hidden the fact that it is only through threats of being taken captive or killed that the Indians have been brought to embrace the faith and swear obedience to the king.

– Bartolome de Las Casas

New World Spirituality before Contact

In the New World, where life revolved mainly around the cycles of planting, cultivating, and harvesting crops, people worshipped many gods, often in the form of agricultural gods representing powerful aspects of nature. Among the more universal deities were rain, sun, and moon gods, the earth mother, and gods of the dead, although important plants or animals were also worshipped, such as the maize god of the Mexicas.

The Taínos, the first people Columbus encountered in the Caribbean, had complex hierarchical religious, political and social systems. They honored two primary deities: a

supreme god or creator, Yúcahu, the lord of cassava and the sea; and a fertility goddess, Atabey, the goddess of fresh water. Lesser deities, including the spirits of ancestors, were believed to live in trees, rocks, and elsewhere. Through hallucinogenic trances during religious ceremonies, the Taínos communicated with the gods, represented by both human and animal forms, to ask for protection and help with the harvest.

Religion touched on almost every aspect of the lives of people in the New World, many of whom worshipped at shrines and holy places and built huge temples and pyramids where religious rituals were conducted. The Mexicas in Mesoamerica, one of the most powerful cultures in 1492, had deities for every profession and for all common foods, and their priests served at least 200 major deities. Average Mexicas would have had little in their homes except sleeping mats, a hearth, and a shrine with a figure of a god.

Many cultures, including the Mayas and the Incas, considered their rulers divine and tended to regard their ancestors (particularly the founders of their political dynasties) as sacred. The Mayas also believed their rulers could communicate with the underworld, while the Incas were a theocratic monarchy, with the emperor both secular and divine and responsible for all legislative, judicial, executive, and religious power throughout the empire. Although the Mexicas did not worship their emperor as a god, they believed his power was mandated by the gods.

Like many civilizations around the world, New World people believed in various forms of life after death and were often buried with items they might need in that afterlife. The Incas' belief that a person could not enter the afterlife unless their body was kept intact led them to mummify their rulers and care for them as if they were still alive.

Incan, Mayan, and Mexica priests performed ritual human and animal sacrifices that took place during religious ceremonies, although the Incas and Mayas conducted sacrifices only during times of crisis or on special occasions. These sacrifices were performed to honor the gods, thank the gods for a good harvest, and maintain cosmic order. As the Mexica empire expanded in the second half of the fifteenth century, Mexica priests increasingly conducted human sacrifice to provide life force to Huitzilopochtli, their sun god; they also sacrificed victims to the god of springtime and vegetation, Xipe Totec.

While the spiritual belief systems of the people in the New World were similar to those held by many other societies around the world, the Spaniards considered the people pagans. And the conquistadors, colonists, and priests arriving in the New World from Spain believed they had been commanded by god *and* country to convince all non-believers to share their faith.

Catholicism Meets the New World

Spain's leaders, along with prominent theologians and priests, believed that only the Catholic Church could unify all of the wide-ranging and diverse aspects the New World cultures and represented the best hope Spain had to pacify the indigenous peoples. But missionaries arriving in the New World in the 16th century faced the colossal challenge of

making Christians out of large numbers of people who were not prepared to give up their long-held beliefs. Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian friars established churches and schools, conducted mass baptisms, and worked to recruit and educate a native class of priests to spread the Catholic doctrine. In some cases, they required the indigenous people to move into new communities, called *doctrinas*, supervised by the friars. Frustrated by the local populations' reluctance to accept Christianity, some priests tore down native temples and burned their spiritual artifacts. Most notably, in 1562, Franciscan friar Diego de Landa burned five thousand Mayan religious images and at least twenty-seven hieroglyphic rolls. Landa went on to stage his own inquisition, in which he tortured over four thousand Indians, 158 of them to death.

Within a few decades it became very clear that they [the priests] had not been able to fully eradicate – and how could they – indigenous religious beliefs. And how did they handle the situation? They established inquisitorial practices. So that the same institution that had been created in Spain to police the behavior of converted Jews was used in the Americas to deal with indigenous peoples, to police their religious behavior.

—**María Elena Martínez**, author of *Genealogical Fictions*

Spanish zeal eventually enabled Catholicism to make great inroads into the New World. But in the process, New World Catholicism evolved into a religion that integrated aspects of indigenous beliefs into Catholic teachings and that adapted Christian concepts, images, and saints to local traditions.

Throughout history, Christianity has incorporated aspects of the preexisting beliefs of the native populations whenever it was implanted in new lands, and in the Americas, the fusing of European and indigenous traditions was a defining feature of New World Catholicism. This fusing can be seen in the story of “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” in which Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the Mexica fertility goddess, Tonantzin, appear to have merged. Many colonial religious images, paintings, and devotional practices also show the merging of religious beliefs. For example, in an early 18th-century painting called “The Virgin Mary of Potosí,” Mary has literally become part of the mountain of Potosí, giving it her face and arms. The Incas believed mountains were home to goddesses like Pachamama, the Andean earth mother goddess, and yet the goddess in the painting is crowned by God the Father and Jesus Christ and worshipped by Spanish royalty and the Catholic pope. The painting can be viewed as a work of art that reflects the birth of new religious culture, one that integrated aspects of pre-Hispanic indigenous religiosity into Catholicism and adapted some Christian beliefs and images to local traditions.

“If by chance they [the Spanish] make you worship what they worship, which are some painted sheets [the Bible] . . . do not obey. Instead. . . when you cannot resist any longer, go through the motions when you are before them, but on the side don’t forget our ceremonies.

– **Manco Inca**, ruler of the Incas, 1533-1544

In many parts of Spanish America, Catholicism was also influenced by African spirituality. Although Spain required all African slaves convert to Christianity, some were able to keep alive certain of their beliefs and practices, especially those pertaining to their ancestors and deities. In Cuba, for example, the religion that people of African ancestry practiced was heavily influenced by West African gods; over time it evolved into a type of folk Catholicism that blended European, African, and indigenous traditions. Variations of this religion are still practiced in Cuba and, thanks to Cuban immigrants, also in parts of the United States. African spiritual traditions also influenced Catholic religious practices and beliefs in other parts of Spanish America, including Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Panama, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina.

Religion in Modern Latin America

Today, evidence of the blending of European, indigenous, and African religious traditions can be found throughout Latin America. In Cuzco, Peru, on the same streets where the Incas once carried the mummies of their emperors, the local people now parade with statues of Catholic saints. The procession to celebrate the holy day of Corpus Christi has become a Christian revision of ancient Incan processions celebrating their kings. People play the same instruments and dance the same steps as their ancestors, but today they carry pictures of Jesus and Mary rather than mummies.

In the Cathedral of Cuzco, built by the Spanish on the very spot where Incan rulers constructed the great plaza they considered the center of the universe, hangs Marcos Zapata's 1753 painting of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. The painting is similar to European depictions of the event, except here the disciples feast on guinea pig and Inca chichi beer, foods reserved for special celebrations in the Andes.

In Guatemala, people still offer incense to their Mayan gods on the steps of local churches, celebrate Christian and Mayan festival days, and place Mayan altars in the middle of Catholic churches to honor their ancestors, the shamans, and the midwives. In small towns, Catholic masses are said not only in Spanish but in the ancient languages of the people, as are masses in Peruvian villages where people speak Quechua, the language of the Incas.

Aspects of Yoruba and other West African religions continue to influence the spirituality of Cubans and other peoples of the Caribbean, where it is not unusual to find that the terms "saint" and "orisha" (a term associated with Yoruba deities or spirits) are used interchangeably.

In the end, Queen Isabella's goal of converting the Spanish New World to Christianity succeeded, but in a form she could never have envisioned.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

The Untold Story of the Americas After Columbus



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