El Sincretismo: Religious Syncretism in Latin America

William Madsen and Manuel Marzal both view modern Latin American Catholicism as an excellent example religious syncretism. The Spanish conquest and the forced religious conversion of many Indians, such as the Aztecs and Incas, to Catholicism caused violent cultural and religious changes. The Indians had their own traditional religious beliefs, rituals, and deities before the arrival of the Spaniards. Therefore, when the cultures and religions collided in the sixteenth-century, the result was not complete conversion and disappearance of the Indian religions, but quite the opposite. In the case of the Aztecs, as well as the Incas, their modern descendants continue to practice rituals and retain beliefs from their traditional religions. Madsen and Marzal both analyze elements from the two original religions, the Indian religion and Catholicism, to explain the great amount of syncretism in modern Latin American Catholicism.

In his book *Christo-Paganism: A Study of Mexican Religious Syncretism*, William Madsen examines the pre-colonial religion of the Aztecs and aspects of sixteenth-century Christianity, the techniques used by the Christians in conversion, and the resulting religious syncretism in Mexico. Using analysis of historical documents and ethnographic research in San Francisco Tecospa village, which was dominated by Aztec culture at the time of Spanish conquest, Madsen examines the parallels and differences in the pre-colonial Aztec and Christian
religions, which is important in understanding how the Spanish conquest caused the syncretism in modern Mexican religion.

Madsen begins his analysis of the modern religious syncretism in Tecospa by providing a detailed history of early Mexico and the many changes in rule and religion of the ancestors of the Aztecs. He describes the revolts, wars, and ever-changing gods worshipped by the people of the Valley of Mexico. This constant religious upheaval and warfare between tribes caused the incorporation of gods and rituals from several different religions into the religion of the Aztecs. Aztec priests’ interpretations of disasters or crop success also altered their rituals and beliefs, calling for more sacrifices or different types of ceremonies to appease the gods. Aztec religion was determined and revealed by the gods, who were not almighty and often changed their minds. Therefore, religious conversion and syncretism was not new to the Aztecs. They did not regard their religion as a perfect and unquestionable system as the conquering Catholics viewed Christianity.

The Aztecs believed in a divine creator couple named Ometecutli and Omecihuatl who had four children, the gods Xipe, the flaying god, Tezcatlipoca, the god of night and witches granted and took away prosperity and caused discords, death, and destruction, Quezalcoatl, the benevolent feathered-serpent god of wind and air gave men maize, taught them the calendar, the arts of weaving and stone work, and Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of the Aztecs, the god of war who caused war, hunger, and plague (Madsen 119). Aztecs believed in multiple creations and destructions of the world, each one involving warring gods and the destruction or transformation of mankind. Nature gods controlled the Aztec universe and provided men with the necessities of life. In Aztec polytheism, no god claimed supremacy over the other gods or showed little jealousy of another because each had his own powers to grant benefits and
adversities. The gods punished men for violation of the moral order or to indicate displeasure with the worship accorded them. Men and gods lived in a relationship of mutual dependency in which men depended on the gods for sun, rain, food, health, and victory and the gods depended on men for human hearts and blood necessary to sustain them (Madsen 122).

Spanish missionaries taught that the universe and mankind were created only once by one omnipotent god, a contradiction of Aztec belief. Catholic missionaries preached of one almighty, invisible God who was perfect, loving, and merciful, who required no human sacrifice and did not depend on man. The saints were perfect benevolent beings, unlike the Aztec gods who possessed dual natures, primarily malevolent. The kindness and mercy attributed to the saints held no similarity with the terrible wrath and vengeance characteristic of Aztec gods (128). Aztecs did not believe that their gods loved them the way Christians did. Catholicism stressed the individual’s need to save his own soul by honoring God and the saints, in contrast to Aztec emphasis on the community’s need to obtain prosperity and victory by honoring pagan gods.

However, the Catholic saints resembled the nature gods because of their role as mediators between man and God. The Aztec gods and Catholic saints were both portrayed by sacred images and honored with offerings, personal devotion, and public processions. Both presided over feast days in a religious calendar and served as village patrons, who aided the entire community in times of distress. However, saints did not have individual, supernatural power; they could not help or hurt man without God’s aid and they could not control the elements or the environment like the Aztecs gods.

Aztec religion was pervaded with fatalism; the sacred sign under which a man was born determined his fortune in life. One could improve his life by making offerings and sacrifices to the gods or lose his good fortune by neglecting his ritual obligations (120). Also the manner of a
man’s death determined his destination in the afterlife. Men who died in battle and women who died in childbirth went to the glorious sky world (Madsen 121). Those who died in bed of ordinary sicknesses traveled through the underworld to Mictlan, where they dwelled in darkness and discomfort. The Christian concept of Heaven and Hell paralleled the pleasant afterworld in the sky, a place of reward for good people of the Aztec religion, and the underworld of Mictlan.

However, Catholics did not believe in predestination. Instead, they thought that each man had a free choice to decide if he would be good or evil and the choice he made determined his place in the afterlife. What made a person good or bad in Catholicism was quite different than in the Aztec religion. Christians believed that good people worshipped only the Christian God and practiced Christian ethics. The Aztecs believed that the good people were those who gave their lives for pagan gods in battle and childbirth.

Christianity and Aztec religion both include a rigid code of ethics forbidding murder, theft, and adultery. Aztec ethics also forbade abuse of the gods, religious skepticism, and cowardice. Religious obligations were fulfilled by waging war, dying on the battlefield, and sacrificing human beings to the gods. Bravery was the supreme virtue in Aztec religion and could be shown through facing danger, hardship, and personal tragedy bravely, performing fearless deeds in battle, or by dying heroically for the Aztec gods (123). The Aztecs did not believe that the gods loved man or that man should love the gods. Also, they did not believe it was their duty to teach the ignorant, punish and correct the errant, or pray for those who did evil (131). In contrast, Christian ethics required man to love and honor the Christian god, renounce all other gods, love his fellow man, forgive his enemy, help the unfortunate, show humility, and speak the truth (130).
The resemblance between the Aztec religious calendar and the Catholic calendar of feast days has many similarities which later facilitated the substitution of Catholic saints for pagan gods. Aztec worship revolved around a complex calendar system in which a god or goddess presided over each day, week, and month and were honored by human sacrifices performed in elaborate public ceremonies accompanied by feasting and drinking. Worshippers sang and danced before an image or idol of the honored god, which was carried in procession to the temple where it received offerings of food, incense, and flowers (Madsen 124). Catholic worship is regulated by a calendar of days dedicated to saints who are honored with processions, singing, fasting, feasting, and offerings much like the Aztec calendar and gods. Also, Easter is very close to the principal Aztec celebration Toxcatl, and the ceremonies are notably similar (131). As part of this festival, the Aztecs worshipped a young man, representing the powerful god Tezcatlipoca, sacrificed him, and later priests ate his flesh in communion rites. Other worshippers ate dough images of the god, which were believed to turn into the flesh of the god. Catholics also celebrated communion rites by eating bread representing the flesh of Christ, the human representation of God, instead of the flesh of human sacrificial victims (132).

Baptism is another rite that the Aztecs and Catholics had in common. The Aztec midwife baptized a newborn with water by moistening the baby’s mouth, chest, and head with water. As she washed the baby’s body she delivered orations on the divine power of water to remove filth from the heart and permit spiritual rebirth (124). After the baptism, the baby was named for one of his ancestors. Catholic baptism parallels Aztec baptism not only in form, but also in meaning. Both religions believed that man was born with sin, which the holy water (considered a gift from God or the goddess Chalchihuitlicue) used in baptism could wash away, causing spiritual rebirth.
Confession was also part of Aztec religion before the arrival of the Spaniards. Aztec confession was the cure to sicknesses sent by angry gods as punishment for committing a crime. Individuals confessed offenses to priests and made offerings to the gods. Gods only forfaved confessed sins once, so repetition of confessed sins resulted in death by sickness, accident, or execution. Similarly, sins including murder, adultery, and failure to honor God were confessed to Catholic priests, who imposed penance to obtain divine forgiveness. Catholic penance demanded fasting, scourging, and giving of alms. Aztec penance included fasting, piercing parts of the body, and sacrificing slaves to pagan gods. However, Catholics had to feel genuine repentance, but could repeat sins when Aztecs could not (Madsen 132).

Christianity and the method of conversion used by the Spanish invaders conflicted with the Mexican custom of incorporating gods and rituals of invading tribes without loss of their own (133). The Spanish conquerors destroyed the core of Aztec culture by demolishing temples and prohibiting war, human sacrifice, and worship of pagan gods. Although the Aztecs still relied on their gods for rain, food, and health, they lost their belief that man and gods were mutually dependent. Catholic friars used church schools to begin conversion with the children who quickly accepted Christianity by the process of imitation. This technique of teaching Christian doctrine by the process of imitation and memorization failed initially with the older Aztecs who refused to go to Catholic churches (134). The more effective technique, as explained by Madsen, was fusing the already parallel Catholic and pagan forms of worship. Familiar rites such as baptism and communion, festivals, and religious customs succeeded in attracting Indians to the churches. When a feast day in the Catholic religious calendar coincided with an Aztec fiesta, the Indians often made offerings to images of pagan gods and Catholic saints on the same altar. Due to their similar role as patrons of towns and providers of aid and necessities, Catholic saints
eventually became associated with and assumed the functions of certain Aztec gods (Madsen 136). The best example of this Christo-pagan syncretism is the association of la Virgin de Guadalupe with the goddess of Tonantzin because la Virgin appeared at the same spot where the Aztecs once worshipped the virgin mother of the Aztec gods.

Madsen explains that the form of an innovation is accepted more readily than its meaning. He also states that the process of acceptance is affected by the communicability, utility, and compatibility of the change with established customs (172). The Aztecs’ acceptance of the Catholic rituals, sacraments, and patron-saint celebrations, but rejection of Christian ethics, theology, and monotheism proves this hypothesis. Catholic forms of worship were embraced because they were useful, communicable, enforceable, and compatible with Aztec religious rites. The Aztecs worshipped the saints and preformed the rites, but did not understand the significance of the saints or the meaning behind the ceremonies because these theological concepts were too abstract to be conveyed in concrete terms and had no precedents in Aztec religion (172). Madsen also attributes the rejection of Christian theology to the difficulty experienced by the friars in explaining Christian beliefs to the Aztecs. Because religious values and faith are difficult to express completely, the friars had little hope of truly converting the Aztecs (137). Also, because Christian ethics and monotheism were so different from the traditional Aztec beliefs, they could not be absorbed into their religion. This incompatibility made religious adaptation practically impossible. Also, there was no great advantage in converting to Christianity because there were no significant benefits of changing their beliefs to a religion that did not seem in any way superior to the Aztecs’ religion (137). The Aztecs accepted those elements of Catholic religion, which resembled their own and could be easily explained in terms meaningful to them. The Aztecs did not adopt Christian ethics because there was nothing
to be gained from it, they didn’t have anything similar to it in their culture, and the importance of
the virtues was hard to communicate. However, the Christian commandments prohibiting
killing, adultery, and theft were accepted because they were easily understood and also forbidden
by the Aztec code (Madsen 173).

Although Manuel Marzal does not provide an in depth description of pre-conquest Inca
religion or analyze the similarities and differences between the Inca and Catholic theologies and
customs as deeply as William Madsen does, both authors come to the same conclusions about
syncretism in Latin American religion. Through a systematic study of the religion of the Andean
Quechua in southern Peru, Marzal analyzes the Peruvian religious change and the theological
dimension of Spanish American syncretism in The Religion of the Andean Quechua in Southern
Peru (67). He continues by defining religion as “the symbolic system comprising beliefs, rites,
forms of organization and ethical norms that pertains to a certain society of culture and by which
its members endeavor to communicate with God and meet with the transcendent in their life.”
Using this definition, Marzal explains that in spite of religious conversion and modernization, the
rural Quechua culture and religion seem closely related to those of the ancient Andean
civilization (68). Marzal does not describe the religion of the Incas; instead, he explains the
patterns of the modern Quechua religious world, which contains elements of Christian and Inca
religion. He begins this explanation by stating that modern Quechua religion is centered around
two religious rites, the celebration of the patron saint and the payment to Pachamama, Mother
Earth. The very different origins of these two significant rituals demonstrate the syncretism in
modern Quechua religion and culture.

The southern Andean region of Peru was once the nucleus of the ancient Tawantinsuyo
Inca Empire. For the Quechua, the descendants of the ancient Incas, the earth is a sacred entity
known as Pachamama. The Quechua continue to make a sacrificial offering to Pachamama every year (Marzal 78). The rite in itself is a repayment to the earth for all that she gives to the people. These offerings presented as thanks to the earth are a good example of the reciprocity, which is one of the bases of Quechua religion. In spite of the attempts of religious conversion by the Spanish Catholics, the Quechua retain this rite because it is so deeply ingrained into their culture. The Quechua still depend on farming and raising cattle to survive, so their relationship with the environment is as important now as it was in the time of the ancient Incas. These beliefs and rituals remain in Quechua religion because there was no alternative to agricultural activity, so the missionaries could not separate these rites from the day-to-day lives of the rural people (100). Instead, Catholic missionaries tried to Christianize these rituals by saying the offerings were a tribute to the goodness of God and his generous gifts of food and good soil. If these attempts succeeded at all, they caused a syncretic result; today, Pachamama is considered by some as an indigenous Andean divinity who is under the control of the supreme God (80).

In modern Quechua religion, God holds the most important place in the Andean divine pantheon (81). However, the intermediaries such as Christian saints and Pachamama and the Waka spirits are the focus of the most complex and meaningful rituals. The saints are mediators between man and God who become patrons of villages and are celebrated by the village they symbolize. Andean intermediaries, or Wakas, grant favors or punish the people with sickness based on their performance of certain rituals. They are also seen as protectors of the people who make offerings to them to maintain a good relationship. The Quechua accepted the saints because they corresponded to these Wakas (96). To the Quechua, God is close at hand and rewards and punishes them in daily life. They see God as the creator of heaven and earth, but in a different sense than in Christian belief; God did not make the world out of nothing, but brought
order to the world. They still retain their belief in three eras of creation, but think that God brought order to the world during one of these eras (Marzal 86). They accept the Christian God, not because his character resembled the Andean creator God, but because it was practically inevitable when the rituals, popularized prayers, sacraments, and catechism were so focused on this belief in God (96).

Although the majority of the southern Andean Quechua are considered part of the Catholic Church, their religious and ethical beliefs are products of syncretistic reinterpretation that combines Catholicism and the religion of the Incas. Their ethics are based on the principle of reciprocity, which is a part of their traditional society, shown by their repayment to the gods for good fortune. To the modern Quechua, the worst sin is incest, followed by theft, laziness, and dishonesty. They view incest as a sexual relationship between any relatives linked by blood, kinship, or spiritually, such as through compadrio relationships. In the Inca variation of the Ten Commandments, the worst sins are marked by the lack of reciprocity in social relationships (91). Marzal provides the examples of theft, which is seen as a lack of reciprocity in the exchange of assets, and lying, which is seen as a lack of reciprocity in the sharing of information, to illustrate this emphasis on reciprocity in Quechua ethics. Their sense of community is another example of cultural and religious syncretism. As Catholics, the Andeans are united by baptism to the universal Catholic community and the parish to which they belong. However, their sense of unity is not based on Catholic institutions; their feeling of belonging is linked to their local cult community which worships the same patron saint, shares the values, and participates in the same common rituals to help their community (90).

Marzal explains that when two religions come into contact, there are three possible outcomes: the two religions are blended into a new religion, producing a synthesis, the two
religions are superimposed and maintain their own identity, producing a simple juxtaposition, or the two religions are integrated into a new religion where the precedent for each component of the new religion can be easily identified, producing a type of syncretism (Marzal 95). Using evidence from the evangelization in the southern Andean region, Marzal demonstrates that interaction between two religions, either in conversion or merely by contact, produces a persistence of some elements of the traditional religion in the new religion, the complete disappearance of some elements, and the synthesis of others elements that are similar in the two religions, followed by reinterpretation and a change of meaning. He analyzes different aspects of modern Quechua religion to strongly support this hypothesis and explain why the Quechua accepted certain Christian elements and rejected others.

The situation in Tecospa, Mexico also demonstrates Marzal’s hypothesis; the contact between the religion of the Aztecs and Catholicism produced a syncretism in which elements from both religions exist integrated and reinterpreted. However, Madsen uses different techniques to explain this religious syncretism. He focuses on the history of the two religions, analyzes the conversion process, and explains why some elements from the Aztec religion persist and others disappeared, and why some Christian elements were accepted and others rejected. According to Madsen, The acceptance of a new religion is divided into imitation and syncretism. In imitation, the purpose of the acceptor is to produce a copy of some alien form. In syncretism, the acceptor attempts a compromise between the alien form and one of his own culture elements. In religious conversion, imitation gives people new rituals to perform but there is no meaning behind the ceremonies; syncretism combines new and traditional rituals, but they retain their former meanings (111). Madsen explains that as a result of religious conversion, the resulting religious beliefs, customs, and rituals were accepted through the process of imitation of the
Spaniards as well as through syncretism, integration of traditional values or rituals and new religious customs or beliefs into a new religion.

The syncretism in the modern Mexican and Peruvian religions, described by Madsen and Marzal, reflects the greater picture of religious syncretism in Latin America. Both situations demonstrate that the Indians accepted the elements of Catholicism that were useful to them, easily expressed and taught, and compatible with or similar to their traditional religions. The Christian customs and beliefs that were accepted by the Indians were transformed and reinterpreted. For example, the modern Indian version of the Ten Commandments and the Catholic saints combines Christian and Indian elements. Certain Christian beliefs and other aspects of Catholicism which were hard to communicate were also mixed with the Indians’ traditional beliefs or altered by reinterpretation. Madsen and Marzal show that successful conversion from a traditional native religion to Catholicism was not common in Latin America. Instead, through syncretism, reconciling Christianity with their native religions, the Indians coped with their forced conversion to Catholicism.
Works Cited
