



Religious Syncretism in Colonial Mexico City

By Bennett Sherry

Spanish conquistadors took over the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1521. Immediately they tried to convert the city's indigenous people to a new religion. Results were mixed.

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Gods on boats

The Columbian Exchange was the movement of animals, people, and diseases across oceans. But people brought more than biological goods. Cultural symbols, including gods, traveled too.

Many came as colonizers seeking to force their way of life on those they met. But it didn't work out that neatly. Religious syncretism happened. That's when different belief systems blend to create something new. In this article, we'll explore the Spanish conversion of Mexico City's indigenous people. How did Christianity change Mexico City? How did Mexico City change Christianity?

Layers of belief in Mexico City

Below is a picture of the Plaza del Zócalo in Mexico City. That big church is the Metropolitan Cathedral, a center of Mexican Catholicism. But this square was once also the center of the Aztec religion. Just across the street from the Cathedral lie the ruins of Templo Mayor. It was the most important temple in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán. This one area in Mexico City has served as a center of Aztec belief, Catholicism, and Mexican nationalism. For centuries, the ruins of an indigenous temple lay buried beneath a Catholic cathedral. This view might look like it represents Christianity paving over indigenous religion. However the real story is more complex.



[The Plaza del Zócalo and the Metropolitan Cathedral](#), Mexico City. Public domain.



The ruins of Templo Mayor. Notice the Metropolitan Cathedral just across the street. By Michel Rudoy, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Strategies of conversion

The Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés, took over Tenochtitlán in 1521. They tore up the city's temples and pyramids, and renamed it Mexico City. Historians often describe the motivations of the Spanish conquistadors as "Gold, God, and Glory." The conquerors wanted to win treasure and spread Christianity.

Soon after Cortés defeated the Aztecs, Catholic missionaries arrived in Mexico. Missionaries are people who travel to foreign places to promote their religion and try to convert people to it. The Spanish wanted to convert indigenous people to Christianity. However, they worried that people would cling to their old symbols. This might lead groups to revolt. The Spaniards burned temples, symbols, and books of the indigenous peoples in an attempt to convert them to Catholicism. Often, when they tore down a temple, Spanish missionaries built a Catholic church over its ruins. They did this in order to gain the Pope's support. The Pope is the leader of the Catholic religion. The Pope was very important in European politics in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.



A model of what Templo Mayor might have looked like before the Spanish conquest. By Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The early years of the Spanish conquest were brutal. The Spanish also forced people into slavery, tore families apart, and killed those who resisted. This started a cycle of indigenous resistance and Spanish violence. Indigenous peoples also watched millions in their communities die from European diseases. Their bodies' immune systems were not prepared to fight the illnesses. This led many indigenous people to question their gods' protection. Some were motivated to convert willingly.

Meanwhile, Spanish missionaries' less brutal methods were more effective than the brutal ways of conquistadors. For example, in Mexico City, missionaries took the sons of Aztec nobility from their families. The religious leaders moved the Aztec boys to new Christian schools. There they were taught the Catholic religion and obedience to colonial leaders.

Indigenous strategies

The conversion of the Americas often gets called a "religious conquest." But elements of both religions blended together. Some indigenous peoples saw similarities between Christianity and their religion. For example, each had a ranking system for priests. Each shared similar symbols and rituals. The Aztecs were familiar with conquering nations pushing their gods on new people. After the Spanish takeover, indigenous peoples often did not totally abandon old rituals and gods. Catholic missionaries often found images of Jesus alongside statues of Aztec gods.

Some indigenous people converted for protection. The Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas convinced the Spanish king to outlaw the abuse of indigenous peoples. Converting was also an opportunity for many people. Indigenous Christians had a better position in colonial society. Again, we see that converting was not a simple act of accepting or rejecting.



An eighteenth-century painting of the baptism of Ixtlilxochitl II, ruler of Texcoco. Ixtlilxochitl was an early convert to Catholicism, and he forced his people to convert. When his mother refused, Ixtlilxochitl threatened to burn her alive. Public domain.



An illustration for a later edition of Bartolomé de las Casas' book, A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies. The book portrayed Spanish atrocities committed against indigenous peoples throughout Latin America. Public domain.

Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

Perhaps the most important example of religious syncretism in Mexico City is the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. According to later stories, in 1531, an indigenous man named Juan Diego was on the Hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City. He claimed to see the Virgin Mary. In his vision, she directed him to build a church. Her image miraculously appeared on his cloak, he said. Juan Diego convinced the Catholic leaders to build a shrine and church. They dedicated it to “the Virgin of Guadalupe.” By the seventeenth century, the shrine was a popular religious site for visitors. The image of the Lady of Guadalupe emerged as an important symbol. Indigenous converts especially saw her as their protector.

Some historians argue that this story was planned by the Spanish. Juan Diego’s Catholic church was built on the ruins of an Aztec shrine for the goddess Tonantzin. Other historians claim that this is the result of syncretism. Worshippers of Tonantzin combined their imagery with the black Virgin of Guadalupe of Extremadura.¹



Left: [a statue of Tonantzin](#). By Thelmadatter, CC BY-SA 3.0. Right: [The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe](#) that Spanish accounts claim appeared on Juan Diego’s cloak. Public domain.

Whatever the truth, the popularity of the virgin soared among both Spanish and indigenous communities. The Catholic Church celebrated the story of Juan Diego and his vision. The original small chapel expanded into a huge modern basilica, or church. The Lady of Guadalupe also became a symbol of Mexican nationalism. Revolutionaries carried her image into battle during the Mexican War of Independence in 1810. She appeared again during the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Basilica is visited by 20 million people each year. Less people visit the Vatican in Rome, where the head of the Catholic church lives.

¹ This refers to the statue and shrine featuring a dark-skinned Virgin Mary figure at a monastery in Extremadura, Spain. The shrine has been a religious destination since the 1300s.



The basilica during the annual celebration in December. The Hill of Tepeyac—where the original shrine to Tonantzin and later the Lady of Guadalupe—rises behind the basilica. By Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata, CC BY-SA 4.0.

The Lady of Guadalupe site was a religious destination for centuries before the Spanish arrived. It remains so today. In images, she is portrayed in a European style but with dark skin. She stands on a moon, wreathed by the sun. Both are important elements in the Aztec religion. Some indigenous still call her Tonantzin. And three centuries later, Guadalupe remained a symbol of Mexican unity.

Blending religions

As indigenous communities converted, beliefs and rituals blended. Catholic missionaries appropriated indigenous symbols. That means they re-used the symbols for their own purposes. Converts brought old practices to the new religion. Indigenous festivities fell on the same days as Catholic holy days. The Catholic practice of confession mixed with similar indigenous rituals. Indigenous symbols were added onto Christian crosses. Catholic tradition was translated into indigenous Nahuatl. The languages of faith blended.

Religious syncretism created a new Catholic culture in Mexico. In 2020, Mexico is the second-largest Catholic nation on Earth, behind only Brazil. Latin America is home to 425 million of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics. Pope Francis is the current head of the Catholic church. He was born in Argentina. And every year, millions of Catholics travel to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. They pray at a site that once celebrated the Aztec goddess Tonantzin.

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The basilica during the annual celebration in December. By Juan Carlos Fonseca Mata, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Atrio_de_las_Am%C3%A9ricas_-_La_Villa_-_Bas%C3%ADlica_de_Guadalupe_-_Ciudad_de_M%C3%A9xico.jpg



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