



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. It's a center of Mexican Catholicism. But this square was once also the center of the Aztec religion. Just across the street from the Cathedral are the ruins of Templo Mayor. It was the most important temple in the old Aztec capital Tenochtitlán. This one area in Mexico City has served as a center of Aztec belief, Catholicism, and Mexican nationalism. The ruins were buried beneath a Catholic cathedral for hundreds of years. To some people, this might represent 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

Hernán Cortés was a Spanish conquistador. His army took over Tenochtitlán in 1521. They destroyed the city's temples and pyramids. It was renamed Mexico City. Historians say the Spanish wanted "Gold, God, and Glory." In other words, they wanted wealth. They also aimed to spread Christianity.

Soon after Cortés defeated the Aztecs, Catholic missionaries arrived in Mexico. Missionaries travel to foreign places. They promote their religion and try to get more followers. Bringing more people into a religion is called conversion. Spaniards burned the temples, symbols, and books of the Aztec and other indigenous peoples in an attempt to convert them to Catholicism. 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 very violent. The Spanish forced people into slavery. They tore families apart. Many who resisted were killed. This started a cycle of indigenous resistance and Spanish violence. Indigenous peoples also watched millions in their communities die from European diseases. Their bodies were not prepared to fight such disease. This suffering led many indigenous people to question their own gods. Some were motivated to accept Christianity.

Additionally, Spanish missionaries used techniques that were less brutal than that of conquistadors. In this way, they were more successful in winning over the indigenous people. For example, missionaries took Aztec sons from their wealthy families. The boys were taught at new Christian schools. They studied the Catholic religion and obedience.

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 the two religions. For example, each had a ranking system for priests. There were similar symbols and practices. The Aztecs were also familiar with conquering nations pushing their gods on conquered people. Still, indigenous people did not completely abandon old practices and gods. Spanish missionaries often found Catholic images near statues of Aztec gods.

Some indigenous people converted for protection. The Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas helped the indigenous people. He convinced the Spanish king to forbid the abuse of indigenous people. 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

The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe is in Mexico City. It's perhaps the most important example of religious syncretism. Supposedly an indigenous man named Juan Diego had a vision in 1531. He claimed to see the Virgin Mary on the Hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City. She told him to build a church. Juan Diego convinced the Catholic leaders to build the church. They dedicated it to "the Virgin of Guadalupe." By the 1600s, 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 the Spanish invented this story. The Catholic church was built over an Aztec shrine to the goddess, Tonantzin. The Guadalupe story could have been a way to cover this up. Other historians claim that this tradition is the result of syncretism. Worshippers of Tonantzin combined their imagery with the black Virgin of Guadalupe of Extremadura .



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.

The popularity of the virgin soared among both Spanish and indigenous communities. The Catholic Church appreciated the story of Juan Diego and the vision. The original small chapel has expanded into a huge modern basilica, or church. The Lady of Guadalupe also became a symbol of Mexico's shared identity and history. Her image appeared during the Mexican War of Independence in 1810 and the revolution in 1920. The Basilica is visited by 20 million people each year. Less people visit the Vatican in Rome. The Vatican is where the head of the Catholic church lives.



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. Converted Christians brought old practices to the new religion. Indigenous festivals fell on the same days as Catholic holy days. The Catholic practice of confession mixed with similar indigenous events. Indigenous symbols were put into Christian crosses. Catholic tradition was translated into traditional Nahuatl language. 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 Roman Catholics. There are 1.2 billion worldwide. The current Catholic Pope is Francis. He was born in Argentina. And every year, millions of Catholics travel to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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Bennett Sherry

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a Research Associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

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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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