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Determining if the Persistence of Indian-inspired forms of Religion Means that the Catholic Church failed in its Conversion Attempts.

In this relatively short essay we are to evaluate the following statement: “The persistence of Indian-inspired forms of religion in late 20th-century Latin America reveals that the Catholic Church failed in its centuries-long attempt to convert the populations of the region to Christianity.” Our first task is to define Catholicism. For our purposes here Catholicism is defined as a faith worshipping one God that has incorporated a rich religious history into its current incarnation and holds allegiance to the Pope.

The institutional Roman Catholic Church in Latin America (the child of the Roman Catholic Church’s conversion attempt) disappeared from the countryside shortly after the independence of Guatemala but religion itself did not (Earle 71), just to use one country as an example for the entire region. This resulted in much of the social landscape of Latin America being pervaded by a system of beliefs and way of life that was popular Catholicism instead of the teaching of the formal institutional Church. It is this popular Catholicism that supplemented and eventually replaced orthodox Catholicism and was much more open to Indian-inspired forms of religion than was orthodox Catholicism (Earle 71). This new form of Catholicism became known as “folk Catholicism” after its wide practice in the countryside. The term “folk” also indicated its differences from orthodox Catholicism (Earle 71).

Even centuries after the attempted conversion of the populations of Latin America to Roman Catholicism, it is plain that there is still a measurable portion of the population who are indigenous. It is estimated that Bolivia, Guatemala, and perhaps Peru are made up of 50 percent people who are indigenous to the region, while 25 percent of the populations of Ecuador and Mexico are indigenous (Penyak and Petry). With the indigenous peoples, who never completely overcame the effects of conquest and religious conversion, representing such visible portions of the population it is understandable that Indian-inspired forms of religious practice would persist.

Religion is both a model for, and a model of culture, so perhaps the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church thought that they could make these Indians less dangerous simply by changing their religion. One example of the Indians being dangerous comes from a story Erna Fergusson tells us (Penyak and Petry): *Some young men, while climbing a volcano, ran across a place where Indians had been doing their witchcraft. These young men moved some of these stones and broken pottery with their feet and sticks. When another group of young men happened upon this same place a week later the Indians, assuming they were the same group that was there earlier, killed them. Naturally the government went and executed 10 men from this Indian village as punishment, but nonetheless these Indians are dangerous.* Maybe changing the Indians' religion would tame their actions and culture as well? That said, I think that anytime you attempt to convert a population's religion in hopes of significantly altering their culture you'll fail miserably because that population will revolt against such changes to their very identity.

Let's briefly look at a specific group and determine if the conversion worked on them or not. The Chimaltecos are Catholic, recognized as such by the Roman Catholic Church (Penyak and Petry). But that is where the similarities with what white European-based Catholicism know as Catholicism end. The entire culture of the Chimaltecos is a fusion of Maya and European cultures, with the most striking aspect of the fusion being their religion. In prayer they will pray to Christ, a Catholic saint, an aboriginal day deity, and a Guardian of the Mountain, in that order. Their concept of these deities is entirely a mix of Mayan and European beliefs. The fusion is so complete that Christ cannot be looked as Catholic or a Guardian of the Mountain as Mayan (Penyak and Petry). Nevertheless all good Chimaltecos will say they are Catholic, even though their religion has almost no contact with the Catholic Church. Mass is unimportant to the Chimaltecos, confession, and church weddings are unknown to them. This group of Indians certainly has felt the pull of conversion, but largely kept their indigenous religious practices intact while formally becoming Catholic. Maybe a few more examples of other groups will show us a more definitive answer to if conversion succeeded or failed?

Religion plays significant roles in major life events, for example those of birth and death, in the form of religious ceremonies. In the Roman Catholic Church the sacrament of baptism is a central "rebirth" into religious life shortly after physical birth. In a community in Guatemala it is understood that the baby takes in everything the mother does before he or she is born (Wright 8). At birth the parents' other children shouldn't be present, but village leaders and extended family should. Siblings should not know how the baby is to be born (Wright 9). All they're told is

that a baby has been born and their mother is off limits for 8 days (Wright 9). During these 8 days the mother and baby are to be alone together to enable the baby to get integrated into the family (Wright 10). After the 8 days are up the mother and baby get to go home and begin the process of the baby learning what it is to be human (Wright 11). This ritual of separation and initiation into humanity mirrors that of Catholic baptism, yet makes it clear this Guatemalan community wasn't fully converted, if at all.

These Guatemalan Indians are careful not to disclose details of their customs, or expose them to external forces, being worried that in doing so they'd expose the Indian world to corruption (Wright 9). They've always kept their secrets and hidden their identity (Wright 20). It is for this reason, they believe, that they've been discriminated against. To preserve their very culture they can barely talk about themselves with outsiders, for if they told outsiders about it then it will be taken from them (Wright 20).

One final component of the baby's ceremonial entrance into humanity reflects Catholicism in an interesting way. 40 days is the number used both with the story of Noah's Ark and Jesus being tempted by the devil; it is this same amount of time that should pass in the baby's life before he or she becomes a full member of the community (Wright 12). Might this be a tidbit of evidence that the conversion succeeded? Of course, religious conversion isn't black and white, there are shades of gray involved which I don't have the time to dive deeply into here.

This community of Indians in Guatemala has a connection to their God that appears more Pagan than Catholic. These Indians use the Sun as the channel to their

one god (Wright 14), The notion of one god here is Catholic, but not the Sun as channel to that god. These people also seem to have prayer as a deeper element of their lives than the average lay Catholic here in the United States. These Indians may pray for the day at its dawning as it may be an important one, the firewood before lighting a fire for cooking, or virtually any other reasons they choose (Wright 15). Prayer of this kind isn't exactly what traditional Roman Catholics would do, yet because prayer is largely a personal thing (besides the prayer in Masses) this form of prayer isn't necessarily Pagan either. Maybe the conversion worked at least a little bit?

Roman Catholicism has its notions about evil, largely in the form of the devil and hell. Examining this area of religious practices is one final example we can use to decide if the Catholic Church failed in its attempts to convert the Indians to Catholicism. Both the Indians of Mexico and traditional Catholicism share the basic belief that the devil and his servants are the opposite of the saints, they harm the production and reproduction the saints work to build (Ingham 103). The Indians believe that the Devil and other evil beings symbolize threatening qualities and behavior of other people (Ingham 103). These Indians equate the Devil with envy, as is evident when you understand they named the Devil "Moxicuani" from the Nahuatl for "envy" (Ingham 105). According to them, the Devil will appear in different guises depending on whom he appears to. Meeting witches or negotiating the exchange of money for souls he will appear dressed in a well-tailored riding coat, but he may just as easily appear on foot dressed in a business suit (Ingham 105). These descriptions

of the Devil are similar to those that Catholics believe in, but actually go beyond the amount of conscious thought Catholics I live amongst give the Devil.

However, unlike Catholicism these Indians of Mexico have more than just the Devil as an evil being to worry about. One other being they believe in is the Harlot La Llorona, a wicked woman thought to be the female personification of evil (Ingham 110). There are many stories that are told of this woman, one being that she is seen in a black dress, and sometimes a bridal gown. She floats along the ground more than she walks, and is sometimes seen as just a white cloud, or even only heard. Once a man heard her call his name, but never saw the source of the voice, while another time people just heard the sound of someone breaking glass (Ingham 110). This separate incarnation of evil, on top of the Devil that is shared with Catholicism, is something that reinforces the importance of the concepts of evil in the religion of these Indians. This is one area in which Indians who may be practicing Roman Catholicism differ from traditional Catholics, but this difference isn't enough to conclude from this alone that the conversion failed.

In conclusion we find that Indian-inspired religious practices and ideas certainly persisted even after the Roman Catholic Church completed its centuries-long conversion of the Indians to Catholicism. However they did not universally persist that prevalently across all of Latin America. Further, what Indian-inspired elements persisted didn't get in the way of populations considering themselves Catholics, the Vatican recognizing the Latin American Catholic Church as a major outpost of Roman Catholicism, nor the Indians' continued practice of what Roman Catholicism looked like back in the 20th-century Latin America. As such the

persistence of these practices and ideas does not mean the conversion attempt failed, it just means the Indians naturally integrated their ancestor's religions into Roman Catholicism, something you see across history in many different cases.

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