

"THE MAYANIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY"¹

BY MARK MATHEWS

"According to...Max Weber, traditional (or primitive or magical) religions are contrasted with universal (or 'rational') ones such as...Christianity. Neither model is particularly helpful in explaining how or why universal religions replace primitive ones except when implanted by superior physical force, and that sidesteps the issue of whether forced conversion brings about any actual changes in belief."² During the conquest of Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula, Spanish conquerors struggled to replace the traditional religions of the region with the universal religion of Christianity. Although the Maya vastly outnumbered the Spanish in this new environment, the Spaniards managed to gain control in the area through superior fighting technologies, a different style of warfare, the use of indigenous allies, and epidemics that swept through the native population.³ This newfound control of a foreign society offered the Spanish an opportunity to introduce Christianity to the indigenous Mexicans. Unlike previous conquering groups in the Yucatan, however, the Spanish religion demanded exclusivity, and, therefore, it was "a profound shock to the Maya when they realized that the Christian God was not merely to take precedence over their own gods, but to replace them altogether."⁴ Nonetheless, a forced conversion of the Maya ensued despite the fact that the Maya probably did not understand "that Christianity was an exclusive religion...demand[ing] the extinction of the Maya's own beliefs and deities."⁵ This conversion, therefore, was not in all instances successful according to Spanish standards.

Wanting to expand the Christian kingdom, the Spanish proceeded with the conversion despite the fact that "few of the inhabitants (of the Yucatan) [were] learn[ing] even the rudiments of Christian doctrine necessary for salvation."⁶ Later on, the Spaniards grew upset when they discovered that "the Indian conversions had been 'insincere' and that the natives had 'relapsed' into paganism."⁷ During this "relapse" period, the Maya began incorporating Christian motifs into the traditional religion practiced before the Spanish conquest. This incorporation of Christian motifs into the Maya's indigenous religious beliefs led to a combination of the two belief systems that synthesized into a pagan Christianity which included "idolatry", sacrifice, and hidden worship services. This new amalgamation of religious ideals did not satisfy the goals of the Spanish conversion efforts.

Many of the conversion methods employed by the Spanish in the Yucatan

accounted for the lack of success of the Christianization effort. In fact, Nancy Farriss argues that the old beliefs continued virtually unchallenged in practice. No churches or any other Christian monuments stood until the Franciscan missionaries arrived in 1522.⁸ Instead of building churches and monuments, early missionaries spent most of their time striving for reconciliation with the indigenous peoples after the violence of the conquest. Upon winning favor with the Maya in this fashion, the missionaries immediately began baptizing large groups of people. They also started baptizing community leaders and their heirs with the hopes of uprooting the communal religious beliefs by beginning with the most important echelon of society. Missionaries set up boarding schools and enrolled the sons of the *caciques*, the communal leaders and holders of local authority, to teach them Christian catechisms. These schools took "youths from noble families and [taught] them Christian doctrine and liturgy, reading and writing, and also music."⁹ The idea behind this was similar to the one behind the baptism of the societal leaders. As the Christianized heirs of Maya power grew older, they would have a firm grip on Christian doctrine.¹⁰ Many times, however, the Maya found ways around these early conversion attempts and remained believers in their pagan religions.

Often, the conversion efforts of the Spanish missionaries did not result in the indigenous peoples changing their beliefs due to poor instruction from the Spanish. As Inga Clendinnen points out, while "adults were obliged to attend weekly, and children daily instruction in the catechism, 'teaching' focused more on training in correct external behaviour than on the transference of knowledge."¹¹ As for the youths in the boarding schools, Clendinnen adds that these "lads staffed the village schools, teaching what they understood of Christian doctrine."¹² Considering the Maya received poor instruction from the Spanish, or they received lessons in Christianity as interpreted by youths from their own society, it is no wonder that many clergymen came to the "painful conclusion that the gospel seed had borne little fruit among the Maya."¹³ In addition, the idea that after baptism the Maya "became Christian" is illogical.¹⁴ According to Clendinnen, the "Indians were baptized after minimal instruction: [In fact] one Franciscan recorded the feat of a brother in baptizing 'four or five or six thousand' in a day."¹⁵ Obviously then, these mass-baptized Maya Indians did not receive the proper instruction before the ceremony. Some missionaries, in fact, thought their job completed when the Indians could "repeat from memory the 'Four Prayers' (the Creed, Hail Mary, Our Father, and *Salve regina*)."¹⁶ For these reasons, one can understand why the indigenous people did not accept Christianity; but instead questioned it. Farriss suggests that the indigenous populations were left with the hard choice of either making a leap of faith into a religion

they knew little about save its exclusive Almighty, or simply not making it.¹⁷ Much to the frustration of the Spanish, many Mayans failed to make the jump and remained loyal to key aspects of their pagan religions.

The worship of more than one deity, a characteristic of traditional religions, remained after the initial Spanish conversion efforts. In the Yucatan at this time, "the introduction of new religious cults by a conquering group - cults that would coexist with the old - was a Mesoamerican tradition."¹⁸ Initially then, the Mayas gladly accepted the introduction of Christianity into the Yucatan just as they had accepted the orthodoxies and deities of other conquering groups before the Spanish. However, "that Christianity was an exclusive religion, one that demanded the total extinction of the Maya's own beliefs and deities, would not have been immediately apparent."¹⁹ The Maya, who did not yet understand the exclusivity of Christian monotheism, continued worshipping a pantheon of gods alongside the Christian Almighty. This "idolatry", as it was labeled, became widespread after the introduction of the exclusive Christianity. The Spanish used the word "idolatry" to describe "any kind of ritual involving idols...[and] the public rites that by tradition were performed in temples and plazas and which represented the Maya's collective bond with the supernatural."²⁰ The conflict then surrounded the adherence to Christian ritual and the simultaneous, secretive observance of the pre-conquest religions.²¹ The unfamiliar exclusiveness of Christianity to a polytheistic people like the Maya made exercising a monotheistic ideal completely foreign and a part of Christianity that they chose not to abide by. Instead, the Christian God entered the pre-existing Mayan view of the cosmos but did not fulfill the Christian role (of exclusiveness) there. This acceptance of the Christian God but not the Christian view of Him was the first step towards the combination of the pre-conquest religions of the Yucatan and Christianity.

Occasionally, the Maya, in order to continue worshipping other deities in conjunction with the Christian God, retreated to secret caves to worship these idols and participate in hidden ceremonies. Once a regular community activity, "the clandestine rites...became a more or less secret offering made by individuals or families in some out-of-the-way sacred spot."²² These ceremonies occurred exclusively on Maya terms in secret caves and remote forest hideouts where the idols remained out of sight. Consequently, despite the Spanish efforts to espouse Christian orthodoxy, these practices, reminiscent of the pre-conquest religions, persisted.²³ Spanish authorities recognized the subversive danger of this secrecy which allowed the Maya to worship their own gods on their own terms. In reaction to these secret meetings of worship, "the clergy obliged the Maya to break up their large, extended-family residences and to cluster their houses

close together and build them with entrances towards the street, rather than the traditional backyard doorway" to lessen the threat and regularity of these secret ceremonies.²⁴ The content of these meetings, however, did not fool the Spaniards. In actuality, almost all Indians accused of idolatry "readily admitted" to it because the incorporation of a multitude of gods into the Maya view of the cosmos had existed long before the idea of exclusivity was introduced.²⁵ To the Maya, a continued worship of a pantheon of gods assured individual and communal prosperity. Therefore, the risk of being punished at the hands of the Spaniards did not outweigh the possible cost of discontinuing the worship of pre-conversion deities because the Maya believed this worship necessary to avoid any sort of decline in the luxury afforded by those gods. A continued worship of the pre-conversion gods assured the Maya continued nourishment from them.²⁶ This growing gap between the public acceptance of Christianity and the private practices of paganism again illustrates the unwillingness of the Maya to completely abandon their old religions for Christianity. Instead, the Maya wished to sustain personal relationships with their longtime deities of pre-conquest Yucatan religions, and they went to great lengths to do so.

One ceremony practiced in pre-conquest religion that continued through the initial stages of the Christian conversion was sacrifice. While it became more privately practiced with the arrival of the Spanish and their Christianity, sacrifice was a remnant of pre-conquest society and religion capable of pleasing the gods and in return receiving favors from them. However, no Spaniard, Clendinnen points out, "whether friar, settler, or bishop, could tolerate human sacrifice."²⁷ Christianity, of course, had no tolerance for this type of activity; thus, the Spaniards considered it a terrible offense. In the opinion of the Spanish friars, "the killing of a human for a god, despite or because of the 'sacrifice' of Christ, was blasphemous in the deepest sense."²⁸ Even so, these human sacrifices were not brutal or savage, contrary to Spanish assertions. Instead, as Clendinnen convincingly argues, "the intention was not to kill, but to wound delicately" due to the fact that blood held a spiritual meaning as a "substance of great fertilizing power" capable of strengthening the relationship between god and man.²⁹ Significantly, Clendinnen points out, these sacrifices followed the Christian calendar as they occurred "every Sunday."³⁰ This fact clearly shows the Mayas combining aspects of both religions. Even though the Maya felt responsible for keeping the relationships with their "old" deities strong, they obviously took very seriously some Christian ideals. Nonetheless, anything short of a total conversion was not only insufficient in the minds of the Spaniards, but also punishable.

The Christian church did not accept or approve of idolatry or human sacrifice as they both had roots in pre-conquest religion. Anything less than complete removal of non-Christian motifs would deny a successful conversion. For this reason, "investigations were made, idols smashed, and idolators severely punished."³¹ The church also "forbade any procedure that involved 'effusion of blood' or 'loss of life or limb.'"³² In response to these pagan offenses, Spanish authorities, namely Fray Diego de Landa, conducted the now well-known idolatry trials during the late 1560s. Grossly unfair, the trials "were not only manipulated but distort[ed]...into a vocabulary the friars could recognize."³³ Upon sentencing, the guilty party was "tied to a whipping post to suffer the prescribed number of lashes."³⁴ Many times, the backs of the guilty, badly flogged during the preliminary interrogations, had no good place to give them these prescribed lashes. Some Indians sentenced to punishment fled or committed suicide. The severity of these trials, under the supervision of Diego de Landa, frightened and intimidated an increasing number of people into abandoning all remaining pre-conquest traditions.³⁵

The conversion process of the Yucatec Maya was a long and arduous one. In the first stages of effort, the Maya did not understand the necessity of exclusion that accompanied Christianity. Therefore, at first the Indians may have maintained a Christian façade while devoting their mind, body, and soul to their pre-conquest deities and belief systems. However, by the end of the 18th Century, the *Book of Chilam Balam*, a compilation of Maya beliefs from the past two centuries, displayed a "Christian dogma at a highly sophisticated level of interpretation."³⁶ In the period between these two radical ends of the spectrum, a synthesis of both Christian and indigenous doctrine occurred resulting in a system of worship where the Christian God, alongside the pre-conquest gods of the indigenous people, received reverence. While the deities of both traditions received adoration in a different manner, the Maya fused them together according to their own conditions. Therefore, in Nancy Farriss' opinion, "all together the evidence leads to the conclusion that for at least the first decades after conquest, the old gods were alive and well behind the public façade of Christianity."³⁷ Given that the old gods remained sacred to the Maya after their introduction to one supreme God and throughout their Christianization, one can hardly argue that no amalgamation of the two ever took place. It seems undisputable that a combination of Christian doctrine and indigenous doctrine constituted the religion of the Yucatan Maya for a period after the initial conversion efforts.

The amalgamation of Christian and Mayan doctrine occurred on many levels.

Initially, the Maya, like most Yucatec indigenous groups prior to the Spanish conquest, welcomed new gods into their pre-existing belief systems without question. The poor conversion efforts and strategies of the missionaries allowed these old traditions and belief systems to propagate. Missionaries also failed in instructing the Maya on basic Christian catechisms. Following, the Maya most likely assumed that Christianity had similar boundaries (or lack thereof) to other Yucatec religions, which, for example, allowed a polytheistic view of the cosmos. Under this assumption, "idolatry," human sacrifice, and hidden worship ceremonies would not infringe upon the Christian ideology; hence, the Maya continued these pre-conversion practices. Reciprocally, the adjustment of sacrificial reverence to the Christian calendar and the attempt of the Maya to incorporate the Christian God into their religion show the annexation of Christian motifs into their pre-conversion orthodoxy. Therefore, an amalgamation of the two faiths visibly resulted in a religion derived from Christian and indigenous beliefs. However, the missionaries and other Spanish authorities did not accept any such union. In their view, anything but a complete abandonment of these pagan rituals did not meet the goals of the conversion. Therefore, under the supervision of Fray Diego de Landa, Mayans found, or accused of, engaging in these pagan ceremonies were interrogated and severely punished. By the end of these trials, more and more Mayans deserted their pre-conversion beliefs to escape terrible consequences. Whether or not these Mayans converted their hearts and heads to Christianity is of course unknown, but until their lives were threatened, a long period of outward amalgamation of Christian and Mayan religious doctrine existed.

ENDNOTES

1. Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 334.
2. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 293-294.
3. Leo Garofalo, professor of Latin American history, lecture in Madison, WI, 9-22-00.
4. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 287.
5. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 24.
6. Garofalo, professor of Latin American history, lecture in Madison, WI, 10-02-00. See also Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 213.
7. Douglass R. Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial*

- Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 174.
8. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 24.
 9. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 335.
 10. Garofalo, professor of Latin American history, lecture in Madison, WI, 10-02-00.
 11. Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 47.
 12. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 47.
 13. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 305.
 14. Mark Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 67.
 15. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 48.
 16. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 305.
 17. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 300.
 18. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 24.
 19. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 24.
 20. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 290.
 21. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 290.
 22. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 293.
 23. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 293.
 24. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 213.
 25. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 74.
 26. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 290.
 27. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 98.
 28. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 177.
 29. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 181.
 30. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 178.
 31. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 291.
 32. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 291.
 33. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 188.
 34. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 76.
 35. Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, 79-81.
 36. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 305.
 37. Farriss, *Maya Society Under Colonial Rule*, 292.

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