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A Brief Observation of Latin American Religion

Andrew W. Becker

Upon my dual completion of military service and university, I set out for a year of travel that took me south of the US. Upon reaching Mexico, I traversed back and forth between the Pacific and the Caribbean coasts through Central America until Colombia, where I followed the Andes Mountain region south to the tip of Chile. In retrospect, I realize I obtained more information about the pre-Hispanic civilizations, cultures, and religions of the Central and South American people during this trip than I could have hoped to learn in multiple college courses. However, what I noticed most is the connection that each country has with Catholicism and yet the vast differences in rituals and worship the people of each region utilize. Latin American countries, as a standard, have a deep and complex connection with the Celestial Sphere; its elements (earth, moon, sun, and stars) cross over into their religious rituals and worship.

As I made my way south through Central America, the ghosts of colonial past interwoven with those of the ancient civilization were inescapable at every new turn. Under the grandiose Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, I observed the few remaining ruins of the Aztec civilization and visited numerous other ruins and remains of bygone powerful dynasties. These pieces of the pre-Hispanic civilization are stark reminders of how an entire civilization was destroyed and replaced, but with deeper observation, it was clear that traditions and religious views had definitely lived on. In northern and central Mexico, as compared to the southern states, it seemed that the pagan religions of the past have had less of an influence on modern Catholicism, yet the further south one travels, the more remaining pagan rituals and practices can be observed to be intertwined with the Catholicism of the local population.

In the small, ethereal mountain town of San Juan Chamula, which is located north of San Cristobal de las Casas in southern Mexico, is the Cathedral San Juan Bautista. The strong smell of pine and incense is the first thing that greets you as you step into this dimly lit church. The floor is covered in its entirety with pine needles, and burning candles light the way every few feet. Statues of stoic saints look down from along the walls as local men, women, and children offer chants and prayers of devotion. Many of these families bring chickens in bags as sacrificial offerings; ancient rituals passed down over the ages. I did not see this, but later read, that eggs, bones, and some local alcoholic beverages called “posh” are also used in these healing ceremonies. This mixture of pre-Hispanic religion and Catholicism is very interesting to observe.

After crossing into Guatemala the pre-Hispanic religion's influence became even more glaring. The local market vendors offered a plethora of herbal potions to cure everything from physical illness to broken hearts. Many of the locals I spoke with also believed very strongly in the Evil Eye. The mythical Evil Eye is an intangible evil force that children, animals, and the spiritually weak are potentially vulnerable to. Children will wear amulets

such as a red cap or ribbon on the arm to draw attention away from this evil stare. The Evil Eye can even be found in professional medical books and journals in Guatemala and is taken very seriously by those of all classes. West of Guatemala City is a shrine dedicated to San Simon, a drinking, smoking, and philandering saint. San Simon sports a handlebar mustache, a cowboy hat, and smokes cigars. He is not in any way recognized by the Vatican but devoted Catholics will travel to this shrine and cross themselves paying tributes of flowers and other items to him as if he was fully sanctioned by the Holy See. This is yet another example of how indigenous symbolisms have become mixed with the religion of the Latin American conquerors.

Honduras and Nicaragua seemed to share many of the same mixtures of pre-Hispanic and Catholic religious beliefs as Guatemala, but once I passed into Costa Rica and Panama this seemed to become much less. This may have been my lack of observation in these areas as I spent very little time in rural parts; nevertheless, as a whole it seemed as if these countries followed more or less traditional Catholic dogmatic protocols.

Colombia, like Panama and Costa Rica, has a population of very religious Catholics, but does not seem to be influenced as much by their pre-Hispanic religious beliefs. Colombia also has a very low indigenous population and this seems to also be a factor. This changes immediately after crossing the border into Ecuador.

Ecuador has a large indigenous population with centuries old traditions that still linger. In the city of Latacunga, Ecuador, which is near the base of the Cotopaxi volcano, there is a three day Mama Negra festival every year. This festival is in honor of the Virgin of La Merced and is meant to protect the people from the frequent eruptions of Cotopaxi. Alcohol, devilish costumes, dead pigs, and consumptuous amounts of food are part of this three day event. This is just one of many passed down ancestral traditions and religious ceremonies.

Peru has many of these same practices as Ecuador but once I passed into Bolivia, the presence of bygone religions was apparent. As I walked through the Mercado de las Brujas, or Witch Market, in La Paz, I was taken by the sight of dead llama fetuses swinging in the breeze under the awnings of street vendors. These dried fetuses are used to bury under the building foundation to honor Pachamama, the goddess of the earth, as well as to protect the workers and bring the home or business good fortune. These dead and dried fetuses are for the poorer people of Bolivia. Those that can afford it buy live llamas to bury. The vendors were selling everything from dead frogs to aphrodisiac potions. La Paz has a strong influence from the Aymara civilization and this was apparent in the items for sale in the markets. Traveling further inland to the city of Potosi, I toured the famous silver mine in the nearby mountain of Cerro Potosi. A few hundred feet into most of the mine entrances is a small side shaft the workers enter before descending further into the mines. In this small side shaft is El Tio or “Uncle” in English. This figure appears to be the devil with his red skin and two horns protruding from his head, but he is actually the lord of the underworld and can give either protection or destruction. The miners offer him cigarettes,

alcohol, and coca leaves each time they put their lives into his hands and venture deeper into the mines of Potosi.

After leaving Bolivia and traveling south into Chile, it was evident that the pre-Hispanic religions had less of an impact on the Chilean Catholic religion. Once again, in Chile, as in Colombia, the indigenous population is much smaller than the countries in between. This seems to be the factor that drives the interweaving of pre-Hispanic religion with Catholicism. Hundreds of roadside shrines and monuments of Catholic type can be seen every few miles while traveling down Chilean highways. Catholic churches can be found almost everywhere one walks in the cities and towns and proves the existence of a Catholic majority as a religion.

Looking back over the countries I passed through and reflecting on how each country practices its beliefs, it is very clear that the civilizations of pre-Hispanic epochs have kept a strong grasp on the modern day lives of Latin Americans. It is evident in the sacrifices of food, alcohol, flowers, and candles at the feet of Saints and Virgins. It is evident in the costumes and rituals during Semana Santa and other religious holidays. It is even evident in the medicinal practices and cures of university educated doctors and medical personnel. The civilizations of the past have shaped and molded who these people are today.