



Religious Similarities between the Christian and Mayan Faiths

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“The Maya.” The phrase brings visions of the great temples at Chichen Itza dedicated to long-lost gods of the sun and death, and temples once lost in the leafy depths of the jungle. One envisions great stone carvings of kings and animal effigies and the calendar they created has baffled people for hundreds of years. Brought to mind are dark deeds of ritual sacrifice- hundreds slaughtered in ceremonies to help the sun god keep the world spinning and give them strength in battle. People today think of the Maya as a bloodthirsty culture. What they do not realize, however, is how similar the Mayan religion is to the Christian one. Many of the themes in the creation story follow the same arc, blood and sacrifice are important aspects of each, and even some of the rituals they practiced were similar.

While the creation story of the Maya can be confusing for someone of the modern western world to decipher, the story is very similar to how many creation stories start: with darkness. In the beginning there were just the gods and an ethereal dark sea. The gods made the Earth, mountains, trees, and animals. The animals would not however, pray to the gods or thank them for their creation. The gods decided they needed to create beings that would do this. After a few tries, the gods decided to make man, or the “first people” they did so out of staple foods like corn and cacao. The gods ground the staples together and used their own blood to create a dough from which to make people. They used the words:

The making, the modeling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food alone for the human legs and arms, for our first fathers, for the human works.¹

The people lived harmoniously, were wise and gave thanks to the gods. The deities realized however, that the people knew too much about the gods and their

¹ Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 148.

ways. The gods thought that this would make the people too much like their creators, so they blinded them, making them only able to see the world around them, and have no understanding of the gods and their ways. After this, humans were pretty much on their own.

We can see similarities to this creation story in the Christian Bible. The first book of Genesis describes how God created the world from darkness one day at a time. Over the course of six days, he created such things as water, light, land, and various flora and fauna. After resting and appreciating what he had created, he made man. God used his own breath to create life into this man.

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and
breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living
soul.²

God named this man Adam and placed him in a garden he made called Eden. Eventually, God created a partner for Adam called Eve. God forbade them from eating from one particular tree, but Eve could not resist temptation, and when they ate the fruit, they were cast out of Eden, never to see God again.

Looking at these creation stories side-by-side, we can see how they are not that different. They both have a world created from darkness by one or more gods, who place land and animals on this world before they create man. They also put physical aspects of themselves into the making of man, the Mayans with their blood, and the Christian with his breath. There is eventually an event that makes mankind unable to see the will of said God(s), giving them the need to worship in a way they think their creator would want.

For the Spanish conquistadors, having a similar creation story would be an incredible advantage in their conversion attempts. Explaining a creation that is drastically different from another can be difficult, therefore having these similarities would help to explain otherwise difficult concepts to grasp. Trying to explain to a culture whose gods live amongst them that they are not meant to know the will of God, would be, understandably, time consuming. In the case of the conversion of the Maya however, they already had this concept built into their faith, making this a

² Genesis 2:7 (KJV)

faster process. This would also possibly have made the Maya more trusting of the Spanish, and therefore more agreeable to conversion and conquest. The people of the Mayan area of Latin America are overwhelmingly Christian to this day, and the conversion process of the Spanish would have affected this religious growth.³

Blood sacrifice was important to the Maya, and contrary to popular belief of shamans ripping the hearts out of living victims, the most important form of sacrifice for the Maya would have been auto sacrifice. The most vital thing about the act of sacrifice was the giving of blood to the gods. This was a way of repaying the gods for all they had done for them. The gods mixed their own blood with the maize to create humans, their blood- their essence, was the most precious thing they could give. Inflicting pain on themselves would have had the most significance to the Mayan people in this “gift to the gods”. The blood of royals was often used to predict the future and the will of the gods. It was the most precious blood of all, and it was often dripped on paper and burned. A priest would read the signs in the smoke.⁴

To the Christians, blood is important as well. The Old Testament is filled with animal sacrifice. Noah built an altar and sacrificed animals after the flood.⁵ Moses was told to build an altar and make a sacrifice of sheep and oxen to God after he received the Ten Commandments.⁶ The Old Testament mentions human sacrifice, with Abraham being tested by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. In the end, God did not make him go through with it, but rewarded him for his faith.⁷ The purifying power of blood also appears in the New Testament. In this section of the Book, Jesus’ blood is holy and is the ticket to heaven. At the last supper, Jesus tells his followers

And he took the cup, and gave thanks,
and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it;
For this is my blood of the New Testament,

³ A Pew Forum survey from 2014 shows that 69% of people in Latin America identify as Catholic and 88% of people identify as Christian overall.

⁴ Arthur A Demarest. *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 184.

⁵ Genesis 8:20 (KJV) And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar

⁶ Exodus 20:24 (KJV) An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

⁷ Genesis 25 (KJV).

which is shed for many for the remission of sins.⁸

Here, Jesus is implying that when he dies, the blood he sheds will purify the sins of the world. He is saying essentially that he is *sacrificing* himself for the good of mankind. Many New Testament books mention this sacrifice in different ways. In Hebrews there is no “remission” without shedding blood.⁹ Paul tells the Corinthians to remember the sacrifice of Jesus by drinking wine.¹⁰

Here we can see the similarities of blood being powerful for both religions. Blood is given because it is the most basic thing humans have. We will die if we do not have it, and this is a show of faith to something they believe in. The Maya believed in their gods, the Old Testament people believed in God, and Jesus believed in the goodness of people, as he said to his followers in Luke 22:20 the blood “is shed for you.”¹¹

The concept of devoting oneself completely to one’s god is very compatible with Maya and Christian religions. This would also translate to sacrificing oneself for the “greater good”. Because the Maya understood community living, they would understand this type of sacrifice. This could have been used to justify to the Maya the Spanish enslavement of the poorer native people. The natives should be sacrificing themselves and their resources for the “good” of the new people coming into their communities.

Ritual was very important to the ancient Maya. There was ritual from birth to death and it encompassed every aspect of daily life. Like many non-Judeo/Christian cultures, the Maya practiced ancestor worship. Some would bury their ancestors in their family plaza, or under their house. They would make offerings to them and would hope that these ancestors would speak on their behalf to the gods to help in any troubles the living were experiencing. One can make connections between this ancestor worship and to today’s Día de las Ñatitas in Bolivia and Dias de Los Muertos in Mexico and across the world.

⁸ Matthew 26:27-28 (KJV).

⁹ Hebrews 9:22 (KJV). “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.”

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:24 (KJV). “And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.”

¹¹ Luke 22:20 (KJV) Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

Children were often blessed in a ritual similar to baptism, to release sin, and to dedicate the child to the Mayan religion. They would do this in groups, as there may not have been a priest on hand, so the children ranged in ages. When there were enough young children in a Mayan village, the children and parents would gather, and a priest would bless and purify them with “incense, tobacco, and holy water”.¹²

Like many ancient cultures around the world, the people of Mesoamerica preferred stoning and beating as forms of punishment.¹³ In fact, the Maya would have a rite of release of sin from a community that involved this very punishment. When a person or village wanted to be purified of sin, they would tell all of their misdoings to one person (usually an old woman). This person was then killed, most likely by stoning. It was thought that the sins of the village would have died with this person and “It was believed that by her death, the whole town would be purified.”¹⁴

Christians do not practice ancestor worship per se; however, a close second is saint worship. According to Catholiceducationresourcecenter.org, one must die in fame of sanctity or of martyrdom and have not said anything heretical against the faith. If this is approved, the case is extensively investigated by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. The next step, assuming the person is not a martyr, the candidate must have one to two miracles attributed to them depending on circumstances. Once a saint, practitioners will typically pray to them for help in their daily lives. Saint Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of animals and the environment and therefore is prayed to for the protection of pets. Saint Jude is the patron saint for lost causes and is prayed to for severe diseases like late-stage cancers. Saint Michael represents military personnel and is said to give aid in battle. Many people travel long distances to see and worship at the remains or “relics” of these saints, which are housed in various religious sanctuaries.

The sacrament of baptism is very important in the practice of Christianity. One is born without the Holy Spirit, and when one is baptized, they receive it. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”¹⁵ Usually a priest will sprinkle holy water on a child’s head or, in the

¹² Michael D. Coe and Stephen D. Houston *The Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2020), 233.

¹³ Mary Ellen Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 86.

¹⁴ Ibid, 66.

¹⁵ Mark 16:16 (KJV)

case of older people, will aid in the person being dipped into sanctified pools or rivers. Typically, this happens when one is a baby in most denominations. Mormons get baptized at eight years old, and Seventh Day Adventists do this around twelve years old, this later age is so that the child has some knowledge of the faith already in them before they receive the Spirit.

Like the Maya, the Bible advocates stoning as a punishment especially in the Old Testament. If a son is known by his parents to be rebellious, he is to be stoned to death by the whole city.¹⁶ In Leviticus 24:16, one can be stoned to death for blasphemy.¹⁷ In fact, this caused Jesus some trouble in the New Testament. When Jesus came to the temple of Solomon, the Jews were ready to stone him. When Jesus asked why they would do this, as he had shown them only good works in his father's (God) name, they answered that they were to stone him because he claimed to *be* God even though he is a man and therefore committing blasphemy. He tries to talk himself out of it and being unsuccessful, escapes the crowd.¹⁸

The act of confessing one's sins in Christianity is important to the faithful attempting to achieve sacraments. A Christian practitioner will confess their sins and wrongdoings to a priest. This usually happens on a one-to-one basis, and the sinner is given prayers or works to complete in order to absolve themselves of the sin. Paul explains to the Romans in the New Testament that God is merciful when he writes "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."¹⁹ In this he is explaining the concept that when one confesses with a pure and willing heart, one can and will be saved.

The correlations between the religious practices would doubtlessly not have been lost on the Spanish conquistadors and the priests that accompanied them in the 1500s. The *Popol Vuh* was compiled shortly after the Conquest in 1550 and tackles the early stories of Maya. It has been translated time and time again by the Spanish, so we must often corroborate these stories with carvings that are on stele and in

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 21:20-21 (KJV). "And they shall say unto the elders of his city, this our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear."

¹⁷ Leviticus 24:16 (KJV). "And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death."

¹⁸ John 10:23-33 (KJV).

¹⁹ Romans 10:10 (KJV).

temples. Explaining to the Maya that the baptism was for babies, and was intended to imbue them with God's spirit, would not have been a stretch. The Maya already worshiped relics; therefore, the Spanish would only have had to explain the concept of saints and sainthood to the converts. The concept of a god who forgives sin and rewards the faithful and the righteous is something that the Maya would have understood. Sacrifice and ritual were fundamental in the daily life of a Mayan person and because of this, the priests that came to the so-called New World were able to convert these people to Christianity with less trouble than they must have expected. Even today, the Christianity practiced in what is now Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, as well as parts of Mexico and El Salvador is sprinkled with aspects of the old religion. All Saints Day (*Día de Todos Los Santos*) in Guatemala is celebrated as a festival for the dead. Traditional Mayan clothing is worn, alters are constructed with offerings of tobacco and alcohol for the dead, and they often fly kites with Mayan designs. This festival is a prime example of the ability the two religions and peoples were able to combine and create their own identity. In the conversion to Christianity, the Maya were able to keep a part of their own religion and rituals while still serving the Christian God.