

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

LATIN AMERICAN RELIGION

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ANCIENT PERIOD

Preclassic (1st Millennium BCE)

Mesoamerica : Olmecs The Olmecs lived in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico on the Gulf of Mexico. The most important location was San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, where a civilization arose in the fertile alluvial plains. Artisan items and rather ornate artifacts were produced of jade, obsidian, and magnetite, which suggested trading networks. Shamanism was important in the Olmec religion, and the shamans possessed powers associated with an animal or animal-quality (spirit or essence). One of the most important was the jaguar god, which was recognized by its almond-shaped eyes and downturned open mouth. The animals that imbued the shamans with their powerful qualities were called “nuhuals” and the shamans who has the jaguar power were referred to as “were-jaguars.” In addition to creating monuments that reflected the religious beliefs. They also incorporated their religious beliefs about the “nahuals” in their pottery, figurines, and jade carvings, which were traded and exchanged in the region. Their ceremonial centers included massive sculptures of heads, and also ornate *stelae*, which included carvings representing the Olmec gods. There were at least 10 different Olmec deities. The Olmec beliefs were shared by subsequent peoples, including the Toltecs and Mixtecs, who also adopted the shamanistic traditions of animal spirits and gods.

South America : Chavin Culture The Chavin people lived in the Andean highlands in Peru and Ecuador from 900 to 200 BCE. Their religious practices took place in the *Chavin de Huantar* temple, which has several interesting design elements. The first is that it is constructed of heavy rocks which are not found near the temple, but were desirable for their black and white appearance which allowed meaningful patterns. Also, the temple was constructed to maximize the sounds of rushing water and wind, which were considered sacred. The Chavins considered the jaguar to be a spirit guide, and an agent of transformation.

Classic Period (1st Millennium)

Mesoamerica : Maya Religious texts and beliefs are in evidence in San Bartolo (northern Guatemala), Monte Alban (southern Mexico / Oaxaca), and Tikal (northern Guatemala): The Maya believed that both animate and inanimate objects have sacred qualities, and that there is an innate spirituality in everything in the world. Their word for the sacred quality was “k’uh” and also “k’uhul.” For the Maya, the earth was created as a result of the god of the skies and wind, Huracán (Hurricane), who made the sky and the earth come together. Animals and plants were created first, and then only later, humans were created in order to honor the gods.

Shape-Shifting and Cyclic Extinction: The most recent Mayan cities and temples demonstrated an evolution in the religion in that it tended to emphasize transmutation and shape-shifting, as well as the animation of inanimate objects. The cosmology of the underworld is not as prominent, nor are the creation myths that detail the three episodes of creation (clay people, wood-reed people, flesh&blood people). However, the calendar is emphasized as is a narrative pointing to a future cycle of mass extinction and rebirth. The event is predicted as the end of the world, which is, in reality the end of a cycle.

Creation Mythology The Popol Vuh has an account of three different creations: the first were made of mud, but they were not able to speak intelligently and were destroyed with water. The second creation involved creating men from wood and women from reeds. They, however, did not have souls and could not honor the gods. So, they were destroyed with hot, boiling water. Finally, the third creation involved making humans made of white and yellow maize, and the blood of the gods. While the different creation myths vary, what they have in common is the idea that creations are cyclical, and that there will undoubtedly be another destruction of humans, with a subsequent rebirth. The apocalyptic narrative focuses not only on destruction, but also in regeneration and rebirth.

South America : Mochica (or, Moche) flourished along the Pacific coast of Peru, from 100 – 700 AD. The religion reflected the culture’s need to defend itself against its neighbors, and from the artifacts that remain, seemed to center

on human sacrifice, with an emphasis on decapitation and blood-letting. Whether or not this was actually the case is not easily determined; after all, the archeological record consists of the materials that resist the assaults of weather and time, and the time-resistant sculptures of stone are those that speak for the entirety of the culture. The fact that they feature individuals holding the decapitated heads of others, and portray ritual blood-letting gives the impression that such practices predominated when it is possible that they did not.

POSTCLASSIC PERIOD

Mesoamerica : Aztecs Like the Maya, the Aztecs believed that the world and humanity would be destroyed and regenerated, not once, but with predictable regularity. Their calendar helped them follow the progression to the present day, which was considered to be the final age. The Aztec calendar was also very important in helping keep track of the special feast days for the Aztec gods and goddesses. The Aztecs had a large pantheon of gods, and the ones listed above represent only a few. Virtually all aspects of life had at least one corresponding god. All the gods required abeyance, and so it was important to find a way to coordinate the ceremonies and festivals that honored them by means of festivals, banquets, dancing, music, decorations, incense-burning, penance and human and animal sacrifice. It was important to honor the gods, because if they were not sufficiently honored, they would punish humanity by means of natural disasters. The larger the need, the bigger the sacrifice. The highest-quality sacrifices were considered to be warriors who had shown valor in battle.

South America : Inca The Inca Empire was the largest empire in the world at the time that it flourished, between 1400 – 1533 CE. At their height, there were 10 million inhabitants in the Inca Empire, and they were ruled by 40,000 Incas. Within the empire, there were at least 30 different languages, which led to the development of quipus (coded knots and strings), which recorded statistics and communicated calculations. Central to Inca religious belief was the progression of the Sun, Moon and stars, and a sense of how the world's history could be predicted through the movement of the constellations and the Milky Way. The Inca religion possessed several aspects in common with other religions of the time, such as the Aymara, Moche, and Tiwanaku. Inca religious practices centered around ancestor worship, and they often offered food, drink, and precious items to the ancestors at their tombs. The Inca practiced mummification. As in other parts of South America, the Incas practiced sacrifice of animals and humans, even children in order to appease the gods. The pouring of libation (water or chichi beer) was also included in the rituals. In comparison with other South American or Mesoamerican civilizations, the Incas did not devote as much space or time to temples or religious practices. However, the Temple of the Sun in present-day Quito was sufficiently imposing to motivate the invading Spaniards to take it down and to erect a huge cathedral in its stead.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (Colonial)

The Catholic Church served as a powerful force to eradicate the belief systems of the indigenous peoples and their civilizations, and to replace them with that of the Roman Catholic Church, which was a powerful and rich political entity, which often ruled “hand in glove” with the Spanish and Portuguese invaders. The conquest was brutal in many ways. Religious centers were razed to the ground and Catholic churches quickly built on top of them.

Spanish Priests: Early accounts by writers such as Father Bartolome de las Cases provide important descriptions of the religious practices as viewed through the eyes of a European. They were, without exception, shocking to the European, particularly the practice of human sacrifice and polytheism. Catholic priests, such as the Jesuits, established missions with the express purpose of imposing a new culture on the old one, and along the way, harness native labor and talent in the construction of Christian monuments, churches, schools, monasteries, and more.

Syncretic Catholicism: The Catholic religion, as practiced in Mesoamerica and South America, quickly absorbed and even appropriated the different gods and their functions, to the point that many saints and saint days were thinly veiled practices of indigenous religions.

19TH CENTURY

Catholic Church Aligned with New Nations: The Catholic Church often supported the Spanish or Portuguese rulers, which is one reason why the power base stayed intact for so many centuries. However, in the 1830s, when

Simon Bolivar started to move through South America and country after country declared independence from Spain, many priests and representatives of the Catholic Church supported independence from Spain.

Mennonites: Religious persecution in Europe resulted in waves of emigration to Central and South America. While it never achieved the same intensity as in North America, the diaspora of diverse persecuted groups did result in clusters of different isolates, which include Mennonites and also Mormons.

20TH CENTURY

A Religious War: The failure to truly achieve a separation of church and state resulted in the violent Cristera War in Mexico. After that war, the government of Mexico officially declared that church and State must remain separate.

Liberation Theology: Politically active priests such as Romero in El Salvador, sided with Marxists rebels during the Cold War, resulting in clashes between priests, nuns, the Church, and fascistic right-wing dictators. The use of Christian doctrine to rise up against social inequality and fascism was referred to as “liberation theology,” and it was often mixed with the Marxist writings of Che Guevara and others.

Discussion Questions

1. The Aztecs believed that they were created by the blending of the blood of the gods and corn. However, they were not the first people to be created; the gods had to destroy two other attempts, because their creations were defective. The Inca believed that they were created from giants from the stars who descended into the earth, and where they emerged, they created human beings. In both cases, the ongoing existence of the human beings was provisional. They had to please the gods or be destroyed. Describe the creation stories or myths from Mesoamerica and South America and evaluate the nature of the gods in terms of archetypes and models.
2. The idea of ritual human sacrifice is repugnant to most people living today. Yet, it was common throughout the Americas. What were the characteristics of human sacrifice? Were they simply religious ceremonies? What were deeper purposes of ritual human sacrifice and displays of self-torture? How did the Spaniards respond to human sacrifice?
3. The Conquest was a two-pronged effort with government / military on one side, and religion on the other. The most coordinated attacks occurred in the large religious centers, including Tenochtitlan, Cuzco and Quito, where the Church was quick to build over the temples. But, they did not succeed in eradicating the religions. Please describe how the ancient religions persist.

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