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Religious Syncretism in Spanish Latin America: Survival, Power, and Resistance

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History and Problems in the Usage of Syncretism

When studying the history of religions as well as cultural encounters, the issue of religious syncretism is frequently evoked; yet, the phenomenon itself is rarely defined specifically by the scholars who study these religious interactions. This is not an inherent fault of theirs as the phenomenon of religious syncretism is only vaguely defined by the anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion that specialize in its study.¹ No single widely accepted definition exists in the field of religious studies.² Attempts to define, outline, and explain syncretism have been met with stark disagreement and scholarly debate over the past several decades. Although theories have emerged that begin to resolve the problems inherent in the usage of the term syncretism, many scholars still avoid the term due to the history of political problems with the term and the lack of scholarly consensus.

The term syncretism was invented in the first century A.D. by the Greek historian Plutarch to describe the Cretans' act of uniting in the face of a common enemy.³ This use of the term derives from the Latin prefix *syn* with the word for the Cretans, *kretoi*, to create a meaning similar to "as the Cretans did".⁴ The modern definition of syncretism, however, has little to do with Plutarch's employment of the term. The modern usage of syncretism seems to derive from the Greek verb *synkerannumi*—to mix together—creating the word that is now used to describe religious mixture.⁵ The Latin translation of this Greek word, *confusio*, although referring to a mingling or mixing, coincidentally alludes to some of the modern problems of utilizing syncretism in the study of religion: confusion.

In the 17th century, during the Protestant Reformation, the term syncretism became imbued with a negative theological connotation that many scholars claim still persists within the usage of the term and study of the phenomenon today. The term was used polemically to connote a "straying" from the orthodoxy by Protestant theologians.⁶ According to religious historian Kurt Rudolph, "syncretists" were viewed as "sin-cretists" during this time period.⁷ This connotation remained in place throughout the missionary expansion into the 20th century.⁸ This led to a series of problems within the study of syncretism and thus to the complexities of the term as a descriptor. Although not as common, syncretism is still used to delegitimize "impure"

¹ In Charles Stewart's exploration of syncretism in "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture", he concludes that the best possible current definition was "the combination of elements of two or more religions within a specified frame". Although I do admire Stewart's scholarship in the field, it can be admitted, and he does, that this definition is relatively vague. His work represents the problem of definition inherent in the study of syncretism.

² Anita Leopold. "The Architecture of Syncretism: A Methodological Illustration of the Dynamics of Syncretism." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27.3 (Berghahn Books, 2001) 40.

³ Anita Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen eds. *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (Routledge, 2014) 14.

⁴ Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 14.

⁵ Luther H. Martin, "Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8.2 (Brill Press, 1996) 216.

⁶ Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 14.

⁷ Rudolph (in Leopold 2014) (69)

⁸ Charles Stewart. "Syncretism and Its Synonyms: Reflections on Cultural Mixture." *Diacritics* 29.3 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 46.

religious change by Christian theologians.⁹ Understandably, this makes many scholars hesitant to use the term due to its associations with Christian triumphalism.

The biases of Christian theologians seeped into the beginnings of the study of the phenomenon of syncretism in the late 19th and early 20th century. One of the more problematic biases is that of ethnocentricity.¹⁰ In its early scholarly usage, syncretism was largely deployed to signify a disruption to religious coherence and purity, specifically *European* religious coherence and purity. This use of the term, especially in correlation with the study of colonized cultures, effectively attempted to delegitimize the reception of different religions by subjugated individuals, groups, and cultures. When employed in this sense by the initial scholars of the 20th century studying the reception of Christianity by colonized cultures, the term signified a clearly Eurocentric approach. The syncretic religion created by the colonized indigenous peoples was judged by the standard 'orthodoxy' of European Christianity and marked as impure if it differed from this 'orthodoxy'.¹¹ This usage propagated a system of judgements in which non-European or even non-elite European religions and dialects of Christianity were devalued due to their difference from the European standard.¹²

Due to its origins in theological essentialism, rooting out the ethnocentricity and bias within the study of syncretism became a main focus of scholars during the 20th century. This changed the notion of syncretism into a hotly debated topic and there became a tradition of denouncing the most recent or accepted approach as theologically or ethnocentrically biased. If we look at a series of three scholars who built on each other's work from 1938-1970, we can clearly see this pattern. One of the early scholars of syncretism, Hendrik Kraemer, argued that syncretism be understood theologically as evidence that all religions are essentially one, different interpretations of the same transcendent reality. However, he claimed that there was one religion that was not inherently syncretistic: his own. Kraemer is a good example of how syncretism was used to validate one religion and invalidate its opponents. He is also an important example of how these biases can be hidden within the theory. In 1968, J.H. Kamstra took up Kraemer's views and argued for a return of syncretism to a non-theological usage. Soon after, Michael Pye took up Kamstra's viewpoints and argued about the biased errors of Kamstra on "syncretism from without", claiming that Kamstra saw outside sources as a threat to an existing religion or cosmology.¹³ Specifically in the discourse between Kamstra and Pye, we can see the speed at which the notion of syncretism changed and was challenged. Subsequently,

⁹ Luther H. Martin, "To Use 'Syncretism' or Not to Use 'Syncretism': That Is the Question." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27.3 (Berghahn Books, 2001) 400.

¹⁰ Due to the origins of the study of this concept, ethnocentricity is not hard to find in this field. Nor are its instances random as scholars who employ the term syncretism often make the same mistaken assumptions.

¹¹ The quotation marks utilized around the term orthodoxy here are a reference to the complicated notion of Orthodoxy in European Christianity (as well as any religion). Many scholars also disagree with the usage of this term as "orthodoxy" typically describes what is stated by those who control the religion, rather than what is actually practiced and believed. In reality, the boundaries and centers of religion are much less perceptible (if they even exist at all). For more on this topic, see Smoller 2014 "Popular Religious Culture" and Benavides 2001 "Power, Intelligibility, and the Boundaries of Religion".

¹² These religions are dialects to European Christianity's "language" only in the sense that, as historian of religions Gustavo Benavides puts it, "languages are dialects with an army". The term dialect vs. language here does not connote the relative validity but rather the relative power relations between the two religions. For more on this, see Benavides 2001 "Power, Intelligibility, and the Boundaries of Religion".

¹³ Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 14. Kraemer and Pye are both published in this source.

Michael Pye has been challenged on his understanding of syncretism due to his value based labeling of “major” and “minor” religions as well as his view that syncretism is an unresolved and temporary state of tension within a religion, ultimately reverting back to the idea of syncretism as a deviation or threat to a religion and its stability.¹⁴

As illustrated above, the definition and study of syncretism was constantly changing and evolving during the 20th century. Furthermore, as each new development was discovered to harbor ethnocentricity, misconceptions about religions, or bias against so-called syncretisms, many scholars lost hope that syncretism would ever have an unproblematic definition. Scholars in the field such as Robert Baird and A.J. Droge called for the elimination of the term syncretism altogether. They argued that, since syncretism is a natural characteristic of all religions, labeling a religion as syncretic does nothing for our understanding besides indicating a cultural bias or intent to delegitimize a religion.¹⁵ Although I empathize with their frustration over the term, I agree with scholars Anita Leopold and Siv Ellen Kraft in their arguments that the elimination of the term syncretism does not eliminate the phenomenon and does not eliminate the mistreatment of cultures in scholarly study either. So how do we proceed with the study of syncretism while avoiding the problems of definition and bias? To start, it is helpful to look to the wave of scholars in the 1990’s and early 2000’s who took up the issue of syncretism. Many of their conclusions give helpful advice on how to tweak the study to offer the most precise and least biased study of cultural and religious interactions. Drawing on their scholarship, this paper aims to create a definition, model, and approach to use in this study of Spanish Latin America that fulfills two primary conditions:

- a) Does not harbor a bias towards the dominant religion or culture
- b) Portrays syncretism as a legitimate creation rather than a deviation

II

Solutional Framework, Model, and Redefinition

One of the most important concepts to include in the redefinition is that of mutual cultural exchange. John Elliott asserts that “...when one belief system engages with another, each is likely to be forced into some degree of adaptation”.¹⁶ This perspective was first emphasized in Hugo Nutini’s 1971 analysis of the cult of saints in Tlaxcala, Mexico. In this study on syncretism, he attempted to emphasize the change not only in the people’s belief, but also in the two pre-existing belief systems. This focus is extremely important to the creation of an unbiased approach. Studies that ignore the mutual aspect of the phenomenon paint the indigenous cultures as mixed or as adopting “prestigious” European traits and portray the European culture as pure and stable by effectively ignoring or failing to report the opposing side of the cultural

¹⁴ Pye was challenged in Luther Martin’s “Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye”.

¹⁵ A.J. Droge, “Retrofitting/Retiring ‘Syncretism’” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27.3 (Berghahn Books, 2001)

¹⁶ J.H. Elliott, “Religions on the Move” *Religious Transformation in the Early Modern Americas*, ed Stephanie Kirk and Sarah Hivett (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) 37. Many scholars such as Benavides, Stewart, and Fernando Ortiz in his study of Cuban culture have asserted similar if not identical claims in their research. Perhaps the most relevant study dealing with this cultural exchange aspect of syncretism is Nutini 1976 “Syncretism and Acculturation: The Development of the Cult of the Patron Saint in Tlaxcala Mexico”.

exchange. Yet again, we see indigenous culture and religion portrayed as mixed and their European counterparts as pure. Although the ethnocentric value judgements are not as explicit in these studies as in the early studies of syncretism, one can see how this assumption leads to ethnocentricity in the field of syncretism. This bias of exclusively focusing on the 'encountered culture' in reporting or observing the encounter leads to labeling indigenous, colonized, or new religions as syncretic but not the colonizing religion that was also a part of the interaction. This leads to the false assumption that syncretism is only characteristic of these indigenous religions, that they stem off of (and inherently, by this branch of logic, deviate from) the colonizing religions whereas what has been proven repeatedly is that syncretism is a natural characteristic of *all* religions.¹⁷

Thus, a successful model must clearly account for the exchange in both cultures. The question of how to do this is challenging. Simply focusing on examples of syncretism in both cultures is not enough. This study will argue and prove that, in colonial situations, there was a greater need for the colonized culture to syncretize due to their need to survive the conquerors who often required some aspect of conversion. By focusing specifically on elements or traditions of mixed origins, our study will automatically reflect the biases of the colonial encounter as there are usually more syncretisms created on the colonized side due to the need to survive. Additionally, the conquering side refused to report the syncretisms in their own religion due to their attempts to superiorize their religion, a process that the negative associations with syncretism would have inhibited. In order to adequately account for and examine mutual cultural exchange we must look for mutual cultural *change* as well. This entails, instead of a focus on syncretisms, a broader focus that examines all religious change that is a result of the encounter between the two religions. This will most importantly include the change to the two (or more) original religions that interacted.

Instead of understanding syncretism in the genealogical sense of Figure 1 as scholars have understood it in the past, incorporating an approach that accounts for mutual cultural change creates the new understanding visualized in Figure 2. The genealogical model depicts religions as stable structures; however our new model importantly describes religions as objects in motion. When these religions meet and interact with each other, they collide and parts of them shatter to form new religious formations. Many of these shattered parts may merge with shattered parts of the other religion to make "blended" traditions or elements that have previously been identified as syncretisms. This can be seen in the model by the shades of purple created from the red and blue religious systems. But to focus on just these "blended" religions misses the full picture. There are also new religious formations or trends that are not blended by origin but are created/a direct result of the religious collision. Furthermore, the two pre-existing religions, when they collide and bounce off of each other, are both changed in their course. By emphasizing the mutual cultural change inherent in what has previously been described as syncretisms, we end up with a model that describes syncretisms (blended religious elements, traditions, or formations) as a result of the religious collision of two or more religions.

¹⁷ Although Michael Pye does harbor some ethnocentricity in his usage of the terms "major" and "minor" religions, he did correctly assert that syncretism was a characteristic of all religions in "Syncretism and Ambiguity" Pye 1971. This fact is also elaborated on in Baird 1991, Stewart 1999, Droge 2001, and Luther 1996 among many other prominent religious scholars.

However, this model also describes that these “syncretisms” are not the only product of the interaction: new religious elements, traditions, and formations are created that are not of

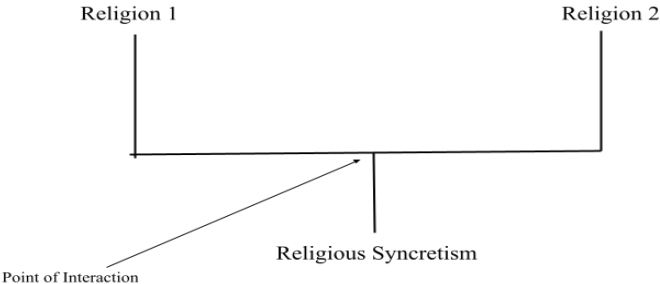


Figure 1

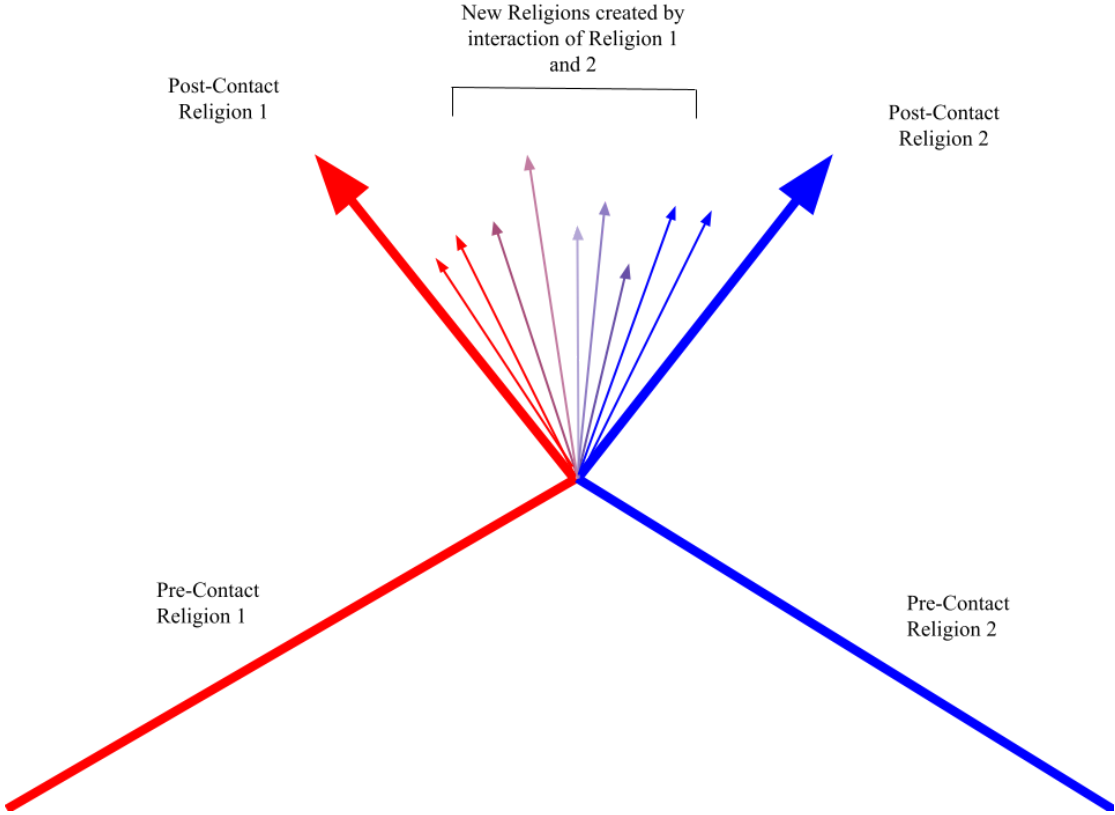


Figure 2

blended origins and the initial interacting religions are also affected. This model necessitates that, when one seeks to study syncretism, one must study the full scope of the religious “collision” or interaction rather than just things of blended origin. To unbiasedly study the interaction of religions and the notion of ‘syncretism’ is to study *all* of the new religious elements and formations, blended or not, as well as the changes within the pre-existing religions that initially collided with each other. This study will adopt this perspective and utilize ‘syncretism’ to refer to all of the religious change and creation that has its origins in the religious collision.¹⁸ The focus of this study will revolve around the religious change and creation on all levels of belief (individual, societal, systematic) that results from the religious collision rather than just the creation of religious elements of blended origin.

Another extremely important focus within the study of syncretism is power. As the model above describes, religious syncretism derives from an interaction between two or more religions. Very rarely are these two religions of equal political power when they interact. This power imbalance will affect how these religions react. Religious scholars such as Gustavo Benavides, Andrew Apter, and André Droogers all affirm that the notion of power is an extremely influential notion in the study of syncretism as it can influence the direction that syncretisms take, almost like a gravitational pull. In terms of mutual cultural change, we must keep in mind that, often, the power dominant religion will be less changed than the subjugated religion as it does not have to adapt as much because it is the religion that largely controls the conditions of the encounter. The model pictured above (Figure 2) indicates two religions with relatively equal political power that create syncretisms with less political power (their respective power is indicated visually by their width). We can alter the model to illustrate a religious interaction with a skewed power dynamic if necessary:

¹⁸ I am hesitant to redefine syncretism as something other than a religious element, tradition, or formation of blended origin based on this model (although I do think this model could have the potential to do so); however, I strongly believe that this model has very important implications for the study of syncretism.

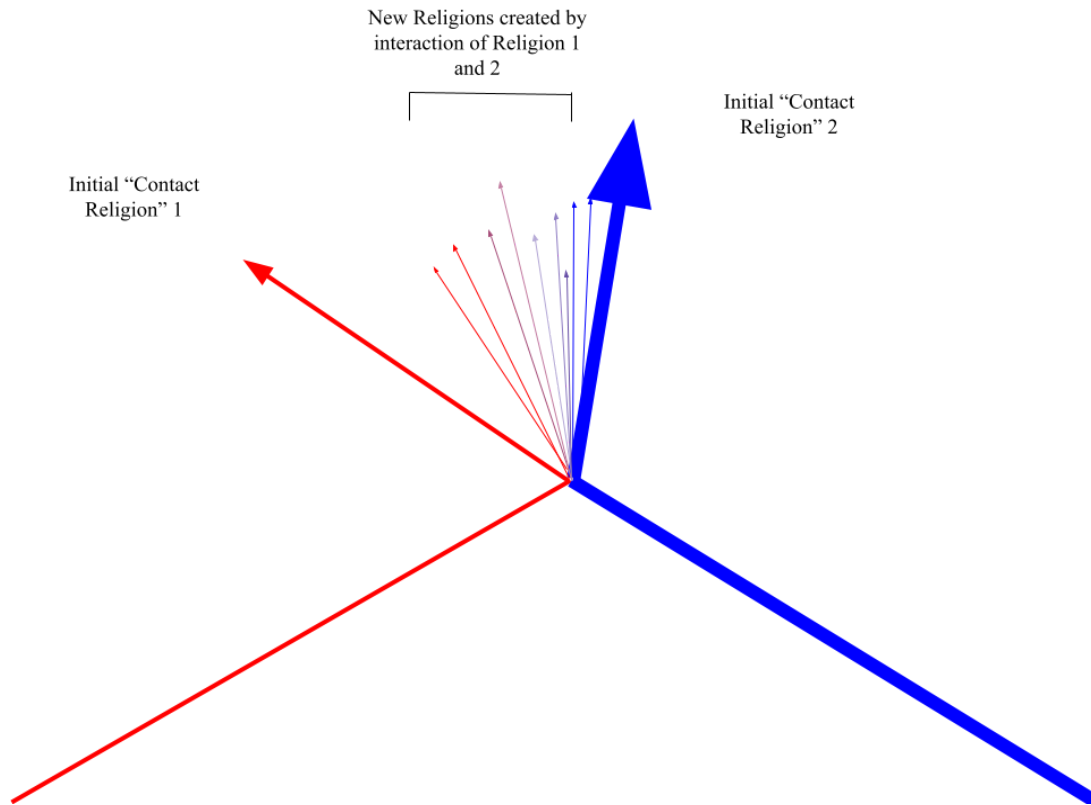


Figure 3

By drawing on some of the ideas of past scholars, we have created the above dynamic model that eliminates the known biases from the study of syncretism. This model can accurately describe syncretism based on conditions of power while also accounting for new non-blended formations and the changes in the initial religions. This study of Spanish Latin America will use this model as a methodological framework in which to analyze the scope of religious change resulting from the encounter/collision of Spanish Catholicism and the various native and African religions that were present in the New World.

III

Cognitive Selection, Focus, and Thesis

A very important theory of religious syncretism that this paper builds on is Luther Martin's theory of cognitive selection. Martin argues that the process of syncretism is a relatively conscious one in which choices are made between elements of religions; an individual's faith in this theory consists almost entirely of elements consciously selected by the individual. He argues that the process of syncretism is "erected on the constraints of cognition itself" and is therefore not a random but a predictable process. Martin's proposition implies that selectivity is a function of the human mind and that the origins of syncretic 'blending' are derived from that process.¹⁹ This theory has largely been accepted by recent scholars in the study of syncretism due to its reinforcement by psychological research as "the activity of fusing, 'mixing', or 'blending', does not present a problem to the human mind".²⁰ Anita Leopold, historian of

¹⁹ Luther H. Martin, "Syncretism, Historicism, and Cognition: A Response to Michael Pye." 221

²⁰ Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 9

religions, evidences this by introducing the theory of conceptual blending proposed by psychologists Fauconnier and Turner which describes that we create and store systems of information and meaning cognitively by blending a variety of sources and information that may or may not be contradictory. These psychologists claim that there are constraints to how we blend so “we must look for the social rules and group interplays that constrain the endless...possibility of conceptual blending”.²¹ Martin echoes this idea in his conclusion of his theory on cognitive selection as he claims that syncretism is not an accident of cultures but rather a specific selective cognitive process in which rules can be found to predict and explain why certain religious elements are chosen/discarded. Essentially, if we can deduce, discover, and evidence these rules, we can create a blueprint for syncretism (and potentially even religion as a whole since syncretism is a part of a larger religious collision that motivates religious change).

The theory of cognitive selection works very well because it emphasizes the agency of historical figures. Rather than visualizing historical figures as passive figures who acquiesced to the larger flow of religions, this theory describes them as active agents who *create* the flow of religion consciously and intentionally by selecting the elements of a religion to keep or eliminate. I will argue, and this paper will show, that this selection process is not constrained just to blended syncretic scenarios but the entire scope of a religious collision as defined in the aforementioned model. If individuals are able to select from the elements between two or more religions to create their own “syncretic” belief, won’t other individuals also apply the same process to a pre-existing religion over time, selecting which elements will be kept/eliminated and creating new ones based on a predictable set of criteria? If we return to the model visualized in Figures 2 and 3, we can use the theory of cognitive selection to predict the direction of the initial and newly created religions after the collision.

In general, research into the cognitive aspects of syncretism have shown it to be similar to foreign language acquisition in which new religions are judged through the lens of the religion one holds, more specifically, the religion one learned during childhood.²² During the conquest of America, natives who had grown up in Aztec society were much less likely to convert completely than their younger counterparts who had little to no experience in pre-Spanish America but had both sets of beliefs available in their societies (although the prevalence of them may have differed due to Spanish repression of indigenous religion)²³ Thus, it is not contrary to logic, history, or past research to operate on the assumption that individuals most often gravitate towards the religion they have been taught or currently hold in the face of a new belief system. Using this assumption, we can create a framework that regards religious syncretism as a largely conscious and agentic operation, drawing on and aligning with the theory of cognitive selectivity proposed by Martin. By incorporating this theory, the model proposed in this paper will answer the following questions to explain the religious change and creation that occurs after an interaction/collision of religions: why are certain elements chosen to integrate rather than their counterparts?; why are certain elements of a religion discarded?; why are other elements

²¹ Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 148

²² Light 2000, Anita Leopold, *Syncretism in Religion*, 381.

²³ J.J. Klor De Alva, “Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity.” *The Inca and Aztec States, 1400-1800: Anthropology and History* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 348.

transformed?; why do certain elements stay the same?; why are new elements introduced?; and finally, how do we resolve the power element that seems to be inherent within the study of these syncretistic situations due to their colonial context but also due to the potential association between power and religion as a whole?

To answer the above questions, I propose a heuristic model that derives from Darwin's survival of the fittest theory. The selection of religious elements in the scope of this study can be predicted based on three factors: survival, power, and resistance. By aligning this heuristic model with Darwin's theory, the religious elements become more or less "traits" that help an individual survive and prosper.

This paper will evidence these claims through a thorough analysis of Spanish Latin America from conquest until approximately the end of the early modern period (1750-1800). This area is well-suited for the study of syncretism as it was the point of encounter and clash between myriad societies with large variations in religious beliefs. Africans and Indigenous Peoples contributed to the large variety of religious and cultural elements. On the other end, the Spanish colonizers brought a violent version of their Christian religion to America that was relatively intolerant to the pre-existing religious beliefs of the subjugated populations. Spanish Christianity was universalist, claiming that their god was the one and only true god for all peoples.²⁴ Thus, the Christian religion was imposed onto the subjugated populations with quite cruel treatment towards those who did not accept it, necessitating a need for the subjugated population to adapt their religious beliefs. As the Spaniards' right to the land in America was tied with their duty to evangelize the natives, Christianity and conversion became central focuses of the conquest. On the Spanish side of the conquest, their self imposed power and authority in the New World was derived from their religious beliefs. This led to many new changes, selections, and conditions of the religion that were used to bolster and cement their authority in the New World. On the subjugated and non-European side, religion became a tool to enhance survival as well as resist colonial rule often through bolstering an individual's or group's power. Ultimately, what we see is a rich site for religious syncretism. There were a variety of religious beliefs to select from in a society in which religion had an important role. The clash of beliefs was well recorded through Inquisition records, memoirs, and other legal and religious records. Individuals of both sides of the conquest either resisted, reinforced, or inverted the power dynamics inherent in the colonial situation through religious selection and syncretism, and their motivations for selection fell into the three aforementioned predictor categories.

IV Survival

Survival was one of the primary motivators for religious selection in this time period. Non-Europeans and Europeans alike sought out supernatural beings to worship and religious practices such as healing that would theoretically ensure their survival either literally or through divine protection/intervention. This theory is affirmed by past scholars of syncretism. Ulrich Berner, historian of religions, asserts that syncretism as a survival mechanism works well as syncretism often occurs under environments of pressure in which groups have to adapt to

²⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 105.

survive.²⁵ Fernando Cervantes, who studied the Latin American religions and conquest, claimed that “religious concepts are rooted in specific ways of responding and reacting to the natural environment”.²⁶ According to these scholars, religious syncretism and potentially religion as a whole has a correlation with the factor of survival.

In Spanish Latin America, one of the religious practices most connected with survival was that of native and African healing. Healing in the New World serves as a strong case study for the selection of religious beliefs based on survival, one that included both colonized and colonizer groups. The Spanish colonies in America had little medical aid or personnel in comparison to the large population of Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous Peoples living there.²⁷ The lack of medicine necessitated another source of healing. Native and African healing methods were demonized and frowned upon by Inquisitors due to their association with magical practices or the *peyote* hallucinogen.²⁸ Yet, their help was often consulted in the New World by Europeans and non-Europeans alike, regardless of the official perspective. Ana de Pinto, a mulatto healer, consulted a Spanish constable named Bartolome de Ruiz. Ruiz reportedly welcomed her treatments, despite the inclusion of prohibited hallucinogens and “witchcraft” elements.²⁹ In this instance, Ruiz chose to sacrifice his hierarchical position in the New World (even if just for a moment) and submitted to a mulatto woman. He chose to ignore the prohibited methods of treatment so he could be healed. When Ana asked him if he would drink her concoction, he replied that “to have health, there was nothing he wouldn’t take”. Ruiz’s statement mirrored the actions of many others in Spanish America as members of all sectors of society routinely consulted indigenous and African healers due to the necessity of their service for survival.³⁰ Despite the official condemnation against magical healing practices, healers were usually only denounced to the courts if the healer gained too much social power and, otherwise, were tolerated by authorities³¹. This religious practice was embraced by almost all groups in the New World, non-European and European alike, due to its positive impacts on survival. Healing in the New World survived its persecution and prohibition because *all* peoples and castes of the New World needed it to survive.

Similar to the issue of conversion, healing practices were complex in their origin. Although Christian and occasionally non-Christian religious elites propagated an understanding that Christian vs. non-Christian elements were mutually exclusive, individuals in Spanish

²⁵ Ulrich Berner, “The Notion of Syncretism in Historical and/or Empirical Research,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 27.3 (Berghahn Books, 2001) 509.

²⁶ Fernando Cervantes. *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*. (Yale University Press, 1994) 160.

²⁷ Joan Cameron Bristol, “From Curing to Witchcraft: Afro-Mexicans and the Mediation of Authority,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 7.1 (Spring 2006) 1.

²⁸ Nora E. Jaffary ed, *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader*, 122-123.

²⁹ Joan Cameron Bristol, “From Curing to Witchcraft: Afro-Mexicans and the Mediation of Authority”, 1. ----- *Christians, Blasphemers and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century*, (University of New Mexico Press, 2007) 149.

³⁰ Joan Cameron Bristol, “From Curing to Witchcraft: Afro-Mexicans and the Mediation of Authority”, 1.

³¹ Joan Cameron Bristol, “From Curing to Witchcraft: Afro-Mexicans and the Mediation of Authority”, 4. The toleration of healers by authorities was linked to the need for their services; however, it was also very conditional on the healers using just their medical knowledge rather than any magical or supernatural elements (this will be discussed further in Section V). The common perspective was different and, in many cases such as Ruiz’s, Europeans directly accepted and even welcomed the magical side of healers and curanderos treatments.

America were more open minded to the sources around them. Native, African, mulatto, and Spanish American healers did not operate their practice with religious blinders on, so to speak. They selected from the vast variety of elements around them and this selection is more accurately predicted by the factor of survival than the origin of the selected elements. Although the tradition of healing had its roots in native and African tradition, healers also incorporated Christian symbols and rituals to bolster the strength of their healing power. When Ana de Pinto healed Bartholome de Ruiz, she invoked the Holy Trinity and made signs of the cross all over Ruiz's body. She stitched a bag filled with loose hairs with the symbol of the cross and sewed it into Ruiz's shirt. Within her healing ritual, we can see remnants of both Christian and African religions employed simultaneously, undoubtedly to invoke the power of both traditions, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of the healing.³² The powers of healing were convincing enough that Spaniards occasionally would become healers. In Quezada's study of 70 curanderos tried by the Inquisition in the New World, 11 of them were Spaniards, testifying to its employment *and* practice by all castes.³³ When healers and *curanderos* were denounced to the Inquisition for their magical practices, they often attributed their healing powers to the Christian god.³⁴ *Curandero* Juan Vásques claimed he was visited by an old man with a cross whom he believed to be Saint John who taught him the functions of herbs and the illnesses they treated. Juana Agustina, also a *curandero*, claimed her healing powers derived from a guardian angel she could communicate with³⁵. By attributing their powers to the conquering god, *curanderos* and healers attempted to legitimize their practice and avoid persecution by associating healing with the Spanish supernatural power. The employment of Christian elements within healing was an attempt to protect the necessary practice from persecution while also amplifying its effects by associating it with the additional power of Christianity.

The practice of healing reveals a complex web of religious elements used for protection. The religious practice of healing itself directly impacted and improved an individual's health and wellbeing and was employed for that purpose by all castes and races. Christian elements within healing served to amplify this function while also protecting the practice of healing from persecution, ensuring the survival of the necessary practice by legitimizing it. Finally, the practitioners of healing, the *curanderos* and other healers, attributed their powers to the Christian supernatural realm to protect themselves from persecution. This chain clearly illustrates the variety of religious change and blending within this paper's model of syncretism. In some instances, healing was blended and imbued with Christian elements; in others, it was strictly native/African in origin but utilized by Europeans and non-Europeans alike; while, in other employments, it was described as a Christian practice by healers themselves in attempts to reinforce and protect the religious practice within the politically accepted sphere of Christianity. In reference to the model, these represent blended religious creations, non-blended religious changes, and changes to the original religious practice all resulting from the interaction of European and non-European religions. If one was to study religious healing in the context of the definition of previous scholars—religious elements of blended origin—then the larger picture of

³² For more instances of healing with elements of mixed origin, see Bristol 2007, Chapter 5.

³³ Noemí Quezada, "The Inquisition's Repression of Curanderos" in Cruz, 1991

³⁴ Nicholas Griffiths, "Andean Curanderos and their Repressors: The Persecution of Native Healing in Late 17th and Early 18th Century Peru" in Griffiths (1999) 186.

³⁵ Nicholas Griffiths, "Andean Curanderos and their Repressors: The Persecution of Native Healing in Late 17th and Early 18th Century Peru" 190.

the religious change surrounding healing would be missed. This vast variety of religious syncretism is underlined by the common denominator of healing: to protect oneself, to increase the protection one had, or to protect the practices that protected oneself.

These religious elements that individuals selected and employed in the New World in attempts at survival were not static. Rather, the elements underwent changes themselves in order to serve the interests of the people, interests that were changing due to the conquest. If one recalls Figure 2, this type of religious change to pre-existing elements is characteristic of a syncretic scenario and, therefore, can equally be explained by survival. As these religious elements were used to strengthen an individual to the times/environment they were facing, these elements had to adapt to fit the new colonial situation, making their pre-conquest and post conquest forms different.

The native mountain gods of the Andean peoples can be observed changing over time during the colonization of the region. Before the Spanish, the mountain gods were symbols of power and were unique to the villages that worshiped them. The mountain gods were viewed as intercessors in the physical world, protectors of the people and town that they were patrons of. Upon the arrival of the Spanish, the Andean mountain gods slowly began to adopt appearances parallel to Catholic saints in their depictions: they would ride on horses, appear in white, and carry swords. Their skills and authority were also adapted to reflect the changing colonial environment. The mountain god of Hacas began to insist his patrons give him offerings in the form of silver coins and his character transformed into one that represented the mercantilist economy. Some of the mountain gods were fully transformed into white Europeans in their appearance. These gods were viewed as divine lawyers with influence over the European world order, advocates for the natives they derived from but did not appear as. Since Andeans perceived their welfare as dependent on the influence their gods had on the material world, their mountain gods were transformed to be able to exert influence over the new world order and protect/fulfill the needs of their people in the changing situation.³⁶

The change in the cult of Mary in the New World mirrors the Andean mountain gods as Mary's function was reinvented as a similar divine interceder. In fact, the cult of European saints as a whole was often welcomed by natives due to their functions as "advocates and protectors of material well-being, especially health and crops".³⁷ This function served as a bridging point between Christian and native traditions as native religions often held gods or huacas to be guardians of towns.³⁸ Even the translation of Mary into the Andean tongue reflects her change in function as one of her translations, as recorded by Garcilaso de la Vega, was "Our Advocate".³⁹ Due to the adoption of the Virgin Mary all around Spanish America, she gradually became a

³⁶ Silverblatt 1988, "Political Memories and Colonizing Symbols: Santiago and the Mountain Gods of Colonial Peru". What is also interesting about this evolution of the Andean mountain gods is that the same change occurred in various European cults of saints. Saints, in the European Christian religion, were also viewed as divine lawyers and were transformed or created in an apotropaic way—one in which the saints exerted influence over the individual's lives and could assist them. This connection is a very prevalent one for this paper as it reveals the possibility that religious selection and change could be predicted by survival elsewhere besides the religious encounter in Early Modern Spanish America.

³⁷ Gustavo Benavides. "Syncretism and Legitimacy in Latin American Religion" in Leopold, 2014, 204.

³⁸ Father Pablo Joseph de Arriaga, *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*, 25.

³⁹ Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas: A General History of Peru Pt 2.*, 805.

general protectress of the natives.⁴⁰ She was viewed as an interceder that, like the mountain gods, protected and worked on behalf of her believers. The cult of the Virgin Mary in the New World is particularly interesting because the changes in her were very clearly made for survivalistic purposes, turning Mary into a supernatural ally and protectress. Clearly, these elements that were Christian or Andean in origin were reinvented and repurposed over time to serve the interests of survival, to protect individuals. Although their change is not explicitly explained by the mixedness that previous scholars identified as syncretism, it is clear that these religious changes were a reaction to and a result of the collision of the native/African and European religions.

The conquest of America brought about extreme change in the lives of Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans in the New World and created a dangerous and shifting environment for all three groups. In accordance with Darwin, as the environment around individuals' change, they, too, change to adapt to their surroundings in order to survive. This concept was extremely evident in the religious syncretisms in the New World. Conversion was enacted, elements were eliminated, bolstered, and mixed, and the elements themselves were changed and reinvented. Religious selection was a tool employed by the peoples of the New World to protect themselves with religious elements or identities. To predict this selection and the direction of the religious syncretism it would make, one can easily apply the concept of survival. Be it physically, through healing, or symbolically, through the supernatural intervention of the Virgin Mary, religious elements in the New World were selected, created and changed based on their efficacy in guaranteeing protection, ensuring survival, and allowing their adopters to eliminate negative or harmful influences in their lives.

V

Power

The second determiner in predicting the selection process of syncretism in the New World is power. Religious selection was often a social tool that individuals employed to gain status or authority within a community or population. This was often done in the New World by associating the individual with supernatural power through belief or through traditions in which they communicated with or drew upon the power of the supernatural. In the New World, the cult of saints was manipulated by Europeans in the New World to associate themselves and their cause with divine strength, imbuing their victories with the supernatural. Spaniards invoked saints before battles to gain their favor and secure the outcome. These saints were most often St James (otherwise known as Santiago) and the Virgin Mary. Although there were often disagreements about which version of the Virgin Mary assisted, she was often credited for military successes in the New World.⁴¹ Inca chronicler Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala claimed that "before every battle, they [the Spaniards] humbled themselves and with their weapons actually in their hands appealed to their Holy Mary".⁴² In Tenochtitlan, Spaniards under Cortes

⁴⁰ William B. Taylor, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion." *American Ethnologist* 14.1 (1987) 20-21.

⁴¹ Joseph Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico*, (2012) 133.

⁴² Don Felipe Huama Poma de Ayala, *Letter to a King: A Peruvian Chief's Account of Life Under the Incas and Under Spanish Rule*, Christopher Dilke, ed. and trans., (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978) 114

mass slaughtered native dancers after yelling “for Saint James and at ‘em men!”.⁴³ Spaniards connected their conquest with the power of their supernatural realm, hoping to gain that power in order to emerge victorious. In one popular instance, their connection seemed to succeed. During the battle of Cuzco, the Spaniards, outnumbered and trapped in the city, called upon St James and St Mary to save their lives and defeat the natives they were battling.

“The Spaniards attacked the Indians with the same courage and ferocity, calling aloud on the name of the Virgin and on that of their defender, the apostle St. James.”⁴⁴

St. James thus descended in a clap of thunder and fought for the Spaniards “sword in hand, mounted on a white horse”.⁴⁵ According to Guaman Poma and Garcilaso de la Vega, he killed many natives and assisted greatly in saving the Spaniards from death and defeating the Inca. Similarly, the Virgin Mary descended from the sky and although she did not directly kill any Inca, she caused a dust to fall into their eyes, preventing them from seeing and giving the Spaniards that evoked her the upper hand.⁴⁶ This story linked Spaniards with divine intervention and protection and became legend, one that deterred future efforts of resistance against the Spanish. St. James was gradually transformed during the conquest into Santiago, the killer of Indians.⁴⁷ Mary, similar to the way she was changed in native-Christian religion, became a patron and motive of the Spanish military. These syncretic changes were enacted by the Spaniards to visually superiorize themselves and to gain power by supernatural association. The changes to Christian religion, as well as the very importance of it in the New World, can be explained by their relation to the power struggle that was the conquest, making Christianity a metaphorical toolbox from which Spaniards selected and modified religious elements to gain or retain their power in the New World.

Christianity and the symbols that revolved around it became associated with power and the dominant sectors of society in the New World. Although this power was intended by the Spanish to be associated with themselves, natives and Africans adopted and reinvented certain elements of Christianity to harness this power as well. The Mesamericans as well as the Andeans had traditions of adopting the gods of their conquerors whilst retaining their own. This was not simply to acquiesce to the new rule of their conquerors but rather a tradition closely related to power. These groups believed that victory in battle demonstrated the “strength of the victor’s god” and their adoption of this deity was an effort to associate themselves with that

⁴³ Bartholomé de Las Casas, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. 50

⁴⁴ Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas: A General History of Peru Pt 2*, 801

⁴⁵ Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas: A General History of Peru Pt 2*, 808

⁴⁶ Don Felipe Huama Poma de Ayala, *Letter to a King: A Peruvian Chief’s Account of Life Under the Incas and Under Spanish Rule*, 115

⁴⁷ The concept of warrior saints first emerged as another example of syncretism (as we use it in this study). It was initially developed as a counter-rhetoric to the Muslim verse stating that Mohammed was aided by Gabriel and 4000 angels. Although their function was changed or amplified in the New World, both St James and St Mary as warrior saints had their roots in the Reconquista and the clashes between Islam and Christianity. However, that does not cloud the claim that these syncretisms were enacted for purposes of power because, even though their origins might have been in the Reconquista rather than just in the New World, they were still developed to associate Spaniards with supernatural power and with the intent of ensuring victory.

Joseph Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico*, 130.

power.⁴⁸ Following the legendary battle of Cuzco, the Andeans initiated this process with Santiago. The Spaniards made Santiago the killer of Indians, but the military might and victory attached to him led the Inca and Andeans to integrate him into their pantheon. The natives interpreted Santiago as a supernatural entity whose powers and blessing they could obtain by worshiping him, a blessing they believed could be used to succor victory against the Spaniards.⁴⁹ Santiago was further connected with material power by Spaniard's invocation of him when using guns or other forms of firepower:

“When Spaniards wage war, they shout before shooting their arquebuses, which the Indians call *illapa* or lightning, ‘Santiago, Santiago’”⁵⁰

The arquebuses and firepower in general were weapons unfamiliar to the natives of Latin America. They thought of these weapons as a form of divine power materialized in lightning, or *illapa* in Andean. In De la Vega's chronicling of the conquest, a native man named Rumiñau claimed that the Spaniards were armed with “lightning and thunder [...] and killed Indians at two or three hundred paces.” The association between this new, unknown weapon and Santiago directed many natives to adopt and worship Santiago to obtain the physical power inherent in the firepower of the Spaniards.⁵¹ Over time, Santiago became merged with the Andean divinity *Illapa*, the god of thunder and lightning who was linked with conquerors, power, and domination.⁵² This merging created a syncretic overlap in which the two names could be used interchangeably while also combining the respective powers of the two aforementioned deities into one concept, theoretically enhancing the power by association of those who worshiped him. The adoption of Santiago by the Andean peoples was an attempt to replicate the military might of the Spaniards, both through supernatural intervention and through the material weapons that were foreign to the natives. The adoption of Santiago relied almost entirely on his association with military victory, the dominant society, and power.

The Virgin Mary was similarly employed by the Spanish in efforts to achieve victory and strengthen their military. The Virgin Mary became a prominent symbol of the conquerors, a conscious link established by the Spaniards. During the Reconquista, the Spanish would place images of the Virgin Mary at recently conquered sites. In the first town that Hernan Cortes captured, he commanded the natives to worship the image of the Virgin Mary and set her image on the altar, continuing the tradition of St. Mary as conqueror.⁵³ In Copacabana, an area recently conquered by the Inca, the people faced a frost in 1582. To prevent it from destroying their

⁴⁸ Fernando Cervantes. *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*, 42.

⁴⁹ Irene Silverblatt. “Political Memories and Colonizing Symbols: Santiago and the Mountain Gods of Colonial Peru,” 187.

The adoption of Santiago establishes a link between survival, power, and resistance. Natives adopted him to gain his supernatural power while also using the aforementioned power to resist colonial rule and survive potential violent encounters through divine protection.

⁵⁰ Father Pablo Joseph de Arriaga. *The Extirpation of Idolatry in Peru*, 54.

⁵¹ David D. Gow, “The Roles of Christ and Inkarrí in Andean Religion”, *The Journal of Latin American Lore* 6.2 (1980) 281.

⁵² Irene Silverblatt. “Political Memories and Colonizing Symbols: Santiago and the Mountain Gods of Colonial Peru,” 175.

⁵³ Joseph Kroger, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico*, 128

crops, they chose to honor a saint and selected St. Mary.⁵⁴ Rather than selecting St. Anthony, the patron saint of harvest or others with functions more applicable to their situation, the Incas selected the Virgin Mary because her feast day was in that same month of February. The history of the island of Copacabana created an imperial dimension to this selection. When the Incas conquered Copacabana and the island near it, they transferred many natives away from their place and used the island to distribute maize to the rest of the empire. When the Inca empire came under duress, they created a cult of their sun god on the island of Collao just outside of Copacabana to unify their people under a tradition. By establishing the Virgin Mary as the patron saint of the island post-conquest, the Incas attempted to regain the authority they lost by associating themselves with the conquerors once again. When this choice was being made, the natives of the island, the Urinsaya, opposed the choice as they worried that their conquerors, the Inca, associating themselves with a powerful conquering deity would be extremely harmful to the Urinsaya. The case study of Copacabana is a very explicit example of syncretic selection. The Inca quite literally selected Mary from a pool of other saints. Her function served a double purpose: to ameliorate the physical conditions and survival of the natives and to increase the social and political power of the Inca. The Virgin Mary was selected based on her applicability to survival and power. By incorporating St. Mary into their belief, the Inca sought to restore their previous conquering power.

Native caciques and leaders endured a similar stripping of power during the conquest. The conquest had removed their spiritual legitimacy and their political authority, leaving them with much to regain. The political piece was easier to satisfy as caciques could remain in power over their people through the system of indirect rule the Spaniards established. Caciques could be promoted to positions of *gobernado*, *alcade*, and *regidor*. Their spiritual authority was not so easily regained. Before the conquest, caciques and other native leaders were the exclusive parties involved in rituals that communicated with and allegedly satisfied their deities. This linked them directly to supernatural authority that could not be replicated by others, earning them a social prominence in their society as well. Some caciques continued to practice these sacred rites for a few decades after the conquest, but the practice lessened dramatically as time went on due to the Spanish campaigns against native religion. Unable to siphon power from their religious customs, some caciques in the Chiapas region turned to Christianity to fulfill this need. In 1582, twelve caciques led by Juan Atonal would meet in the night and call themselves the 12 apostles. In their company were two women who renamed themselves as Santa María and Santa Magdalena. The caciques, many of whom were considered to be model Christians previously, blended powerful Christian identities and names with the native belief of nagualism—that certain individuals could briefly transform into powerful, divine beings.⁵⁵ The caciques conducted rituals in which they would take the form and power of the supernatural beings they were associated with, essentially becoming gods.⁵⁶ To rebuild the spiritual facet of their leadership and legitimacy, these caciques selected powerful symbols from Christianity,

⁵⁴ Here we see the employment of saints as cultivators of well-being discussed in section 2

⁵⁵ Nagualism revolves around the idea that each human has a spiritual guardian. Some guardians are more powerful than others, the lesser being called *tonalli* and the more powerful being called *naguales*. The individual's who are the most powerful and worthy have the ability to turn into their spiritual guardian, becoming their divine form and deriving supernatural powers from this.

⁵⁶ Kevin Gosner. "Caciques and Conversion: Juan Atonal and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Post-Conquest Chiapas", *The Americas* 49.2, (1992) 125

perhaps some of the most powerful names besides Jesus himself, and reinvented their function to gain power via a private and superior relationship with a supernatural entity, a function that had previously delivered them social prominence and political power.

The conquest of America created a situation of tension and struggle for dominance. The Spaniards sought to assert their superiority through warfare; however, they often put down their arabesques and used their Bible as a weapon instead. Religion was used as a means of asserting authority and gaining power in the New World, a justifier of violence and a controlling tool. Eventually, after the Christian Europeans became the dominant power in Latin America, the Christian religion became associated with this power. Non-Europeans selected, reinvented, and blended elements of Christianity with their own religion in an attempt to appropriate the political power of Christianity. The conquest of America was both political and religious simultaneously, imbuing the latter with the power struggles of the former. The syncretic religious practice and selection of individuals reflected their desires and motives to elevate their status, gain supernatural power, or to stabilize their pre-existing power. Religion in the New World became a tool that revolved around the struggle for power, one that both dominant and subjugated groups manipulated for their own gain. The collision between the Christian and native/African religions in the New World created a vast spectrum of syncretic belief that revolved around the inescapable concept of power; beyond just involvement, this struggle for power fundamentally changed the religions involved.

VI

Resistance

The final predictor of religious selection within this model is resistance. The subjugated populations were almost always the groups involved in this form of selection. Oppressed individuals and groups chose religious elements that helped them resist the status quo. Elements of the conquering religion were often repurposed as symbols of resistance and rebellion. This link is seen in devil worship in the New World. Devil worship was often a means of attaining power, either political power or power over one's circumstances.⁵⁷ Some natives and Africans clearly had further motivations for worshiping the devil: he stood in opposition to the god of the Europeans, providing natives with a symbol to oppose Spaniards in the same fashion.⁵⁸ The Devil initially was used as a facet of resistance to perpetuate native traditions.

⁵⁷ This phrase "power over one's circumstances" is used here in connection with power seeking. But we can see how this may be connected to survival as well. As expounded on in Section 4, elements were often chosen due to their ability to influence one's circumstances in a way that affected their survival. This took form in the ability to influence crops, protection, etc. In Section 5, we discussed how elements were chosen simply due to the power they had in general, whether or not they could achieve the desires of their user. While the motivations for this power may be different (survival or desire), we can see here how survival is linked to power as, to survive, one seeks out powers they can appropriate or invest in to influence their survival.

⁵⁸ Native and African devil worship can also be explained by another visible power that is not resistance. We discussed earlier how many non-European practices of sacrifice, cannibalism, and magic were attributed to the Devil in the New World. This association was conveyed to the natives and Africans directly, instructing them that their practices were demonic. The natives and Africans, however, did not necessarily have a concept of the devil, or a singularly evil deity, in their cosmologies. Instead, deities were believed to act in both good and bad ways. Since natives and Africans saw their religious practices (i.e. cannibalism, sacrifice, magic, etc) as essential to the stability and prosperity of their society and

Since the Europeans claimed native traditions were demonic, they embraced this association and embraced the Devil himself. The Devil became the deity that protected their “idolatrous” rituals and eventually became synonymous with the deities worshiped in these rituals. In the instances of the *naguales*, the cave guardians discussed previously, they invoked the Devil alongside the worship of their tutelary deities until the two eventually became merged. Over time, however, the Devil began to shed his associations and synonymizations with these native deities and became a separate entity, one that fought against the Spaniards and emerged “as the chief opponent of the status quo”.⁵⁹ Spaniards imbued the Devil with supernatural power that natives and Africans could appropriate and draw from. But more importantly, Spaniards adamantly opposed the Devil and feared him. Their obsession with the Devil in the New World provided an opportunity for subjugated groups to benefit by invoking his presence. Slaves and natives manipulated the concept of the Devil into a weapon that could be used to psychologically hinder their Spanish oppressors. By worshiping the Devil and invoking his presence, natives and Africans inverted the power relationship in the New World through fear. Insert . Due to his place and emphasis in the Christian faith, as well as the strong association between him and natives in the New World, Spaniards were ultimately afraid of the Devil, despite what was officially said about his lack of power over God. By working the Devil into their rituals and practice, natives and Africans weaponized this fear to psychologically inferiorize the Spaniards.

On the opposite end of the Christian cosmology, the Virgin Mary was similarly reconstructed (or repurposed we might say as Spaniards had already imbued her with this function) to become a symbol and patroness of native resistance. This is a logical furthering of the function of Mary as a warrior saint for the Spaniards. By accepting this function of Mary, adopting it, and worshiping her, natives sought to employ Mary’s warrior powers in their own struggles against Spanish oppression. The first employment of St Mary in connection with native resistance was only a few decades after the original conquest, during the Taqi Onqoy movement of the 1560’s. This movement was a nativist, religious focused revolt that believed that the native gods/huacas would return and do battle against the Christian God and His saints. Even though the movement sought to pit the two cosmologies against each other and regain the right to the land, many of its female followers renamed themselves “Santa Maria” or “Santa Maria Magdalena”.⁶⁰ Within this blended syncretism, St Mary was invoked not through worship but rather by name and connected explicitly to native resistance to Spanish colonialism and Christianity. One might call the usage of Mary as a source of power against the religion she derives from ironic; but this assumes the native employers to be unaware of Mary’s importance

ultimately as a good thing, when the Devil was introduced in correlation with these practices they understood him as a positive deity since he represented parts of their traditions they valued highly. Although this explains a lot of the early devil worship in natives and Africans, it is an explanation that is highly situational and did not last once these practices (cannibalism, etc) fell out of importance in native belief. This is an important factor to examine when examining non-European devil worship; however, this paper will focus on the concepts of power and resistance as cognitive motivators for religious syncretism rather than situational explanations.

⁵⁹ Fernando Cervantes. *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*, 94.

⁶⁰ Here we can see yet another connection between resistance and power. Christian symbols were utilized in native resistance but they were also employed to harness and gain their power. Jeremy Mumford argues that they renamed themselves “in order to be revered as saints”. The connection between resistance and power in the New World was an intimate one.

to the faith, ignorant of this connection and irony. Rather, the natives consciously selected the name *Santa Maria* to incorporate into their resistance, employing a powerful symbol of the Christian faith as a weapon against them. In fact, some of the earliest native understandings of Christianity recognized Mary as the singular most important and powerful factor in Christianity. Thus, her employment in this revolt could be an attempt to harness the power of and invert what was understood to be the most prominent figure in Christianity as a weapon against the Spaniards who worshiped her, one of the few supernatural weapons Spaniards were likely to comprehend and react to.

Due to her earlier function (both by Europeans, natives, and Africans) as a general protectress, Mary was seen as an intermediary. She was consulted when her believers had troubles, both spiritual and material, and she was believed to come to their aid. In the New World, this meant she would often intercede in the European/Spanish legal system to aid her non-European believers.⁶¹ This constructed Mary as an intermediary between the Americas/Americans and their Spanish rulers. As her belief progressed, she was utilized again in her warrior saint fashion—but this time in service of the American natives.⁶² Although the Taqi Onqoy rebellion employed St. Mary in a more basic fashion, just employing her name, the Southern Mexican revolts of 1712 invoked, through practice and belief, her more complex authority over both the Christian supernatural realm and the material realm of Spain. In the Chiapas region of Mexico, a native girl discovered an effigy of the Virgin Mary in the woods. Claiming that the effigy could speak to her, a chapel was soon constructed and natives from the surrounding regions traveled to hear the girl translate what Mary had said to her. The Virgin allegedly claimed that both the Spanish God and the Spanish King had died and were to be replaced by “an Indian king of kings who had come to reward native people for their sufferings and trials”.⁶³ Preceded by years of neglect and clerical corruption in the region, this statement from the Virgin catalyzed the Southern Mexican Uprising of 1712, led by Sebastian Gomez. What was also interesting is that the Virgin communicating through the native girl instructed the natives to take up arms against “the Jews in Ciudad Real” who were allegedly trying to regain control of Christianity.⁶⁴ These “Jews” in Ciudad Real were actually Christian Spaniards. The labeling of the Spaniards as Jews and enemies of the Christian religion illustrates how natives adopted Christian elements, down to their very language and connotations, and repurposed them to oppose and resist Spanish religious and political authority.

Towards the end of the era of Spanish colonialism in Mexico, St. Mary (primarily in the form of the Virgin of Guadalupe) became a symbol of Mexican nationalism. When Michael Hidalgo marched on Mexico City in 1810, he adopted the image of the Virgin Mary as the symbol of his resistance.⁶⁵ During this independence struggle, Mary was also employed by

⁶¹ William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion” 20.

⁶² She was reinvented by all non-Europeans here, Christians and non-Christians alike. Some scholars argue the belief of her as an American patroness during the 18th-19th centuries was led by Creole elite. This still represents syncretism for the purposes of resistance and illustrates that it occurred on multiple planes of oppression! Furthermore, there were many other examples of Mary being used in native rebellion specifically.

⁶³ Robert Wasserstrom, “Indian Uprisings Under Spanish Colonialism: Southern Mexico in 1712”, 50.

⁶⁴ Robert Wasserstrom, “Indian Uprisings Under Spanish Colonialism: Southern Mexico in 1712”, 50.

⁶⁵ William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion”, 22.

smaller priests to invoke “her protection against the peninsular Spaniards”.⁶⁶ Smaller groups of Mexican rebels during the Independence movement used Mary as well to justify their destruction and violence against the Spaniards. José María Morelos, during his revolution from 1811-1814, similarly employed Mary as the symbol of his revolution, utilizing her as a divine justifier and a unifier of the Mexican people. Beyond the scattered rebellions and revolts during the 18th century, the Virgin Mary became a divine patron of Mexican resistance and nationhood during the 19th century. By following native and, eventually, Mexican employments of Marian devotion and worship, a very clear path emerges centered around the factor of resistance. In the Taqi Onqoy, Mary was understood as a source of power in Christianity, and invoked only nominally in connection to resistance. In the Southern Mexican revolts, Mary’s function as a key figure in the Christian cosmology and a superior entity to all humans (including the king) was understood and used to diminish the Spaniards power and authority by invoking Mary’s divine superiority. Finally, Mary’s functions as a divine warrior and a general protectress were combined with her function as a patron of the people to create a divine unifier and justifier of Mexican rebellion. The evolution in this understanding makes sense chronologically: as more time passed, natives and Mexicans became better versed in Christianity and its complexities and rules. The commonality between these three significant points of Marian devotion share the same denominator of rebellion and utilized what they understood about the Virgin Mary to accomplish this goal. Natives and Mexicans consciously took and retooled what they understood about Christianity at a specific point to serve their purposes of resistance against the Spaniards.

The belief of subjugated groups in the New World was certainly not a passive acceptance of the enforced religion alongside the status quo. Rather, the religion of natives, Africans, and women in the New World was an active effort to understand and interact with the divine while also redefining social values and societal inequities to better suit their needs. Resistance connects the previous factors of survival and power together to create a rich and complex system of religious selection in the New World that was dependent on these factors but in varying orders and mixtures. An argument can be made that the evidence presented to explain subjugated groups’ power seeking through religion could also function as resistance as they were attempting to regain control or power that the colonial rulers did not allow for. Subjugated groups in the New World created religious syncretisms by actively participating in the gradual change of religious elements into modes of resistance. Be it the adoption of the Virgin Mary as a revolutionary symbol, the repurposing of the Devil as an enemy of the New World hierarchy, or the employment of magic to create personal liberties, subjugated groups directed the religious change resulting from the colonial contact into a rich system of religious resistance.

VII

Conclusion

Survival, power, and resistance dominated the New World, both the religious aspect and as a whole. Religion, and more specifically syncretism, served as a legitimate tool in which people attempted to resolve their dilemmas related to these factors by interpreting and

⁶⁶ William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion.”

interacting with the divine. Religious belief in the New World was a selected amalgamation of elements that served this specific function. As historian of religions J.D.Y. Peel notes, “prayer is a recipe”.⁶⁷ It is a recipe in which ingredients are added, mixed together, and chemically changed to achieve a desired result. In the New World, prayer and religion as a whole were recipes to improve survival, gain power, and resist colonial structures. Returning to the questions this study sought to answer, we can conclude that the religious elements present in New World syncretisms were selected, blended, and evolved in direct correlation with their efficacy in influencing and improving the three factors of survival, power, and resistance. But what further conclusions does this allow us to make? Does all religious syncretism revolve around these three factors or just those inherent in the Latin American region? Is there a connection between these three factors, or even one of them, to religion as a whole? Certainly, this study necessitates further research into these questions to test the applicability of this argument to other regions, time periods, and scenarios of religious interaction. However, stepping outside the disciplinary box of a historian, this study begs the question of how it applies to the present day, how it applies to us. How do we choose our religious beliefs? Do individuals in present-day also select their religious beliefs based on power? It is very easy to fall into the trap of examining historical subjects as ignorant, simple, and lesser than us and therefore easy to think that we are inherently more developed and that our religious beliefs and selections cannot be so simply described by anything other than truth. However, if this study reveals anything about our present-day religion, it is that it might be worthwhile to examine and question: why do we believe what we believe?

⁶⁷ J.D.Y. Peel, “Syncretism and Religious Change.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10.2 (Cambridge University Press, 1968).

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