

CHAC AND MAXIMON: PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

Marilyn Bierling
Calvin College
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Religious syncretism is defined in many ways, but most definitions include the interpenetration of differing religions, a mingling of beliefs which changes the internal logic of a belief system. Such changes cause tension for orthodox religious leaders, but not necessarily for the people who practice syncretism (Mulder 204-205). Usually the term “religious syncretism” carries a pejorative connotation, especially when one’s own beliefs are threatened, but the syncretic process also gives fascinating insights into our basic human need for God and our yearning to make sense of the universe.

Many examples exist of religious syncretism in Latin America, but this article focuses on some of the present-day customs of the Mayan peoples in Mexico’s Yucatán peninsula and in the Guatemalan highlands. These practices illustrate the mixing of indigenous and Christian beliefs that still occurs at the dawn of the new millennium. Why have these practices developed—and how might they be changing? How can an overview of these customs lead to discussion in our classrooms or in other educational settings?

Let us start first in the highlands of Guatemala. On one side of a narrow valley, a stream of water cascades over a cliff and down toward the town of Totonicapán. Several hundred feet downstream, Mayan women in brightly-colored traditional clothing wash their laundry in the stream, as they have done for centuries. But another ancient scene is unfolding in a mountain cave directly across from the cascade. Inside a grotto formed by a natural hollow in the rocks, we see two men: one is a Mayan priest who also worships in

the Catholic church in the town below, and the other is a businessman for whom business has not been going well. The priest has a small black book from which he reads. Some of the words are in Quiché Maya, other words are in Spanish, and in Latin we hear repeated "*in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.*" The priest holds a small black figurine in one hand, passing it around the body of the businessman. From time to time the priest takes a swallow from a small bottle of alcohol and then spits it out, spraying the alcohol over the businessman. He also passes an egg around and over the man and drops the egg into a fire within the cave. The fire is surrounded by candles of various colors.

The green and blue candles around the fire symbolize the heart, or *el corazón* of the earth and the sky. White candles symbolize good, and the black candles stand for evil, representing the darkness where the sun sets and where there is black magic. Red is a good color because it stands for heat, the sun, and for the color of one's skin. Yellow can be good or bad, good because it is the color of maize, and bad because it is also the color of sickness. The figurine represents San Simón, and both the figurine and the egg suck out the bad spirits from the businessman so that he will be successful. If the egg does not break when dropped into the fire, the bad spirits will not be able to escape back into the man.

The next day a mass is celebrated in the church of another town, not too distant. As the visitors walk up the stairs to the entrance of the church, they tread over flower petals strewn there as an offering to the Mayan gods. Inside, the mass is said in both Spanish and Quiché Maya, and a marimba accompanies the singing. A small boy approaches the visitor and suggests leaving the church in order to watch a chicken sacrifice. The boy insists that the sacrifice will be much more interesting than the mass. The town is Chichicastenango, and the scene takes place in the 1990's, not several hundred years ago. It has been more than 500 years since the first mass was said in Latin America.

The examples above illustrate the syncretic nature of much religious expression in Latin America, the existence of Christianity and indigenous American religions side by side. Christianity came to Mayan lands with the Spanish *conquistadores*, but the new religion did not always displace the old. Rather, in many locales and especially among the poor and uninstructed, faiths mingled and combined,

creating a shifting situation in which a new religion could be reconciled with the old and adapted as well as adopted. Forms of syncretism developed throughout the centuries, often without the realization by practitioners that the new synthesis was different from traditional Catholicism or that the rituals came from two distinct sources.

Let us move on to the Yucatan Peninsula, first visited by Europeans in 1517 and then conquered by Francisco de Montejo, who founded Merida in 1542. Native resistance was seen in numerous rebellions against both Spanish and Mexican control, such as the uprising at Quisteil in 1761 and the Caste War, which began in 1847. The classic and post-classic Mayan ceremonial centers had, for the most part, fallen into decay before the Spanish arrived. Many Mayan rituals, however, remained strong even after the Conquest, as can be seen by the zealotry of Fray Diego de Landa to erase all traces of paganism in 1562 or the Speaking Cross that appeared during the Caste War (Reed 132-145; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 165-166). Several factors hampered the Catholic Church in its drive for orthodoxy throughout Yucatan. Indigenous peoples had little access to education or to the scriptures, and they clung tenaciously to traditional beliefs. Catholic priests were few, and the mass, when celebrated, took place in a language incomprehensible to the common person. The Mayans accepted Christianity, but their understanding of the new religion was not complete. The lines between the old gods and practices and the new saints and rituals became blurred.

A ceremony that I had the opportunity to witness occurred in the village of Xoy, a few miles outside of Peto and about eighty miles southeast of Merida. I was staying with a family on the outskirts of the village of about 350 people, living with the family in their typical round hut with thatched roof. It was mid-July, the corn was growing, and nearly every afternoon we experienced a torrential downpour. A neighbor had already shown me a high mound behind his house, after cutting through the surrounding underbrush with a machete. According to him, the mound was the source of many old and unusual objects of their ancestors. Stones from the top of the mound had been used in several recent building projects. It was obvious that this recycling of building materials had been going on for a long time, especially when we saw a stone with a Mayan profile forming part of the old wall surrounding the village's small Catholic church.

One day I was informed that the community was preparing for a ceremony to Chac, the god of the rain, to be performed the following Saturday. The ceremony was to be sponsored by the Catholic church, and though my family would not be attending because they were *evangélicos* (Protestants), they told me that I might be interested in watching. However, the ceremony originally scheduled for that weekend never got underway and was postponed until the following Saturday. Preparations for the ceremony continued in a field on the outskirts of town. A booth (or altar) of sticks and leaves was constructed, and women were asked to make *masa* from corn for a special type of bread. Some of the Protestant women complied with the request from the community, while others refused. Finally I was told that the ceremony was scheduled for early Saturday afternoon (people did not use watches or clocks, so the exact time was not specified). Unfortunately, before the ceremony began, the sky clouded over, and another torrential downpour commenced. The ritual had to be postponed until later in the afternoon.

When the rain stopped, hundreds of people gathered in the small field. Only men and boys were allowed to approach the altar of sticks and leaves, which was heaped with gifts of fruit, corn, gourds, and breadstuffs. However, the tables spread with the corn bread were available for all to eat. As we watched, more bread was put together, layer by layer. During the ritual itself, four small boys crouched under the altar and croaked like frogs, while the Mayan ceremonial leader (whom they called *sacerdote*) chanted in his Mayan dialect and sprinkled a liquid into the air from a large bowl. After the ceremony ended, several of the children in the crowd left quickly in order to participate in a program held at the small local Presbyterian Church. The next morning in the Protestant service, the sermon (preached in Spanish and translated to Mayan) dealt with the contest between Yahweh and Baal on Mt. Carmel, with several references to the Chac ceremony the day before.

The Chacs (or Chaacs) are the traditional gods dating back at least to the Classic period of the Maya (A.D. 300-900), as glyphs from ancient monuments make clear. There were four major Chacs, associated with the four cardinal directions and colors (red for east, white for north, black for west, and yellow for south). The Chacs rode through the sky, hurling thunderbolts at the earth and either sprinkling water from gourds (which had been collected from *cenotes*)

or urinating on the earth. Frogs had a close connection with the Chacs, since they announced the rain and were musicians and guests of the Chacs (Thompson 251-262).

In a book entitled *Chan Kom, a Mayan Village*, first published in 1934, Redfield and Villa describe a rain ceremony that they had witnessed in a Yucatan village (138-143). Every man in the village was required to participate in the ceremony, while women were kept busy making *masa* and preparing the special breads. An altar covered with leaves was constructed, and a boy was tied to each of the four posts supporting the altar; these boys became the frogs who croaked during the ceremony. An older man impersonated the *kanku chac*, leader of the rain gods, and he held a gourd and machete. While assistants sprinkled the altar with *balche*, a liquor made from bark, the older man would rise to his feet to imitate the sound of thunder with his voice and to wave the machete, imitating the flash of lightening. After a time of silence in which the gods were given time to eat the offerings on the altar, the ceremony concluded with a feast. In his 1950 sequel to the original book (*A Village That Chose Progress: Chan Kom Revisited*), Redfield mentions that even after Protestantism came to Chan Kom, both Catholics and Protestants continued to participate in ceremonies of Mayan origin (107). Everyone in the village still attended these rituals, although privately some expressed disbelief (119). Redfield contrasts this scepticism with the attitude of the people during his earlier stay in the village, when nobody even thought to ask questions. The idea that their Catholic religion differed from any other belief had been nonexistent at that time (88).

The Ch'a-Chak ceremony witnessed by David Freidel in the village of Yaxuna and described in the book *Maya Cosmos* (29-33) repeats the same essential elements: the request to the community for supplies, the leafy, green altar, the sacred layered bread, the sprinkling of water from gourds, the imitations of thunder, the croaking of the four boys, and the subsequent feast. Freidel mentions the "mild embarrassment of the villagers caught between their faith in ancient knowledge and their aspirations to become 'modern' people. Being present at this ceremony was like something glimpsed from the corner of your eye, something you're not really sure you've seen" (33).

The rain ceremony that I witnessed in Xoy illustrates several aspects of syncretism in a small Mayan village at the end of the 20th century. Although the village is very poor, it has more access to the

outside world than ever before. Some of the families own television sets, many have traveled to Mérida, and most have attended the small school in Xoy (though often not past the third grade) and have gained some literacy in Spanish. Older children and adults are able to speak and understand Spanish, as well as Mayan. Yet many people in the village still believe and practice some of the ancient ceremonies. In Xoy the Catholic church is still involved with the Mayan ceremony, and there seemed to be little consciousness among the Catholics in Xoy of the two very different origins of their religious beliefs. The attitude of the Protestant leaders in Xoy was that they should not participate, even if others in their extended families did participate, since *evangélicos* should not drink alcohol or attend ceremonies for the ancient gods. There was pressure from extended families for the Protestant women to help prepare bread for the Chac ceremony, and some of them did help in order to keep peace in the family. Interestingly, because the rain ceremony was first delayed one week and then, because of a rainstorm, was postponed to later in the afternoon, it came into direct competition with a scheduled program at the Presbyterian church, causing some people to scurry from one place to the other. In spite of the critical tone of the sermon the next morning in the Presbyterian church, there still seemed to be a great amount of tolerance in Xoy for various religious practices.

My next example brings us back to Guatemala, to the town of Zunil in the highlands of the Quiché Maya, where a strange figure named San Simón "lives." I had been warned by the Pentecostal family with whom I was staying not to visit San Simón, but naturally this warning only increased my interest. Apparently San Simón had met the disapproval of the Catholic church in the area as well, since he had been expelled from the Catholic church in Zunil and was obliged to live in a different house in the town each year, under the care of a different *confradía* (religious brotherhood). The small house where I found San Simón was dark; candles lit the interior only dimly. After my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I saw several *indigenas* seated on benches along the side of the room. In one corner of the room in his own chair sat San Simón himself. He appeared to be made out of wood, and he wore a hat, suit, tie, sunglasses, and a red bandana over his mouth. While I watched, an attendant on one side of San Simón put a cigarette in the saint's mouth and puffs of smoke began to rise. Meanwhile, more people were entering the house.

They knelt before San Simón, prayed, and then put money between his fingers. Some also brought offerings of alcohol. At one point the attendant took the cigarette from San Simón's mouth and tipped the saint back, pouring the alcohol down his throat. Then the saint was brought back upright and the red bandana was put back over his mouth.

I stayed for a while, talking to the various people who entered the room. One woman had come from the border with Mexico. She was a street vendor having trouble with her business, and she had heard that San Simón was very powerful and could answer her prayers. Other people from her town had urged her to visit San Simón. Another family from near Totonicapán (Guatemala) had enemies, and they had heard that San Simón could rid them of curses that had been directed against them. When I finally left the house, I noticed that other activities were occurring outside in the street. An old man sat across from the house, telling fortunes with cards and attempting to sell candles for San Simón for the equivalent of about eight U.S. dollars each. Down the street in an alley was a fire into which eggs were thrown to see if they would break or not. If they did not break, the evil spirits were trapped inside. I was told that chickens were sacrificed here as well.

In my research I have found that there are at least three other images of San Simón in Guatemala. One is not too far from Guatemala City, in the town of San Andrés Itzapa, off the road between Antigua and Chimaltenango. I have heard that at times this San Simón wears the general's uniform of Jorge Ubico, dictator of Guatemala from 1931 to 1944. According to stories I heard, the general had ordered that San Simón be put in jail, because rebellious elements were taking him out into the street and rallying around him. However, Ubico's wife became sick and dreamed that her sickness was due to the incarceration of San Simón. When finally her husband was persuaded to release the saint, the wife became better and Ubico donated his uniform to the saint. During Holy Week in Guatemala, this saint in San Andrés Itzapa is especially revered by many people from around the capital.

A third San Simón is found in the town of Sololá on Lake Atitlán (Molina 37), and a fourth, which we will discuss at some length, lives in the town of Santiago Atitlán, also on Lake Atitlán. He is called Maximón (pronounced "Ma shimón," *ma* being a title of respect in the Mayan dialect Tzutuhil). In some ways he bears a resemblance

to the San Simón of Zunil, since he holds a cigar in his mouth and wears a hat and bandana (the bandana is tied under his chin, however). He is different from the San Simón of Zunil in that he is assembled by a local *confradía* and marched through the streets only during Holy Week. In his book *Las confesiones de Maximón*, Diego Molina F. describes the appearance of Maximón during Holy Week (5-30).

Molina was invited to visit the house where Maximón lived and was allowed to stay while the men from the *confradía* "dressed" him on Tuesday night of Holy Week. The men began with an amulet or stone that contained the "spiritual essence of Maximón" and gradually added clothing and a wooden mask, so that the figure began taking on human appearance. One of the men took liquor in his mouth and blew it out over the mask and clothing of Maximón. When the figure was finally finished, it was worshiped by the *indígenas* in the room, but the figure was not taken outside until the next day (*miércoles santo*). After he had been paraded with a small musical band through the streets of Santiago Atitlán, Maximón was placed in a small, fruit-adorned chapel next to the courthouse. Maximón stayed there until Friday, and meanwhile the townspeople came to the chapel to pray and bring him cigars and alcohol. On Friday, Maximón joined a procession for a few moments, but suddenly was taken from the procession and carried to another house, different from the first, where he was dismembered and rolled up inside a mat for another year.

Molina believes that the cult to Maximón may have begun at the end of the 18th century or beginning of the 19th, though his only evidence for its nonexistence earlier is an observation by an archbishop in 1768 or 1770 that he "had not noticed any idolatry in Santiago Atitlán" (23-24). Molina recounts the legend of a clever, good-looking young man who could work miracles, but who also seduced some women of the town. As a punishment his arms and feet were cut off and he died (that is why Maximón has short legs and no arms), but even after his death he continued to perform miracles. Until the 1950's, Maximón's procession was allowed to enter the Catholic church, but the cigar smoke, the use of alcohol, and the unorthodox celebration displeased the priest, who ordered Maximón out of the church. In the process, Maximón's mask disappeared, but a new one was made. The policy of the present priest in Santiago Atitlán is one of nonintervention with the tradition, although Maximón still does not enter the church.

Molina suggests that the name of Maximón or San Simón may result from confusion between the Spanish terms *don* and *san* and the Mayan title *ma*, and between personages such as the apostle San Pedro (also known as Simón), Don Pedro de Alvarado (conqueror of Guatemala), and Judas Iscariot (26). The image of Judas is burned in many Guatemalan towns on the Saturday of Holy Week (and sometimes blown up by firecrackers in Mexico). In the Guatemalan town of Chinautla, the image of Judas that is burned is made from banana leaves and is called *Mash Simón*. Molina suggests that behind all of this confusion of names and beliefs, as well as beneath the clothing of Maximón, may exist a prehispanic deity.

In an article entitled "Judas Transformed," June Nash identifies the San Simón of Zunil and the Maximón of Santiago Atitlán with the biblical Judas, albeit with a positive rather than a negative image. Because of the offerings of fruit displayed in Maximón's "chapel" and because of his seductive powers in the stories told about him, Maximón appears to be the incarnation of a traditional fertility deity, contrasting with the ascetic Jesus portrayed during Holy Week (49-50).

The Chac ceremony of Yucatán and the San Simóns of Guatemala are two examples of religious syncretism in Latin America that survive into our times. As luxury hotels are built on the shores of Lake Atitlán and hordes of tourists with videocams descend on the church at Chichicastenango, as the Catholic church encourages Bible study, and as Protestantism sweeps through the Mayan areas of Mexico and Central America, what will be the effects on the syncretism which has been a feature of indigenous belief for the past five hundred years?

The changes in the Catholic church after the second Vatican Council in Rome (1962-1965) have both reinforced and weakened the tenability of syncretic beliefs. On the one hand, Catholics have been encouraged to "acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians" (Flannery 739). Thus other religious beliefs need not be totally rejected, but rather the elements of truth contained in these beliefs may be recognized. Nevertheless, by making Catholicism more comprehensible by performing the mass in a language the people can understand and by encouraging participation of the laity and grass-roots congregations in Bible study, the Catholic church has also weakened the foundations of syncretic belief systems. Indigenous

peoples, who once never doubted that they were good Catholics or that their religious rites differed from those of Catholics elsewhere, are now increasingly aware that some of their beliefs and practices are indeed very different from traditional Catholicism.

Protestantism is also influencing the area of the Maya; estimates of the Protestant population in Guatemala, for example, range around 30% (Ostling 68). Although Protestants belong to several different groups (Presbyterians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, etc.), they generally put a heavy emphasis on Bible study and the distinction of Christianity from indigenous folk religion. Thus most Latin American Protestants discourage participation in what they consider pagan ceremonies. Many of the rites of Mayan origin involve the use of tobacco and alcohol, and since many Latin American Protestants abstain from both substances, they feel constrained to stay away from these rites. Although Protestants discourage the ancient folk beliefs, they do not necessarily discourage the maintenance of other aspects of traditional culture. Many indigenous Protestant congregations conduct services and have the Bible available in their own dialect, have pastors from their own ethnic group, and continue wearing native dress.

It is uncertain to what extent the syncretism between indigenous religions and Christianity in Mayan territory will survive as we enter the new millennium. Will Chac and Maximón survive? We know that the Mayan people, *la gente*, are deeply religious and have been incredibly tenacious in their beliefs and customs during five centuries of domination. Most likely the Mayans, like all humans beings, will continue to try to make sense of a confusing world, attempting to sort out and syncretize opposing elements to express their own reality. But the tensions inherent in syncretism will also continue, as both Catholics and Protestants in Latin America become increasingly literate in the Bible and in their own cultural history.

What are some areas of discussion for Christian foreign language educators and their students? First of all, we see that human beings are by nature deeply religious. We are moved to explain the mysteries of nature and call on our God or gods to intervene in the inexplicable courses of our human lives. All of us deeply desire a higher person whom we can worship and adore and to whom we can turn to give meaning to our lives. We believe that God has created us this way.

Secondly, we learn that contrasting belief systems can indeed mingle, with a resulting distortion to both systems. We can easily head in a different direction because of prior paradigms or prevailing cultural beliefs. We need to continuously examine our own beliefs and attitudes with the Word of God as our guide.

We can go a step further and ask our students how our own understanding of Christianity may be influenced by the culture in which we live—and how much is truly biblically based. For example, I grew up in the Dutch community of Western Michigan, where certain cultural norms have been followed with religious faithfulness; for example, my family and I continue to attend two church services on Sunday. We need to realize that what we consider valuable for the Christian life is not necessarily a biblical injunction. We can discuss such issues with students, helping them to discern and distinguish between cultural practices which may or may not be good for our Christian walk and those which are given specifically in the Bible—and how our freedom in Christ informs our decisions.

We could mention how practices from Europe's pagan past, such as the celebration of the winter solstice, may have meshed with Christian beliefs to produce a date such as December 25 for the celebration of Christ's birth. But we should also reflect on our modern-day syncretism, such as the wedding of North American style capitalism and materialism to Christianity, producing a gospel of health and wealth.

And there are other profound questions. Is all syncretism necessarily negative? What is the place of dialog between religions? Understanding that God has placed in all of us the need to seek and worship him, what is there in other religions (or in the various branches of Christianity) that may be enlightening and exemplary? What about respect for the earth? Or the poetry of Nezahualcoyotl, a pre-Columbian Mexican king and poet who described his yearnings for the one true God? And what should the Protestant or Catholic missionary do—build on the people's beliefs and traditions, or urge them to make a complete break with their religious past? Are there some practices in non-Christian religions that can be redeemed and transformed for Christ's kingdom? In a recent article entitled "Christ Reforms Culture: The Gospel and Non-Christian Religions," John Cooper asserts that "the good can be reclaimed for Christ by those who follow him as Savior and Lord." However, some parts of culture,

including various aspects of post-Christian society, may be so “polluted by false spirituality that they are best abandoned” (5).

The Christian foreign language teacher can find much material for thought and discussion in the study of religious syncretism and the relationship between religion and culture. Although there are no easy answers, consideration of the questions can lead to growth in spiritual discernment for ourselves and for our students, as we seek God’s will for our lives as Christians in our own culture today.

WORKS CITED

- Cooper, John. “Christ Reforms Culture: The Gospel and Non-Christian Religions.” *Calvin Seminary Forum* 7.3 (2000): 4-5.
- Flannery, Austin, O.P., ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Northport, NY: Costello, 1975.
- Freidel, David, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker. *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path*. New York: William Morrow, 1993.
- Molina F., Diego. *Las confesiones de Maximón*. Guatemala: Artemis y Edinter, 1983.
- Mulder, Dirk. “Dialogue and Syncretism: Some Concluding Observations.” *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Eds. Jerald Gort, Hendrik Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989. 203-211.
- Nash, June. “Judas Transformed.” *Natural History* 3 (1994): 46-54.
- Ostling, Richard N. “The Battle for Latin America’s Soul.” *Time* 21 Jan. 1991: 68-69.
- Redfield, Robert and Alfonso Villa Rojas. *Chan Kom: A Maya Village*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

Redfield, Robert. *A Village That Chose Progress: Chan Kom Revisited*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950.

Reed, Nelson. *The Caste War of Yucatan*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964.

Thompson, J. Eric S. *Maya History and Religion*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970.