



When Two Faiths Collided

Aztec Religion and Spanish Catholicism

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Children of the Reconquista

When the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries arrived in Mexico in the early sixteenth century, they were already products of centuries of Iberian history. Spain had only recently completed the **Reconquista**, the long struggle to expel Muslim rulers from the Iberian Peninsula. The conquistadors inherited a militant Christian worldview forged in generations of warfare against those they regarded as infidels.

The Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian missionaries who followed the conquistadors pursued a different mission. Their objective was not military conquest but the conversion of the Indigenous peoples of the New World to Christianity. Yet both soldier and missionary viewed themselves as participants in a divinely sanctioned enterprise.

A Puzzle for the Missionaries

As the missionaries and their scribes gradually deciphered the culture and religion of their newly conquered subjects, they must have been both fascinated and perplexed by what they discovered.

The friars encountered an advanced civilization whose magnificent cities, sophisticated government, and impressive artistic achievements contrasted sharply with religious practices centered on large-scale human sacrifice. How, they wondered, could such a highly developed civilization embrace rituals that seemed so profoundly barbaric?

Familiar Structures, Unfamiliar Beliefs

Even more surprising were the structural similarities between Aztec religion and Christianity.

The Aztecs possessed a well-organized priesthood, magnificent temple complexes, an elaborate liturgy, a religious calendar, and what one scholar described as a "most devoted commitment to penances." These parallels led some early missionaries to speculate that one of Christ's apostles must somehow have reached the Americas centuries before, only to have the Christian message become hopelessly corrupted over time.

While modern historians reject that explanation, it illustrates how unexpectedly familiar certain aspects of Aztec religion appeared to sixteenth-century Europeans.

Sacrifice as the Center of Worship

Sacrifice occupied a central place in both Catholicism and Aztec religion, although the two traditions understood sacrifice in profoundly different ways.

Catholics commemorated and sacramentally participated in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice through the celebration of the Mass. The Aztecs, by contrast, believed their gods required continual nourishment through the offering of human blood.

For the Aztecs, sacrifice was not merely symbolic. Human hearts and blood sustained the gods who, in turn, sustained the universe itself. Religious ceremonies acknowledged an ongoing cosmic obligation. Fear, duty, and gratitude all played roles, but the overwhelming emphasis was on maintaining the fragile balance that kept the universe functioning.

Some sacrificial ceremonies even concluded with ritual meals in which portions of the sacrificial victim were consumed by participants, reinforcing the sacred relationship between the gods and humanity.

Penance, and Piety

Another remarkable similarity between Catholicism and Aztec religion involved confession and moral conduct.

Catholics confessed their sins privately to a priest, expressed genuine contrition, received absolution, and performed a suitable penance.

The Aztecs also empowered their priests to hear confessions, particularly late in life or when death appeared imminent. The penitent sought purification through the goddess **Tlazolteotl**, often called the "Filth Eater," who symbolically consumed human sin.

Unlike Catholic confession, however, Aztec confession was generally regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Since repeated confession for the same offense was ordinarily not permitted, individuals often postponed confession until old age or serious illness.

The Aztecs were also surprisingly strict in matters of personal morality. They condemned theft, adultery, drunkenness, and numerous other behaviors that threatened the stability of society.

Sin and the Cosmic Order

Despite these similarities, the two religions understood sin quite differently.

Christians believe sin separates humanity from God and damages one's relationship with the Creator.

The Aztecs viewed religious transgressions more as violations of the cosmic order. Rather than causing God to withdraw His favor, sin invited the unwelcome attention of offended deities whose presence could bring suffering, misfortune, or disaster. Religious observance therefore became an essential means of preserving harmony between humanity and the supernatural world.

The Ascetic Priesthood

No members of Aztec society devoted themselves more completely to religious discipline than the priesthood.

Clothed in black robes often stained with dried sacrificial blood, the priests practiced rigorous fasting, prolonged vigils, and acts of self-mortification. One scholar aptly described them as "athletes of self-mortification."

Their acts of penance included ritual bloodletting through the laceration of ears, tongues, thighs, shins, and even the genitals. Such practices were intended both as offerings to the gods and as demonstrations of extraordinary religious devotion.

Xipe Totec and the Mystery of Renewal

Perhaps no Aztec ceremony better illustrates the complexity of their religious thought than the festival honoring **Xipe Totec**, "Our Lord, the Flayed One."

Celebrated during the festival of **Tlacaxipehualiztli**, shortly before the planting of maize, the ritual centered upon the sacrifice and flaying of prisoners. Priests then wore the skins of the victims for twenty days, symbolically becoming the god himself.

To modern readers the ceremony seems grotesque, but to the Aztecs it represented agricultural renewal. Just as a seed sheds its outer covering before new life emerges, the god symbolically shed his skin so that the earth might produce new vegetation.

The dried skins, resembling corn husks, embodied the promise of rebirth and the continuity of life. Through Xipe Totec the Aztecs believed they secured both abundant harvests and the continued favor of the gods.

The Legend of Quetzalcoatl

Christianity teaches that Christ will one day return to gather His faithful and establish His eternal kingdom after the final judgment.

The Aztecs likewise believed they were living under the Fifth Sun and that history would eventually come to an end, although they did not know when.

One of the most enduring legends concerns **Quetzalcoatl**, the Feathered Serpent, a culture hero associated with wisdom, civilization, and the gifts of agriculture. According to tradition, he departed his kingdom after being deceived by rival gods and promised one day to return.

Early Spanish chroniclers claimed that Emperor **Moctezuma II** believed Hernán Cortés to be the returning Quetzalcoatl because Cortés arrived from the east during the year **Ce Acatl (One Reed)**, traditionally associated with the god's return.

Modern historians, however, increasingly question this interpretation. Many believe the story was exaggerated—or perhaps even invented—after the conquest to portray the Spanish victory as divinely ordained. Whether Moctezuma actually believed Cortés was Quetzalcoatl remains one of the most debated questions in Mesoamerican history.

Humanity's Debt to the Gods

Both Catholicism and Aztec religion viewed humanity as indebted to the divine, but they differed fundamentally regarding the nature of that debt.

Christians believe Christ paid humanity's debt through His sacrifice on the Cross, a gift acknowledged with gratitude but impossible to repay.

The Aztecs believed the gods had sacrificed themselves to create and sustain the universe. Humanity therefore owed them an everlasting debt of nourishment through blood sacrifice. Men and women survived only because the gods had first given of themselves, and in return the gods required continual repayment.

To the Aztecs, this relationship represented not cruelty but the proper balance of the cosmos.

The End of an Ancient Religion

The conquest of the Aztec Empire brought about one of history's most profound cultural transformations.

Spanish authorities systematically destroyed temples, suppressed traditional religious practices, and encouraged conversion to Christianity. Many priceless books, sculptures, and religious objects disappeared forever.

Although human sacrifice ended with the conquest, so too did one of the world's most sophisticated Indigenous civilizations.

Spanish chroniclers sometimes claimed that tens of thousands of victims were sacrificed annually and reported enormous skull racks in Tenochtitlan. Modern historians generally regard many of these numerical estimates as exaggerated, although there is no dispute that human sacrifice occupied a central place in Aztec religious life.

A Moral Chasm

James A. Michener, in his novel *Mexico*, beautifully captured the enormous moral and emotional gulf between the old religion and the new. An elderly Aztec woman reflects upon Christianity after first encountering it:

"For all these years we've been worshiping hideous gods, while in other parts of the world people could look at the sky and worship human beings like themselves who could weep. But what impressed us most was that the mother had a benign smile as if she loved everyone and hated none."

She concludes simply:

"My son shall be born to these gods."

Conclusion

The encounter between Spain and the Aztec world was far more complex than a simple clash between civilization and barbarism. It was the meeting of two deeply religious societies that shared surprising structural similarities while embracing profoundly different understandings of God, sacrifice, sin, and humanity's place in the universe.

Appreciating both the sophistication and the brutality of Aztec civilization helps explain why the conquest of Mexico remains one of the most dramatic and morally challenging episodes in world history. It reminds us that great civilizations are often mixtures of remarkable achievement and deeply troubling beliefs—a reality that makes the study of history both fascinating and humbling.

The Religion of the Aztecs: Unexpected Parallels and Profound Differences Between Spanish Catholicism

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