Just Change: Religion and Spirituality
July 2006, Page 16

Coke and Conquistadors: Religious syncretism in Latin America

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In San Juan de Chamula, there's a church where the congregation drinks Coca-Cola. I visited this tiny town, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, in January 2005. The church claims to be Catholic; indeed, the faux-gold shrines to the Catholic saints that line one wall of the interior are difficult to miss, rimmed as they are by flashing rainbow fairy lights. But the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's own and favourite saint, stares these saints down from the opposite wall and between them, the predominantly Tzotzil Maya congregation engage in practices which bear little resemblance to Mass or Communion. On the floor, pews are replaced by a carpet of pine needles, covered in candles – one for every worry. Shamans chant in the Tzotzil language. Perhaps most incongruously, every worshipper bears not a rosary or hymnbook, but a bottle of Coke.

This is syncretism at perhaps its most pronounced; this indigenous group has taken the religion forced upon them during colonisation and gradually transformed it into something which aligns itself more closely with their traditional beliefs. The new "Almighty", which appears to have emerged in Mexico of late – Market Forces – has led to some further and rather interesting appropriation by this congregation. In indigenous tradition, it is believed that one must burp in order to expel evil spirits when praying. Originally, a fermented maize drink was used in this custom, but it has since been all but replaced, thanks to the divine efficiency of Coca-Cola.

Throughout Latin America, this kind of indigenous syncretism as a response to colonisation and later globalisation is common. The Alleluia religion in Guyana, which accepts the divinity of Jesus Christ but emphasises communal values and ecological harmony, is one example. Among descendants of those brought to the continent by slaves from Africa is a similar story. Most slaves came from Western Africa and practiced the Yoruba indigenous religion. However, this religion was banned in most parts of the New World so new and diverse forms developed, hidden under a veil of obedient Catholicism. In Candomble and Santería, for example (the Brazilian and Cuban forms of this religion respectively), every *orixa* (god or goddess) has a Catholic saint counterpart.

Today, of course, there is a greater level of religious freedom in Latin America than previously (although it is still far from ideal). Theoretically, it would be conceivable for indigenous people and the descendants of slaves to return to the 'old ways' that were practised prior to Christian influence. But it seems as though there is more than the continuing dominance of the Catholic Church in this continent holding them back. Perhaps, in a post-colonial context, the 'old ways' are no longer relevant enough either,

and syncretist forms of worship make the most sense in the diverse cultural patchwork that covers today's Latin America.

So what, if any, are the developmental implications of this phenomenon? Can we call it an opportunity for empowerment, something deliberately subversive; or simply a cultural 'coping mechanism' to be taken into account? In San Juan de Chamula, the syncretist church has certainly become extremely powerful in recent years, to the point where control of the village and that which occurs there is largely beyond the reach of the Mexican government, and indeed of the official Catholic Church. The case has been portrayed by some groups as a shining example of indigenous groups gaining autonomy (not to be confused with the Zapatista autonomous communities that also exist in Chiapas).

But to others it appears that the syncretists have themselves been co-opted by external political interests, and the consequences have been anything but empowering for the majority of San Juan de Chamula's indigenous population. The church leaders have been educated and propped up by the PRI (a powerful political party), and the church has become increasingly dogmatic as their influence has increased. Those who don't follow the teachings (predominantly evangelising Protestants) are expelled, and most exiles flee to squat in the ever-expanding shanty towns on the outskirts of nearby San Cristóbal de las Casas. Within the town, tension is rife between remaining Protestants and syncretists – violence erupts frequently, and people on both sides have been killed.

In this case at least, syncretism can be viewed in some respects as a cultural vehicle, which has allowed aspects of indigenous tradition to be preserved and perpetuated despite historical suppression. However, like many aspects of culture, it has the potential to be appropriated to fulfil the political aspirations of particular factions. Certainly, the spiritual fulfilment San Juan de Chamula's church offers its followers – who can't pray unless they can afford the bottle of Coke the practise now requires – seems now to be of secondary importance.

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