ON THE MOVE

A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States

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Part I

Contributions of Pre-Columbian Religion
Chapter 1

The Indigenous Heritage

In 2002 at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City Pope John Paul II canonized Juan Diego a saint—recognition almost five hundred years overdue. But the legacy of Guadalupe and hence the debt was due not just to the simple Indian peasant to whom, according to tradition, the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared in 1531. It was due to the many generations of Náhuatl Indians who nourished the tradition of Guadalupe before the Spaniards began to document it more than a century after the apparitions. The story of Guadalupe was told, danced, transmitted from mouth to mouth and from people to people before it was written and accepted by the church.¹ The original account of Guadalupe, a collective work of Indian theologians, was penned in the Náhuatl language by an Indian who had studied and taught at the Colegio de La Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, then directed by Indians. The belated canonization of Juan Diego only begins to acknowledge the history, presence, role, and value of Indian religion in the Catholicism the Spaniards planted in the Americas.

Indian religion permeates the faith of Hispanic Catholics in the Americas, and its paradigm is Guadalupe. Guadalupe, however, is just one of many Indian gifts to the American church. The Cuban devotion to Our Lady of Charity began when two Taino Indians, Juan and Rodrigo de Hoyos, and a black slave boy, Juan Moreno, found a miraculous statue of the Virgin
floating in Nipe Bay near the northwestern tip of Cuba in 1610. The Santuario of Chimayo, the most popular pilgrimage destination in New Mexico, links a sacred Indian site with a Christian tradition. The Santuario, visited annually by pilgrims from throughout the Southwest, was built over a spring sacred to the Indians for its healing properties. Research on other devotions and pilgrimage sites would doubtless reveal similar links with indigenous religion.

Religion for Hispanics in the United States, wrote Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, includes not only Catholicism but also the idea that the world is holy, which he called one of the oldest truths in the Amerindian world. In Hispanic popular religion, defined as the religion of the people, the natural and supernatural realms become closely intertwined. Father Daniel Groody, CSC, a theologian who studied the religious practices and spirituality of Mexican farm workers in California, concluded that pre-Columbian religion, especially the ability to contemplate, flows in their veins: “They know they are in the presence of the holy.” The popular devotions of Hispanics, according to theologian Juan Schobinger, are based “more on indigenous cultural elements than on official Roman Catholic worship patterns.” Moreover, the cosmovision of Hispanic Catholics, like that of indigenous peoples, “is intuitive rather than rational, open to nature instead of blinded by ego, communitarian rather than individualistic, in which all that is visible symbolized a greater reality on whom everyone depends.”

The religious history of the Hispanic people of the United States begins with the faith journey of people who crossed the Bering Strait to Alaska twelve thousand years ago. Over several thousand years, as they migrated to the tip of South America, indigenous people heard God speaking to them, as God speaks to every culture. They responded in faith and practice according to their understanding of that message, parts of which are alive in Hispanic faith today. These Indian beliefs were incorporated into Iberian Catholicism, already different from that in the rest of Europe, blending elements of Christian, Jewish, and
Arab religions and cultures. To that already multiracial and multicultural religion, the millions of slaves brought to the Americas beginning in the fifteenth century added their contribution, especially in the Caribbean. Their devotional and spiritual practices incorporate African beliefs and devotions, one of them Santeria.

There is no written history of the evolution of religion in the Americas; only a small elite in Mesoamerica possessed the art of writing. Archeology nevertheless yields substantial evidence. Drawings, etchings, symbols, sculptures, ceramics, pyramids, and prayer platforms reveal the search for God, the rise of religious leaders, and the development of ritual and cult. Shamanism, which arose among the Ural-Altaic peoples of northern Europe and Asia, also appeared in the Americas, seeking to explain an unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits. Suggesting the same origins, stone and ceramic drawings and etchings in the Americas resemble those found in caves in France and Spain going back to Paleolithic times.

Like other peoples across the globe, the first inhabitants of the Americas perceived the need to serve God, do penance and offer sacrifice, choose good and reject evil, see the hand of God in all creation and live a moral life in harmony with their family and community. The mountaintop, a sacred place going back in ancient Palestine at least to the time of Abraham, was also holy for indigenous peoples, who built their prayer platforms on hilltops and mountaintops. The pyramids built by the Mayas were a symbolic outreach to the cosmos. Their interest in the stars enabled the Mayas to develop mathematical concepts more advanced than those of the Greeks and to craft the most accurate calendar in the world during that era. To this day four sacred peaks anchor Navajo religion in the US southwest.

Similarly, Christians and indigenous people envisioned heaven, or at least the abode of God, as being in the sky and the abode of the devil, or of evil, as being underground. In the cosmovision of Mesoamerica, the universe had thirteen heavens superimposed on one another, each with its own god.
There were nine subterranean worlds, the deepest one belonging to the god of death. Some gods were good, such as those of rain and fertility; others were bad, such as those of drought, tempest, and war. For Andean people, the earth itself was God, the mother who brought forth and sustained life. They prayed to her for fertility of the land, safety for travelers, a good birth for mothers, and happiness in all enterprises. A similar idea of God existed at one time in Eurasia.

The Pueblo Indians of what is now the southwestern United States worshiped some spirits and feared others. Their ceremonial life had frequent rituals. They believed supernatural forces controlled their lives and had to be propitiated to ensure success in hunting and farming and to ward off illness or enemies. The *kachina* cult represented supernatural beings that may have been ancestral spirits. The people worshiped a supreme being, the sun god of the nomads but equally the mother earth of the planters. The jaguar, god of the hunters, had a special place in their pantheon.

Nevertheless, some groups had arrived at the realization that there is only one god. The Taino peoples of the Caribbean had a supreme being “who is in heaven and whom nobody can see and who has a mother, but no beginning.” They named their god Yocohu Baque Moorócoti, and his mother, Atabey. With the hindsight of five hundred years, a Dominican priest, a modern-day spiritual descendant of one of the first missionary orders in the Americas, wrote: “The Taino Indians believed in God; the only new element the Spaniards added was that of Christ and the Gospel.”

For the Mayas of Mexico and Central America, Hunab was the creator of the world and his son Itzmna was the lord of the skies, of night and day, and the hero of civilization because he gave the Mayas the art of writing and the calendar. Other cultures—there were thousands of them—had many gods.

There were hundreds of tribes on lands now in the United States, hunter-gatherers on the Pacific Coast, planters in the Southwest and Southeast. The political organization of a
particular tribe was simple; it had one or more chiefs. There were associations of various kinds of warriors, the leaders of religious rituals and ceremonies, the medicine men, the heads of various totemic cults, animal or mineral. The style of life was communal. In most tribes the basic unit of society was a monogamous family, though there were a few tribes that practiced polygamy. For the most part, their broad sense of social morality—on such questions as murder or adultery or slavery, for example—was similar to that of their conquerors. Their world view consisted of a cosmic dualism. Spring struggled against winter, the sun against the moon. There were spirits and demons, and numerous mythologies.

Prairie Indians, who lived west of the Mississippi, divided their camps and villages into two parts, representing earth and sky. The sky was the masculine principle, the earth the feminine. There was a supreme being, the organizer of the land. For some, the earth, as in Andean cultures, was the supreme being.

The pueblos had guilds or associations for healers, hunters, warriors, and religious and social leaders. The religious associations carried out the ceremonial life, usually in kivas—large worship chambers for unmarried males. They believed life after death would be similar to life on earth. They could not accept that as a consequence of how they lived on earth, they could be tortured in hell for all eternity.

As in other parts of the world, priests led ritual, cult, and ceremony; interpreted cosmic and religious phenomena; and served as arbiters of personal and social morality. Some cultures had a variety of ministers, from shamans to warrior priests to sacrificers, cult leaders, and medicine men. In some groups the priesthood was a powerful class able to mobilize the resources, skills, and labor to build elaborate temples, pyramids, and at times, entire complexes of buildings, plazas, monoliths, and sculptures. At Teotihuacan, thirty miles northeast of present-day Mexico City, the Olmecs could not have built the massive pyramids to the sun and to the moon and their surrounding structures without the support of political and economic leaders.
In such advanced cultures priests were among the powerful elite who could read and write and who possessed other skills. As in Europe, such power came in exchange for identifying with the goals of political and military leaders.

Had they come with an open mind, the European newcomers could have found many coincidences and convergences between their faith and that of the indigenous inhabitants. Harmony and a common spirit animated both traditions. Pablo Richard, a theologian from Costa Rica, sees in indigenous religions the structure of the history of salvation found in the Bible. The Bible and indigenous religious tradition converge on the recognition of Yahweh as God, the Exodus, the continual remembrance of the stories of ancestors, the fundamental myths to reinforce identity and historical conscience to confront oppression, the struggle for land, and the historical and narrative character of theology.\(^7\)

Traditions similar to that of Jesus, prophet and teacher, exist among all indigenous peoples. In Mesoamerica that figure is Quetzalcoatl, peaceful and long-suffering; among the Kuna of Panama, it is Ibeorgun. The Christian belief that God sent his only son to take human form and be crucified for the redemption of humanity has its parallel in Olmec culture. These people believed that at Teotihuacan (meaning “city of the gods”), the god Nanahuatzin threw himself in the fire and thereby created the sun. In that way the gods created the present world and the human race. The people therefore made offerings, at times human sacrifices, to atone in some way for the sun’s original sacrifice. In the duality of life and death in indigenous religions, which historian Osvaldo Silva describes as the “union of contraries,”\(^8\) death is seen as transformation and the seed of new life. Similarly, by his death and resurrection Christ brought new life to humanity.

Human sacrifices by the Aztecs, abhorred by the conquistadors, had also occurred in their tradition. In ancient Palestine, Abraham attempted to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, and though
God held back his hand, the practice did not end, though sacrifices of animals and the fruits of the harvest were more common. In pagan times during a time of famine in Sweden the chieftains first sacrificed oxen, then, when the crops did not improve, human beings, and finally, King Domald. The Mass, which the Europeans brought to the Americas, commemorates the sacrifice of God’s own son on the cross.

Notwithstanding the many convergences, Europeans failed to see that many indigenous beliefs and practices were connected in some way to the origins of their own religious outlook. No doubt the early Christians would have been more receptive, when religion was communal and open to all. But five hundred years ago, in an age of religious warfare, all peoples were either believers or infidels. Europeans saw all indigenous religion as idolatry or, worse, as worship of the devil. Attempting to crush it, they defaced and destroyed temples and other places of worship and punished severely, even executing, those who refused to give up their beliefs. Europeans believed they were the sole custodians of the word of God. To this day a religiosity with elements from other traditions is considered defective, less than authentic.

Yet, the times are changing. Because modern humanity has polluted the earth’s air and waters, built enough nuclear weapons to destroy the planet many times over, despoiled its most precious resources, and even tampered with its genetic codes, the Indian idea that the world is holy appeals to religious leaders as the foundation for a new theology of the environment. The ability of indigenous peoples to experience joy even in the face of appalling living conditions and the strength to be able to survive burdens that would crush other cultures have similar appeal.

In time, the syncretic nature of Hispanic religion will be seen as its strength.