**Syncretism**

**Define the word “syncretism.”**

Among the many tools used in the Spanish Conquest, Christianity was perhaps the surest way to ensure compliance from the Indigenous population in the New World. But contrary to popular belief this was not always a one way street. After years of using force the Catholic monks and friars had to come to the realization that Christianity as a monotheistic religion was just not something that the Indigenous population embraced. Even when pagan idols where removed and former temples and shrines destroyed, the sites still remained. While on the surface, Christian gods and deities such as saints and virgins were accepted by the Indians, they continued to worship their own gods in secrecy. This was because the Indians were accustomed to accepting the gods of their conquerors into their pantheon, but they weren't so willing to cease the worship of the gods of their ancestors. Because of this we see so many Christian deities with a dual identity in Latin America today.



**Guadalupe/Tonantzin**

Starting with perhaps the most popular of dual identity Christian deities, the Virgen de Guadalupe is an example of this phenomenon. You can get a more in depth look at this deity's background [here](http://emmaspeaks.hubpages.com/hub/The-Myth-of-the-Virgen-de-Guadalupe), but for a quick overview, this deity was created by Miguel Sanchez, a Catholic priest, in 1648, but was embraced by the Christian clergy in Mexico as a way to convert the Indigenous population because of her Indian appearance. A church was built for her on the Hill of Tepeyac, which was also the site of the pagan Nahua goddess, Tonantzin. Indians made pilgrimages to this site for centuries and even well into the 18th century, Indians that made this pilgrimage were going to pay homage to Tonantzin, not Guadalupe. However, this manifestation of Christian faith was acceptable to the Catholic clergy because the image that this portrayed was that of Christian converts.



**Ogum/St. George**

In Brazil the black Portuguese worship the warrior god Ogum under the guise of the Christian saint St. George. Ogum originated in Yoruba and Haitian religions. During the European Slave trade, Brazil got a majority, some 70%, of black slaves, but their first stop was usually the Caribbean.The Africans brought along their beliefs and gods from Africa and even though the Indigenous population already had their own gods, they were quite open to new ones.

This pagan god has several identities depending on what country you are in, so in Bahia, he is more synonymous with St. Sebastian or St. Anthony. Even the corresponding pagan religion that synchronized with Christianity can make a difference in the dual identity of this god, so in Voudou he is known as St. Jacques Majeur (St. James the Greater), or Santiago Matamoros (St. James the Moorslayer), but in Santeria he is syncretized with St. Peter.

 **Yemenja/Virgen de la Concepcion**

Once again, in Brazil, Yemanja is one of the seven orixas of the African Pantheon and is also known as the Queen of the Ocean. Also from the Yoruba religion, this is another deity that has several identities. The syncretism between Christian and Umbanda religion gives us Our Lady of the Seafaring. In Bahia, she is known as Our Lady of Conception. In Santeria/Christian syncretism in Cuba and Haiti she is known as Our Lady of Regla. Clearly with this example as with others, the Spanish were only so successful in their quest to convert the Indigenous population. While the appearance on the surface may be one of Christian conversion, all that really happened was the addition of new deities to a pre-existing pantheon. With the introduction of another culture, the Africans, into this New World, the pantheon just grew bigger.The Christians had not only the Indigenous idolatry to contend with, but they also had the deities of this other culture, the Africans, and *their*syncretism with the Indigenous culture to compete with.

**Superstition or Belief?**

In essence what this boils down to is the clergy's decision to pick their battles. Was it really important that the Indigenous population understand that the Christian gods they were told to worship were strictly Christian? Or was it necessary for them to give up their own beliefs? Differentiating between beliefs and mere superstitions was a practical way for the Catholic clergy to justify this new form of Christianity. When a typical farmer and descendant of the Maya in the Yucatan Peninsula was asked why, if he was a Christian, did he make offerings to the chaac, the rain spirits, he answered, "Because I make milpa." In other words, one thing had nothing to do with the other and praying for rain to the rain gods in order to ensure a good crop had no effect on his Christianity. I think this is the best example of Christianity in Latin America as understood by not only the Indigenous population, but even among modern Latinos. There is no denying that superstition is taken seriously among Latinos. The fact that superstitions have been accepted within the Christian religion is a telltale reminder of the unspoken compromise that was made between the Spanish Catholics and the Indigenous population five hundred years ago.

1. Make a connection to other civilizations/empires that we have discussed thus far.
2. Why do you suppose the blending of cultures and assimilation might begin with religion?
3. In thinking about the social structure that begins to take shape, what do you predict is a likely outcome for the native populations of an area that becomes a colony in the “New World?”