

## RELIGION AND THE MAYA

Helen Ballou \*

Undergraduate Student, B.A. in Human Development, Early Childhood Education, and Special Education Program, Rivier College

*a place to see "The Light That Came from Beside the Sea," the account of "Our Place in the Shadow." A place to see "The Dawn of Life,"*

*–Popol Vuh*

*You are all in mortal sin, and live and die in it, because of the cruelty and tyranny you practice among these innocent peoples. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude?*

*–Fray Anton Montesino*

Religion is many things to many people. To the Maya, religion was ultimately their creator and destroyer. The Maya lived in the area of Central America that encompasses present day Belize, and parts of southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. They were at their strongest from approximately 200 to 900 CE (Keen, 2004). Some theories claim that the Maya were already in a slow decline or were recovering from social and economic collapse when they were ‘discovered’ by Europeans in the 1500s (Keen, 2004). According to Gallenkamp (1981), this decline could have been a result of tremendous pressure put on the working class to create increasingly decadent ceremonial sites, or from warfare, or famine. In spite of this, the Maya were considered one of the most highly advanced civilizations, with “extraordinary abilities in architecture, sculpture, painting, mathematics, and astronomy” (Keen, 2004, p. 15). Although the Maya and the Spanish and their respective religions had similarities and distinct differences, the combined efforts of these ‘discoverers of the New World’ brought about the subjugation and near obliteration of the Maya.

The Maya had a class hierarchy: king, nobility, priests, artisans, working class (farmers and peasants), and slaves. The Spanish class hierarchy mirrored that of the Maya. Post-Conquest, the Maya traded one class system for another. Instead of working toward the greater good of their own people, in deference to their own king, nobility, and educated priests and scribes; the Maya were forced to serve a Spanish king, Spanish nobility, and Spanish priests who advanced Christianity and eradicated Maya culture and religion in the name of progress and salvation.

The Maya were accustomed to paying tribute to Maya kings in the form of labor, goods, and food (Sharer, 1996). After the Conquest, the Maya continued paying tribute but this time for Spanish oppressors under the encomienda system. The labors of the Maya were for the greater good and benefit of a far-off king and country and for leaders who cared little, if at all, for the Maya way of life or the dignity of their humanity. The Maya were used and degraded; treated like animals. They were harshly punished if they turned to their faith for solace and many lost hope and committed suicide. The Maya’s religious beliefs defined their culture and roles in their world and in juxtaposition of this aspect, the Spanish religion, Catholicism, systematically destroyed the Maya just to the brink of complete annihilation.

Maya religion and Catholicism had many similarities; both had written and oral traditions, several of which were parallel in plot and content; the Maya had the Popol Vuh, Catholics had the Holy Bible; both held elaborate ceremonies which included fasting, penance by bloodletting, and burning incense (Keen, 2004); both contained sacrifice as a ceremonial component; both believed in an afterlife; and both maintained rules and convictions to guide one's life by.

Literacy became a key factor in the preservation of Maya heritage and tradition. The Spanish missionaries taught the converted Maya how to read and write in Spanish. This was done to expand the Maya's knowledge of Catholic theology and to allow the Maya to read and write Catholic text (Gallenkamp, 1981). The newly educated soon devised a way to use this skill to preserve their own dwindling heritage. Books were written in Spanish by the Maya (and also by some of the missionaries and clergy) recounting Maya history, the Conquest and colonization of their homeland, and Maya tradition. Preservation of the Mayan texts was acceptable only for anthropological purposes, but not religious purposes.

The Quiche Maya, who lived in present-day Guatemala, had their own Mayan Bible, the Popol Vuh that they used for divination and decision making. They had procured it on a pilgrimage somewhere on the Atlantic coast and it served as their 'Council Book' (Tedlock, 1996). "The writing of words in ancient Mayan books was done by means of a script that combines logographic and phonetic principles" (Tedlock, 1996, p. 28). The original hieroglyphic Popol Vuh probably had illustrations and charts that "contained systematic accounts of cycles in astronomical and earthly events that served as a complex navigation system for those who wished to see and move beyond the present" (Tedlock, 1996, p. 29). Someone had created an alphabetic Popol Vuh most likely in an attempt to preserve the original and prevent this knowledge from being lost. It had been done Post-Conquest because there was a reference in it to torture by the Castilians (Tedlock, 1996). The whereabouts of the original, hieroglyphic Popol Vuh is unknown; it could have returned to the ancient Maya gods in a cloud of dust, or it may still be waiting to be discovered. The alphabetic Popol Vuh gave a "long performance and account" (Tedlock, 1996, p. 29) written in two columns on each page; one in alphabetic Quiche Mayan text, the other a Spanish translation made by a priest named Francisco Ximenez in the early 1700s. Again, some members of the clergy respected the Maya culture and made an effort to preserve indigenous cultural artifacts.

The Catholic's Bible reflects the Popol Vuh in several aspects: its creation stories, use of divination, and edicts about expected behavior. Given enough time, one could ascertain parallel readings from both books. Supposedly, Pre-Conquest, the Maya had thousands of books chronicling their life, history, and complex calendar system (Gallenkamp, 1981). There are precious few Mayan text in existence at this time which include the Dresden Codex, Madrid Codex, Grolier Codex, and the Paris Codex. These four hieroglyphic codices are named for the locations where they reside, although the current location of the Grolier Codex is unknown.

Other alphabetic texts, a series named the Chilam Balam or 'Jaguar Translators' (Tedlock, 1996) provide insight into the Spanish conquest, divinations and prophesies, history, rituals, and astronomy of the Yucatec Maya.

More than any other Mayan book, whether hieroglyphic or alphabetic, the Popol Vuh tells us something about the conceptual place of books in the pre-Columbian world. The writers of the alphabetic version explain why the hieroglyphic version was among the most precious possessions of Quiche rulers: They knew whether war would occur; everything they saw was clear to them. Whether there would be death, or whether there

would be famine, or whether quarrels would occur, they knew it for certain, since there was a place to see it, there was a book. “Council Book” was their name for it. (Tedlock, 1996, p. 29)

Regardless of any similarities, the majority of Mayan writings were burned by overzealous clergy and church officials in a bid to win favor of their God and their king. Ironically, Keen (2004), states that “Bishop Diego de Landa, who burned twenty-seven Maya codices as ‘works of the devil,’ nevertheless observed that the Maya were very generous and hospitable” (p. 20). That anyone wreaked such havoc and destruction and then made such a mild mannered observation about the people that he so wrongly treated is mind-boggling.

A Maya daykeeper’s prayer and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm from the Bible are similar in content and style (see Appendix A). Both give comfort and hope to the reader. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is a more formal entreaty for guidance or even an agreement. This Daykeeper’s Prayer is almost a workingman’s checklist. It has a slow, steady cadence to guide one along the journey. Both show an enduring faith and hope in the future and trust in their Maker.

The Bible and the Popol Vuh each had a version of how the world was created, commonly known as a creation story. Man was made last in each version but they differed in one very important aspect. In the Popol Vuh, man was equal to and in harmony with the plants and animals. There was an innate respect for the natural world. In fact, man was made of corn which was collected by the animals (McMaster & Trafzer, 2004). “They sought and discovered what was needed for human flesh. It was only a short while before the sun, moon, and stars were to appear above the Makers and Modelers. Split Place, Bitter Water Place is the name: the yellow corn, white corn came from there. And these are the names of the animals who brought the food: fox, coyote, parrot, crow. There were four animals who brought the news of the ears of yellow and white corn” (Tedlock, 1996, p. 145). Man was brought up to live in harmony with nature. There was an interdependency and acknowledgement of the importance of everything. The Maya believed that spirit resided in everything in the world and they honored that spirit.

In Genesis, the Christian creation story, Man is not equal to the plants and animals but above them, better than them. In Genesis 1:28, it states, “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Holy Bible, 1983, p. 2). Man is not encouraged to live in harmony with nature, but to exploit it and dominate it; use it for Man’s personal gain. The Spanish conquistadors, colonists, and many times the clergy reflected this elitist attitude in their exploitive treatment of the indigenous people and their homeland.

According to McMaster and Trafzer (2004), there still exists a tri-dimensional relationship between the Maya people, their environment and the supernatural world around them; it is the foundation that their religious tradition rests upon. The Maya believe in an interconnected world that they respect and live in harmony with. Every day is holy. This is in direct contrast with European values which is not ecocentric/biocentric like the Maya, but anthropocentric (McMaster & Trafzer, 2004). European Man was not interdependent with nature but exploitive of it, taking whatever spoils it could grasp. The indigenous people were not looked at as a unique culture but as possessions with a monetary value. There was no respect; no honor for spirit.

Maya religion was polytheistic. The Maya worshipped many gods who worked together and sometimes in opposition of each other. Their foremost god, Itzam Na “incorporated in himself the aspects of many other gods: not only creation but fire, rain, crops, and earth” (Keen, 2004, p. 18). Accompanying Itzam Na on the Maya spiritual journey was a sun god, moon goddess, Cha the rain god,

Kukulcan (feathered serpent) the god of writing and learning, a maize god, and Ah Puch, the god of death, and many, many others (Keen, 2004). According to Sharer (1996), the noted Maya scholar, “Sir Eric Thompson, proposed that all other deities were but aspects of Itzamna, making Maya religion in a sense monotheistic” (p. 160). “The day-to-day activities and the entire life cycle of each person was set by custom and governed by religious beliefs...The Maya kept their lives in harmony with their world—their family, their community, and their gods” (Sharer, 1996, p. 117). The Maya of today still worship these same gods in similar fashion to their ancestors. They hold on to many of the same traditions that managed to survive.

Catholicism was and still remains monotheistic. Catholics believe that their god is the one, true God. During and after the Conquest, the Spanish conquistadors and clergy alike insisted that all other people would have to conform to their beliefs as well, even if the application of deadly force was necessary to bring about salvation and redemption. Why they thought that they were better than other people most likely had underlying political and economic foundations that were complicated by a sense of self-righteousness and egocentrism mixed with power.

The Spanish church was immensely wealthy and influential, being the most powerful entity in Spain, second only to the Crown (Keen, 2004). “The Catholic Sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, particularly favored the clergy and the spread of its influence as a means of achieving national unity and royal absolutism” (Keen, 2004, p. 100). The colonists, including the clergy, had a narrow view of their mission and purpose in the New World. Overall, no respect was given to the Maya people as individuals or as a culture. The Maya were looked down upon as savages and infidels in need of guidance and saving because they lacked Christianity. While the clergy may have had a “sensitive social conscience and a love of learning” (Keen, 2004, p. 101), their attitude was of an elitist nature that frequently relegated the Maya to that of the ‘noble savage.’

This characterization ranged in definition from docile, obedient, and ignorant, to proud and passionate, yet “with very tractable minds void of error and ready for impression” (Keen, 2004, p. 101). Many members of religious orders attempted to secure rights for the indigenas, just stopping short of fully respecting their cultures and spiritual beliefs. Any efforts that were made were done primarily in the context of a Catholic life. To fully respect the Maya would have required abandoning the New World and leaving the Maya and other indigenous peoples to themselves to live their lives the way that they chose to. That did not happen.

“Franciscan and Dominican friars undertook the complete obliteration of Maya religious beliefs” (Gallenkamp, 1981, p. 24). Temples, idols, and shrines were destroyed and any display or worship of their gods was denied. Priests were killed or enslaved; their power and influence ripped away from them. If the conquistadors and clergy had read Deuteronomy, chapter 12, verses 1-12, they probably would have felt justified in their actions. Verses two and three directs followers to “utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods...and you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place” (Holy Bible, 1983, p.2-3). Maya priests and anyone else caught or even suspected of worshipping their Maya gods were tortured horribly. According to Gallenkamp (1981), people were beaten, whipped, stretched, mutilated, burned and scalded with hot water. A surge of righteous indignation may have rippled through their loins as books were burned and temples dismantled to cobble the path to a newly erected Catholic church. Had they not read Matthew 22: 39?

Gallenkamp (1981), states that “some authorities estimate that the population of certain tribes was reduced by seventy-five to ninety percent in the century immediately after the Conquest” (p. 24). This

was the result of a combination of neglect/slavery, warfare, disease, and genocide. The Spanish had to walk a fine line to maintain control yet maintain their economic benefit. According to Gallenkamp (1981), the Spanish publicly killed off Maya leaders and priests, anyone of influence, who could sway the masses in order to intimidate and scare the remaining people into submission.

Men like Bartolome Las Casas fought for the rights of the indigenous people and attempted to preserve their heritage and culture (Sanderlin, 1992). Las Casas wrote numerous treatises against the encomienda system and slavery, and worked on behalf of the indigenous people. He did not make much progress because the economic tide was against him. Maximum profits could not be made if labor was not maximized, hence, indigenous slavery and subjugation. It was too profitable to enslave and suppress the native peoples to let go of; the Spanish would not back down. Rules and laws that were passed to support indigenas were frequently ignored.

Las Casas even wrote in support of the Maya practice of human sacrifice (Sanderlin, 1992). The Maya believed that strength of spirit resided in blood (Sharer, 1996). They would sacrifice captives in a holy ceremony, offering the blood to their gods. The Spanish looked down upon the Maya as barbarous and inhuman yet the Spanish could not see the correlation between the Maya and themselves in this regard. The Spanish would regularly spill human blood in the name of their god (class discussion, HS260, September 24, 2007). The Spanish dispatched life without a backward glance. Their targets were oftentimes tortured or burned at the stake (Gallenkamp, 1981). Again, this was all done in the pretext that it was in God's name and honor. The rituals of human sacrifice by the Maya were brutal but their intentions were honorable and religious in nature while the Spaniard's goals were to cause pain and misery. Had the Spanish examined their own actions, the designation of the term barbarous may well have shifted from the Maya to themselves.

In Las Casa's A Defense of Human Sacrifice (Sanderlin, 1992), the friar states that "Men want to be taught not forced...there is no greater or more arduous step than for a man to abandon the religion which he had once embraced" (p. 167). That the Maya religion was such an integral part of their daily lives must have made it even harder to turn away from. To the Maya, their gods were living gods in the truest sense. Many of the converted did so for purposes of self-preservation but still worshipped in their own way in secret. According to Sharer (1996), some remote Maya villages practiced a mixture of Catholicism and Maya religion, so at least some Maya were able to hold onto their beliefs. That they were allowed to mingle the two religions gives one hope. Some argue that God is God and all people worship in their own way. There is no wrong religion; they are all right. One thing is for certain; The Maya gods created the Maya and the Catholic religion destroyed them. It may not have been a total physical destruction but surely a symbolic one. The Maya were forced down a path that they would not have taken if they had not been 'discovered.'

"It is often remarked that those who do not learn from the past are likely to repeat the problems and tragedies suffered by our forebears" (Sharer, 1996, p. 213). It has been said several times in class discussions that it seems like humans have not learned very much over the centuries. The same mistakes are made over and over again; just the dates, locations, and the faces change. The Spanish conquistadors, colonists, and church members wrought terrible injustices against the Maya. The Maya survived. Now, the Maya can band together as a united force (e.g. Latin America advocacy groups) and fight for their rights. According to McMaster and Trafzer (2004), in the Year 2012, the Maya will be entering into a new Great Cycle in their calendar system which will be their 5<sup>th</sup> millennium. Through advocacy, education, and the continuation of traditions, the Maya will keep their heritage alive.

What is Truth? What is a Fact? Books and opinions can be slanted one way or the other; paragraphs can be rearranged and quotes highlighted at key points to support an opinion or thesis. These things

really happened: The Maya lands were colonized by the Spanish. The Spanish attempted to eliminate the Maya culture and religion. The Maya were enslaved. People died. The Maya cannot change the past, but they do have the power to affect the future. That is the Truth.

## References

- Chilam Balam de Chumayel (Manuscript). Retrieved November 13, 2007, from [http://diglib.princeton.edu/xquery?\\_xq=getCollection&\\_xsl=collection&\\_pid=c0940](http://diglib.princeton.edu/xquery?_xq=getCollection&_xsl=collection&_pid=c0940)
- Gallenkamp, C., (1981). *Maya: the riddle and rediscovery of a lost civilization*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
- Holy Bible. (1983). *Holy bible: new king james version*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Keen, B., & Haynes, K., (2004). *A history of latin america*. (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Maya Codices. Retrieved November 13, 2007, from <http://pages.prodigy.net/gbonline/awmayac.html>
- McMaster, G., & Trafzer, C., (Eds.). (2004). *Native universe: voices of indian america*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society.
- Restall, M. (1998). *Maya conquistador*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Sanderlin, G., (Ed. & Trans.). (1992). *Witness: writings of bartolome de las casas*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Sharer, R., (1996). *Daily life in maya civilization*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Tedlock, D., (1996). (Trans.). *Popol vuh: the definitive edition of the mayan book of the dawn of life and the glories of gods and kings*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Simon and Schuster.

## Appendix A

### 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: (from The Holy Bible)

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I shall not want.  
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul;  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness  
For His name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
For You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
You anoint my head with oil;  
My cup runs over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
All the days of my life;  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord  
Forever.

**Daykeeper's Prayer:** (Tedlock, 1996, pp. 18-19)

Make my guilt vanish,  
Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth;  
do me a favor,  
give me strength, give me courage  
in my heart, in my head,  
since you are my mountain and my plain;  
may there be no falsehood and no stain,  
and may this reading of the Popol Vuh  
come out clear as dawn,  
and may the shifting of ancient times  
be complete in my heart, in my head;  
and make my guilt vanish,  
my grandmothers, grandfathers,  
and however many souls of the dead there may be,  
you who speak with the Heart of Sky and Earth,  
may all of you together give strength  
to the reading I have undertaken.

---

\* **HELEN BALLOU** has lived in Brookline, NH for most of her life; the happiest years being the last 11 with her wonderful husband, Pete. She is a sophomore in Rivier College's Human Development, Early Childhood Education, and Special Education program. She is a peer tutor for the First-Year Seminar (FYS), Religion. She will continue to shine on and she hopes that the reader will as well.