

7. Christianity and the Americas

Cultures in Motion

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Christianity in the Americas 1500–1700 CE

■ *Spanish missionary area*

■ *Portuguese missionary area*

■ *French missionary area*

■ *English missionary area*

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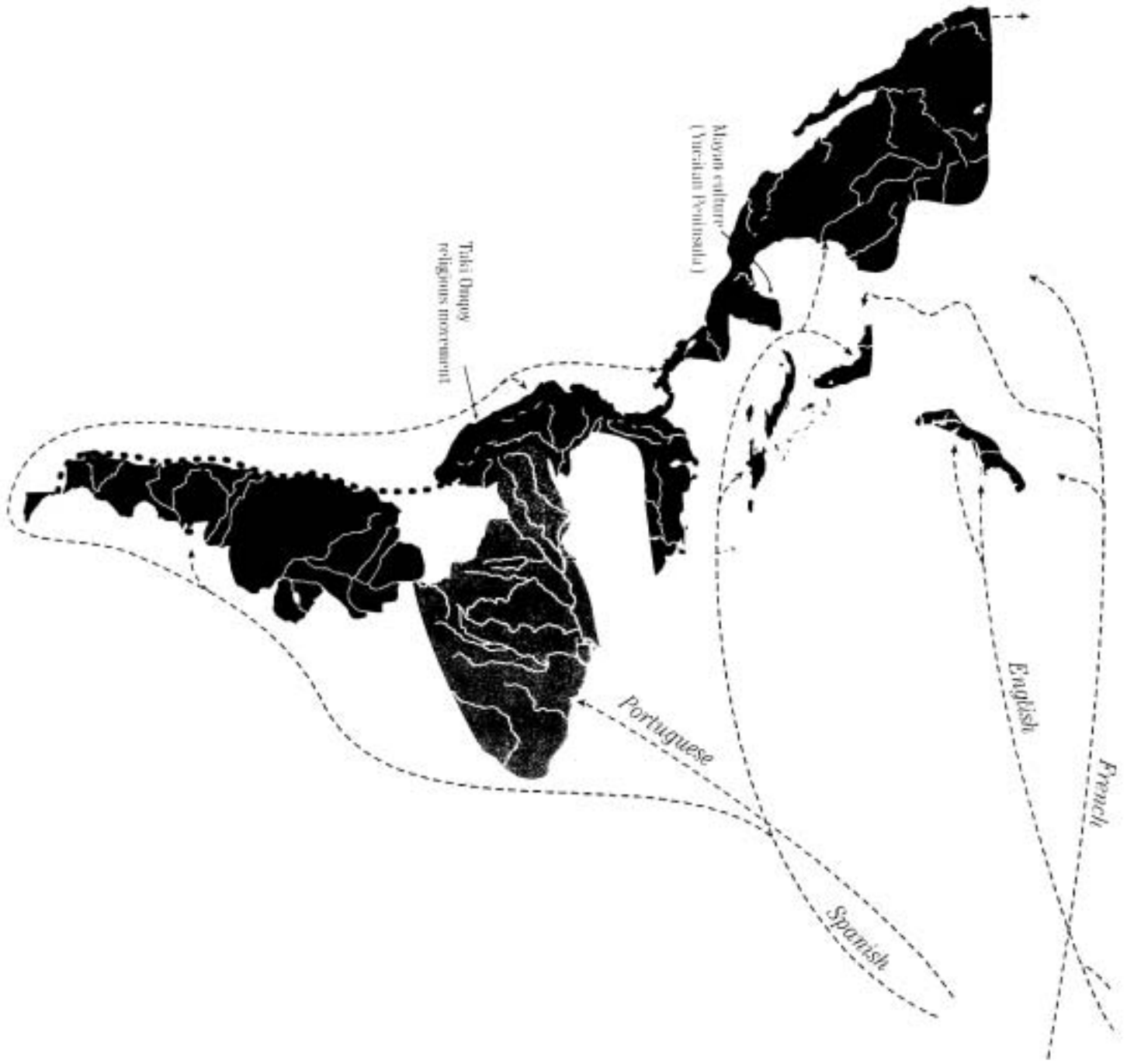
..... *Andes*

Europe's regular connection with the Americas, from 1492 CE onward, brought important cultural contacts. Christianity was one of the main European imports to the Americas (which at the time of first contact supported more than a thousand distinct societies), along with new animals, new diseases, and new rulers. Missionary activity was intense. Interest among many previously polytheist native American groups ran high, though Europeans used a mixture of persuasion and force to drive their religion home. Many syncretic combinations developed, even in this unequal interchange. The spread of Christianity also involved Africans brought to the Western Hemisphere as slaves (see Chapter 9).

European religious outreach to the Americas initially involved Catholicism, in part because Catholic Spain and Portugal were the first entrants to American colonization, and in part because Protestant leaders developed an interest in converting local populations more slowly. The missionary surge was part of the same movement that saw new efforts in Asia (see Chapter 5), but the con-

sequences were more sweeping. Later missionary efforts, in the nineteenth century, reached beyond the Americas into Pacific Oceania.

The Catholic church early intervened in Spanish and Portuguese claims in the Americas, sponsoring the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas that set up respective spheres of influence and arguing that both countries deserved territory in return for bringing the native peoples into the Christian community. Printing presses, imported by the sixteenth century, concentrated heavily on religious materials, while European artistic styles were imported for churches and religious paintings (as well as government buildings). More to the point, religious orders, like the Franciscans and Dominicans as well as the sixteenth-century Jesuit order, provided large numbers of missionaries, establishing churches in the Indian towns and setting up missions in frontier areas. Some early missionaries became ardent defenders of Indian rights. More common were people like Diego de Landa, bishop of Yucatán (Mexico, 1547), who admired Mayans' culture but so



detested and feared their religion that he burned all their books and tortured many Indians suspected of backsliding from Christianity. The spread of Christianity in this sense was part of a larger colonial system, a means of institutionalizing conquest and impressing the inferior status of the natives of the Americas.

Missionary outreach was in fact gradual and spotty, even as church structures spread throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and (by the eighteenth century) up the coast of California. Indian groups in remote areas—for example, parts of the Andes region as well as the Amazon rain forest—long avoided Christianity. Even Indians who entered missions, sometimes eager for protection and interested in European agricultural methods, did not necessarily durably convert.

Still more common were patterns of syncretism, partially concealed in order to avoid government persecution. Attacks on traditional religion and religious leaders, plus the dramatic punishments for nonbelief, left many Indians with few alternatives to conversion, and interest in Christianity was sincere in any event: here was an attractive religion surrounded by the trappings of a powerful society. Yet many Indian and mestizo (Indian-European) groups mixed in old elements as well. During the 1560s, for example, a Taki Onqoy religious movement swept the central Andes of Peru, with native

preachers claiming that the old gods were speaking through them. The preachers argued that spreading disease was a sign of the old gods' displeasure at conversions to Catholicism. Yet many of the priests called themselves Mary or Mary Magdalene, invoking obvious Christian names to add to their appeal. Even after resistance movements of this sort were crushed by colonial authorities, Indians continued to use traditional religious symbols, including family dolls, and combined belief in magic with their Catholicism. Christian prayers and visits to local magicians were used together to deal with disease. In Mexico, Mayan groups combined prayers to the Christian god with agricultural rituals aimed at the traditional gods. Saints in fact represented the older deities, and even the priests found it prudent to overlook this compromise. Christian crosses were commonly covered with the traditional religious cloth, the huipil, which allowed Mayans to worship both sets of divinities together. Easter was less important to the Mayans than was All Souls' Day, because the latter could be merged with traditional ancestor worship, with food offerings placed on the tombs.

The result of Christian outreach in Latin America was a mixed picture. Immigrants of European origin maintained Christian beliefs and also Western artistic and intellectual styles, though they also used some Indian styles and themes (showing colorful

items in church paintings, for example). Mestizos and Indians changed their culture by adopting Christianity and sometimes additional habits, such as a new sense of work discipline and time, and abandoning such older patterns as human sacrifice. But their beliefs were different from pure Europeanism. Added to the mix were African slaves (see Chapter 9), who kept important elements of their culture as well even as they, too, gradually converted to aspects of Christianity. This complex mixture served as the basis for an essentially new Latin American civilization. Its ingredients continued to bubble up even into the twentieth century. By this point, Latin Americans were contributing powerfully to a broader Western culture in literature, art, and music, though with some distinctive emphases. At the same time, new syncretic religions, mixing European, African, and Indian traditions, spread widely, particularly in places like Brazil. In the 1920s, for example, a religion called Umbanda was launched in Brazil, gradually winning millions of believers on the basis of ongoing Indian rituals (including trances) plus Christian and African elements.

North America

Christianity came to North America primarily in the form of European immigration by British Protestants and French and Spanish Catholics. These people brought their reli-

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gion (and other cultural trappings) with them; in many cases, the desire to practice religion freely was a key motive in coming to the New World, a desire that helped give the European colonies a fervent religious heritage. (To this day, the United States has more widespread religious belief and practice than do most parts of Europe.) Indian populations were far smaller than those in Latin America, and they were soon decimated by disease as well. Pushing the Indians away from the settlements, more than conversion, dominated the thinking of the white settlers. Catholic missionaries were active early on in Canada and other French territories, and in the Spanish missions that spread up the California coast in the eighteenth century; but Protestants showed less interest. Efforts to convert Indians were fitful—Dartmouth College was founded for this purpose in the eighteenth century—and most native American groups retained their own styles and values. White masters also hesitated to Christianize their African slaves, lest education should make them harder to control. Here, however, extensive interaction, including the slaves' learning English, did produce a new cultural mix, and most slave families came to embrace an often fervent Christianity along with elements of their African cultural traditions.

Missionary activity developed in the eighteenth century, but it was often directed at converting existing Christians to a different

denomination. Anglicans set up an important effort in 1701, with limited success in Puritan New England. A new group, the Methodists, won many converts, particularly on the colonial frontiers. In the nineteenth century, missionary attempts were extended to Catholic immigrants, again with limited results.

By this point Protestant missionary interest was sufficient to warrant new attention to native Americans. The policy of placing Indians on reservations, which had emerged by the 1830s, had double-edged implications. On the one hand, it got native Americans out of the way of whites, who could then ignore them—or argue, sometimes sincerely, that they were allowing Indians to defend their traditional culture. On the other, reservations were sometimes intended to allow a transition in which missionaries, educators, and other outsiders would “civilize” the natives toward their later integration into the larger American culture. Missionary outreach to the reservations developed steadily, often associated with schools and medical care. Many Indians developed a mixture of Christian and traditional beliefs and rituals. Some, however, simply found their culture eviscerated, with no satisfactory replacement. A fervent revival of traditional religion developed among the Sioux in 1890, with religious visions associated with the “Ghost Dance.” Tragically, the movement frightened whites

and their attempts to repress it culminated in the Indian massacre at Wounded Knee. The place of native American culture in the United States—indeed, the culture itself—remained a source of contention.

American Christianity was supplemented and altered by steady streams of immigration. New immigration sources in the later nineteenth century brought growing numbers of Catholics and a new Eastern Orthodox minority (along with a smaller Jewish minority and some Muslims). Smaller Asian immigration currents brought some Asian Christians, but also others, who were greeted by missionary efforts that had mixed success. Immigration after World War II augmented Buddhist and particularly Muslim minorities in what was, still, a largely Christian religious culture.

Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania

A final area of Christian conversion emerged in the Pacific in the nineteenth century, with the growing settlement of Australia and New Zealand and increasing contact with the island regions of the Polynesians and other areas. By this point Protestant missionary interest was growing. In Australia and New Zealand, Christianity entered mainly in the ranks of European settlers

(though religious sentiment among the new Australians was often muted). Missionaries' attempts among Australian aborigines and the Maoris of New Zealand began fairly early as well. The first mission to the Maoris began in 1814, from Australia. Some Maoris were fully converted, and others mixed Christianity with continued belief in the Maori prophets; the Ratana and Ringati churches maintain this syncretism even today.

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Missions in Polynesia followed close on the heels of traders and plantation owners. Close contact with Western advisers convinced Hawaiian kings of the superiority of Christianity, and local polytheist religions were banned in 1819. In 1820 an American Protestant missionary board sent a large contingent to the islands. Conversions followed quickly, along with stringent curtailment of traditional cultural expressions such as the hula. (Catholic missionary efforts, from Europe, also entered in, from 1827 onward, resulting in several years of bitter conflict with Protestant groups backed by the Hawaiian monarchy.) Only in the 1870s was a revival of older styles permitted, along with new imports (from Samoa), such as the grass skirt.

Conclusion

In the Pacific, as in parts of North America, Asia, and Africa, some Christian missionary efforts in the nineteenth century were colored by a pronounced belief in Western superiority, which reduced the flexibility necessary for syncretism. Demands for adherence to Western ways of civilization, including clothing styles, did not prevent substantial conversions, but they also confirmed some groups in their preference for traditional religious and ritual outlets. Thus some American Indians, especially those confined on reservations, largely ignored the missionary appeal. But Christian vigor continued as well. In the later twentieth century, fundamentalist Protestants mounted a huge missionary effort in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, winning important converts. Particularly in places like Guatemala and Brazil, large portions of the population, particularly in the poorer social classes, moved to this new Protestant commitment.