

# Devising a Syncretistic Version of Catholicism Among the Pueblo

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## Özet

Bu makale beyaz adamın gelişinden sonra güneybatı Pueblo Kızılderililerinin yaşamında meydana gelen değişiklikleri ele almaktadır. Hıristiyan misyonerlerin amacı bu insanların dini inançlarını değiştirmektir. Başlangıçta Kızılderililer Hıristiyanlığa karşı koymadılar, ancak misyonerlerin tek Tanrıya bağlılık konusundaki ısrarları, yüzyıllar boyunca sürecektir ihtilafa sebebiyet verdi çünkü Kızılderililer kendi geleneksel inançlarından vazgeçmek niyetinde değillerdi. Kızılderililerin dini bastırıldı, törenleri yasaklandı, yasaklara uymayanlar ise kırbaçlandı veya öldürüldü. Misyonerler tüm çabalarına rağmen, Kızılderililerin inançlarını değiştirmek konusunda tam bir başarı elde edemediler çünkü Pueblolar hayatta kalabilmek için dinlerini değiştirmişlerdi ve bunu da Hıristiyanlığı kendi geleneksel inançlarına göre uyarlayarak yapmışlardı.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Kızılderili inançları, Pueblolar'ın dini, Sinkretizm, Kuzey Amerika'daki misyonerler. Dini zulüm.

## Abstract

This article discusses the changes that took place in the lives of the Pueblos of the Southwest after the arrival of the white man. The aim of the Christian missionaries was to convert these people. Initially most Native Americans were not antagonistic towards Christianity, but the insistence of the missionaries upon a total devotion to one God resulted in centuries of conflict because the Native Americans were unwilling to disown their traditional beliefs. The Indians' native religion was suppressed; their ceremonies were forbidden; transgressors were whipped or executed. Despite the efforts of the missionaries, they were not wholly successful in converting the natives because the Pueblos were converted to Christianity in order to survive and only by modifying Christianity according to their traditional beliefs.

**Key Words:** Native American beliefs, Pueblo religion, Syncretism, Missionaries in North America, Religious persecution.

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A missionary once undertook to instruct a group of Indians in the truths of his holy religion. He told them of the creation of the earth in six days, and of the fall of our first parents by eating an apple.

The courteous savages listened attentively, and, after thanking him, one related in his turn a very ancient tradition concerning the origin of the maize. But the missionary plainly showed his disgust and disbelief, indignantly saying: "What I delivered to you were sacred truths, but this that you tell me is mere fable and falsehood!" (Eastman, 1980: 119)

Ever since the first white man set foot on the North American continent, he has viewed the indigenous peoples as primitive pagans and considered himself ordained to civilize, "Christianize" these people, completely disregarding the drastic change he would incur on the way of life of the natives. The Europeans believed that they had discovered a New World; yet their religious bigotry, cultural bias and materialistic world view kept them from comprehending or appreciating the rich cultural heritage of the people who occupied this world. The Spanish conquistadores exploited the natives. While the French traders and trappers took advantage of the Indians to obtain pelts, the Christian missionaries viewed them as potential converts.

This paper argues that despite the efforts of the Spanish Catholic missionaries to convert the Pueblo people, they were not wholly successful because the Pueblos accepted Catholicism on their own terms and did not abandon their traditional religious beliefs and rituals altogether. Instead the Pueblo people have devised a syncretistic version of Catholicism in which they blended beliefs rooted in the Bible with the beliefs and practices of their own. The Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "The Man To Send Rain Clouds," is a perfect example of syncretism. In the story an old man dies but his death is concealed from the Catholic priest until the native rites are performed at his burial and then the priest is called to sprinkle holy water on the grave. Even today, together with Catholicism the Pueblo continue to practice their old beliefs and rituals.

Prior to the encounter, Indians had many religious traditions. While there was great religious variety among them, the indigenous people's spiritual life on the whole differed to a great extent from the Christian beliefs of Europeans. Their religious world was populated by a number of culture heroes, divine beings, magical animals and spirits. Just as they could bring health, power and knowledge to humans, these could also bring sickness and disaster. In the view of the Hopi and of other Pueblos in the Southwest, a single, powerful force pervaded the universe. All ordinary living creatures and many inanimate things possessed spiritual power. In general, Indians' sense of religious well-being was strongly linked to place; each rock, stream, tree, valley, and mountain range had special power and meaning for the human inhabitants. Through them flowed the

Great Spirit which held nature and mankind in perfect balance. Thus, in such a world, religion and daily life were inseparable. As a matter of fact, "the Pueblo have no word that translates as "religion." The knowledge of a spiritual life is part of the person twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year," states Joe Sando, the historian from Jemez Pueblo.(1992:30) Every action had a spiritual consequence: thinking the right thoughts, performing the proper ceremonies would enable them to maintain balance or harmony; neglecting them would destroy the balance and nature would be offended. As a result calamities such as drought could occur or misfortunes could befall them.

Europeans introduced new religious traditions into the New World. Even if they did not all promote the same denominations, all European nations believed in some form of Christianity. Spain and France were Catholic, the English church was Protestant. Nevertheless, in spite of their doctrinal and national disagreements, both Catholic and Protestant settlers in America believed that Indian religions should be eradicated.

Initially most Native Americans were not antagonistic towards Christianity. A new form of worship did not signify the negation of the old to them. In fact they were curious about the deeds of the Son of God, the new medicine man. They also feared the whites and suspected them of having powerful spirits. Given Spanish military success, their spiritual power had to be taken seriously.

The insistence of the missionaries upon a total devotion to one God resulted in centuries of conflict for the Indians were not willing to disown their traditional beliefs. The natives did not understand the Christian god; their own religion was more practical, special priesthoods existed to insure a successful hunt or a bountiful harvest, to cure disease or to vanquish enemies. As the missionaries forced them to accept Catholicism, they devised new religious ceremonies blending both Christian and Indian concepts and symbolism to keep their hopes and heritage alive.

By 1607 there had been only 400 converts in the Southwest. Though there was resistance to the Spanish at Taos and Zuni, at Picuris and Pecos conversions reached 7,000 the next year. By 1626 the missionaries claimed as many as 30,000 converts. (Walker, 1995:100) Yet, even while they called themselves Christians, many Pueblo people continued to follow the old ways, meeting secretly to perform their own rituals. Thus, Native rites went underground and the Pueblos went to Mass so as to please their oppressors.

In spite of the growing conversions, the missionaries failed to achieve their goals among the Pueblos. Pueblo people practiced Catholic rituals, but they did not repudiate their own religious rituals. In fact, the Pueblos made Catholicism into a religion which supplemented and partially merged with existing rites. The Virgin Mary and various saints were likened to kachinas in their roles as intermediaries between the spiritual

world and the physical world. Portraits of the Virgin sometimes depicted her surrounded by ears of corn, flowers, butterflies, and other traditional symbols of fertility. Images of Virgin Mary on buffalo hide also constitute a good example of how the natives integrated white man's religion into their lives. An image of the Virgin Mary painted on a buffalo hide by a Native American artist from the Southwest around 1675 portrays Mary praying with a blue shawl covering her head and shoulders. (Ballantine, 1993:151)

Christmas coincided with rites marking the winter solstice. The ceremonial calendar came to include the celebration of Christmas and observances at Holy Week in some Pueblos. On All Souls' Day gifts of food were made to their ancestral dead. Annually the saint's day of their patron saint, Santiago (Saint James) was celebrated in Sant Ana.

Each Pueblo was assigned a patron saint and on the saint's name day people celebrated. The feast day started with a mass after which the statue of the saint was carried in a procession that sang Spanish church hymns to the plaza, where a shrine had been erected. At the end of the day the patron saint's statue was returned to the church after being paraded between rows of dancers and other participants. The Pueblo people modified and accepted their borrowings, however, they remained peripheral to the central core of Indian ceremonial life. These feast days are still celebrated among the Pueblos.

The Pueblos learned to say their prayers in Spanish and decorated their homes with Christian pictures and images. However, as they adopted such Catholic elements, they also modified them. Saint James became more central to the religious life of the Pueblo than was Christ and joined the Pueblo religious pantheon. The Christian God, Dios, was made part of the pantheon, yet he remained as a minor deity and was later referred to as "the Mexican God." Nevertheless, the basic principles of Catholicism such as heaven, hell, sin, confessions did not appeal to them for they were foreign to their beliefs. The Pueblos continued to believe in an afterlife as a kind of continuation of this life.

Although a church existed and there was a saint's day celebration in every village, the fundamental tenets of Catholicism were resisted by the Pueblos. The details of ritual which they had accepted and incorporated into their system only served to embellish their system, yet did not signify a transition from a religion based on natural growth and fertility to one that was preoccupied with sin and individual salvation.

In the 1530s, the Spanish conquerors in Mexico, the Conquistadores, heard of the accounts concerning Indians of the unexplored lands of the Southwest and soon became interested in adding new territory to the empire and of Christianizing the Indians. Accordingly, a Franciscan friar, Marcos de Niza, was sent forth at the head of an exploring party, in the spring of 1539. When de Niza, the first European to view a pueblo, saw the Zuni village of Hawikuh, he thought he had found the famed "Seven

Cities of Cibola." The Spanish harbored an old legend that told of the mysterious seven cities, rich in gold and jewels. This myth of Eldorado fascinated the Spanish soldiers and adventurers. However, instead of gold and jewels Francisco Vasquez de Coronado found a "little, crowded village...crumpled all up together." (Ortiz 1989:162) The Zuni warriors were ready to defend their town. They sprinkled sacred commel in a line and warned the Spaniards not to cross. After the ensuing fight, in which stones and arrows were no match for Spanish armor and firearms, the conquerors plundered the town and set out for Acoma and Tusayan, the ancient land of the Hopi, to find the fantasy wrought golden treasure,

Today, most of the Pueblos still commemorate the arrival of Coronado's party, portraying him on their feast days as a figure on a dancing horse, holding a sword. In some villages the horseman is called "Santiago," that is, Saint James, who appears to have been the conquistador's patron saint. Thus, the Pueblo incorporated Catholic Saints into living ceremonies. A Santiago painting on hide by Molleno made in the 1830s, is exhibited in the Museum of International Folk Art Collection of the Museum of New Mexico. The painting depicts Santiago riding a horse, holding a banner in one hand and a sword in the other. Interestingly enough, the horse is stepping on heads and hands that seem to be cut off. By working their history into living ceremonies, the Pueblo gain a kind of revenge upon their persecutors.

Since there were no golden cities to be conquered, the Pueblos were left undisturbed for the next forty years until the missionary zeal of the Catholic church and the imperial impulse of the Spanish crown resurged. In 1598 wealthy nobleman Don Juan de Onate led a large expedition to the Southwest. With him were eight Franciscan friars and a papal mandate to bring Christianity to the Pueblos.

The Pueblo people reacted to the intruders with fascination and dismay. Although some fled to the hills, some greeted them offering them water and corn and invited them to their villages. The friars were satisfied and scattered throughout the villages setting up crosses and staging morality plays on the life of Christ. To the Native Americans the crosses resembled giant prayer sticks and Christ seemed like a powerful Kachina. Yet, Onate's brutality led to a rebellion in Acoma in 1599. Other outbreaks followed and the ruthless military governor was removed from office.

According to European estimates on a cold winter afternoon on January 21, 1599, a bloody fight took place between the Acomans and Onate's men. Seventy men led by his brother Vicente de Zaldivar approached 'Sky City' and over the next three days fought up their way to the top of the Mesa. They used a new weapon, a cannon, and the battle became a massacre. 800 Acomans died; 500 survivors were taken captive; all males over 12 years of age were condemned to 20 years' servitude and those over 25 were sentenced to have one foot cut off. (Walker, 1995: 98)

The new regime transformed the ancient way of life of the Pueblos. As a result of the *encomienda* system in which the communal fields the people farmed were parceled out to Spanish colonists and the *repartimiento* system which allowed the landowner to demand annual taxes of corn and cloth from the natives living on his property as well as labor, the Pueblos were reduced to the state of serfs in the land of their ancestors.

With the Spanish government taking formal possession of the southwestern regions, Spanish saint names were given to the settlements. Missionary friars set up schools in order to win converts. Besides reading and writing, they taught the rudiments of Christian doctrine. The Franciscans made the catechism in the form of pictographs in order to carry their message easily,

The Pueblo country was divided into districts and each was assigned a Catholic priest. The Indians were required to take oaths of obedience and pay homage to the Catholic church and the Spanish crown. The Indians' native religion was suppressed, their ceremonies were forbidden; transgressors were whipped or executed. A number of engravings dating from the sixteenth century are proof of the atrocities of the Spanish. In a 1598 engraving, soldiers hold a captive's feet to the fire while burning his belly with hot wax. Every means, including torture was used to enforce Spanish rule. Most missionaries abhorred such practices, except to root out "devil worship" within the Pueblos.

Authoritarian with their Indian "children," the friars depended on soldiers stationed

at each mission to gather the newly baptized Indians, 'neophytes' as they were called. Native American men and women were locked up in separate dormitories. Those who attempted to escape and those who were found practicing tribal rites were flogged by the soldiers. Frequent rebellions against strict mission rules were suppressed. (Nabokov, 1991: 51) Moreover, many of the Spanish officials and missionaries did all they could to destroy the aboriginal religious rites. When white men first witnessed Indians impersonating animal spirits in costume and dance, and worshipping rocks and rainbows, they failed to see this as a form of deep religious expression. According to them, these were deplorable pagan rites that the Indians had to relinquish.

The Kachina dances performed by the Hopi and the Zuni, in which dancers wore masks impersonating their ancestors and the Hopi snake dance in which poisonous snakes were used, were among the heathenish ceremonies. Nevertheless, both of these rituals were essentially prayers for rain. The Kachina dances were forbidden in order to

stamp out "devil worship," kivas were filled with sand, masks, prayer sticks and effigy were destroyed.

Kivas occupied a central place in the life of a Pueblo Indian. A Kiva was a ceremonial chamber that had evolved from the traditional pit house and was entered through an opening in the roof. It is a circular or rectangular construction in which ceremonies are still held (Figure 1 ).



Figure 1 A Kiva

*Photographed by the author.*

The pine ladder at the entrance (Figure 2), symbolizes a rainbow that connects the spirit world of the kiva with human life in the village above. Murals found in the ruins of ancient Pueblos illustrate masked lightning gods, birds and catfish that are powerful symbols believed to solicit rainfall and fertility.

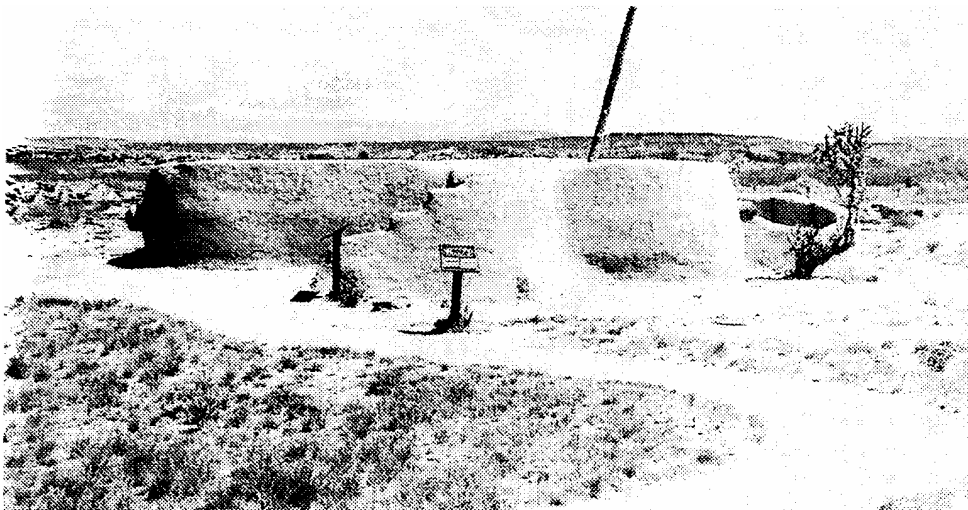


Figure 2 A pine ladder at the entrance of the Kiva. *Photographed by the author.*

The persistence of native beliefs made the priests prohibit Pueblo ceremonies more ardently. Catholicism had become a burden to the Pueblos. Converts had to attend mass and other Catholic services. Lapses brought the lash. The Pueblos not only had to work in the fields and at the loom, but also for the missionaries, building churches and cultivating fields. The Pueblos grew tired of the Spanish religious and economic oppression. A number of natural disasters and epidemics the foreigners had imported, caused the death of many and they turned to their own religious ceremonies for a solution.

In 1675 the Spanish imprisoned 47 religious leaders for idolatry and witchcraft. Four Tewa medicine men were hanged for practicing "Sorcery" and the rest were condemned to public flogging. Later it was found out that the reason for the arrests was the leaders' failure to recruit Christian converts for the Spanish authorities. This attack on Pueblo religious pride triggered the Pueblo revolt of 1680. Under the leadership of Pope who was among those whipped, the Pueblo peoples finally united in revolt and drove the invaders away until they returned in 1692. The Pueblo revolt was an act of people determined to reject Christian civilization that posed a direct threat on their culture and religion which was a way of life. This was the only successful rebellion in North American history against white domination. The few survivors retreated 300 miles along the Rio Grande.

Tercentennial paintings by San Juan Pueblo artist Tommy Montoya document key events of the revolt. In one painting, Pope confers with other rebels. In another, Tesuque runners spread the word. The third painting portrays Pueblo soldiers battling with Spanish horsemen in Santa Fe and finally, the last one depicts Spanish refugees

beginning their exodus. (Walker, 1995:103)

Another revolt took place at the Hopi Pueblo of Shongopovi and the resident friar was punished severely. Insurgent villagers sought revenge after years of harsh treatment by the friar who whipped converts and seduced Pueblo women, they strung the priest up to burn and dismantled the church he had forced them to build.

Following the exodus of the Spanish, Pope wanted to restore the Pueblos to their Pre-Spanish state. The Spanish language was banned. The Pueblos symbolically tried to erase all the traces of Christianity. They held ceremonies to thank the war gods. They discarded their baptismal names. Churches and mission were burned down. Nonetheless, the Acoma who took pride in the Mission of San Esteban refused to destroy it during the revolt. The Mission of San Esteban at Acoma (Figure 3) has survived to this day. A guide recounts its history to those who visit Acoma.



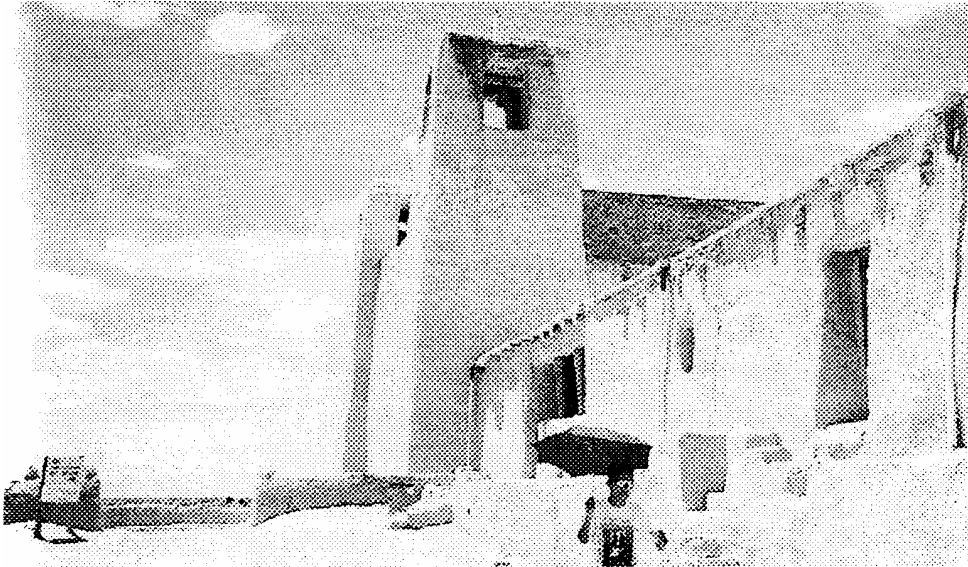


Figure 3 The Mission of San Esteban, Acoma. *Photographed by the author.*

The hero of the reconquest of New Mexico, Don Diego de Vargas, who was said to be one of the most humane conquerors in the history of American colonization, offered the Indians two alternatives, conversion or death. His motive is openly stated in a letter to his viceroy, "I have two aims and purposes in view, the first being the idea ... to see if I can win them (the Indians) to our holy faith and, if so, have them as friends as in the case of the Taos tribe; and if unsuccessful in my purpose, and theirs is such that they persist rebellious and contumacious, then I will have them all destroyed and annihilated at once...." (Astrov, 1992: 61)

Spanish rule continued until the Mexican Revolution of 1821. After the Mexican revolution the Indians were declared citizens on equal basis with non-Indians. Otherwise, life under Mexican rule was not different for the Pueblos. Following the war between the United States of America and Mexico, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. Indian rights previously established under Spanish and Mexican rule were recognized and protected by the United States with the articles of this treaty. Twelve years after New Mexico was admitted to the Union as a state in January of 1912, Congress declared all Indians born in the United States to be citizens. Yet, not until 1948 was legislative action taken to enable Indian citizens of the state as well as of the nation to vote.

Within the space of two hundred years, the Pueblo have been subjected to the domination of three foreign governments: those of Spain, Mexico, and the United States. Nevertheless, the changes brought about by time and foreign intrusion could not destroy

the culture of the Pueblos. Native Americans of the Southwest were converted to Christianity in order to survive. They were converted to Christianity modifying it according to their traditional beliefs and rituals to pass them on to posterity.

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