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## *Subtle Syncretism in Colonial Peru: The Catholic Conversion of Indigenous People since the Spanish Conquest*

**ABSTRACT:** *Through the lens of religious syncretism, this essay analyzes the conversion of Indigenous people—particularly the Inca in the colonial Spanish Viceroyalty of Peru (established in 1542)—from their traditional religious practices to Catholicism. Based on the accounts of several period authors who were of Indigenous or mixed-race ancestry, including Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (c. 1535–c. 1615), Garcilaso de la Vega (El Inca, 1539–1616), and Blas Valera (1545–1597), as well as contemporary artwork and modern scholarship, it discusses how syncretism in religious ritual, art, and specific festivities aided in the conversion process. The author argues that this type of syncretism has been the most lasting and therefore most important method of Catholic conversion in the region.*

**KEYWORDS:** *colonial Latin American history; Viceroyalty of Peru; Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala; Garcilaso de la Vega (El Inca); Blas Valera; School of Cuzco; Indigenous religion; Catholicism; syncretism; religious conversion*

### *Introduction*

In 1532, Spanish conquistadors under the leadership of Francisco Pizarro (c. 1478–1541) invaded the Inca empire, located on the western side of the South American continent, and captured the Inca emperor Atahualpa. By 1533, Atahualpa had been executed, and the land was soon claimed for Spain under the title of the Viceroyalty of Peru (established in 1542). From the moment the conquest began, and only increasing in intensity as time went on, the Catholic Church worked to convert the region's Indigenous people to what they viewed as the "one true faith." Most notably, from a modern-day perspective, the Catholic Church utilized state-sanctioned violence to force the Indigenous people to convert or die. However, the Church also used other, more subtle methods to achieve Indigenous conversion—methods that were arguably more effectively than violence, namely, those of "religious syncretism." The online *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines "religious syncretism" as "the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices."<sup>1</sup> I argue that the syncretism of Catholic and traditional Incan/Andean beliefs was the strongest force for the Catholic conversion of the Indigenous people in the Viceroyalty of Peru due to its endurance.

### *1. Syncretism of Various Beliefs and Practices*

Prior to the conquest, common Indigenous beliefs held that the ancestors needed sustenance in their afterlife, which necessitated the making of offerings to the ancestors' mummies in their tombs. The Catholic Church's condemnation did not stop the practice, so its priests pivoted to limiting what could be offered and declared that these offerings were actually useful in reducing a soul's time in purgatory.<sup>2</sup> Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (c. 1535–c. 1615), an Indigenous chronicler who had been raised by the Spanish, wrote about Andean burial

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<sup>1</sup> "Religious Syncretism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, [online](#).

<sup>2</sup> Gabriela Ramos, *Death and Conversion in the Andes: Lima and Cuzco, 1532–1670* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 85–87.

rituals that involved sacrifices to the dead,<sup>3</sup> although he argued that the Catholic Church's motivation for accepting these traditions was its individual priests' inclination to steal the mummies' offerings when no one was looking and thus enrich themselves rather than contributing the offerings to the operations of the Church.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of each Catholic priest's earthly or spiritual motivations for continuing to encourage the offerings, the merging of Indigenous practices and Catholic teachings regarding the treatment of the dead clearly occurred and ultimately aided in the Church's overall mission to increase its flock.

In his account, Guaman Poma referred to the "guacas"/"huacas," namely, those objects or places held sacred by the Inca, as "stones, demons,"<sup>5</sup> which suggests that people of Indigenous descent like Guaman Poma himself were already conceptualizing the religion of their ancestors as both false and evil. Guaman Poma and other authors of Indigenous or mixed-race descent described their people's traditional customs as simultaneously powerless, typically failing to bring the good effects sought, and powerful, typically bringing some bad effects unsought. Accordingly, the Catholic catechism was updated for usage in the Andes to include not just the customary renouncing of the Devil but also a rejection of guacas/huacas and sorcerers. Old Testament stories used as warnings in the catechism were also updated to refer to condemned oracles as guacas/huacas.<sup>6</sup> In Guaman Poma's work, traditional Inca spiritual leaders were repeatedly labeled as "priest-sorcerers" who were "servants of the demons."<sup>7</sup> Such lexical choices served to merge the worlds of the Spanish and the Andean people, but they also decidedly marginalized and villainized the latter's traditional religious practices. In his chapter on the so-called "sorcery," Guaman Poma consciously demonized traditional Indigenous religious customs, stating: "This is written to punish the idolaters who are against our Holy Catholic faith."<sup>8</sup> He was aware that this caused him to be disliked by members of the Indigenous community who were still devoted to their traditional practices.<sup>9</sup> Thus, people of Indigenous descent—like Guaman Poma—who had converted to Catholicism set themselves apart from those who still engaged in the religious traditions of their forebears. This served the interests of the Catholic Church as it divided the Indigenous people and slowly brought about conversion—both as externally imposed by the Spanish and as internally imposed by the Indigenous converts in the Viceroyalty of Peru.

According to Garcilaso de la Vega (El Inca, 1539–1616), the mixed-race son of an Inca noblewoman and a Spanish conquistador, who was, in turn, reflecting the writings of Blas Valera (1545–1597), the mixed-race son of an Andean mother and a Spanish father, there were various Andean traditions that resembled the Catholic practices of confession and

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<sup>3</sup> Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government: On the History of the World and the Incas up to 1615*, trans. Roland Hamilton (University of Texas Press, 2009), 226–234.

<sup>4</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 232.

<sup>5</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Ramos, *Death and Conversion*, 85–87.

<sup>7</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 205.

<sup>8</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 214.

<sup>9</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 214.

fasting.<sup>10</sup> Valera stated that, for the Indigenous people, confession consisted of seeking out a religious leader who would hear one's wrongdoings in private, implore the sinner to seek reconnection with the gods, assign the sinner a penance, and then keep this exchange a secret unto death,<sup>11</sup> which is, in fact, the basic procedure of a Catholic confession minus the polytheistic element. Meanwhile, Guaman Poma claimed that, for religious reasons, the Indigenous people traditionally abstained from fruit, salt, and sexual relations in the month of March,<sup>12</sup> thereby mirroring the Catholic practice of abstinence during their fasting times (such as Lent). De la Vega argued that all these practices, when left incomplete due to a lack of the proper Catholic faith, were mere deceptions of the Devil.<sup>13</sup> However, many Catholic priests in the Viceroyalty of Peru showed little hesitation to take ownership of such preexisting religious rituals to persuade the Indigenous people to convert to Catholicism. After all, it was a whole lot easier to convince people to change their respective reasons for confession or fasting than to induce them to engage in these activities out of nothing. Indeed, this was quite similar to reworking mummy worship into assisting those in purgatory. Thus, existing traditions were given different meanings to ease Indigenous people into the Catholic way.

As the Spanish were pursuing the conversion of the Indigenous people, they had to realize that the Andean communities were very spiritually attached to their homelands, either due to their ancestor worship or due to some other mystical connection with the land. When the Spanish first sought to dissuade the Andean people from their traditional religious practices, they attempted to relocate them to places to which they had no spiritual connection. However, this plan largely failed because many of the Indigenous people simply never moved to these other places. Consequently, the Spanish turned to a process of using Andean traditions tied to the land to convert the people. Friars, particularly Franciscans, began to move into buildings associated with Incan guacas/huacas,<sup>14</sup> thereby literally occupying traditional positions of respect in the hope that the Incan people would listen to them. Additionally, in 1559, within the lifetimes of many who had witnessed the Inca empire fall, the Spanish "corregidor" of Cuzco (a key local official acting on behalf of the Crown) was instructed to divide the Inca's former religious capital into five parishes, each with its own Catholic church that was to be built on an Inca sacred site.<sup>15</sup> Valera recorded that this was indeed implemented, and he mentioned that the Jesuits had established both a school and a church inside a former Inca temple.<sup>16</sup> The result of such measures would have been twofold: firstly, an occupation of Incan sacred spaces and the resultant prevention of traditional worship from occurring at those sites; and secondly, the endowment of the Catholic Church's

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<sup>10</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, *El Inca, Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru*, trans Harold V. Livermore (University of Texas Press, 1966), 82.

<sup>11</sup> [Bas Valera], *Gods of the Andes: An Early Jesuit Account of Inca Religion and Andean Christianity*, trans. Sabine Hyland (Penn State University Press, 2011), 69–71.

<sup>12</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> De la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ramos, *Death and Conversion*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Ramos, *Death and Conversion*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> [Valera], *Gods of the Andes*, 58.

new religious structures with a preexisting air of holiness, which would have appealed to those who had long associated these locations with their own, traditional spirituality.

It was not just Spanish Jesuits who displaced traditional Inca spiritual workers in the name of Catholicism. Indigenous people, too, soon engaged in the practice. Guaman Poma,<sup>17</sup> De la Vega,<sup>18</sup> and Valera<sup>19</sup> all referred to Inca women who had taken vows of virginity and secluded themselves together in special buildings to serve the Inca sun god. The writers compared these women's way of life and resultant social honor to that of Catholic nuns and furthermore explained that, at the time of the conquest, many of these women did indeed become Catholic nuns.<sup>20</sup> According to De la Vega, the house of the women who had served the Inca sun god in Cuzco became a convent for nuns of the Dominican Order.<sup>21</sup> The choice to serve a different god was not just made by Indigenous women: Valera himself, the son of an Andean mother,<sup>22</sup> chose to embrace the Catholic faith of his Spanish father and became a priest of the Jesuit Order.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Syncretism and Religious Art

It was not just in churches and convents that Indigenous and mixed-race people dedicated themselves to Catholicism. Within a century of the establishment of the Catholic parishes in Cuzco, the city's Indigenous and mixed-race painters found themselves attracted to the portrayal of religious scenes. Utilizing both accepted European iconography and traditional Andean aesthetics, these painters developed a unique style that came to be known as the "School of Cuzco."<sup>24</sup> Considering the increasingly syncretic religious world that these painters inhabited, it only makes sense that syncretism would find its way into and eventually permeate their art. Among the most noticeable and impactful syncretic artworks of the School of Cuzco were depictions of the Virgin Mary in her various capacities.

Firstly, in her capacity as the mother of Jesus, the Virgin Mary resonated with both Indigenous people and their descendants as she mirrored the Inca earth mother goddess Pachamama. Pachamama's sacred association with the mountains led to a unique Andean way of depicting the Virgin Mary as wearing a typical Indigenous or Indigenous-style dress that made her silhouette resemble a mountain.<sup>25</sup> Other painters highlighted the Virgin Mary's protective capacity by depicting her not just as a mountain but as one that encompassed and sheltered the Andean people, both great and small. This particular motif is reflected in an eighteenth-century painting known as *The Virgin Mary of [or 'with'] the Mountain of*

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<sup>17</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 223.

<sup>18</sup> De la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 195–196.

<sup>19</sup> [Valera], *Gods of the Andes*, 84–85.

<sup>20</sup> [Valera], *Gods of the Andes*, 84.

<sup>21</sup> De la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 195.

<sup>22</sup> Sabine Hyland, *The Jesuit and the Incas: The Extraordinary Life of Padre Blas Valera, S.J.* (University of Michigan Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>23</sup> Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel K. Heath, "Cuzco School of Painting," in *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture*, ed. Jay Kinsbruner and Erick D. Langer, 2nd ed. (Charles Scribner's Sons, 2008), 2: 739, Gale eBook.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Damian, *The Virgin of the Andes: Art and Ritual in Colonial Cuzco* (Grassfield Press, 1995), 50.

*Potasiama* [or 'Potosí'], in which the Virgin resembles the mountain of Potosí (located in modern-day Bolivia but historically a part of the Inca empire and the subsequent Viceroyalty of Peru) and shelters both the common people and the Inca, the former emperor, himself (see Figure 1).<sup>26</sup> This style of portrayal showcased the Indigenous people's spiritual connection to the land that the Spanish had previously exploited by establishing the parishes of Cuzco, but it also differed in that the connection to the land was now voluntary, deliberate, and self-reinforcing. Works like these were made by converted Indigenous people themselves and served to help convert even more Indigenous persons.



Figure 1: Anonymous, *Virgen del Cerro* [The Virgin Mary of the Mountain of Potasiama/Potosí], eighteenth century, oil on canvas, 47.2 x 39.3 inches, Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí, Bolivia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PMa\\_BOL\\_107\\_Potosi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PMa_BOL_107_Potosi.jpg), Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

<sup>26</sup> Damian, *Virgin of the Andes*, 52. Anonymous, *Virgen del Cerro* [The Virgin Mary of the Mountain of Potasiama/Potosí], eighteenth century, oil on canvas, 47.2 x 39.3 inches, Casa Nacional de Moneda, Potosí, Bolivia, [online](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PMa_BOL_107_Potosi.jpg).

Secondly, in her capacity as the Queen of Heaven, the Virgin Mary appealed to both Indigenous artists and converts. Inca queens and their royal power had traditionally been closely associated with religious rituals that honored lunar deities, so it followed that depictions of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven by the School-of-Cuzco artists heavily featured lunar imagery.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly interesting when analyzing the history of Inca rulers as told by Guaman Poma, who stated that their first king was the “child of the sun and of the sun’s wife, the moon,”<sup>28</sup> a backstory that, according to the author, was reflected on the Incan coat of arms, which prominently displayed both the sun and moon with human faces.<sup>29</sup> Valera provided a similar narrative of the Inca’s honoring the sun and moon, and he explicitly stated that “Queen of Heaven” served as one of the moon goddess’s titles.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in a choice that may have been tied to preexisting Indigenous beliefs, both Guaman Poma and Valera alluded to the Virgin Mary’s husband, Saint Joseph. The latter was often depicted by the School of Cuzco with solar imagery as well as in the garb of Inca royalty, such as in the seventeenth- or eighteenth-century work *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child*.<sup>31</sup> While Christian theology does not consider Saint Joseph as Jesus’s biological father, his role as Jesus’s human father figure is nonetheless emphasized. Thus, the School of Cuzco might have utilized it in conjunction with the Virgin Mary’s moon-queen associations to construct an image of the Holy Family that the Andean people would have recognized. Additionally, by portraying both of Jesus’s parents in ways that reflected the parentage of the first Inca king, the Catholic Church’s image of Jesus as the “King of Kings” would have been strengthened. All of these syncretic strategies presumably contributed to the successful Catholic conversion of the Indigenous population.

The painters of the School of Cuzco were, of course, not the first Catholic artists in the Viceroyalty of Peru. The Catholic Church had been utilizing artwork to convert the Indigenous people nearly from the moment the Spanish had arrived. One of the initial obstacles to the Indigenous people’s Catholic conversion was the language barrier. A common way to address this problem was the visual representation of religious concepts by means of art. In 1575, the Spanish Jesuits brought the acclaimed Italian Jesuit painter Bernardo Bitti (1548–1610) to the Viceroyalty of Peru, commissioning him to paint biblical scenes in the region’s newly constructed churches. Bitti’s paintings were reportedly a resounding success for the conversion of the Indigenous people because his graphic depictions of Hell’s torments for nonbelievers created enough psychological distress for the average viewers that they felt the need to convert on the spot. This dark subject matter grew unpopular and largely died out in European church art soon after Bitti’s time, but it endured in the Andes.<sup>32</sup> The continued investment in such works demonstrated that psychological warfare was just as effective at

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<sup>27</sup> Damian, *Virgin of the Andes*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Guaman Poma, *First New Chronicle*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> [Valera], *Gods of the Andes*, 49–50.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child*, late seventeenth–eighteenth century, oil on canvas, 43 x 32 1/8 inches, Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA, [online](#).

<sup>32</sup> Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt, *The Virgin, Saints, and Angels: South American Paintings 1660–1825 from the Thoma Collection* (Skira, 2006), 43–44.

achieving the Spanish goal of the Indigenous people's Catholic conversion as physical violence and other forms of coercion.

### 3. Syncretism in Colonial Latin America's Corpus Christi Celebration

During this time of ecclesiastical growth in Cuzco, Catholic prelates were meeting at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) to discuss a myriad of issues facing the Church and reach a series of formal conclusions. The assembly's 1551 pronouncement regarding the proper celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi (literally "the Body of Christ") would become an important fixture in Andean Catholicism. To understand Corpus Christi, one must first understand "transubstantiation." "Transubstantiation" is the Catholic spiritual principle (or doctrine) that the bread and wine consumed during Communion become the flesh and blood of Christ, sacrificed for the sins of humanity. This particular teaching was a complicated but important facet of the faith. As early as the Council of Vienne (1311–1312), Pope Clement V (r. 1305–1314) had decreed that transubstantiation was to be celebrated by all Catholics as an obligatory sacred feast known as Corpus Christi.<sup>33</sup> Almost two and a half centuries later, the Council of Trent stipulated that the feast of Corpus Christi was to be celebrated by means of processions as a "triumph over heresy,"<sup>34</sup> a ruling that Catholics in Europe and in Catholic-colonized regions such as the Viceroyalty of Peru were quick to follow.

Indigenous people in the Viceroyalty of Peru were required and compelled to participate in these Corpus Christi processions rather than their own, traditional harvest ceremonies and solar worship (known as "Inti Raymi").<sup>35</sup> To achieve this goal, according to De la Vega, the Spanish allowed the Indigenous people to wear the traditional festival costumes of their culture and also encouraged the rewriting of traditional Indigenous worship songs to honor the Christian god instead.<sup>36</sup> The anonymous seventeenth-century painting *Santa Rosa y La Linda*, one of several in a Corpus Christi cycle of artworks, shows how much Indigenous religious symbolism endured even as Catholic festivities were observed. In this painting, there is a brightly dressed man (off center to the right), likely a local leader, with the sun emblazoned on his clothes.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that the Indigenous people were more inclined to celebrate Corpus Christi if they were allowed to retain some of their traditional heritage in its visual manifestations. Over time and successive generations, the Indigenous religious roots of these symbols would have been slowly eclipsed by the Catholic faith, thereby nearly achieving the erasure of Indigenous beliefs without outright bloodshed.

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<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Dean, *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru* (Duke University Press, 1999), 8, ProQuest eBook.

<sup>34</sup> Dean, *Inka Bodies*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Dean, *Inka Bodies*, 43.

<sup>36</sup> De la Vega, *Royal Commentaries*, 416–417.

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous, *Santa Rosa y La Linda*, c. 1674–1680, oil on canvas, c. 82 x c. 136 inches, Colección Corpus Christi, Museo de Arte Religioso del Palacio Arzobispal del Cuzco, Cuzco, Peru [online](#).

### Conclusion

Through syncretic practices, the Catholic Church was able to convert many Indigenous people and convince them that Catholicism was the “one true faith.” Mixed-race writers and authors of Indigenous descent, such as Valera and Guaman Poma, took the religion of their Spanish fathers and denigrated the traditional religious practices of their Indigenous mothers in their works. In addition, former Inca holy women became Catholic nuns, and artists of Indigenous descent turned their attention to the glorification of Catholic saints by fusing the latter’s iconography with the imagery of the Indigenous people’s original deities. The transition made easier by familiar garb and song, the Indigenous people moreover turned their ceremonial energies toward festivities like Corpus Christi, which is still widely celebrated in the region today. In a similar fashion, Indigenous traditions related to burials and ancestor worship, fasting, and confession were spun into acceptable Catholic versions. In the end, the syncretic method proved incredibly effective. When an independent, modern Peru granted its citizens religious freedom, the vast majority of them remained Catholic—76% according to a 2017 national census.<sup>38</sup> Due to the syncretic practices utilized in the region, Catholicism has largely eclipsed Indigenous forms of worship despite the modern absence of violent colonialism.

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<sup>38</sup> This 2017 census is referenced in the “2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Peru,” U.S. Department of State, [online](#).