

Landon Calannio, Eric Flores, Ellie Porges

Cosmology and Controversy

Instructor Bjork

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Comparing Christian and Mayan Cosmologies

When facing the task of comparing and contrasting two cultures as vastly different as the Mayan and Christian, it is necessary to examine and analyze several key facets of each culture. Studying the symbolism seen in the religions, the architecture of each culture and the anecdotes surrounding creation and construction can help us to gain valuable insight into both cultures and consider the possibility that western culture is viewing Mayan cosmology through a stilted and Christian cosmological lens.



Figure 1: An example of the famous Mayan calendar, which is said to end in the year 2012. (Mayan End Age)

Within all religions, symbols and representations of divinity play a huge part of both the religion and the culture connected to said religion. In the Christian and Mayan religions there are not only vastly different forms and icons, but also notable similarities. The Mayan concept of time has recently risen to prominence and is famously cyclical, (owing to the western phenomenon of doomsday predictions and movies that depict the supposed ending of the world

in 2012 as predicted by the Mayan calendar of destruction and rebirth). With such a representation of ages beginning and ending as the world is destroyed and rebuilt in a continuous wheel of death and renewal, a thought process is revealed, declaring eternity as an assured idea (as promised by the continuous rebirth of the world) yet inherently cataclysmic, for with the world beginning anew the world must first obviously end. Yet each world is temporary, as all will eventually be destroyed and reborn. Interestingly, of the remnants of the Maya still living in Guatemala, some still hold many of the Mayan customs and beliefs. They also maintain that while December 21, 2012 will bring the new age of the world, the famous date simply represents renewal, and the world will change for the better after that day. In a similar manner, Christianity displays both eternity and evanescence in its cosmology, with the final battle of the Apocalypse between heaven and hell, and Christ's second coming promised, impending, and inescapable. In other words, the Christian timeline is a linear progression, with each event on a direct path towards the ending and re-beginning of the world. However, the Christian renewal happens only once, and the Apocalypse (heralding the ending of the world) is a momentous event never to be seen again. The Mayan concept is much more circular, with a world ending repeating in an endless cycle of birth and death. This shows the Mayan view as extremely cyclical, compared with a much more linear, progressive thought process of a Christian view. Time may be seen as a symbol of religion through the manner in which each religion views creation of time by their deity through the creation of the universe in the first place.

In Mayan cosmology there are several distinct creation stories, with explanations for the creation of the earth, the universe, the sun and the moon, and other various natural questions that all cultures seek to answer. Of those known, all share similar elements, such as the four attempts at creation, and the final medium used to create mankind being maize. However, details and end

results can vary within the separate anecdotes, such as one focusing on the twin heroes' ascension into the heavens as the sun and the moon, while another may describe another version, in which the ancient hero Xbalanque triumphs over evil as a reward takes his wife up into the sky. Thus, it seems as though Mayan traditions were all rooted in at least a similar origin, but morphed and developed, characterizing the religion as mercurial, allowing the faith to branch and change, perhaps as the Maya began to gain a greater understanding of their world and faith, and thus their belief changed with them. In Christian cosmology on the other hand, creation follows a very set and determined path. God's creation of time and the world are defined precisely in Biblical traditions. There is no discrepancy in the accounts of God's work; creation is a clearly defined event in Christianity without the differing interpretations seen in the Mayan faith. In this way we can see the Christian approach to time, having only one origin and thus one explanation of the beginning. Christianity's linear approach to creation mimics its single declaration of the inception of the world. This contrasts with a perhaps looser Mayan tradition, with differing accounts of the beginning of the universe echoing time's cyclical endings and beginnings that are so clearly shown in the Mayan calendar, discussed later in the essay.



Figure 2: The Mayan Yaxche tree, which includes 13 steps to Heaven and 9 steps to hell. (Mayan Kids)

However, there are several symbolic similarities between the Mayan and Christian tradition that may suggest a more universal relationship between the two religions. The emphasis on a tree being a central figure in the progression of history is one such symbol seen in both cultures. In the Mayan creation the sky god brings the world out of primordial waters with the raising of a “world tree,” thus beginning and allowing the existence of life on the planet. In western stories the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life are central aspects in the Garden of Eden. In the Biblical description, the garden was the only place of residence of the two lone members of humanity. Thus, the Garden of Eden was the one and only reality of humanity in the era being described in the Old Testament. Ergo, one could argue that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (placed in the physical center of the garden as well) was the center of the world as well as the Garden, seeing how the Garden was the only “world” humanity was conscious of. Thus we see huge emphasis placed upon the power of the tree in early religious writings of both cultures, lending a universal significance to the tree as a symbol of power despite the extreme

disparity between both climate and geography that takes an important role in other legends of both societies. In another universal similarity, Mayan rulers would determine their successors according to the stars, and wait for the constellations to dictate an acceptable time for the next king's reign to begin. The signs the gods put in the stars for the command of kingship is an idea that is echoed in western accounts as well, with the rule of Jesus heralded in the sky, and the three kings traveling to greet their new ruler, as divined by God's message in the heavens. A voluntary release of power as commanded by God would be an idea the Maya would have been very familiar with, and the power of the stars as seen as a symbol for divine communication seems to extend beyond culture and geography. It is worth noting that the interpretation of Yaxche that we have compared to Biblical trees is also stilted with a western or "Christian" influence. It is difficult for westerners to comprehend a view of the world in the literal sense that the Maya did. The Christian tree of good and evil is at best a central tree figuratively, not in a literal center of the whole world. By comparison Yaxche is the literal, stable center of the Maya world, with its roots and branches stretching across the entirety of the world. The western ideology permeates the perception of the Mayan world, and inhibits a truly cultural understanding of the Mayan culture.

Through an examination of the architecture associated with each religion and the symbolism seen in the architecture of each. An interesting difference is the choice between the holy or spiritual numbers seen in each culture. The Maya favored the number four, after the four corners of the world that the gods measured and placed upon the earth at the creation of the world. This reveals a penchant not only for symmetry and equality, but also of architectural pragmatism, and the emphasis their creation story placed upon the measurement and construction of the world, which almost certainly influenced the massive monuments the Maya built. In western culture, on

the other hand, seven serves as the number of significance, after the days it took God to create the universe. By focusing on the time creation took rather than the construction of it itself, Christian culture places its emphasis not on building but on power, seeing God's creation as a thing of will and might, rather than a carefully calculated edifice. The examples shown here of symbolic construction of culture differ greatly, thus lending themselves to a rather disparate perception of the two societies.

Alternatively, one may feel that the Mayan pyramids, massive temples dominating the Mesoamerican skyline, are strikingly similar to the Mesopotamian ziggurats, the giant buildings that overshadowed the lives of early Christians. Ziggurats and Mesoamerican pyramids share many distinct characteristics, including the theorized sled-style construction technique, the step-like surface leading upwards, and the temples placed atop the monstrous structures. It is intriguing to see the similarities in these edifices from two completely different cultures, the ziggurat's long outward ramp being the only main immediately noticeable cosmetic difference between such buildings and the Mayan pyramids. (However, it should be noted that all ziggurats have the distinction of having exactly seven levels, another facet to be tied to the Mesopotamian/Christian culture.) It is worth noting that, while not essentially of Christian origin, the ziggurat structure has influence within Christian and Judaic writings (Sartori). There has been much debate on the subject of the tower of Babel being a historical ziggurat, with the project in fact being a multi-cultural construction of ancient times (Leick). If true, the fact that the Tower of Babel's already universal nature (being the collaboration of single language people before the God's scattering and separating of mankind) can extend much further towards an actually literal



Figure 3: A depiction of the Mayan view of Earth, Heaven, and Hell. It includes a representation of the four corners of planet Earth. (Exploding Motor Car)

interpretation of worldwide cultural similarity. Both pyramids in Mesoamerica and ziggurats are temples, designed to get closer to the gods and containing places of worship at the summit of the structures. These places of worship and mystery draw similarities between Christian and Mayan culture, and perhaps extend towards a much more universal attempt at understanding the heavens.

Finally, in discussing Mayan and Christian cosmology, the topic of the 2012 end of the world is essential to establishing a connection between the two cultures. In actuality, December 21, 2012 represents the ending of a *Baktun*, a period of measurement in the Mayan long calendar. The Mayan representation of a cyclical calendar, the continual death and rebirth of the world was an event typically celebrated in Mayan tradition, and certainly did not herald the apocalypse (Jenkins). It is this distinctly western interpretation of the date that has given rise to the apocalyptic interpretation. The blockbuster movies such as *2012*, and the general perception of the world coming to a cataclysmic end. Doomsday predictions and the movie and book adaptations are all a result of a more Christian reading of the Mayan culture. Seen through a Christian lens, it is fairly easy to see the doomsday implications within the calendar's end date.

The Christian tradition dictates an Armageddon, the burning and crashing down of life on planet Earth. Along with the Biblical account of the Apocalypse, there are numerous representations of the end of life on earth in popular western fictitious books, movies, video games, and other medium. We can connect this western fascination with widespread destruction to a Christian filter on the world. With the Old Testament's wrathful and destructive God and the prophesized and unstoppable destruction of the world, the view of the Mayan cyclical earth as another sign of a day of reckoning is not an entirely far-fetched idea. However, as stated before, the Mayan view of the world did not quite correlate to a linear, unstoppable march of time. Modern remnants of the Mayan culture maintain that the



Figure 4: This image depicts the Mayan universe as was created by God. This is an example of a cosmography. (DC symbols)

changing of the calendar is an event for celebration, a sign of the world undergoing positive, distinct changes for the better. The world in the Mayan culture follows the circle of existence that every living thing on earth follows, from the birth and death of plants, animals and humans

alike, to the tides and the erosion of mountains. The fundamental difference between a Christian and Mayan tradition is simply a statement of pessimism and optimism, with the Christian viewpoint of the universe eventually expending itself, to the Mayan interpretation of everything, eventually, circling back to the beginning.

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