

CHRISTIANITY IN THE NEW WORLD

The Catholic Church during the Middle Ages played an all encompassing role over the lives of the people and the government. As the Dark Ages came to a close the ideas of the Renaissance started to take hold, and the church's power gradually began to wain. The monarchies of Europe also began to grow replacing the church's power. Monarchies, at the close of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Renaissance, did not so much seek the guidance of the church as much as it sought their approval. However, the Church during the Age of Discovery was still a major influence. The discovery of the New World and its previously unknown inhabitants presented new problems in the Catholic Church in the late 14th and early 15th century. When Spain's rulers and emissaries decided to physically conquer and populate the New World, and not just trade with it, the transplantation of Christian institutions followed.

The church established contact with the New World, and made it a goal to establish the Catholic doctrines among the native population there. The Catholic Church and the Spanish monarch, however, looked upon the native population in the New World as souls to be saved. They did not consider or treat the Indians as equals. The implanting of Christianity in the New World, and the treatment of the native population by the missionaries and christian conquerors was detrimental to New World. Through men such as Cortez and Las Casas accounts of the conversions have been recorded. One of the reasons for this was the alliance of the Catholic Church with the Spanish monarchy. The status of the Indians was disregarded as the Christian conquerors and missionaries who wanted to convert them subjected them to violence and reduced them to a laboring population. The Indians, however did not always respond in a negative way to the work of the church.

The Catholic Church arrived in the New World immediately after Christopher Columbus laid claim to it for Spain. After Columbus's discovery of the new lands he wrote a series of treatise as to what the European purpose there was. Columbus, in his writings, said that the purpose of the New World was two fold. He said that the gospel message of the church should be spread globally beginning with his discoveries in the New World. Second, he stated that the riches discovered in the New World should be dedicated to the recapture of Jerusalem from the Moslems. Columbus saw the discovery of the New World as a prophesy coming true. He saw the Indians that lived there as a labor source that should be christianized and used for the greater good of the church.

Two papal bulls were issued in the year of 1493 that established the Spanish position in the New World. They also established the role that the church was going to play in the New World. The first bull was issued on May 3 and it was called Inter Caetera. It said that the lands discovered by Spanish envoys not previously under a christian owner could be claimed by Spain. The bull also gave the Spanish monarch the power to send men to convert the natives to the Catholic

faith and instruct them in Catholic morals. The second papal bull issued that year expanded on the meaning of the first.

The bull fixed a boundary for Spanish and Portuguese spheres of influence in the New World. This boundary heavily favored Spain further showing the alliance between Spain and the Church.

The history of the Catholic Church in the New World began in the year after Columbus' first voyage. The Spanish monarchy sent the first missionaries to establish Christianity there. The number of missions sent to the New World accelerated in tempo until the final decade of the 16th century. The crown paid for the sending of missionaries, and its officials kept track of the many "shiploads" of religious personnel sent and of the expenses they incurred. The records show that the Spanish dispatched missionaries to more than 65 destinations, ranging from Florida and California to Chile and the Strait of Magellan. (Van Oss 5) Between 1493, when the first mission left for Espanola, and Spanish American independence (roughly 1821) more than 15 thousand missionaries crossed the Atlantic under royal auspices. (Van Oss 4)

The Spanish, when choosing who to send as their principle emissaries of the Catholic Church, went over the heads of the Spanish bishops and clergy, and called up friars belonging to several monastic orders. There were three monastic orders

of friars that came to the New World. These were the Franciscans, the Dominicans, and the Augustinians. (Ricard 3)

While secular priests were not discouraged from going to the New World, the Crown did not send them as missionaries.

"By sending friars instead of secular priests to convert the Indians, Spain took advantage of an old evangelical strain in European monasticism". (Van Oss 3) In the times before the

Christianity of Europe wandering monks roamed the countryside converting the rural populations. The monarchy put this old idea back at work. The Spanish monarch also

picked the monastic orders to fulfill this task because they were among those who possessed an education. Spain at this time lacked seminaries. The local priests were uneducated and were seen as largely ignorant.

Once in the New World the missionaries played an indispensable role in subduing the Indian population, concentrating it in towns and villages and taking charge of administration. Some times these settlements were largely left in the hands of

church officials because they were unreachable by colony administrators. "Rural churchmen, in the frontier settings of the 16th century acted in an atmosphere of independence which bordered on impunity". (Van Oss 9) These missions were

not always run in the best interest of the Indians. The natives were often subject to harsh conditions, and they were not protected by the missions. The missions instituted by the

government were described this way, "The church, with few exceptions, accompanied and legitimized the genocide, slavery, ecocide, and exploitation of the wealth of the land. The

mission left a bitter fruit inherited by the descendants of the survivors of the invasion". (Terrar 1)

No country at this time conceived of setting up anything but a

Christian empire. "The monarch of Castile not only exercised supreme secular authority, but he was also the head of the colonial church. Indeed, his laws of the Indies began with the words, 'On the Holy Catholic Faith' ". (Vas Oss 2) The Church because it was under the Spanish monarchy participated in the wrongs incurred in the New World. The Church went along with the government in instituting the unfair practices against the native population.

Las Casas writings about the treatment and conversion of the Indians are some of the best that survive today. Las Casas was a Spanish bishop who late in life became a renowned champion of the Indians. He was born in Seville in August 1474, and he first went to the New World in 1502. He became a priest and participated in the acquiring of Cuba. He received land and slaves as a reward for his contribution. In 1514 he experienced a radical change of heart and came to feel that the native population had been unjustly treated by his countrymen. He then became determined to dedicate the remainder of his life to their defense. Las Casas was one of the notable authorities on the Indians, and was remarkable because he realized the indians should not be measured by the Spanish yardstick, but must rather be understood with in the framework of their own culture. He saw the indians not as heathens and savages, but in a different stage of development from Europe. Las Casas contended that the indians had many skills and accomplishments, and in fact possessed a culture worthy of respect.

Las Casas writes about the treatment of the Indians upon being subjected to the Spanish Christians. He accompanied the Spanish entourage on the occupation of Cuba. In this venture he accompanied the expedition in the office of clerico. He stated that one of the chief cares of this office was when they halted in any town or village, it was his job to assign separate quarters to the Spanish and the Indians. This was to prevent violence from erupting between the two peoples. His principle job; however was to assemble the children in order to baptize them. This was a sad task for Las Casas because scarcely any of the children remained alive a few months afterward. This was due to violence or the disease that the Spanish brought with them. Las Casas on his travels also saw the violence and horrors which the Indians were subject to. Las Casas describes this scene upon entering the Indian village of Caonao: "The Clerico was preparing for the division of the rations amongst the men, when suddenly a Spaniard, prompted, as was thought, by the Devil, drew his sword: the rest drew theirs; and immediately they all began to hack and hew the poor Indians, who were sitting quietly near them, and offering not more resistance than so many sheep". (Liburn 10 & 11)

Las Casas then goes on to describe the scene as "heaps of bodies . . . strewn about, like sheaves of corn, waiting to be gathered up". (Liburn 10) The Spaniard's job was to convert the native population to Christianity, not use them to test the sharpness of their swords which they had done in this case.

In Mexico, Hernan Cortez, the conqueror, recognized the need

for religious instruction among Indians. His instructions he received from the Spanish monarchy and the Pope for his venture included the order to, "spread the knowledge of the true faith and the Church of God among those people who dwell in darkness," (Ricard 14). Cortez followed these instructions very diligently. When he encountered the Indians on the mainland of Central America, he undertook their religious conversions. He explained the Christian religion to them, and wanted the natives to renounce their idols and embrace the Christian religion. He and the religious men with him preached against sodomy and human sacrifice to the tribes that they encountered. In Mexico, like other Spanish colonies, numerous Friars and priests came and worked to Christianize the native population. However, this was largely ineffectual because the various Holy men could only sow a few grains here or there. Cortez realized the need for order in the Catholic Church in the New World to convert the native population. Cortez wrote to the king of Spain, Charles V, about the need for missionaries to convert the Indians. He asked for friars of the St. Francis or St. Dominic order who would set up monasteries to instruct and convert the native population. There, presently arrived in Mexico at San Juan de Ulua on May 13 or 14, 1524 the famous mission of Twelve, who began the methodical conversion of the Indians.

Cortez's envisions of monastic communities, where the native population could be converted to Christianity, came true especially in Mexico. Huge monasteries were built for the purpose of the conversion of the native population. These monasteries built were of enormous size and decorated ostentatiously. The monasteries included pomp and circumstance in their ceremonies. The reason claimed for doing this was to keep the Indians interested in Catholicism and away from their native religions. "On February 8, 1537, Zumarraga wrote the Council of the Indies that beautiful churches helped in the conversion of the Indians and strengthened their devotion. Twenty years later, on February 1, 1558, Viceroy Luis de Velasco make the same observation to Philip II". (Ricard 168)

These churches, supposedly built for the benefit of the native population, were built or supported by the native population. For them this was a heavy burden, whether they built the churches themselves or had to pay workmen to the labor. They had to do this at the cost of neglecting their fields or trades. There were also accounts of the friars physically punishing the Indians for their work or lack of it, "But one must accept with reserve the testimony of the Indians who complained of abuses by the Dominicans during the construction of the convent at Puebla, claiming they were exhausted from work, and that one of the religious had loaded them with large stones and them beaten them over the head with a stick". (Ricard 170)

The missions set up by the church were also guilty of abusing the native population. The Indians were supposed to benefit from these missions, but all they recieved from them was more misery. The Indians in having to support these new edifices and having to convert to Christianity suffered from a double edged sword.

The native americans had three responses to the thrusting of the Christian religion upon them. One response was the incorporation of elements of Christianity into their own religion, creating a new religious system. They took the beliefs out of the Christian religion that agreed or make sense with their religion and combined the two. "Ancient rituals attached to Christian ones included a sweeping ceremony that accompanied the bringing of the Eucharist to the sick, the lighting of fires on the eve of the nativity, the extreme use of self-flagellation, the burning of a traditional incense before images of saint, dedicating strings of ears or corn to the Virgin". (Luenfeld 304) Some Indians outright rejected Christianity. An example of this written by Thomas Giles was, "among the Incas of Peru, baptism was considered subjection to the invader; some Incan chiefs killed those who accepted the rite". (Giles 2) The Indians largely could not accept Christian beliefs because of the actions of the Christians themselves. The brutality and the lack of concern or remorse that the Spanish showed to the Indians played a large role for the rejection of the Spanish religion. The Indians did not want any part of a religion that preached rape, slaughter, and cruel subjugation. The explanation of a Mayan who objected to the behaviors of the Spanish was the following, "The true God, the true Dios came, but this was the origin too of affliction for us: the origin of tax, of not giving them alms; of trial through the grabbing of cacao money, of trial by blowgun; stomping the people; violent removal; forced debt, debt created by false testimony; petty litigation, harassment, violent removal; the collaboration with the Spaniards on the part of the priests, . . .and all the while the mistreated were further maltreated...but it will happen that tears will come to the eyes of God the Father. The justica of God the Father will settle on the whole world." (Giles 2)

Not all the Indians rejected the Christian religion. Many of them accepted it. They desired Christian friendships and to change their habits to the ones of the Spanish. The reasons for the acceptance of Christianity vary, but one of these is fear. Some Christian conquerors threatened lives if the Indians were not baptized and did not actively participate in the Church. Another reason for the conversion is that the Indians were in awe of the conquerors. The Spanish represented power and the Indians were in reverence of their great amount of power they represented. Some accepted the religion because the missionaries demonstrated boundless zeal, high morals, and great courage. Not all of the missionaries sent by the Church were violent or corrupt. There were some who worked for the benefit of the native population. The Indians saw this and respected it.

The Catholic Church helped the Spanish monarchy administer to the native population in the New World. The Church, by being subject to the Spanish monarchy, is also to be held accountable to the numerous evils inflicted upon the Indians in the Spanish colonies. In many cases they were forced to convert to Christianity, and their views about god and religion were not taken into account. The Catholic Church incurred a great injustice to the native population in the New World.

They were reduced to second class citizens, and forced to work toward goals that they did not fully understand. Through the writings of Las Casas, it is seen how the Indians were slaughtered needlessly, and how they were baptised without regard to their feelings. Cortez paved the way for missions to be founded in the New World supposedly for the good of the Indian population. This, however, also turned against them. The Catholic Church role in the lives of the native population was a negative one due to its alliance with the Spanish monarchy and its forced conversion of the Indians.

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