

*PART TWO*  
*THE CHRISTENDOM OF THE WEST*  
*INDIES*  
*(1492-1808)*

Three aspects of Latin American history will be examined briefly in this part: the Amerindian cultures prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the Hispanic culture itself, and the conditions in the Church during the colonial period.

*1. The American Cultures*

In America the European conquistadores and colonists encountered two highly developed cultures: the Mayan-Aztec in Mexico and Central America, and the Inca in Peru. At the time of the arrival of the Spanish each of these indigenous cultures had reached a stage of development more or less on the level of the Egyptians during their first dynasty. The "cultural distance" therefore between the Spanish and the Indians of these two superior cultures was more than five thousand years. The rest of America was secondary and in an absolutely primitive state.

The "ethico-mythical nucleus" of these cultures has been carefully examined by students of the philosophy of religion. These indigenous communities were by and large agricultural—or, as in the case of the Aztecs, warriors—highly syncretistic in which the *chtónicos* gods, such as Mother Earth and the Moon, were combined with the *uránicos* gods. Basically, the Indian mentality was antihistorical, that is, a ritualistic rhythm and a transcendental reality of the divine archetypes controlled and sacramentalized all daily activity. The Inca and Aztec empires originated in the fifteenth century, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century when the Spanish were arriving in America, these civilizations were still relatively young. Their pantheons had not as yet been codified nor adequately organized, their theogonies and beliefs were still heterogeneous, and their philosophical reflection had hardly begun.

*2. Hispanic Christendom*

The Hispanic people—a segment of European medieval Christendom—were the descendants of the Caucasoid tribes who originally inhabited the Iberian peninsula. During the early Christian era the area—present-day Spain and Portugal—was a province of Rome that subsequently converted to Christianity. In the seventh century the peninsula was invaded by the Arabs, and the Spaniards entered the eighth century locked in a desperate struggle against Islam, a conflict that continued for eight centuries and which produced in the Spanish people a spirit of the "crusades." They were able to reconquer their territory by advancing slowly toward the southern part of the peninsula. But it was not until 1492, the same year that Columbus discovered some of the islands of the Caribbean, that the Moors were finally expelled from Granada.<sup>1</sup>

The structure of the Hispanic world was therefore essentially that of medieval Europe together with certain elements of the Arab world. One of these elements was the tendency to unify indissolubly the aims and purposes of the state and of the Church. This tendency can be traced from the Constantinian period through the Visigoths and the Pontifical States. It should be observed, however, that the Islamic doctrine of the caliphate demanded this same kind of unity, a religio-political monism which was also promoted by various royalist schools such as that of Marsilio de Padua and all the other jurists who supported the absolute primacy of the monarchy. The absolutism of Henry VIII of England and of some of the Danish monarchs was an expression of the same philosophy but was obviously carried to an extreme.

In Spain there existed, therefore, something akin to a “temporal messianism” in which the destiny of the nation and the destiny of the Church were believed to be united. Hispanic Christianity, it was believed, was unique in that the nation had been elected by God to be the instrument for the salvation of the world. This idea among the Spanish that they had been elected by God—which, incidentally, was the perennial stumbling block for Israel—constituted the foundation of the religio-politics of Isabella, Charles, and Philip.

### 3. *The Patronato System as an Institution of Christendom*

The Catholic Church in Spain and Portugal during the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries was subservient to the Portuguese and Spanish governments not only because of the absolutist policies of the Hispanic kings, but also because of the weakness of the Roman pontiffs during the period. Portugal was the first to obtain significant concessions from Rome beginning in the thirteenth century. These “rights” were followed by others.

The Holy See first recognized the *possessio* of Portugal over lands already discovered and those yet to be discovered. Then the Pope awarded to the Portuguese Crown exclusive authority over all of Africa. Third, anyone who proceeded contrary to this absolute right of Portugal would be, according to the Pontiff, subject to excommunication. The rights and powers of the Portuguese Crown were declared to be not only spiritual, but also political and economic, and these rights became the basis of a slowly developing colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Papacy ceded to the Portuguese kings the right and responsibility, *the jus patronatus*,<sup>3</sup> of “propagating the faith”<sup>4</sup> among the peoples in the newly discovered lands and in those retaken from the Sarracen power. This was the first time in history that the Papacy gave to a nation the twofold authority to colonize and evangelize, that is, temporal and eternal, political and ecclesiastical, economic and evangelistic authority. This consolidation of power by Portugal and Spain produced two military and imperial theocracies more Islamic than Christian but not unique for the Middle Ages. There also developed within the Portuguese and Spanish endeavors a fundamental ambiguity between colonizing and evangelizing. Only the Jesuits were able to constitute as *territorium nullius Diocesis* the newly discovered lands under direct protection of the Holy See, and for a long time this Order enjoyed a greater freedom than other churchmen in Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

Spain, especially Castile and Aragon, hypertrophied the Gothic tradition and gained unlimited power over the Church—an understandable and justifiable phenomenon in view of the chaos that existed in Rome. The Hispanic system of the *Patronato* had its antecedents in the Middle Ages, but more proximate causes were the conquest and evangelization of the Canary Islands that began in 1418 when the Roman pontiffs gave to Spain not only jurisdiction over the peoples of the Islands but also the responsibility

of defending them and of sending missionaries to them. A Franciscan convent was founded in Ondarra for the sole purpose of preparing missionaries for the Canaries. The *Patronato* was of even greater significance in regard to the territory of Granada after it was retaken from the Arabs in 1492. Two crucial concessions had already been awarded to Spain by the papal bulls —*Provisionis Nostrae*, promulgated on May 15, 1486, and *Dum ad illam*, which followed on August 4. According to the terms of these pronouncements, the kings of Spain reserved the right to nominate all bishops, tantamount to naming them, and also to participate in the benefices and tithes of the Church. Granada had been the ultimate goal of the Spanish “crusade,” but it signaled in reality the beginning of Spanish expansion. The newly discovered lands and inhabitants of the Americas were placed under the authority of the Spanish Crown by two additional papal bulls, *Inter coetera* and *Eximiae devotionis* of May 3 - 4, 1493, on the principle that as subjects of the Catholic kings and as members of the Church these people could thereby partake of the benefits of the gospel.

The astute Ferdinand of Aragon was able to wrest from the popes one concession after another: the nomination of all bishops, the establishment of new dioceses together with determining their geographical boundaries, as well as the sending of all missionaries and religious, that is, monks, friars, and nuns. But the culmination was the right granted to the Spanish Crown to the tithes of all the dioceses and parishes. On the one hand it would appear that the popes were unaware of all that they were ceding, while on the other hand Rome hardly possessed the power to deny the demands of the Spanish and Portuguese kings. It is significant, nonetheless, that in Burgos in 1512 the first three bishops named for the Americas accepted their posts under these conditions and with the royal privileges.<sup>6</sup>

The executive organism of the *Patronato* developed slowly until the creation in 1524 of the *Supreme Council of the Indies*, which consolidated and exercised authority in all matters related to the Spanish colonies: religious, economic, administrative, political, and military. The American Church in turn was denied any right to communicate directly with Rome or with any other European prelate. Furthermore, the Council was empowered to send missionaries to Spanish American colonies without advising their superiors, to nominate all bishops, to organize new dioceses and to divide others. The representatives of the *Patronato* in the American provinces were the viceroys, the governors, and the courts (*Audiencias*). The episcopacy in the colonies was organized by these representatives of the Crown, which deemed the Church as a necessity. But the royal authority became the basis of a clash between the Church and the state when the episcopacy attempted to gain freedom in its work of evangelization. For example, Toribio de Mogrovejo, Archbishop of Lima, is a key to understanding the reaction of the Church to the absolute authority of the Council.

According to the laws and decrees emanating from the Spanish Crown and from the Supreme Council of the Indies, the purpose of the conquest of the Americas was essentially missionary. But in actuality this missionary or evangelistic purpose was often negated by the actions of those who engaged in the conquest, actions which in reality were contrary to the laws. Latin America was characterized by a "perfect legalism" in theory, and a shameful illegality and an inadequate application of the laws in fact.



## CHAPTER IV

THE CLASH BETWEEN TWO CULTURES  
AND THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH

The Hispanic civilization arrived in America during the apogee of her cultural, military, and even religious power, especially since the reform of Cisneros, and encountered other cultures that from virtually any point of view were substantially inferior. Spain, with the generous help of her people, of her unoccupied military forces, of her noblemen passionate for new titles, of the multitudes of poverty-stricken individuals thirsting for riches, and of religious and priests, among whom there were many saints, doctors, and others not quite as impressive—as is normal in all of history—initiated the political, economic, and spiritual conquest.

I. THE INSTRUMENTS OF ONE CIVILIZATION VERSUS THE  
INSTRUMENTS OF ANOTHER

In this unequal struggle Spain triumphed rapidly over the indigenous peoples. The Aztec and Inca empires succumbed in holy terror before the power of the Spanish arquebuses, cannons, horses, bloodthirsty dogs, and weapons of iron and invincible armor. A mere handful of men conquered a continent with millions of inhabitants, thereby signaling the supremacy of the Mediterranean over the pre-Hispanic American civilization. This entire indigenous civilization was defeated by the Spanish and then exploited to the ultimate degree possible. Europe benefited greatly from the multiple agricultural products of the American civilization, from her gold and silver mines, and at least in part from her ancient cultures. We will observe from a demographic perspective—and as an example—what the clash between these civilizations produced.

In the royal commissions (*Cédulas Reales*) the Supreme Council of the Indies and the Crown continually sought information in regard to the growth or the decrease in the number of Indians. The Laws of the Indies were created specifically for their defense. Bishops were horrified by the disappearance of the indigenous peoples, which was attributed to bad administration, inhumane treatment, injustices, as well as the impact of European diseases, plagues, and the “pestilences” as they were called.

The following table (p.42) indicates the rapid decrease of the indigenous peoples in Mexico during the period from 1532 until 1608.

These statistics appear to be accurate from the investigations I have made, and they explain the repeated complaints voiced during the sixteenth century regarding the alarming decline in the Indian population.

## II. THE INDIAN WORLD VIEW VERSUS THE HISPANIC WORLD VIEW

The Spanish invasion and conquest led to the total disintegration of the Indian world. Nonetheless, as always, the intentional elements of the Indian world view tended to

Regional Populations in Various Periods in Mexico<sup>1</sup>

Upper Regions	1532	1568	1580	1595	1608
I — Central Macizo	7,999,307	1,707,758	1,233,032	770,649	
II — Central Vera Cruz	171,984	32,340	21,560	20,200	
IV — Oaxaca Misteca	1,560,931	222,165	150,620	146,740	
VII — Michoacán	1,038,668	188,398	161,299	96,913	
IX — Guadalajara-Zacatecas	462,446	80,515	64,618	90,670	
Subtotal	11,233,336	2,231,176	1,631,129	1,125,172	852,244
Lower Regions					
II — Pánuco - Vallés	1,532,860	74,087	42,370	45,690	
III — Alvarado - Coatzacoalcos	710,230	37,682	32,207	17,876	
V — Oaxacas - Zapotecas	681,372	68,076	56,076	37,119	
VI — Oaxaca Coast	862,687	63,545	43,885	33,729	
VII — Michoacán - Tlaxcala Coasts	243,163	113,531	64,264	71,158	
X — Guadalajara Coasts	614,760	61,476	21,336	41,484	
Subtotal	5,645,072	418,397	260,138	247,056	217,011
TOTAL	16,871,408	2,649,573	1,891,267	1,372,228	1,069,255

be retained for a much longer period of time than the instruments of the indigenous civilization. The Hispanic concept of life destroyed the basic foundations of the indigenous cosmology. The Indian elites —not only the Aztecs but also the Incas and other Indian peoples conquered by the Spanish —adopted the Hispanic world view or were relegated to an inferior level in the society, that is, they ceased being a part of the ruling elite and became members of the marginal elements of the new society.

Even to the present the Indian lacks the normal institutions necessary for the development of a world view, and it appears that the indigenous peoples as a nation and as a culture have been virtually destroyed. The Spaniard was scandalized, for example, by the Aztec offering of human sacrifice —one of the pre-Hispanic instruments —and failed to see any theological significance in this practice. Human sacrifice, however, was the essential rite understood by the Indian to assure any cosmic renewal in view of the fact that the gods needed blood to live and to give life to the universe. The Spaniard, unable to understand the ultimate bases of the Indian culture and civilization, sought to obliterate every vestige of the pre-Hispanic American civilization. Tragically, there was no adult interlocutor such as Matteo Ricci encountered in China or as Roberto de Nobili found in India. The indigenous American peoples lacked the philosophers and theologians who could have acted as bridges between the Hispanic and the American “ethico-mythical nucleus.” Moreover, the multiplicity of languages and cultures impeded the conquerors from absorbing the cultural wealth of the conquered tribes and peoples.

The result of this clash of cultures can be seen in the emergence of the Hispanic

world view as the predominant one in the new American civilization. The key posts politically, culturally, and economically were occupied by Spaniards. The Indian civilization, on the other hand, as a vital system and organism with the possibility of development, simply disappeared, and the Indian peoples became an inferior social class which the Spanish attempted to isolate and prevent from becoming a part of the controlling elite in any sense. This was a very real but tragic fact. Perhaps in a sense it was inevitable—but the pre-Hispanic existential understanding was eradicated.

### III. THE WORK OF THE MISSIONARY

In the organization of the Hispanic empire, the Church became the primary organism responsible for and committed to the perpetuation of the Hispanic world view primarily because the ecclesiastics controlled the universities, the secondary and primary schools, and the printing and distribution of literature. The vast majority of the intellectual elites in Latin America were priests. Also, virtually no member of the intellectual elite in Spain, with the exception of the missionaries, came to America with the idea of making a cultural contribution. Noblemen and soldiers as well as colonizers came to the New World with the understanding that they were responsible for the defense of the interests of the Crown and of the *Patronato*. The Church, on the other hand, was responsible for the work of evangelization and acculturation of the newly discovered peoples.

The Christian existential understanding—the faith and tradition that essentially transcended all human culture and civilization—became inextricably bound to the “ethico-mythical nucleus” of the Hispanic culture, which in time was superimposed upon the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Christianity became identified with the Spanish, and this identification was virtually absolute, especially in the mind of the conquistador. For him, to be a Spaniard and to be a Christian were identical, just as being a Mohammedan and a member of the *umma* were for the Arab one and the same. The Indian, therefore, deduced logically that to be a Spaniard or to belong to his civilization and to be a Christian were equivalent, especially in view of the fact that submitting to the authority of the Inca meant respecting and worshiping his gods. It was only the missionaries—and not all of them—who discovered the necessity of distinguishing clearly between “Hispanism” and “Christianity,” that is, between the understanding of the Christian faith and the “ethico-mythical nucleus” of the Hispanic civilization.

Missionary work should have involved the conversion of each member of the Indian culture to the Church. But it should have also involved the massive conversion of the Indian culture by a century of dialogue between the Christian apologists born in the Indian culture who could critique the “ethico-mythical nucleus” of these indigenous cultures from the perspective of Christian understanding. This, however, was not possible. Having failed to understand the basic organisms of the Indian civilization, the missionary encountered a culture of disintegrating and diverse elements. And though the baptism of these people proved to be fairly simple—because there was little effort to catechize the “ethico-mythical nucleus”—there remained a pagan atmosphere diffused and uncontrolled and almost impossible to discern and evangelize. Spanish expansion was achieved in the same manner as that of the Roman Empire, the Medieval Crusades, and the Arab caliphates, that is, a region was occupied militarily, then pacified, a government formed, and the people of the area converted to the religion of the invaders—although in the Roman empire the local gods were simply placed in the pantheon. This was the *modus operandi* of a worldly empire. But if this

empire claimed to be Christian, the missionaries and the prophets could only rise up and cry to heaven as Antonio de Montesinos did in December of 1511 on the island of Hispaniola. The cry of this Spanish priest continues to be heard throughout the history of the Latin American Church. To know how to hear it, to understand it, and to repeat it is the work of the Church historian.

One often hears of the missionary meaning or purpose involved in the conquest — a phrase which can conceal a basic misunderstanding. For to speak of the missionary purpose would seem to signify above everything else its importance. But was the missionary purpose the principal one, or a secondary, marginal one? Was it the only purpose, or, on the contrary, was it merely an apparent one?

I would prefer to speak of the integral meaning of the conquest as seen in the *modus operandi* of a Christian nation still living in the Middle Ages. The conquest signified the expansion of the Hispanic type of Christianity, including all the ambiguity that such a formula indicates. By understanding the structure of the Hispanic national Christianity one can immediately comprehend the diverse elements of which that Christianity was constituted, and the spurious contradictions will disappear.

It was not possible for Spain to be a national Christendom of a Medieval type — where there was a confusion between the spiritual and the temporal and the certain Caesarian tapestry *sui generis* —and at the same time an economic power inspired by a growing capitalism. It is absurd to claim that Spain attempted to exploit her American colonies for her own economic benefit. Was Spain a state organized to defend the interest of private companies such as was Venice, Holland, and later England? Or was Spain a state organized according to the imperial model as was the Byzantine Empire in the East or the Holy Roman Empire in the West? During the Crusades the spiritual and political goals of the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons were completely distinct from the economic objectives of the Venetians and the Genovese. On the other hand, the objectives of the Franks were not exclusively spiritual. They were also very much political as the organization of the Christian kingdoms of the East clearly indicate. We are speaking here of the Christianity of these kingdoms.

In the same sense Spain by her expansion as a Christian kingdom mixed ambitiously two indissoluble objectives: the *domination* of the lands and inhabitants newly discovered under the temporal power of the Crown, and the *evangelization* of these peoples by incorporating them into the Church, the spiritual arm of the kingdom. The political objectives of Spain, however, should be clearly distinguished from those merely economic as well as from later capitalistic exploitation such as one sees practiced by the German company in Venezuela or according to the familiar organization of colonies as parts of a Commonwealth. Isabella and Ferdinand, Charles, and Philip did have political objectives not only in Europe but also in America, and because of these objectives it was necessary for the monarchs to invest large sums of capital. But the reason was not merely economic, and to criticize them as capitalists is an unfounded anachronism.

The religious or missionary aims of the Spanish rulers are easily understood. They were an integral and necessary part of the effort to expand —and thus were mixed essentially with the political aims of Spain as a Christian kingdom. Freed from any admixture or ambiguity the missionary aim would not be a part of the expansion of a Christian kingdom, but it would be only that of the Roman Catholic Church. The history of Christian missions in Hispanic America, however, is the account of a continual crisis between the state which included the aims of the Church as a means of expansion —a position clearly accepted by many members of the Church but



certainly not by everyone —and those of a Church which recognized very slowly the necessity for freedom, the problems of poverty, charity, as well as the separation of the political aims of the state from the missionary objectives of the Church.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was the first to propose a peaceful evangelization, that is, that the missionaries should go to the Indians before the military. And it was the Jesuits in particular who, under the direct authority of the Pope and with a relative independence from the Crown, were able to demonstrate clearly an exclusively missionary purpose.

How has this colonial period been judged as a civilizing effort in relation to the Church?

Some support the Black Legend —they refuse to give any value to the work of Spain and Portugal, calling them rather intolerant because of the method of *the tabula rasa*; exploiters because of the extraction of gold and silver from Latin America; supporters of slavery because of their treatment of the Indians; and religiously superficial because the Christianity implanted in America was inadequate and in many respects pagan.

Others support the Hispanic Legend recently proposed. To support their position they cite innumerable documents and testimonies from the colonial era which portray Spain as a great missionary nation closely identified with the Catholic Church. The work of Spain in the Americas is seen as being almost perfect, and as evidence for this the letter of the laws are cited instead of the events of history.

The truth is that the Catholic kings and the Austrians had a politic of military expansion, economic mercantilism, and of evangelization by which they proposed to unify Europe and the world within the Roman Catholic Church under the sign of the cross. But this noble objective demanded certain means, and these means were purchased with the gold and the silver of the Indians who were organized into the *mita*, and by other systems extracted from the American mines.<sup>2</sup> The exploitation of these precious metals along with the agricultural production of the colonies instituted an economic-social system with artificial and monopolistic privileges that impeded the work of evangelization.

The missionary Church opposed this state of affairs from the beginning, and nearly everything positive that was done for the benefit of the indigenous peoples resulted from the call and clamor of the missionaries. The fact remained, however, that widespread injustice was extremely difficult to uproot.

The Church should have established its independence with respect to three poles: the Crown to which it was tied by the system of the *Patronato*, the Hispanic-Creole society with which it was unified naturally by its ethnic and cultural solidarity, and the Indian communities to which it was sent for the purpose of evangelization and protection, for the bishops were the logical and most conspicuous protectors of the Indians. Although the missionary orders for the most part made heroic sacrifices in their initial attempts to evangelize the indigenous peoples, the missionary spirit waned and this original purpose became incidental.

As to the civilization itself, the major error of the Spanish beginning in the sixteenth century was the organization of a mercantile system by which the gold and silver were purchased at low costs with the products of raw or manufactured materials from Europe. Because of this system Spain did not industrialize its colonies. Rather, it impeded industrialization and agricultural exploitation in Latin America. The British, on the other hand, based their colonial system in the eighteenth century on the industrialization of the mother country, and thereby surpassed Spain as modern indus-

trial capitalism displaced the agrarian Medieval mercantilism. Latin America and her Church, however, were equally united in this process of civilization.

Alexander von Humboldt wrote toward the end of the eighteenth century regarding the Latin American civilization:

I have had the advantage, which few Spaniards can dispute, of having visited successively Caracas, Havana, Santa Fe de Bogotá, Quito, Lima, and Mexico.... It appears to me that there is an intense interest in Mexico and Santa Fe de Bogotá in the profound studies of the sciences; more interest in Letters and in developing a passionate and fickle imagination for flattery in Quito and Lima; more light regarding political relations among the nations and a greater understanding of the state of the colonies and of the metropolis in Havana and Caracas. The multiple communications with European commerce, and this sea of the Antilles which we have characterized before as a Mediterranean, have powerfully influenced social progress in Cuba and in the magnificent provinces of Venezuela.<sup>3</sup>

These words are cited as evidence that there existed in Latin America an authentic culture, the product of the Hispanic effort, from its origin until today, although it was profoundly *dependent* on the Empire.