

RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO

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The fate of whole networks of ideas and their associated sentiments and cultural forms has become one of the most anxious concerns of the present age. The modern era has witnessed a bewildering succession of compulsory contacts of the most intimate and consecutive sort between hitherto distinct civilizations. This phenomenon has created a special field of research in anthropology—the study of acculturation—which is less frequently the subject of historical study. The responsibility for reporting how rival sets of ideas have fared in the course of armed clashes of cultures has largely been left to political historians for whom intellectual developments are often obliged to assume a secondary rôle. In the contemporary war for men's minds, when entire societies experience the substitution of one world-view for another, we can no longer afford to be neglectful of these decisive episodes in the history of ideas.

The present paper will seek to record some of the spiritual and social conflicts which occurred when the religions and politics of the Old and the New Worlds first clashed. This dramatic confrontation of civilizations is much in need of new monographic studies, but in the meantime the data now available permit speculation on some of the aspects of conquest and conversion in Mexico of the sixteenth century.

Spaniards who undertook to describe the new lands, whether as discoverers, conquerors, or chroniclers, were principally concerned to report what was new in the American scene and peoples. Simultaneously and less perceptibly there occurred an interior exploration by the writers, a probing of their own varying commitments as individuals, as Spaniards, and as Catholics. Being required to present themselves to men of the New World who had never heard of them, Spaniards faced the task of convincing the Indians of the superiority of their institutions and their faith.

In the Spanish penetration of the New World, conversion was inescapably tied to conquest. As subjects of the King of Spain, the Indian would have to become, sooner or later, a Catholic, because the king was administrator of the *patronato real*. So that the Indian, confronted by a variety of agents of clerical or lay status was really exposed to one single complex of ideas which underlay the Spanish Catholic life of the sixteenth century. Conversion therefore, involved not only the adoption of the creed but the acceptance of the Spanish Catholic way of life. These two patterns of creed and deed were intimately related to one another in both Spanish and Indian cultures. But the intensity and extent of the bond between them differed in the two traditions. This difference is the major clue to the story of the first social contact of the Old World and the New.

Man's origin and destiny, his place in the universe and in human society were defined in both Aztec and Spanish traditions. Religious thought suggested the meaning of life, and religious functionaries regulated conduct. Aztecs and Spaniards alike possessed a clearly defined cultural framework within which they oriented themselves to nature, themselves, and the uni-

verse. Here the identity between the two cultures ended and the differences began.

For the Catholic, every hour and every act is colored in some fashion by his origin in sin and the certainty of Last Judgment. The Christian knows that he has been tarnished by the disobedience of his first parents and will be saved only through the blood of Christ and the prayers of the Church.¹ Creed and code of ethics were connected in a different way among the Aztecs. Not the revealed commandments of one God, but the priestly interpretations of the will of idols, each uniquely relevant to one occasion, formed the Aztec's guide to conduct. This contrast in the mode of integration of belief and behavior had a decisive impact upon the character of Indian acculturation.

In matters of creed, a Franciscan chronicle reports, the Indians were "like wax ready to receive any imprint."² Aztec theology and soteriology were incapable of opposing the vastly more complex and comprehensive explanations of the origin and destiny of man and world offered by the Catholic Church. In matters of conduct, on the other hand, the Indians had tested patterns of habit, revered folkways, inherited pieties. The unsettling of these involved the dissolution of their fundamental ways of life. The Christian distinction between the mortal and immortal properties of man, the differences between classes of obligations, and the realms of the sacred and profane especially violated Aztec assumptions and fragmented their cosmos. Thus, the contrast in the orientations of Aztec and Catholic to belief and behavior requires our arrangement of the problems of conversion under two major headings: changes of creed and changes in the ways of life.

I. *The Creed*

The teaching reported by the missionaries must be taken as our point of departure in the ensuing discussion of the Catholic Faith. Systematic conversion by the regular clergy began in Mexico with the arrival in 1524 of twelve Franciscans chosen by the Pope.³ They coöperated with the friars already there and the records left by three of the Franciscans, Fray Pedro de Gante, Fray Toribio de Benavente (or Motilínia) and Fray Ber-

¹ *Códice Franciscano del siglo XVI* [Nueva Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de Mexico (Mexico, 1941)] is the basis for this interpretation.

² *Ibid.*, 206: ". . . esta gente nueva, de su parte tan aparejada como la cera para recibir el sello de cualquiera doctrina que se les diere ahora sea mala ahora buena . . ."

³ The best discussion of the work of the Orders is Robert Ricard, *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique*, Thesis, Instituto d'Ethnologie (Paris, 1933). The first Franciscans were chosen by Charles V while he was in Flanders. Pope Leo X issued the bull *Alicias felices*, 1521; in 1525 Pope Adrian VI issued the bull *Exponi nobis* which defined the mission of Spain in Mexico. After the Franciscans, there arrived the Dominicans, 1526, and Augustinians, 1553. A few Mercedarians also worked in New Spain.

nardino de Sahagún are the main source of this inquiry.⁴ The *pláticas* or addresses of the missionaries compiled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún constitute the earliest presentations of Catholic doctrine to the Aztec leaders.⁵ The issues covered in these addresses are best viewed in the following sequence: (A) the nature of the universe; (B) the world of the gods; (C) the world of man.

(A) The Christian cosmos of the sixteenth century was essentially that of the Church Fathers, with the earth suspended between heaven and hell. Whatever moved was moved by God, the source of all motion, of all seasons, of all beginnings and endings. Through His manifestation of Himself in the Holy Ghost and Jesus Christ, He had proven His love for man. God was all powerful and all just; benefits through natural events (good harvest) or disasters (drought or illness) could neither be really influenced by natural man, nor always explained. For the ways of God in nature surpass all human understanding.⁶

The cosmos of the Aztecs was explained by legend and not revealed by religion. The creation of the universe remained in the realm of mythology, a story of the lives of gods to whom men were accidental playthings.⁷ One of the monuments found in the center of ancient religious life of the Aztecs is the famous calendar stone of Aztec or possibly Toltec origin in Mexico City. The symbols marked on its disk-face tell the cosmogonic myth of previous creations and destructions of the world. From the last creation dates a calendar which was then current. Creation of the world, therefore, was significant mainly for reckoning time, and for establishing a beginning. Creation was not essentially a moral act. According to Aztec tradition the rôle of man in former ages was passive, not that of Adam and Eve committing the original sin.

The Aztec approach to heaven and hell also differed from the Christian. The Indian dead might wander through thirteen heavens and nine hells, each presided over by a god, until they were allowed to rest.⁸ The course of one's journey after death, however, was determined by the way in which he had died. Thus, a warrior living his life in battle went straight to one of the heavens. The passage through Aztec hell differs in essence from the Christian concept of purgatory because of the different premises from which their concepts originated.

Christians and Aztecs also differed in their orientation towards the universe. For the Catholic, every moment of life on earth was suspended

⁴ Sahagún wrote the famous work *Historia general de las Cosas de Nueva España*.

⁵ Walter Lehmann, *Sterbende Götter und Christliche Heilsbotschaft*, Spanish and Mexican text; transl. publ. posthum. by G. Kutcher (Stuttgart, 1949) with notes on Vatican and Viennese MSS of *pláticas*.

⁶ Códice Franciscano, 31-32.

⁷ M. Orozco y Berra, *Historia antigua y de la conquista de Mexico*, 3 vols. (Mexico, 1880), I, chap. 1.

⁸ A. Caso, *La Religión de los Aztecas* (Enciclopedia Ilustrada Mexicana), reprint (Mexico, 1936), 31ff.

between the ultimates of creation and salvation. The Mexican religion was homocentric. Though declared to originate in myth, time expressed profane, and not sacred, human consciousness. To the Aztec, the passing instant was not immediate to God; rather the present was conceived as distinct from the future. The realm of the beyond was deemed unfathomable to living men and inaccessible through ordinary experience. Magic might aid men to come closer to the inexplicable, but neither thought nor death would penetrate the mystery. The Christian point of view which inescapably linked the here and the hereafter appeared to the Aztecs not only to conflict with their cosmic myths but to render human experience less real or true. A change in the cosmic orientation of the Indian came indirectly, through his eventual acceptance of the new Christian definition of the divine and of man's status as a created being external to God but inexorably linked to Him by destiny.

(B) The core of the Indian religion was idol worship. This the Spaniards realized on their first contact with the new continent. Cortés wrote of the idols in his reports,⁹ and Sahagún devoted the first of twelve books of his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* to the theme of "los dioses." Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta reports in a marginal observation: "idols of the Indians are infinite" (in number),¹⁰ and is evidently hard put to distinguish between gods and spirits or to perceive that the gods were, as we think, of three kinds: gods of war, gods of agricultural and political destiny, and household idols or spirits of nature.

When the Franciscan missionaries began to present to the Indians the subject of their one and only God who would inevitably triumph over all other gods they did so very indirectly. In the addresses delivered before the leading chiefs gathered in Tenochtitlán by command of their conquerors, the Franciscans first presented themselves as ambassadors of the Pope and bringers of the scriptures; only later did they deal with the true God. The *caciques* were made to listen to the authority of the Bible concerning the nature of the new deity, and their response, presented by the Aztec priests, was a practical capitulation rather than an expression of religious conversion.

For both Aztec princes and priests, the exchange of the Christian God for the Aztec pantheon threatened the end of their tribal organization and coordinate oligarchy. In Mexico, as in other polytheistic lands, the new God had been originally welcomed to join the others, but in Tenochtitlán, where the Franciscans addressed the nobles gathered by command of their enemies, the power of the new God was already demonstrated in an awesome fashion. The legend of the return of the native idol Quetzalcoatl in the

⁹ Hernando Cortés, *Cartas de relación de la conquista de Mejico*, EspasaCalpe, (Mexico, 1945), 35. Letter sent by "La Justicia Y Regimiento de la Rica Villa de la Veracruz," July 10, 1519; pp. 88-89. Letter written by Cortés himself, Oct. 30, 1520. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, XII books in 5 vols. (Mexico, 1938), vol. I, chapter entitled: "de los dioses."

¹⁰ Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia ecclesiastica Indiana*, ed. J. C. Icazbalceta (Mexico, 1870). This book was written at the end of the sixteenth century.

person of Cortés had long since been abandoned. The superiority of the Christian God was defended by the twelve Franciscan missionaries in the following arguments: ¹¹ (a) Was the Christian God not known everywhere in the world? Except for Indians, who had ever heard of the Mexican idols? (b) Was not an omnipresent immutable Creator superior to mere idols? (c) Was not the Lord's compassion for man, His revelation, His manifestation in Christ and His promise of salvation proof of His concern for men unlike any ever shown by the Aztec gods?

The Indian princes were at a loss how to counter these claims, and asked to be allowed to consult their own priests. After listening to the same presentation of the Catholic God, the priests deliberated among themselves and replied, appealing to their forefathers and their fear of the revenge of the gods were they to prove faithless: What we know about our gods comes to us from our forefathers. Our ways of worship have been defined by tradition and our gods have served us. Now we are asked to abandon the laws by which we live, in which we were born and grew up. Only disaster can come from abandonment; the wrath of our gods will surely be upon us. Our faithlessness will make our people rise against us. Not salvation but death is what you bring us

What can we do who are mortals and dejected?
 Let us die if we have to die.
 If we are to perish, let us perish,
 Because truly the gods have died.¹²

How describe the gods whose threatened twilight evoked such eloquence from Aztec prince and priest? From our perspective, the gods of the Aztecs appear to have been relentless in their demand for the suffering, torture, and sacrifice of their worshippers. The more benevolent deities of the earlier Toltecs and other sedentary tribes had been subordinated during the conquests to the practice of human offerings among the Aztecs.

The most spectacular sacrificial celebration in Mexico had been the consecration of the great temple of Tenochtitlán built in honor of Huitzilopochtli in 1487, less than fifty years before the arrival of the Spaniards.¹³ Twenty thousand lives were offered to the gods on that occasion. Notwithstanding the claims of some contemporaries and recent writers, there is little reason to believe that these holocausts were eventually to bring about a reaction and the consequent abolition of human sacrifice among the Indians. These excesses did not end until suppressed by the church and crown of Spain. The prohibitions on the shedding of human blood in the propitiation

¹¹ Summary based on the *pláticas*, ed. W. Lehmann, note 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 102. It was probably closer to reality to declare the Indian gods dead than to have them become devils into which the Franciscans promptly turned them when they were asked about the origin and nature of the idols.

¹³ *Anales de Tlaltelolco*, ed. S. Toscano. Notes by H. Berlin and R. M. Barlow (Mexico, 1948). Berlin's notes on calendar, 82. Description of temple by Sahagún, *op. cit.*, II, Appendix.

of the gods proved a decisive blow to the creed and cult of the natives.¹⁴

To be sure, remnants of old cults persisted for a while after the conversion. Indeed, some traces persist even today. Modern literature identifies some of the Virgins of Mexico and some of the shrines and saints with idols and pagan places of worship. But the application to a Saint as an intercessor for rain is hardly the same as the worship of the wrathful idol, Tlaloc. The permission given to the clergy to adopt "algunos similes de cosas entre ellos usadas" never included attributes of pagan idols.¹⁵ So long as asking the deity for rain, or for intercession in human affairs, is an accepted part of religions, controversies about the degrees of paganism or Catholicism in ceremonies will persist. From the Catholic point of view, no concessions were made concerning the nature and attributes of the Trinity, Angels, Saints and Devil. To the educated Indian the coming of the Christian God meant only one thing: their gods were dead and their worship ended.¹⁶

(C) In return for the shattering of his cosmos and the extinction of his gods, the missionaries brought the promise of eternal life to the individual Indian. They ascribed to him a soul capable of being saved and of being received equally with Spaniards, in the city of God. This important concept of equality of races in the eyes of God, strongly stressed by a number of outstanding Spanish theologians, required repeated struggles to be preserved.¹⁷ It implied the responsibility and readiness of the Church to guide

¹⁴ *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento conquista y colonización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de América y Oceanía*, 42 vols. (Madrid, 1864-84), XXVI, 168, Valladolid, June 26, 1523; prohibition of sacrifice by royal order.

¹⁵ *Doctrina Cristiana* (Lima, 1584), III, 3, *Recopilación de Leyes*, Ley, 22, Lib. V, "y guardan sus buenos costumbres lo que fué contra nuestra Santa Religion," cited in Rafael Gomez Hoyos, *Las Leyes de Indias y el derecho eclesiástico en la América Española y las Islas Filipinas* (Medellín, Colombia; 1945), 123, note 3.

¹⁶ It has been maintained that in some periods and in certain places the idea of one God, *the Creator and First Mover*, existed in Indian tradition and that he was characterized as "He who has all in himself." F. X. Clavigero, *Ancient History of Mexico*, transl. Ch. C. Richmond (New York, 1806), 4 vols., II, ch. 2. Sahagún compares this god with Jupiter, the chief of the gods whose cult, important though it was, did not limit the power of the other gods. He too was an idol to be abolished; Sahagún, *op. cit.*, I, 16.

¹⁷ Cf. P. Venancio Carro, *La teología y los teólogos juristas españoles ante la conquista de América*, 2 vols. (Seville, 1944); J. Hoeffner, *Christentum und Menschenwürde, Das Anliegen der spanischen Kolonialethik im goldenen Zeitalter* (Trier, 1947). S. Zavala, *Servidumbre natural y libertad cristiana según los tratadistas de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Buenos Aires, 1944), Publ. del instituto de investigaciones históricas . . . núm. LXXXVII; also Bartolomé de las Casas, *Del único modo de atraer a todos los pueblos a la verdadera religión* (Mexico, 1942). This first edition of the XVI century work has been edited by A. Millares Carlos and contains a very valuable introduction by Lewis Hanke. The Spanish text is by A. Santamaria.

the lives of Indians along the path of Christian virtue and Catholic ritual. Native traditions, "which favored ready acceptance of the new faith by the Indians," however, had to be substantially changed in content and meaning before they could serve Christian ends.

Resistance to conversion was crystallized around social custom and political tradition as interpreted and maintained by priests and chiefs. Conversion required the exchange of one set of masters for another: the abolition of the priestly caste destroyed the exceptional powers claimed by the chiefs. The substitution of the Christian hierarchy for the native priests proved a basic blow to all native social organization.

The Indian priestly hierarchy had been very numerous and powerful in regulating both public and private life. A merchant's trips, the building of public works, the timing and conduct of war, planting, reaping, and all family matters, even sports and games, were subject to priestly supervision.¹⁸ Obeying a stricter code of laws than the laity, priests dedicated their lives to intercession with the idols and interpretation or divination of their people's destiny.¹⁹ They received appeals from the chiefs—Montezuma consulted them at the arrival of Cortés. But the priests depended upon the princes for their support, as for instance in the case of gifts of work hours and material for the building of temples. The Christian missionaries had no alternative in respect to the priests. A threat to conversion, the priests were bereft of function once the idols were destroyed. In Sahagún's collection of *pláticas*, the priests poignantly exclaim: "Let us die if we have to die. Do not rouse our people against us."²⁰ The attack on the priesthood had two sources: the Spaniards, secular and clerical alike, and the converted Indian subjects. The Aztec priestly class can be said to have vanished along with the idols whom they served and the religion which they guarded.

II. *The Sacraments*

The elimination of the Indian creed, idols, and priests left a complex structure of social custom to be replaced. The rules for a Christian life as embodied in the sacramental system and the associated patterns of the popular cult—the worship of saints, ecclesiastical dogma, processions, and fiestas—were what the Franciscans brought to fill this void. The limited application of the sacraments in daily life contrasts most sharply with the mass of private and public religious ceremony which had affected every phase of Aztec life. Among investigations in this field the book of Ricard contains many pertinent references, but a short discussion of the relation of the sacraments to the popular cult will point up the impact of the Aztec challenge to the Christian tradition.²¹

The first and most basic sacrament was, of course, baptism. The problem of compulsory baptism had long troubled European theologians. In

¹⁸ A. Caso, *op. cit.*, 55–56. ¹⁹ J. Kohler, *Das Recht der Azteken*, Separatdruck der *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1892), 31, par. 76, deals with the rights and duties of the priest class. ²⁰ Lehmann, *op. cit.*, 102.

²¹ Robert Ricard, *La Conquête Spirituelle du Mexique*, *loc. cit.*

New Spain, initial confusion is evident in the vacillations of the ecclesiastical program. A vast number of Indians were claimed for baptism in one day and soon after, attacks were made upon the insufficiency of preparation to receive the sacrament. With the arrival of the Franciscans, a simplified form of preparation was made available and systematically put to use.

The sacrament of confirmation was only instituted when and where a regular clerical establishment could rely on records and dispose enough personnel. This meant that during the early years of itinerant mission Indians were seldom confirmed. Of the Franciscans only Fr. Motolinia was given authority to celebrate confirmation. With the coming of Bishop Zumarraga, episcopal confirmation was instituted.²²

The introduction of the sacrament of marriage involved a major modification of the cultural patterns of the Indians: the change from plural marriage to monogamy. Regarding this sacrament there developed two outstanding policies: (1) the Church was never to waver in rejecting the legality of plural marriage and requiring celebration of the sacrament in church; (2) the most disturbing bar to the consolidation of this program proved to be the poor example of the many Spaniards who were most lax in observing the injunctions of their own faith.²³

Confession was a sacrament which had some precedent in Indian tradition. The readiness with which new converts streamed to confession and fulfilled their penances delighted all missionaries. But these reactions to the sacrament mainly show the desperate need for religious guidance in each decision of Indian life. The unaccustomed freedom from the dread power of offended idols was translated into eagerness to increase participation in all clerical rites. In the early days, ardent converts, trying to please the friars, confessed as often and as much as possible, including other people's sins, making up some of their own. One outstanding effect of conversion in the early days can be traced to the general failure to instruct the Indian in the broader context and intent of the confession. The Indians slipped readily into a completely external view of the moral life and came to depend upon the priest as the absolute arbiter of their conduct.²⁴ The Indians were thus prevented from assuming greater responsibility for the motivation of their own actions and postponed their merging with the adult Catholic world.

This disability was kept in mind when the Indians were generally barred from participation in communion. Indians were deemed so recently weaned from the practice of human sacrifice that the miracle of transubstantiation appeared too difficult to be explained to them. To expose the body and the blood of Christ to pagan misunderstanding was thought to invite the risk of

²² Mendieta, *op. cit.*, 280.

²³ Apostolic council of Lorenzana, 1525, referred questions to Spain. For the Bull of Pope Paul III see Mendieta, *op. cit.*, 303.

²⁴ For the administration of confession, see P. M. Cuevas, *Historia de la Iglesia en Mexico*, 5 vols. (Tlalpam, Mexico, 1921-1928), II, 198.

deseccrating the most holy sacrament entrusted to the Church.

Extreme Unction was not administered to Indians for a number of reasons, both theological and practical: this sacrament was not considered "de necessitate salutis"; the requisite number of priests was lacking; proper appreciation of the meaning of the sacrament was deemed unlikely in most cases; and finally, the risk and trouble involved in carrying the Host to the home of the dying person seemed excessive. That there were remonstrances concerning the omission of this sacrament is evident from the fact that the Franciscan writers took pains to defend their case.

To sum up this section: in principle, if not in fact, the sacraments—excluding Holy Orders—were by profession of the Church available to all Indians. By contrast to the relative indifference of the natives to Christian theology and cosmology, their response to the sacramental system was lively. The intellectual needs of the converts could not compare to their craving for the practical guidance provided by the authoritarian priestly rules of earlier days. The sacramental scheme evidently hallowed the turning points of life, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Where indeed Aztec traditions did not conflict with dogma, they were permitted to remain as part of the popular cult.

In addition, finally, to sacrament and popular cult, the Indian came to draw from another source, not specifically religious in origin or character, the Spanish version of the feudal code which, often as not, came into conflict and competed with the Spanish ethic. The most characteristic case of adaptation was involved in the Spanish *pun-donor* or sense of *honor y fama* so strikingly illustrated in the following passage from the *Romance del frayle fingido*:

Las manchas del honor
se curan, limpian y asean
con sangre, que es el remedio
de mas importancia y fuerza.²⁵

Insofar as social traditions that developed among Indians did not interfere with dogma, the Church left well enough alone. The number of "costumbres entre ellos usados" was large and varied. Pre-Christian and non-Christian Spanish customs reached the Indian at the same time as rites of Catholic derivation. Habit and sentiment rather than reason dictated which customs underwent incorporation and assimilation.

III. *The Status of the Indian Convert*

The provision of the sacraments implied only a minor adjustment of Catholic practices to the situation in New Spain. However, a special status for the Indian within the Catholic fold began to emerge in connection with two matters of Church law: the administration of the sacrament of Holy Orders and fixing of the jurisdiction of the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

²⁵ Cited in Ludwig Pfandl, *Spanische Kultur und Sitte des XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1928), 78; see also Américo Castro, "Algunas observaciones acerca del concepto del honor en los siglos XVI y XVII," *Revista de Filología Española*, III (Madrid, 1912).

Holy Orders were reserved for the bishops and never allowed to be administered by the otherwise favored friars. Here was made one of the most crucial decisions affecting the eventual status of the Indian convert. In principle, Indians might qualify for elevations to the clergy. In fact, though often superior in training and dedication to Spanish candidates, the Indians were not admitted to clerical office. During the sixteenth century an occasional appointment for auxiliary posts—*doctrineros* and *donados*—was made, but the natives were never allowed to enjoy equality with Spaniards.²⁶ The arguments against Indian priests and friars were less theological than social and political in origin. It must be kept in mind that a Catholic priest of any race is as much a priest as one of any other race, entitled to minister to all Catholics. Formally, advancement in the ranks is based on merit and talent. To the Spanish conquistadores and settlers; however, the notion of subordination to Indian priests was totally unacceptable. Spanish clerics saw in the evident signs of Indian talent and capacity for ardor only a threat to their powers. The devotion of the Franciscans to proving the fitness of the Indians helped give the issue the color of a challenge.

Nor was there lacking fear of a native church, with native priests ministering to their own people. Nothing seemed greater folly to the new Spanish rulers than to entrust the natives with the administration of the new faith. That way lay disaffection and heresy.

It is clear, therefore, that a long-range possibility, a distinctive *Ecclesia Indiana*, a member-church in the Catholic commonwealth, was sacrificed to a short-range interest, the appeasement of the settlers and Spanish clergy. Possibly it was hoped in some quarters that in time the Indians would become more acceptable to the Spaniards and that time was a better argument than force.²⁷ In the case of Indian status, however, time worked to the disadvantage of the natives.

The removal of Indians from the jurisdiction of the Holy Office was a gradual process. At first, Indian cases were brought before various courts of the Holy Office and were treated in the same manner as Spanish ones. Not only the most serious Indian crimes, idolatry and preaching against the faith, but blasphemy and violation of the marriage sacrament were presented before the influential Tribunals.²⁸ The most famous cases were the series in Yucatan under Bishop Diego de Landa. These had as their victims exclusively *caciques* and chiefs who received severe sentences ranging from burning, to exile, whipping, fines, and personal servitude. Some of the

²⁶ *Código Franciscano*, 97; Mendieta, *op. cit.*, 444; Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Biografía de Don Fray Juan Zumarraga primer obispo y arzobispo de Mejico* (Madrid, 1929), 154; the king prohibited the founding of a monastery for Indians.

²⁷ J. G. Icazbalceta, *Zumarraga*, 156, quotes Viceroy Mendoza to this effect.

²⁸ *Archivo General y Público de la Nación* (Mexico, 1910 . . .), vols. 1-3, for a list and text of early cases. Toribio Medina, *La Primitiva Inquisición en América, 1493-1596* (Santiago de Chile, 1914).

sentences were later lightened on review by Bishop Landa.²⁹ The trial of Don Carlos, *cacique* de Tezcoco, condemned to burn in 1539, was the most celebrated Indian case.³⁰ Reports of it appraised the crown of the harshness with which European standards were applied to recent converts. As this procedure seemed unjustifiable, Indians were withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the Holy Office after 1575, at first gradually, and then completely. Power to hear Indian cases "con mayor benignidad y clemencia" was, however, reserved to the bishops.

These decisions to protect the Indian worked to reinforce the double-standard of responsibility for Indians and Spaniards. The Indian was not deemed to be as fit as a Spaniard to be a custodian of souls, whether his own or that of another. The non-acceptance of Indians into the society of ministers and servants of God was hardly compensated by the partial exemptions of Indians from tithes, since labor was exacted from the Indians in any case. In brief: the problem of status was "solved" by making the Indian the "ward of the Spaniard."³¹

The degree of the Indians' dependence was subject to continuous discussion throughout the sixteenth century. Those who favored the utmost freedom of the Indians and those who demanded perfect orthodoxy and full control lived and worked side by side. The main stages in the evolution of the struggle over Indian status can be sketched. The enthusiasm and sympathy of the first missionaries, their sympathy for the Indians, was never again reached by a majority of clergy. As the social and political aim of colonial administrators was the effective control and exploitation of subject peoples, the Church, as a whole, adjusted itself to the fact of the Indians' inferior status. The experiment of higher schooling for natives as at Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco, for instance, was allowed to founder. The need for books written in the native languages went unheeded. For fear of stimulating heresy, important studies of Indian antiquities as well as translations of lives of Saints into Indian languages were left unpublished. The neglected works included Sahagún's masterpiece.³²

Toward the end of the sixteenth century the status of the Indian convert had been essentially fixed. The Church accepted responsibility for the salvation of each Indian and acknowledged his soul as equal to that of other Catholics in the eyes of God. Within colonial society as a whole, however,

²⁹ Diego de Landa, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan*, ed. Alfred M. Tozzer. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (Cambridge, 1941); France V. Scholes and Ralph L. Roys, "Fray Diego de Landa and the problem of idolatry in Yucatan." Reprint, *Cooperative Research* (Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1938), 585-620.

³⁰ *Proceso Inquisitorial del cacique de Tetzco*, ed. E. Gomez de la Puente (Mexico, 1910). Publicaciones de la comision reorganizadora del Archivo General y Público de la Nación, I, 12, passim.

³¹ Herbert F. Priestley, *The Mexican Nation* (New York, 1923), 120.

³² R. Ricard, *op. cit.*, 65, gives a list of works; 68, on crown policy.

the Indians of New Spain had been assigned the inferior status of wards under guardianship.

IV. *The Effect and the Extent of the Conversion*

We must now return to our original point of departure: How appraise the results of the spiritual clash between Spanish Catholic and Aztec cultures in the New World? It is still too early to strike a final balance of this encounter. Many corners of the field have still to be ploughed by scholarly methods of research. The following remarks, arranged along the lines of our outline, suggest themselves by way of an interim summary:

Underlying all developments—whether in the areas of creed, cult, or social structure—is a fact one forgets at one's peril. The conquistadores, colonists, and missionaries were a mixed lot with mixed motives. Conversion was neither the only, nor even the primary, aim of all of them. For some, the best of the missionaries, the conquest was instrumental to conversion; for others, the conquistadores, colonists, and not a few priests, conversion was instrumental to conquest.

Missionary and conquistador alike, however different their reasons, both wished the end of the Aztec's complex pattern of creed and deed. However noble the motives of individuals, neither group could with practical consistency stop to consider the meaning or merging of Aztec faith and folkways. The missionary hastened to win the Aztec's soul for Christ; the conquistador claimed his body for Spain. The effect of their contradictory aims has determined the pattern of Mexican life to this day.

It needs to be remarked that the conversion of the Indians occurred without a loss of belief in a religious orientation. To the contrary, the fervor of their faith was readily directed to the new creed, cult, and spiritual directors. Whenever Indians were approached by missionaries, they made—after the initial resistance of their priests and chiefs—no objection to the dogma of God's unity, the need for the salvation of the soul, and the efficacy of the sacraments administered by the clergy. If their understanding of the depths and subtleties of these doctrines lagged behind their will to believe, it is not because of the inertia of their habits or the torpor of their minds induced by alleged racial inferiority; it was because of two reasons: (A) proper schooling was denied them by their conquerors; (B) more imperative than the complexities of doctrine was their need to find surrogates in the new faith for the pieties which had directed their actions and anchored their ways of life.

The *credenda*—what they were required to believe—of the new faith were not nearly so important to the Indian as the *agenda*—what they needed to do, the prescriptions for conduct. In this sphere, conversion proved a frightening solvent of the fabric of tribal life, the loss of familiar folk traditions and acknowledged pieties. The Aztec might readily accept the call to Christ, but how was he to know what Christ wanted done, or how men might follow in His way in the numberless transactions of life, from birth to death?

The Aztec may well have been as perplexed about the *agenda* of the new Gospel as were those Jews who wished to cleave to Christ but could not find in His Will a law as clear as that of the Law of Moses. With some modification, an Aztec might have found his feelings echoed in the pleas of the Hebrew friend of Christ:

For the Law of Moses touched the life of man, as it were, in certain points; as for example in sacrifices and feasts, purifications and sabbaths, and in the obeying of the ten commandments: but the Law of Christ covered the whole of the state of man, the thoughts as well as the deeds; even as encompassing as the air, which pierceth into every corner and cavern of the earth, wheresoever human life is. In fine, whereas the Law of Moses commanded us what we should do, the Law of Christ commands what we should be.³³

Among the Aztecs, the social unit, the family and tribe, had been the vehicle and repository of destiny. Everyone was born into a "web of life," rooted in tradition, slow to change, and clearly motivated in action. In Christianity, the individual was the unit. It was the freedom of the individual soul and not family solidarity which was paramount. While the Christian creed must have been satisfying to Indians able to comprehend it, the Christian way of life set the earliest converts upon a lonely road. Aztec ritual had dealt most elaborately with war, tribal destiny (political action), agriculture, and trade. The Christian Indian found no significant sanction of this once vital content of his life, nor was the conquered subject permitted a political life of any scope. He was not allowed to make war, and agricultural production or manual labor, which were his lot after the conquest, were no longer looked upon as community enterprises but as low callings. In the early years of the conquest the basic patterns of native social life failed to be embraced within the new cult. Only later, after the ruin of the Indian upper classes, did there emerge a religious community life attuned to the changes of the seasons as in the *fiestas* and *cofradías*.

Spain's prime concern after the military conquest was the molding of the new colonial society in the image of her own traditions. When the missionary and the conquistador clashed over the ways in which this enterprise could be best fulfilled, the loser was generally the Indian over whom they quarreled. In the words of a mid-century viceroy of Peru, before the Indians could become Christians, they had to become men, that is, Spaniards and Catholics.

³³ Philoeristus, *Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord* (London, 1878), 108. *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento conquista y colonización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de América y Oceanía*, 42 vols. (Madrid, 1864-84), II, 57, contains an Indian answer to the question why Indians now lie so frequently, more than under the old regime: "If you ask why now, under the law of God, there is more drunkenness and other vices than in the time of infidelity . . . he will reply that (in former times) no one did his own free will, but what he was ordered to do, and that now our great liberty has done us harm, for we are obliged to fear and respect no one"

A Spanish Catholic, however, could be either a missionary or a conqueror, and confronted with that contradiction of behavior under the same ethic the Indian could not but be estranged. The violation of Catholic dogma by Spaniards undermined the very word of the new God among Indians. This was repeatedly expressed in the Inquisition proceedings of Don Carlos, the *cacique* from Tezcoco, who blamed his relapse on the bad example set by some members of the Spanish clergy and the crimes of the laity. Spaniards, on the other hand, from Mendieta to Cuevas, professed to see in the survival of any virtue in the midst of the temptations of the conquest, proof of God's inexhaustible mercy.

Conversion in the true sense of a valid assumption of a creed and modes of conduct based upon it could seldom be sustained in original purity. The early Franciscan missionaries, exceptional and dedicated men, had had the good fortune to see much of Aztec civilization still intact. Later missionaries, arriving after the wreckage of the conquest, had a hard time reminding themselves that the Indian was a man of a strange culture and not a natural slave. Once the work was left to lesser men, and Indian leaders were no longer allowed to survive, the races, or rather the classes drifted apart.

After the middle of the sixteenth century the solidification of colonial life and accumulation of precedent had hardened the arteries of Spanish spiritual enterprise. As a consequence of the disruption of native leadership and decimation of Indian population, the patterns of social stratification had become fixed.³⁴ In the true sense the Christianization of New Spain was not accomplished by conversion but through the emergence, two generations after the conquest, of a Catholic *Mestizo* culture where Spanish government had taken hold.

There is a broader background, omitted thus far, against which this experience of conversion and conquest needs to be seen in any final reckoning. Along with the evangelical fervor of theologians and missionaries, there went a Spanish reaction to the challenge of Protestantism, the power of the Council of Trent, and the Hispanic sense of imperial destiny. The Spanish Catholic was a soldier under the banners of King and Pope, watchful of the orthodox creed. Innovations in matters of faith and disaffection in government were equally abhorrent to both missionary and colonist. No Spaniard was willing to risk the perils of heresy or religious separatism. In this ambivalent way the spirit of the Counter-Reformation progressively triumphed over the primitive Christian notion of spiritual liberty in all Spanish colonies.

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³⁴ Charles Gibson, *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1952), 410, notes the changes and problems of the first generation succeeding the conquest.