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## Natives' Conversion to Christianity

### *Introduction*

Beginning in the late 15th century, history records an ongoing and dramatic process. As Europeans made their way to their Americas, exploration was greatly overshadowed by different agendas. The English, French, and Spanish who would come to claim for their home nations vast territories in North and South America were primarily interested in gain. Reflecting the conflicts long in place in Europe, each nation seized upon the Americas as an opportunity to expand its presence, acquire wealth, and dominate its rivals on a broader scale. Spain in particular played an early and immense role here, focusing on South America and establishing a powerful presence very much oppressing, if not outright eliminating, the indigenous peoples they encountered. Within all of this existed another European motive, or what may be seen as a rationale for the occupation of the lands: conversion. In plain terms, the Spaniards could or would not consider allowing a non-Christian people to worship in ways alien to themselves. Introducing the Native populations to Christianity, then, was usually promoted as the “true” cause of the conquests, because this would bring the Natives to God and salvation. The ethics of such mandatory conversion aside, what occurred were long years marked by a wide range of consequences. Natives who resisted Christianity faced torture and death, some tribes adopted Christian practices as a means for survival, and others actually accepted the new faith and/or incorporated it into their own belief systems. At the same time, the coercion factor itself defies the real meaning of

Christianity, and the successes of some conversions cannot excuse this process, or the suffering inflicted on many Natives in the name of Christianity. Ultimately, when the Natives of the Americas underwent the various processes of conversion to Christianity mandated by the Spanish, Christianity itself suffered, no matter how many were genuinely brought to the faith.

### *Discussion*

As noted, the European influences and inroads in the New World of the Americas was by no means limited to the Spanish. As England, France, and Spain competed for dominance in Europe, this conflict was expanded through exploration, and it was not long before all these major powers were determined to establish strong presences across the ocean, and thus generate income and whole populations of new citizens. The Spanish conquest of the Americas, however, and particularly in regard to South America, was done both earlier and on a greater scale. Since the Christian reconquest of Iberia in 1492, the kings of Spain had an overriding ambition: to extend the empire as deeply into the New World as possible. Moreover, and the actual motivation of it notwithstanding, Spain insisted on converting all peoples encountered to Catholicism as a primary point of any occupation (Hefner 129). The English wanted the land and viewed the indigenous populations as “being in the way.” The French took a more commercial approach; they were often brutal in their treatment of North American tribes, but they were nonetheless interested in securing them as trading partners (NAN). Spain was very much after wealth and land as well, but only Spain carried with it this imperative to “enlighten” the Natives. For the Spaniards undertaking the conquests, it was urgent that the Catholic faith be as expanded as the empire itself, and largely because Spain viewed the two as one and the same. Put another way, for the Spanish to truly claim the Native lands and people, Catholicism was essential and all must be completely brought to the faith.

The first Spanish ships came to the Americas in 1514, and triggered events that would go on for centuries and involve complex rivalries, exterminations, battles, and sometimes cooperation. When the Spanish conquest of South America, as well as the Southern parts of North America then seen as belonging to the continent, are viewed broadly, the actions were catastrophic in many ways. Even as the Spaniards insisted on converting Natives to the Catholic faith, they did not fail to use brutal force whenever it was seen as necessary, just as their sheer presences created deadly dangers for natives: “Countless Indians lost their lives through slaughter, mass suicides, and European diseases” (Giles). It is noted as well that, and not unexpectedly, the savagery of the Spanish in mandating conversion created resistance likely not in place if other means had been used. Vast documentation exists supporting that many Native tribe leaders expressed interest in the new faith. However, if they and their people did not immediately accept Catholicism as the true religion, they faced torture used to bring them to acceptance: “In many instances, the conquistadores employed violence to force natives to accept baptism” (Giles).

When a more specific approach is taken to the Spanish conquest, however, the interactions between the parties reveal the many elements coming together, often colliding violently, and sometimes even going to cooperation. To begin with, it is important to recognize that, for the Spaniards, commercial interests and conquest were synonymous with conversion. The first Spanish fleets sent to occupy the New World were equipped with missionaries as well as soldiers, and of four kinds of religious orders: Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, and Jesuit. All missionaries understood that they had one single purpose: bring the Natives to embracing the Catholic faith. At the same time, the missionaries were also instructed to do far more than teach Christianity; that is, as they engaged in converting, they were to also organize the Natives into

workforces serving Spanish interests, in farming and mining. The mining was of particular importance to Spain, which had ambitions for vast wealth in silver from South America. These plans for the missionaries were, moreover, drawn out very specifically. The missionaries were granted subsidies by the Spanish Crown and the Native tribes they converted, to labor and to Catholicism, were exempt from paying taxes to Spain until they were “economically viable units” (Hefner 129). If these processes, then, were not forms of conquest by military force, they were just as strongly in place. Then, the missionaries of all Orders knew that they could rely on Spanish troops if needed, to settle unrest.

The Native conversion to Catholicism by the Spanish, however, was complicated by the inevitable factors of changing rulers in Spain and Europe, and by the actual circumstances of each tribe or territory. Eight years before the Aztecs would be conquered by the Spanish, the king issued a general proclamation meant to address all Native populations, which he perceived to be the subjects of Spain: “In 1513, King Ferdinand told the Native Americans that God had declared that the Pope rules all people, regardless of their law, sect, or belief” (NAN). The edict goes on to express that, while Spain and the pope pray that the Natives will gladly accept the true religion, force will be used as necessary. This edict translated to what may be termed “Spanish policy”; as Spaniards came to Native settlements, they would read to them the “Requirement.” This was a statement expressing the history and truth of the world from the Catholic viewpoint, and demanding that all agree to its truth and become servants of the Christian God and the Spanish Crown. That Natives could not understand Latin or Spanish was not considered important. Moreover, the missionaries were also given to understand that the Natives were not merely ignorant of Christianity, but were devoted to evil forms of worship. All of this was seen by Spain as supporting its right, as stated in Ferdinand's Requirement, to exact extreme brutality

on any who did not comply (NAN). No matter the relatively cooperative forms Christian conversion took, then, it is inescapable that a grave ultimatum existed no matter the Native response. When the core of Christianity is recognized, then, conversion based upon any such threat defies the essence of the faith itself.

It is also important to note, certainly, that not all Spanish conversion was brutal. Records support that many missionaries devoutly believed in bringing Christianity to the Natives in a “Christian” way. The Peruvian Incas perceived Christian baptism as surrender to the invading force, a view certainly validated by the Spanish threats and/or abuse. At the same time, there is widespread evidence of Native populations responding with interest and friendship when conversion was presented in non-violent ways. As noted, many missionaries were determined to show charity and kindness to the Natives because they correctly believed that this would win over far more converts than force. To that end, they respected Native ways and worked with the people, generating trust and mutual respect. One Jesuit missionary's letter tells of true cooperation between his Order and the natives of what would become Brazil: ““From far away, they [the Indians] send requests for priests to indoctrinate them because they want friendship with Christians and to change their habits for ours”” (Giles). There were also other reasons going to Natives accepting Christianity without force. For some, force itself was the motivation because the power of Spain revealed that the Spanish “God” was more powerful than their own. Then, it is documented that genuine welcomes were sometimes given to the Spaniards for internal reasons. Prince Ixtlilxochitl, representing the people of Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, gave a friendly reception to Cortes and his troops because the city had long resented the domination of the Aztecs. In Cortes, Spain, and Christianity, the prince saw a means of freeing his people from that rule, and he honored Cortes. He also begged to be indoctrinated in the

Catholic faith, and large numbers of the population followed suit (Giles). This clearly demonstrates that the experience of Christian conversion of the Natives took a variety of forms. At the same time, it is important to note that the faith itself was, in a sense, promoted for political reasons here, rather than for any true desire to understand and accept it.

Far more commonly, however, Native American conversion was a process marked by violence and gross injustice, even as many Spanish officers and missionaries objected to the practices and subjugation. They seem to have understood, as in the Jesuit letter, that Christianity is not served by oppression. Missionaries of the Dominican Order, moreover, became vocal in their feelings. As early as 1512, they were responsible for the king's issuing the Laws of Burgos, which was in place in regard to all Spanish holdings and conquests in the New World. These Spanish monks had witnessed unspeakable practices of the Spaniard troops and officers. Given, again, that the conversion to Catholicism was inextricably tied to commercial interests, the Spanish essentially turned entire Native populations into slave colonies. When a Spanish officer was granted land, for example, the Natives working it also belonged to him. This was the serfdom variation of slavery, but no less severe. It was the state of *encomienda*, translating to the lives and work of Natives as being given as rewards to Spaniards serving the Crown well (Seaman 213). The state was technically structured so that Natives could work the lands and mines for themselves and serve the Spaniards only partially, but the system soon devolved into outright exploitation. Ironically, the *encomienda* required that the Spanish offer religious instruction to the Natives, but this was largely ignored. What took its place was a greater demand for labor and brutal treatment, and it is widely documented that many Spaniards tortured, raped, and beat the Natives in their care. Even missionaries were reported as engaging in the same behaviors (Seaman 213). All of this then led to the Dominican insistence on change, which

brought about the Laws of Burgos. While not allowing Natives real freedom, the Laws nonetheless ordered that all Natives be provided with basic needs, humane treatment, and proper training in Christianity.

Unfortunately, the Laws had little impact, if any. Spain had in fact essentially enabled a feudal system far from its base of power, and the Spaniards followed no authority beyond their own borders in the New World. The brutality and exploitation continued, and the disregard of the Natives was such that whole tribes were decimated. The Tainos people of Hispaniola, for example, were actually driven to extinction (Seaman 213). Some years later, Friar Bartolome de Las Casas made a powerful objection to Spain regarding the ongoing abuses. He was opposed by the leading Spanish humanist of the era, Juan Gines de Sepulveda, who argued that the superiority of the Catholic faith was such that the Natives deserved no better (Seaman 214). Moreover, the Spanish Crown widely circulated de Sepulveda's thinking and engaged in a campaign to discredit de Las Casas and his ideas that Christianity demanded kindness and respect for all people (NAN). It then becomes clear that a conversion was long in place, and involving many lands, in which Christianity was largely perverted to serve interests far removed from Christian principles. Some Natives accepted the faith, and not all because of political motivations. Then, there were certainly missionaries and other Spaniards who represented Christian morality correctly. By and large, however, conversion was a grossly unjust and often devastating process by which the Spanish, both assured of their right to dominate and the inherent inferiority of the Natives, employed religion to consolidate power and horrifically oppress and abuse vast Native populations.

### *Conclusion*

It is inevitably difficult to define how a process occurs when that process is as far-

reaching and complex as the Spanish conversion of Native Americans to Christianity. History in fact records cases of Natives as genuinely interested in the faith, and seeking to learn it.

Similarly, there is evidence of Spanish decency in the form of missionaries determined to adhere to real Christian ethics, and bring the faith through gentleness, rather than oppression. The far greater reality, however, is that Natives resisted Catholicism, and for the logical reason that it came as part of a vastly destructive and brutal regime. This being the case, it is arguable that no Spanish conversion was successful because it was based upon force, and this blatantly contradicts the tenets of the faith. When people are literally given no choice but to accept a religion, the religion becomes meaningless, and this is the tragic legacy of Spain and the Americas. In the final analysis, Christianity itself suffered when the Natives of the Americas underwent the various processes of conversion to Christianity mandated by the Spanish, and this is true no matter how many were correctly brought to the faith.

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