

THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE: AN OVERVIEW

One of the first things that strikes the researcher into Iberian missionary activity in the New World is the sheer magnitude of the task. That two relatively small nations, more or less on the periphery of Europe, could have done so much over such a large area in a relatively short space of time is nothing less than astounding.

This magnitude arose first from geography. For the Spanish this meant an empire that by the end of the sixteenth century stretched from Zacatecas, some 150 miles north of Mexico City, down to the tip of Argentina. By the eighteenth century the northern boundary had been pushed north of San Francisco and well into Texas. By any standard, the distances that had to be traversed were awesome. By the standards of the time they would appear to have been almost insurmountable.

A second major difficulty in the earliest years of both colonization and evangelization was that there were no traditional or established policies to draw from. Both church and state had to grope toward tactics, processes, and structures that would meet their needs in the New World. When Columbus met Ferdinand and Isabella at Barcelona on his return from his first voyage, no one had any idea what the extent of the new empire would become. Nor was any thought given, beyond immediate needs, to long-range plans for administration and bureaucracy. As a result both Spanish and Portuguese government of the newly conquered lands was improvisatory. Although improvisation prevailed briefly, both nations soon came to have a rational and relatively effective colonial administration that, for all its defects, kept their empires together until the nineteenth century. This is all the more remarkable in that for the first century and a half it was done without the benefit of standing armies.

Improvisation also characterized the first missionary undertakings. The New World was the Catholic Church's first great experience in mission work since

the conversion of the Slavic peoples half a millennium before. There was relatively little background to draw on, few models to be copied. Again, within a relatively short space of time, the basic missionary program became well defined. In the Spanish dominions this definition came about in New Spain, which was in a real sense the proving ground for missionary methods.

Another factor, one that is perhaps not sufficiently treated in most histories of New World missions, was the crushing financial cost of founding and supporting missions and missionaries. An undertaking so vast required a sound financial base, which only the monarchs could provide. That such a base was established and even proved adequate is one of the wonders of the entire enterprise, all the more so in view of the precarious nature of the Spanish economy in the colonial period. In Spain financial support inevitably became part of the patronato, especially when the crown gained the right to collect tithes. These were redonated to the church according to a complex formula. In addition, however, there were individual grants, called *mercedes*, which were made in response to petitions from monasteries, churches, hospitals, convents, and other religious groups. In Brazil, in a special way, the challenge of supporting the missions and their institutions led to the involvement of the religious in commercial enterprises, such as sugar plantations. A similar process occurred among the Jesuits in New Spain. In exchange for the security and support given by the state, however, the Church gave up its freedom. The domination of the Spanish crown over the Church reached its climax under the Bourbons in the eighteenth century. In Brazil the domination was not quite so total, and there were missionaries whose primary accountability was to Rome, not to Lisbon.

The complexity of the task was aggravated by the bewildering variety of peoples and languages that were encountered: the misnamed Digger Indians of California, the sedentary and agricultural Pueblo peoples, the warlike Apaches and Yaqui, the high civilizations of central Mexico, the stubbornly resistant Mayas of southern Mexico and Guatemala, the centralized and hierarchical empire of the Incas, the formidable Guaraní of Paraguay, and the all-but-unconquerable Araucanians of Chile. These peoples had to be approached in their own languages and with at least a minimal concept of their culture and beliefs. The task of translating Christian European concepts into totally alien tongues and cultures was itself daunting. Indian and European lived on different sides of a major cognitive and psychological chasm. On a superficial level the friars solved this problem by simply incorporating Spanish words, such as *dios*, *espíritu santo*, or *obispo*, into the native languages. At other times the missionaries adapted native terms to Christian usage, but the result was often confusing. Among many of the New World Indians, for example, the idea of sin as a personal, willful violation of a divine law that merited punishment was incomprehensible. Whereas the Europeans saw the concepts of order and chaos as antithetical, the Aztecs saw them as part of an ongoing dialectical process. This was not confined to the New World. In the late sixteenth century the

Jesuits in China were encountering the same difficulty, one that the institutional Church was unable to handle.

Present-day researchers are showing the impact that translation into a native language had on religious belief. The very fact of using a native word subtly altered the religious concept toward the outlook, mentality, and world-view of the natives themselves. In the case of New Spain this has been called the *nahuatilization* of Christianity. There is also the implication that the missionaries themselves were affected by these sometimes arcane changes. In the post-Vatican II Church the idea that the evangelizer is to some extent evangelized by those to whom he or she preaches has gained some currency. It seems also to be a valid criterion for measuring the success of the missionary enterprise in Ibero-America.

This gap in understanding between evangelizers and evangelized may have worked in the natives' favor. The latter appeared to have accepted Christianity in its fullness, yet it was often only a veneer. This may have prevented the missionaries from fully understanding the syncretic process whereby Christianity was being mingled with native beliefs and practices, or it may have given them an excessive optimism about the success of their efforts.

The principal agents for the missionary endeavor were the religious. In a special way this meant the Franciscans and Jesuits. Although many bishops were deeply involved in missions and dedicated to their spread, the diocesan clergy as a whole were not, except in parts of Brazil. They belonged to an ecclesiastical system that was essentially postmissionary and presupposed a high degree of structure. The expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish and Portuguese domains in the eighteenth century and their subsequent suppression was a devastating blow to mission work in the New World.

By the end of the sixteenth century both the Spanish and the Portuguese had developed similar missionary approaches. Whether called *aldeias*, *reductions*, *doctrinas*, *presidio/missions*, or *congregación*, the method required the gathering of the natives, especially those living in small villages or as nomads, into larger and more stable units. In these villages the Indians led a semicomunal existence, learned catechism and European ways, were taught skills and crafts, and were separated both from their pagan brethren and from the corrupting influence of the white man.

The system adopted by both nations required a military presence. Attempts to evangelize hostile Indians without military protection usually ended in martyrdom for the missionaries. This system of *presidios* was first used on the Chichimeca frontier of New Spain in the late sixteenth century. Usually the garrisons were small, partly because of the financial outlay involved. The presence of the soldiers was a mixed blessing. While it kept the missionaries alive to pursue their work, it also brought the Indians into contact with some of the most corrupting and brutal elements in the Spanish world. Missions were outposts of empire, just as the *presidio* was the help of the mission. Missions

and empire were inextricably intertwined, just as were church and state in Spanish society.

In the Spanish dependencies the regalism of the *patronato* and the vague and overlapping jurisdictions favored by the Habsburgs as a form of checks and balances on local officials also worked against the missionary endeavor. Persistent conflicts between civil and religious authorities were standard throughout the colonial period. Archbishops and viceroys were natural enemies and rarely worked together in harmony. This was intensified by the factionalism characteristic of Spanish politics and by the excessive sense of personal honor and prestige on the part of all those involved. Far too much energy, time, and work went into these vendettas, to the detriment of the higher work of evangelization.

The very presence of the Spaniard and the Portuguese worked against the missions. The general concept embraced by the mendicants, that contact with the European could only harm the native, was based on fact. Slave-raiding expeditions, incursions for the sake of conquest, labor exploitation, biological contamination, all of these things that were associated with the European turned the natives away from Christianity. It was exemplified in an appalling way by the Mexican Indian who said that he did not want to go to heaven if there were going to be Spaniards there.

In recent times, in part as a response to the beatification of Junípero Serra, this mission method had come under heavy criticism. It has been accused of uprooting native cultures and exposing the natives to European diseases. It has been seen as exploitive in its work demands and cruel in the punishments inflicted on the natives. From the overly romantic view of the missions and reductions that prevailed in times past, the pendulum has swung toward condemnation.

Many of these criticisms are valid. Europeans of the colonial period were unaware of the impact of culture shock. This did not come just from the uprooting of the mission/reduction system. The impact of a jolting removal from a familiar life, language, religion, and society, especially one that was secure and harmonious, caused immense harm. In the sixteenth century, as in the twentieth, conquest by an alien power was traumatic. In New Spain, among a people whose prehispanic laws punished drunkenness, alcoholism became rampant. They were, as Charles Gibson observed about the Aztecs after the conquest, living a life deficient in social controls.¹

Similarly, one purpose of the missions was ultimately to integrate the natives into European society. This was based on an assumption of the superiority of that society and the need for the natives to enter it. Until that happy day arrived, they were regarded as minors, wards of the crown, under the tutelage of the missionaries. All these systems were halfway houses to a new way of life. A number of factors, including the suppression of the Jesuits, made that goal unattainable. Whether it would ever have been attained is debatable.

In the mission situation the Indians had both private property and a certain level of self-government. Their languages and a vestige of their culture, often syncretistic, survived. The Indians also developed defensive techniques. Often, as in Peru, it was simply getting away from the European. Sometimes it was military resistance, as in Colombia and Chile. At other times it took the form of syncretism, combining the old and the new. Passive resistance and passive-aggressive techniques were also employed. In sixteenth-century New Spain the natives quickly came to appreciate the complexities of Spanish law and manipulated it in their own favor. They were a highly litigious people and were often quite successful in their use of the courts. Contemporary research, using records in the native languages, tends to corroborate the picture of the natives as highly adaptable in their response to subjugation.

The idea of separating the Indian from the European while at the same time seeking to integrate the former into the latter's way of life seems paradoxical and even intrinsically contradictory. And perhaps it was ultimately doomed to failure. It should be noted, however, that whatever the excesses or failures of the mission system, the Indians' situation was vastly better in the missions than it was after the missions disappeared. The expulsion of the Jesuits and the secularization of the California missions left the natives at the mercy of racist and hostile societies: Spanish in South America, American in the United States. For at least part of their history, they were protected.

This leads also to the question of the use of force, physical or psychological, in the process of conversion—an area that still needs further study. There were numerous complaints, for example, that even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Franciscans of New Spain still maintained jails and stocks for the natives. As late as 1688 it was still customary in New Spain to give the natives five or six blows with a stick when they were late for services or instruction. Certainly this view of punishment and force, a heritage of the reconquista, fitted in with the mentality of the times. There were unabashed apologists for it, such as Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who held that the words in Luke's gospel, "force them to come in" (14:24), applied to the Indians and Christianity. The very Latin words *compelle intrare* came to be a code term for some sort of compulsion. This idea was bolstered by the weighty authority of Saint Augustine of Hippo, who had interpreted this passage as supporting the use of compulsion in some circumstances. A sixteenth-century Jesuit, Alonso Sánchez, became one of the leading proponents of the proposition that Christianity could come to the New World only through Spanish domination. He extended this claim to saying that China would be christianized only through force of arms, an idea vehemently opposed by his fellow Jesuit José de Acosta. The very policy of relocating natives into large groupings (*congregación*, *aldeamento*) was a form of force. The presence of an armed conqueror who overthrew idols and of *encomenderos* who endowed churches was also a potent form of intimidation. It can be and has been argued that it is unfair to judge the

mentality of the sixteenth century by that of a later, supposedly more enlightened one. This is not entirely applicable to the present question since the long-standing tradition of the Church and a basic theological principle was that faith had to be accepted freely. Many churchmen and missionaries in the New World lost sight of that principle. This was often the result of frustration when gentler methods proved ineffective. In a human way the missionaries blamed their ineffectiveness on the flaws of the natives, shortcomings that needed a firm and authoritarian hand for correction.

The mission situation undoubtedly gave some of the missionaries a taste for power over the docile natives. The accusations of excessive corporal punishment go back to the earliest days of the enterprise and continue down to the nineteenth century. This is a dark, negative thread that runs through mission history. It cannot be denied, but it also must not be exaggerated. The Jesuit reductions, for example, were characterized on the whole by a mild administration.

Against this must be balanced the fervent dedication of the missionaries to their task. The cost of the mission work was not just financial, it was also personal. The number of missionaries who lost their lives in the course of their work cannot be known for sure, but it was exceedingly large. The missionaries endured their own form of culture shock, going into totally foreign circumstances, harsh climates, adjusting to new food, and enduring disease.

As the quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage approaches, more and more voices are using the word *genocide* to describe the European impact on the Western Hemisphere. In truth, the long-range effect was dreadful. Demographic studies have convincingly shown a catastrophic decline in the native populations of the New World. The primary agent of this destruction was the bacterium and the virus. The natives fell in vast number before the onslaught of European diseases—smallpox, typhus, influenza, measles—for which they had no immunological protection. Thousands of years of separation had left them vulnerable, a situation that also occurred in Polynesia. Aggravating this was labor exploitation, culture shock, alcoholism, and despair. The disappearance of the natives of the Caribbean region bears tragic witness to this blot on the Spanish escutcheon.

But is it correct to use the word *genocide*? As elaborated in this century, the term applies to a calculated, deliberate extermination of an entire identifiable people for racial or other reasons. Despite the dreadful consequences of the European invasion of Latin America, there was never any planned or calculated desire to destroy the people as such. After the calamitous mistakes made in the Caribbean, the Spanish colonials realized that the Indian was the basis of their prosperity. Self-interest alone demanded that the Indian be preserved, if not necessarily treated well. There are other terms to describe what happened in the Western Hemisphere, but *genocide* is not one of them. It is a good propaganda term in an age when slogans and shouting have replaced reflection

and learning, but to use it in this context is to cheapen both the word itself and the appalling experiences of Jews and Armenians, to mention but two of the major victims of this century.

The Spanish, and to a lesser extent the Portuguese, were unique among all colonizing and imperialistic peoples in having a formidable movement in favor of the oppressed natives. Unlike the British, and later the Germans and Dutch, the Iberian nations had an institutionalized conscience in the form of a church that had a clearly defined place in society. In addition, Spain enjoyed a rather wide freedom of speech and protest. Clerics, officials, and private citizens wrote to the king (through the Council of the Indies, of course) with amazing frequency. Their letters were noted and evaluated with bureaucratic thoroughness. It is this thoroughness, together with an efficient archival system, that enables us today to reconstruct the great humanitarian movement of the sixteenth century.

The pro-Indian lobby was never an organized, clearly defined group. Some of the protagonists, like Motolinía and Las Casas, were hostile to each other. There were varying opinions about the Indian and how he should be helped. Motolinía and Zumárraga upheld the basic justice of Spanish rule, while Las Casas, toward the end of his life, believed that the Spanish were bound to full restitution, including all the conquered lands themselves. Some held a patronizing view of the Indian, while others exalted him in the best "noble savage" tradition. More important than the differences, however, is the fact that the movement on the whole had an impact, despite setbacks, failures, and the omnipresent "American reality," that is the *de facto* situation that laws and theories could never entirely affect. The frenzied reactions of the colonials demonstrate that quite clearly. Las Casas's missionary experiments failed in the short term but today can be seen as pioneering and farsighted. The New Laws of 1542 were a baffling combination of idealism, practical politics, and centralized government. The fact that many of their specific provisions were quickly repealed does not lessen their impact, for the crown was able to maintain the principle that the *encomienda* would not create a New World nobility. The Valladolid dispute, despite its disappointing outcome, is remarkable for ever having taken place at all. There is nothing comparable in the history of any other nation. The efforts of the third Mexican Provincial Council of 1585 to lessen the exploitation of Indians in the forced labor service (*repartimiento*) and the textile sweatshops (*obrajes*), together with their fiery condemnation of war against the Chichimeca Indians, are high points in Spanish rule of the Indies. It is essential to remember that Anglo-America never produced a single figure comparable to the great Spanish defenders of the Indians of the sixteenth century or to Antônio Vieira in the seventeenth. Helen Hunt Jackson scarcely belongs in their company.

Because of these efforts, the natives under Spanish rule were surrounded with a network of protective legislation. It is unwise, as many historians insist, to believe that the existence of laws guaranteed good treatment of the Indians who lived thousands of miles from the lawgivers. Still, the very existence of the

laws gave both the pro-Indian agitators and the natives themselves a weapon with which to fight oppression. In the history of Mexico these laws were not removed by a conservative, clerical, or colonial government but by the liberal republic of the nineteenth century. In a misguided, and ultimately disastrous, effort to remove the Indians from their minority status and make them equal, the republic left them defenseless before aggressive, liberal, nineteenth-century capitalism. In 1910, as Mexico prepared to celebrate the centenary of its first war of independence and unwittingly prepare for a new revolution, "the millions of rural Mexicans who found themselves in dying villages or subsisting as peones on the nation's haciendas were worse off financially than their rural ancestors a century before."²

How successful was the evangelization of the Iberian New World? Opinions vary widely. Some believe that it resulted in a deeply implanted Christianity that remains to this day. Others claim that Christianity was little more than a veneer over a fundamental paganism. A third opinion subscribes to syncretism, a combination of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and practices. The second opinion is given support by the pessimism that overtook many of the missionaries in the late sixteenth century. They found that in many cases Christianity was merely a veneer and that their peoples were still pagan at heart. This caused many of the friars to look back nostalgically to the early years as a golden age of missionary success.

Given the obstacles that were met and, with varying degrees of success overcome, it must be admitted that on the whole the Ibero-American missionary enterprise was a success. This statement, however, must be taken with great caution and many reservations. It does not mean that the resulting Christianity of the native peoples was all that the missionaries envisioned or that it fit neatly into Western European categories. Adaptation of the new to the old and various forms of syncretism were common ways of adjusting to a change in belief and moral systems. Christianity in the Americas was based on a late-medieval Iberian model and was filtered through the prism of various native American cultures and beliefs. Present-day research, especially that which deals with Aztec-language documents in New Spain, is revealing an unexpected resilience on the part of native cultures. The coping mechanisms of the Indians, especially their manipulation of the Spanish legal system, were stronger than had been previously thought.

Christianity in Ibero-America is in many ways a local and folk religion. It is deeply embedded in the local culture, with the result that its strength is as much cultural as it is religious. In some areas, such as Brazil, Haiti, the Maya country, and the Andean areas, the fusion is such that the old has dominated the new, and the result is neither Christian nor pre-Christian but a mixture of the two. Even where the Catholicism is more identifiable, it tends to be nonclerical, noninstitutional, and nonintellectual. The sacramental system is of less importance, or relevance, than in other Catholic communities. It is significant that sixteenth-century Nahua Indians in New Spain did not speak of

attending mass, but of seeing mass. At the heart of worship stands the *santo*, the local patron saint who is the center of grass-roots religious life. The *santo*, who in some places is identified with a prehispanic deity, is invoked for all needs, his image is a special blessing and is cared for zealously. The cult of the *santo* frees the individual and community from the control of the clergy and gives direct access to the divine.

Supreme among the *santos*, of course, is the Virgin Mary. She is the patroness par excellence, whether as Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico or the Virgin of Luján in Argentina. In traditional Spanish piety, the Virgin stood between an angry, judgmental Christ and an erring world. She embodied compassion, particularly toward the oppressed and suffering, and gave them hope, if not for this life, at least for the next. In some areas, for example, among the postconquest Mexica, she was for all practical purposes a female deity, the caring and nurturing mother goddess. In both Spain and the New World she was the center of innumerable apparition stories and legends, often for the purpose of giving supernatural approval to a specific shrine or church.

It has often been said that the missionaries deliberately substituted the cult of the Virgin and the saints for preconquest deities and in that way won the Indians to Christianity. That assertion cannot be accepted uncritically. Missionaries of the sixteenth century were highly critical of religious fusion. Their initial policy vis-à-vis native religions tended more toward obliteration than to substitution. In all probability, at some point in the process of evangelization, the clergy came to terms with this syncretism and accepted it, more or less grudgingly. Substitutions did take place, but it was not part of a deliberate missionary plan.

A striking characteristic of Latin American religious practice is a deep concern, almost an obsession, with suffering and death. Such an obsession can be found in preconquest thought, as among the Mexica. It also characterized much of Iberian spirituality, with its bloody crucifix, *memento mori*, physical mortification (also characteristic of preconquest native religions), and realization of the shortness and contingency of life. The realities of the conquest and postconquest life reinforced this for the natives. Life after death was often more real than life before death. Contemporary celebrations of All Souls Day, the Day of the Dead (*día de los muertos*), testifies to the ongoing strength of this preoccupation. Fatalism, an outlook common to both conquerors and conquered, came to characterize the overall view of life.

To what extent was the Church in the new world a wealthy church? Generalizations on this score are difficult and frequently clouded by prejudices and presuppositions. In general, the Church was a major landowner throughout the colonial period. Land was granted by the crown for religious purposes and often left as legacies by individuals. Cash donations for construction and maintenance came from the crown. Donations by individuals established chaplaincies with endowed sources of income. Endowments were also to be found for missions, as in the famous Pious Fund of the Californias. Convents and confraternities often

had a significant economic impact through investment in urban real estate and activities as moneylenders. Religious communities often rented their lands or buildings and used the resulting income for their works. The Jesuits were the leaders in entrepreneurial activity, though their corporate genius in that regard has perhaps been exaggerated. The reductions of Paraguay were economically self-sustaining and flourishing. The Jesuit haciendas and sugar plantations of New Spain, the latter often employing large numbers of black slaves, were among the most efficient of the colonial period.

Contrary to a popular misconception, these incomes and possessions did not lay under the "dead hand" of the Church. Much went into circulation through charitable works, purchases, and reinvestment. The Church's holdings also made it a major source of credit in the absence of an established banking economy. Long-term, low-interest loans were made to hacendados, landowners, farmers, and businessmen. Often it was assumed that the capital would not be repaid and so the interest became a form of annuity for religious organizations. This in turn was often plowed back into the local economy. In 1804, as both a reform measure to restrict the Church's activities and as a source of ready cash, the crown decreed the Act of Consolidation, which sequestered the Church's immense charitable funds. This required the Church to call in its mortgages and notes, resulting in disaster for its debtors. This in turn embittered many criollos against the Spanish crown, which was now cast in the role of unfeeling bureaucracy rather than source of justice.

The missionary enterprise in Ibero-America is simply too vast and too complex to be fully described in any single historical study. Fortunately, contemporary scholarship is increasing not only our factual knowledge of this great endeavor but is also shedding light on the fascinating interplay of peoples, beliefs, and institutions that accompanied it. It also is showing the peril of facile generalizations, based on nationalistic prejudices or faddish assumptions about cultures and races. The missionaries accomplished wonderful things but fell short of the mark as far as full christianization of the New World was concerned. It was flawed, like any human undertaking, but still stands as one of the greatest religious and humanitarian enterprises of all time.