ONE

# Introduction

During the century following the crucifixion of Christ, the apostles charged with spreading the "good news" of the Gospels enjoyed rather limited success. In an historical "blink of the eye" – during the late second and third century C.E. – people throughout a collapsing Roman Empire embraced Christianity. During the fourth century Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, and by the sixth century C.E., most Europeans – numbering in the millions – understood themselves as Christian.

Christianity experienced a similar history some 1,400 years later in Latin America. Here, too, the collapse of empires (e.g., Mexica, Inca) ushered in a period of several centuries during which millions of Indians came to understand themselves as Christian.

This book is a comparative study of early Christianity in the late Roman Empire (c. 150–800 C.E.) and in colonial Mexico (c. 1520–1720 C.E.). Following the early success of Mendicant missionaries in southern Mexico, the Jesuits, between 1591 and 1650, baptized over four hundred thousand Indians and established a vast network of Christian communities in northern Mexico. My central thesis is that the Mendicant and especially the Jesuit enterprise, although not on the same temporal or spatial scale as the rise of Christianity in Europe, nevertheless entailed similar processes. Perhaps most significant, the Christianization of pagan Europe and Indian Mexico was coincident with epidemics of acute and chronic infectious disease that undermined the structure and

functioning of pagan and Indian societies, respectively.[1] Both pagans in Europe and Indians in Mexico were attracted to Christian beliefs and rituals because they provided a means of comprehending and dealing with epidemic disease and calamity. The organizational strategies based on charity and reciprocity that were implemented by early Christians and later by missionaries in Mexico also were particularly attractive in the context of profound sociocultural upheaval. Both medieval monks and Jesuit missionaries emphasized the cult of the saints and their relics, which, paradoxically, involved accommodation as much as suppression of indigenous belief systems. Significantly, the literature produced in Europe by early Christians, particularly sacred biography and history, was later used by Jesuit and, to a lesser extent, Mendicant missionary authors as literary models and sources of rhetoric to represent their New World experience. Pursuit of this "borrowing," which I attribute in significant part to demonstrable similarities in the two processes of Christianization, has resulted in a book that is a comparative study of Old and New World mission frontiers as well as early Christian literature and Spanish missionary texts.

The idea for this book began taking shape some twenty-five years ago, while doing archaeological research in Sonora, Mexico.[2] Living in northern Mexico made me aware that the people of Sonora carried on estimable traditions that were rooted in their Indian past. Our archaeological research indicated that this past encompassed lives that were at least as complex and presumably as fulfilling as the lives of contemporaries in early modern Europe. If so, then why did hundreds of thousands

[1] The term pagan at this point in time is fully loaded with unfortunate baggage. I use it as a referent for the mostly Celtic and German-speaking peoples of Western Europe who, in the context of a demographic collapse and migration, coalesced in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, giving rise to better understood ethnic groups such as Franks, Saxons, and Irish. Sadly, when referring to the Indians of northern Mexico, I also gloss over what undoubtedly were innumerable differences among dozens of peoples; the differences and many of the cultures themselves have been lost to history.

[2] The Rio Sonora Project was funded by the National Science Foundation from 1975 to 1979 and was principally concerned with determining the broad outlines of Sonoran prehistory and the extent to which the region functioned prehistorically as a trade route linking Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. Richard A. Pailes and Daniel T. Reff, "Colonial Exchange Systems and the Decline of Paquime." In *The Archaeology of West and Northwest Mesoamerica*, eds. Michael S. Foster and Phil C. Weigand, pp. 353–363 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

of Indians embrace Jesuit missionaries and Christianity? About the time I started puzzling over this question I read William McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) and Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* (1972), which detail how epidemic disease changed the course of history in the Old World and the New. Their work compelled me to examine the accounts of Spanish explorers and Jesuit missionaries from northern Nueva España. To my suprise, I found considerable evidence that epidemics of smallpox, measles, typhus, and other maladies spread northward from central Mexico in advance of the generally northward-moving mission frontier, decimating Indian populations and contributing to Indian interest in baptism and missionization.[3]

My research on disease and its contribution to Jesuit success was made possible by a vast literature produced by the Jesuits. Ignatius Loyola and Jesuit superiors encouraged missionaries to write often. During the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jesuits in Nueva España wrote thousands of letters and reports, including yearly summaries (*annuas*) for each province and its many subdivisions (e.g., *rectorados*, *colegios*). Some priests also took it upon themselves or were asked by superiors to write histories, synthesizing the observations and experiences of fellow missionaries.[4] The most detailed and informative narrative of the Jesuit experience in colonial Mexico was published in 1645, and was written by a former frontier missionary and Jesuit provincial, Andrés Pérez de Ribas. Titled in English *History of the Triumphs of Our Holy Faith Amongst the Most Barbarous and Fierce Peoples of the New World*,[5] the *Historia* is a wonderfully detailed commentary on Spanish and Indian relations in northern Nueva España.

Having satisfied, or so I thought, my interest in disease, I initiated in 1992 a National Endowment for the Humanities project to

[3] Daniel T. Reff, *Disease, Depopulation, and Culture Change in Northwestern New Spain, 1518–1764* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1991).

[4] The fifth father general of the Jesuit order, Claudio Acquaviva (1581–1615), instructed each Jesuit province throughout the world to select a Jesuit to collect historical material and to compile a chronicle or history of the province. Magnus Morner, *The Political and Economic Activities of the Jesuits in the La Plata Region, The Hapsburg Era* (Stockholm: Library and Institute of Ibero-American Studies, 1953), 10.

[5] Andrés Pérez de Ribas, *History of the Triumphs of Our Holy Faith Amongst the Most Barbarous and Fierce Peoples of the New World*, trans. Daniel T. Reff, Maureen Ahern, and Richard Danford (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999 [1645]).

prepare a critical, English-language edition of Pérez de Ribas's *Historia*. On previous occasions my reading of the text often entailed a mining operation of sorts; I read the book largely for ethnohistorical insights. Along the way I nevertheless became aware that the *Historia* was an often gripping, dramatic narrative, filled with demonic apparitions and miracles. Once I began the close reading implied by translation, I further discovered that Pérez de Ribas relied heavily on early Christian literature for literary models and rhetoric to represent the Jesuits' New World experience. Pérez de Ribas was not alone in this regard; other Jesuit as well as Franciscan authors used type scenes (e.g., "faith healing the blind"), metaphors, rhetoric, and explicit parallels from early Christian literature to describe the mission frontier in places such as New Mexico and Paraguay.[6] Jesuit narratives, for instance, tell of missionaries who were informed by God of their impending martyrdom through bleeding altar cloths, and of missionaries whose bodies, or body parts, remained incorruptible following death. The same or very similar incidents are recounted in the *Life of Saint Hilarion* and countless other sacred biographies. Similarly, the *Historia* recounts instances where Jesuits destroyed roadside cairns or trees that were "worshipped" by the Indians, replacing them with crosses. Almost identical pagan religious practices and "replacement strategies," used by medieval clerics and monks, are described in the fourth-century *Life of Saint Martin*.[7] Jesuit texts also abound in metaphors and epithets from early Christian literature, including references to the devil as "the enemy," "the infernal beast," or a "demonic kinsman." References to the devil's snares are as common in Jesuit missionary texts from Mexico as they are in Athanasius's *Life of Saint Antony*, which pertains to Mediterranean Europe during late antiquity. Perhaps most significant, Jesuit missionary texts abound in

[6] For instance, Fray A. Benavides, *The Memorial of Fray Alonso de Benavides*, trans. E. Ayers (Chicago: Privately Published, 1916 [1630]); Juan E. Nieremberg, S.J. (with Andrade Cassini), *Varones Illustres de la Compañia de Jesus*. 3 vols. (Bilbao, 1889 [1666]); Antonio Ruiz de Montoya, *Conquista Espiritual hecha por los religiosos de la Compañia de Jesus en las provincias del Paraguay, Parana, Uruguay y Tape* (Bilbao: Corazon de Jesus, 1892 [1639]).

[7] F. R. Hoare, trans. and ed., *The Western Fathers, Being the Lives of SS. Martin of Tours, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, Honoratus of Arles and Germanus of Auxerre* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954).

references to sickness and the miraculous cure; the latter is perhaps the most common "type scene" in early Christian sacred biography and history.[8]

Why would Iberian missionaries writing on the eve of the Enlightenment rely so heavily on literary models and rhetoric that were over one thousand years old to represent the missionary experience in the New World? The perhaps obvious answer, particularly in the wake of post-structuralism, is that Jesuit missionary authors were part of a "regime of power," the Counter-Reformation Church, with a particular discourse and rules for signification. Jesuits were formed as religious through their reading of the lives of the Church Fathers and saints and later, as authors, essentially were required by the Church and Spanish Crown to employ early Christian literature as a literary model and source of rhetoric.

In recent years I have employed the critique of ethnography and "constructivism" as an analytical framework, researching the contingent factors (e.g., theological, literary, political, institutional, historical) that encouraged Jesuit "borrowing" from early sacred biography and history.[9] As noted at the outset, perhaps the most significant finding of this research has been that the Jesuits employed early Christian literature not simply as a reflex of Counter-Reformation discourse but also because there were demonstrable parallels between their own experience and the experience of their missionary counterparts in late antique and early medieval Europe. The rise of Christianity in both the Old World and New was coincident with profound dislocations resulting from epidemics that undermined indigenous religions and society as a whole. The challenges that early Christian missionaries confronted and overcame, realizing sainthood in the process, were analogous to those that

[8] Clare Stancliffe, "From Town to Country: The Christianization of the Touraine, 370–600." In *The Church in Town and Countryside*, ed. Derek Baker, pp. 43–59 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 57.

[9] Some exemplifications of constructivism: Edward M. Bruner, "Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism." *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994): 397–415; Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance, The Culture and History of a South African People* (University of Chicago Press, 1985); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 143–145; James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives*: *The Anthropologist as Author* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

missionaries faced in the New World.[10] Medieval hagiography is replete with mention of roadside cairns, tree worship, ceremonial intoxication, flying witches, and other pagan practices that the Jesuits encountered in the New World one thousand years later. Both medieval missionaries and the Jesuits imagined themselves at war with Satan and his heathen familiars, the dreaded shamans. Both sets of missionaries directly challenged these religious leaders but accommodated indigenous beliefs and practices through the cult of the saints and other "Christian" rituals and devotions.[11]

I did not intend above that Jesuit missionary employment of early Christian literature was *not* affected by institutional/political contingencies. The Counter-Reformation Church certainly exercised a profound influence on contemporaries. However, "the Church," be it understood as theology, an institution, or as discourse, was not monolithic. Catholics disagreed – sometimes violently – over the sacraments, grace, illumination, perfection, and a host of other issues. Moreover, although authors in Iberia and America were encouraged by the Church as well as the Spanish Crown to embrace particular signifying practices (e.g., rhetoric and type scenes from early Christian literature), they did not necessarily affirm hegemonic positions. The much celebrated Mexican nun, Juana Ines de la Cruz, who challenged the authority of her male confessors by quoting scripture and Church authorities, was perhaps without peer. But *Sor* Juana was not the first or only colonial-period author to use authority to question authority.[12]

Jesuit authors in the New World used – and, one might say, *deployed* – early Christian literature in response to a variety of institutional/political contingencies but particularly to defend their mission enterprise and vocation. During the century following the foundation of the Society of Jesus, most members of the order came to prefer life as a teacher over

[10] McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, 181; John L. Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970 [1956]), 92.

[11] Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 76.

[12] Electra Arenal and Amanda Powell, trans. and eds., *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, The Answer/La Repuesta* (New York: Feminist Press, 1994).

the Ignatian ideal of itinerant missionary. By 1645, less than half of all Jesuits were missionaries.[13] This profound shift in vocations posed a threat to Jesuit missionaries in the New World, who depended on the Society of Jesus for money, men, and political support, particularly in dealings with the Spanish Crown, which funded and approved missionary enterprises in the New World. Jesuit missionary authors relied on sacred history and biography for narrative scenes and rhetoric to persuade their readers (i.e., Jesuit novices and superiors; royal and ecclesiastical officials) of the preeminent status of the missionary vocation. For instance, in recounting the heroic lives and martyrdom of fellow Jesuits, Julio Pascual and Manuel Martínez, Pérez de Ribas implicitly and explicitly invokes early Christian literature, particularly the *Roman Martyrology* and lives of the saints:

> They opened the portals and began shooting arrows inside so no one could escape. One arrow hit Father Julio Pascal in the stomach, at which point Father Manuel Martínez said: "Let us not die for Christ sadly and cowardly." Then he emerged from the house, at which point they furiously shot more arrows, pinning Father Martinez's arms to his torso. Father Julio Pascual followed, even though his stomach was pierced by an arrow. Full of devotion and with their rosaries in their hands (I myself have one of these, all covered with blood), they both fell to their knees and asked our Lord for His favor and grace. They began to be struck by thousands of arrows covered with a poisonous herb. These rained upon their bodies until they became two Saint Sebastians, and within a short time they fell to the ground.[14]

Jesuit "deployment" of type scenes and rhetoric from sacred biography and history was itself consistent with the experience of missionary authors in Europe during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In his late-fourth-century *Life of Saint Martin*, which became the most influential of all hagiographies in Western Europe, Sulpicius Severus confronted analagous "institutional" constraints Jesuit missionaries faced over one thousand years later. During the early Middle Ages, many monks and

[13] Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits, Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice, A Historical Study* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1964), 288, f. 21.
[14] Pérez de Ribas, *History of the Triumphs*, 259.

ecclesiastics in Europe were convinced that a contemplative life rather than the active life of a missionary was the true path to religious perfection.[15] Moreover, many early medieval monks and clerics questioned, as did later Jesuit critics who disparaged the Indian, whether missions to "rustic" Celts and German "barbarians" were worthwhile.[16] In his *vita* of Saint Martin, Severus went out of his way to highlight Martin's missionary vocation, casting it as an *imitatio Christi*. Severus's recounting of Martin's miracles and his success converting pagans was "proof positive" that Martin was doing God's work. The *vita* is also peppered with subtle and not-so-subtle attacks on the complacent and withdrawn lives of contemporary clerics and monks:

> Indeed, I have come across some who were so envious of his [Martin's] spiritual powers and his life as actually to hate in him what they missed in themselves but had not the strength to imitate. And – oh, grievous and lamentable scandal! – nearly all his calumniators were bishops. There is no need to mention names, though several of them are barking now at me.[17]

There were, then, institutional/political as well as theological and cultural–historical parallels between the missionary experience in the Old World and New. As discussed later, although neither early Christian nor Jesuit literature mirror directly the reality of the mission frontier, both literatures nonetheless reflect the similar contingencies that governed the lives of missionaries and their pagan and Indian converts.

## Previous Scholarship on the Rise of Christianity

To my knowledge, this is the first comparative study to pursue McNeill's provocative suggestion that epidemic disease may have played a dynamic

[15] Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[16] W. H. C. Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), 17; E. A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 231.
[17] Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, 43.

role in the rise of Christianity in both Europe and America.[18] Scholars have ignored or dismissed the possibility of New and Old World parallels.[19] Many it seems have assumed that the first, postapostolic Church was unique.[20] The study of the early Church in Europe has traditionally focused on Christian theology and theologians. Much has been written about men such as the Apostle Paul, Iraneus, Eusebius, Augustine, Cassian, and Gregory the Great. We know relatively little about the millions of "ordinary" people who embraced Christianity during the late Roman Empire.[21] Historiography, in general, has emphasized "great men." As Voltaire remarked, "For the last fourteen hundred years, the only Gauls, apparently, have been kings, ministers, and generals."[22]

Similarly, the study of Christianity in Latin America has emphasized "great men" and "great ideas." The great man theme is prominent in the earliest histories written by missionary authors,[23] who cast the friars

[18] Stark has pursued in persuasive fashion McNeill's argument as it pertains to the Old World. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity, A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[19] For instance, Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints, Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 29.

[20] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine, On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), 143.

[21] T. Barnes, "Pagan Perceptions of Christianity." In *Early Christianity Origins and Evolution to A.D. 600*, ed. Ian Hazlett, pp. 231–244 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (*A.D. 100–400*) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 8; "What Difference Did Christianity Make?" *Historia* 35(3) (1986): 322–343, 322–323; R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4; A. D. Wright, *Catholicism and Spanish Society Under the Reign of Philip II, 1555–1598, and Philip III, 1598–1621* (Lewiston, Australia: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

[22] Quoted in Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 32.

[23] Mendieta and López de Gómara were some of the earliest New World authors to advance the great man theory. See John L. Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 37. With respect to the Jesuit authors, see Juan de Albieuri, "Historia de las missiones apostólicas, que los clerigos regulares de la Compañía de Jesús an echo en las Indias Occidentales del reyno de la Nueva Vizcaya," Mexican Manuscript #7, Hubert H. Bancroft Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Juan E. Nieremberg (with Andrade Cassini), *Varones Illustres de la Compañia de Jesus*, 3 vols. (Bilbao, 1896 [1666]); Andrés Pérez de Ribas, *Coronica y Historia Religiosa de la Provincia de la Compañia de Jesus de Mexico*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Sagrado Corazon, 1896 [1653]), *History of the Triumphs of*

and black robes as great civilizers, combating idolatry, drunkenness, warfare, laziness, and polygamy. During the Enlightenment, this discourse was accepted uncritically by the *philosophes*, who cited the Jesuit mission enterprises of the New World as proof of how the application of reason could create societies where once there was only chaos or uncertain relations.[24] This idea of the Jesuit missionary as the vanguard of civilization persisted well into the twentieth century and was taken up by Frederick Jackson Turner and his influential student, Herbert E. Bolton.[25] Throughout much of the twentieth century, anthropologists as well as historians cast the Jesuit missionary in a role analogous to a modern-day extension agent, the source of new crops, tools, cattle, and other innovations that purportedly attracted Indian converts and "revolutionized" aboriginal culture.[26]

In recent decades the pendulum has swung from a largely laudatory Church history to a poststructural, postcolonial history, which has been decidedly critical of the Church in both Europe and colonial Mexico. The Church of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages increasingly has been seen as a sexually repressive and exploitive institution that "talked" endlessly and glowingly of suffering and continence, convincing the masses to accept deprivation, all the while bishops lived comfortable,

*Our Holy Faith*; Ruiz de Montoya, *Conquista Espiritual;* José Cardiel, *Breve relacion del régimen de las misiones del Paraguay* (Madrid: Gráficas Nilo, 1989 [1767]), 51.

[24] Magunus Morner, *The Political and Economic Activities of the Jesuits in the La Plata Region: The Hapsburg Era* (Stockholm: Library and Institute of Ibero-American Studies, 1953), 195.

[25] Herbert E. Bolton, "The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish-American Colonies." *American Historical Review* 23 (1917): 42–61. For a discussion of Bolton's influence, see David J. Weber, "John Francis Bannon and the Historiography of the Spanish Borderlands." *Journal of the Southwest* 29 (1987): 331–336; David Sweet, "The Ibero-American Frontier Mission in Native American History." In *The New Latin American History*, eds. Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson, pp. 1–48 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

[26] Clement J. McNaspy, S.J., *Conquistador without a Sword* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984), 190; Alfred Métraux, "Jesuit Missions in South America, Part 2." In *Handbook of South American Indians, Volume 5*, ed. J. Steward, pp. 645–653 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1949), 646, 651; Silvio Palacios and Ena Zoffoli, *Gloria y Tragedia de las Misiones Guaraníes* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1991), 191; Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533–1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), 285–298.