CATHOLIC COLONIALISM

A parish history of Guatemala 1524–1821

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Introduction: A medieval projection

The discovery of America and its previously unknown inhabitants surprised Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, and presented a challenge to its traditional cosmology. Theologians consulted their libraries and devised ingenious theories to explain the Biblical antecedents of the Indians. At the same time, Spanish explorers faced the practical question of dealing with the unexpected riches of the Indies. They too sought and found guidance within Europe's medieval Christian tradition. When Spain's rulers and emissaries decided to physically conquer and populate the New World, and not just trade with it, the transplantation of Christian institutions followed inevitably.

There was one moment of hesitation. On the shore of what they would later baptize as the kingdom of New Spain, Hernán Cortés and his men quarreled over their purpose in coming, and without knowing it, over the destiny of the Spanish state on the American mainland. Some said they should 'take all the gold and silver they could' and return to Cuba, whence they had come. Others proposed a more daring tack: to proceed inland, settle the land, and subject its native inhabitants to themselves in the name of the Spanish Crown. The would-be settlers had their way. 'Immediately', Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote many years later from his Guatemalan home, 'we ordered that a town be made and founded and settled, which we named Villa-Rica de la Vera Cruz.'[1] In this decision to go beyond bartering the green beads of Castile with the Indians of the coast, lay the first stirrings of the Spanish colonial state.

If the Middle Ages can be described as 'the period in western European history when the church could reasonably claim to be the one true state', then Spanish colonial rule was a medieval projection.[2] The underlying mentality combined worldly realism with the most deeply felt religious faith. To our secular eyes this may appear an improbable alchemy. But we cannot doubt the sincerity of the seventeenth-century jurist Juan de Solórzano, who wrote in his *Política indiana* (1647) that Spanish sovereignty needed no other justification than that God (who 'gives kingdoms and takes them away') had seen fit to give America to Spain. Spain obliged itself to do something in return. The terms were outlined in a series of papal bulls, the first of which appeared in 1493. Solórzano summarized them as granting absolute power and jurisdiction over the new territories in return for their subjugation, or 'reduction', to the church.[3] Since the bulls also effectively transferred ultimate control of the American church from the papacy to the Crown, Spain found these terms congenial. Under the provisions of royal patronage (*patronato real*), reduction to the church meant reduction to the Crown.

The complete fusion of church and state in colonial Spanish America makes it a sterile debate as to whether the papal concessions represented a degradation of the church to the status of a mere tool of empire, a *serva servorum regis*. Such a statement would hold exactly as much or as little truth as to say that they reduced the emperor to the role of secular arm of the church. In fact, nobody conceived of a non-Christian empire. The monarch of Castile not only exercised supreme secular authority, but he was also the head of the colonial church. Indeed, his Laws of the Indies began with the words, 'On the Holy Catholic Faith'.

No king of Spain aspired to be anything but a Christian monarch. All inherited the ancient tradition of the covenant, enshrined symbolically in the temple of Jerusalem built by Solomon, and perpetuated by a long line of medieval kings and emperors. Many dreamed of a New Jerusalem to crown their reigns. When Braulio (bishop of Zaragoza, 631 to *c.* 651) wrote to the Visigothic King Chindaswith, he took care to hold before him the examples of Joshua, David, and Solomon. The Spanish hymn 'In profectione exercitus' referred to Moses, the defeat of Amalec, and David as models for the subjection of Iberia's barbarians by the Visigothic king of a New Israel.[4] In 798, Alcuin wrote to the future Holy Roman Emperor, expressing the wish 'to see you in Aachen, where the temple of the very wise Solomon, with the help of God, is being built'. Charlemagne indeed took the temple of Jerusalem as his inspiration. He had his throne in the Palatine Chapel assembled according to the measurements of Solomon's throne, and in his court academy he allowed himself to be called by the name of David.[5] Charlemagne's namesake, Charles V, inheritor of the Holy Roman Empire and king of Spain, also inherited the medieval ideal of the covenant and the New Jerusalem.

In its desire to expand the Christian empire to the New World, the Spanish Crown resolved to send armies of missionaries at its own expense. By this means it embarked upon a most ambitious campaign of evangelization, aimed at nothing less than the conversion of the entire population of the newly discovered territories.

In choosing its principal emissaries the Crown went over the heads of Spain's bishops and secular clergy, calling instead upon friars belonging to several monastic orders. While secular priests were not discouraged from going to America, the Crown did not send them as missionaries. By sending friars instead of secular priests to convert the Indians, Spain took advantage of an old evangelical strain in European monasticism. Although a contradiction would seem to exist between the contemplative ideal of monastic retreat, and the pastoral vocation of preaching and baptizing 'in the world', these opposed concerns had long been reconciled. The monastic tradition of the Middle Ages incorporated pilgrimage and the propagation of the faith among the pagans as acts of piety and devotion – and of separation from the world. Life among the pagans or life in a convent cell: both were forms of solitude and voluntary exile.[6]

From the time of Saint Anthony onwards, wandering monks engaged in the conversion of rural populations. By the fourth century, Egypt's Coptic monks were already known as destroyers of pagan temples. Pope Gregory the Great enhanced the sacerdotal privileges of monks, partly exempting them from episcopal control, and entrusting to them the conversion of England. During the early Middle Ages monks played a large role in the conversion of rural northern and western Europe: northern Gaul, Celtic Britain, Anglo-Saxon England from the fourth to the seventh century, the Low Countries and Germany in the eighth.[7]

By contrast, the secular ministry led by the bishops lacked a comparable evangelical tradition. From Saint Peter on, the secular hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons confined their activities largely to the cities, among the already converted. Medieval bishops often did not even regard the conversion of pagans to Christianity as an essentially pastoral problem. This was the attitude, for example, of the seventh-century bishops of the Iberian peninsula who, although surrounded by pagans, saw no need to preach to them. They considered idolatry and paganism as crimes against the *respublica christiana*, and therefore acts to be dealt with by the general system of justice. For reasons which are not entirely clear, the secular clergy limited themselves to the execution of their liturgical duties among the faithful, and showed little inclination to propagate Christian doctrine among the ignorant.[8]

The Spanish Crown thus again followed medieval precedents when it enlisted the monastic orders for the conversion of America. But the use of the regular orders for this purpose also reflected a realistic assessment of the ecclesiastical resources available, which favored the orders over the secular clergy. While the Spanish historian Antonio Domínguez Ortiz probably speaks too harshly when he characterizes 'the majority' of Spain's sixteenth-century priests as 'crassly ignorant and morally warped', it is true that Spain at the time lacked seminaries, and that standards for ordination were low. The peninsula's many monasteries provided an attractive alternative source of ecclesiastics. Numerically, Spain's growing monastic population actually exceeded its secular clergy. The regular preponderance grew during the years of conquest and colonization as the so-called mendicant orders, and especially the Franciscans and Dominicans among them, accounted for a surge in the foundation of new convents which reached a peak during the second half of the sixteenth century.[9]

Marcel Bataillon, among others, has called attention to the strong evangelic tendencies of the Franciscan and Dominican reforms during this period, contrasting them pointedly with the 'materialism' of Spain's 'spiritual proletariat'.[10] These tendencies embodied a pronounced apocalyptic strain, continuing a common motif of monastic thought during the Middle Ages. Medieval monks saw exile among the pagans as a path which would lead them to union with God. This was the message, for example, of the three-stage program presented to his followers by the wandering monk Saint Romuald, among whom was Saint Bruno of Querfurt, martyred, with eighteen other missionaries, in Poland in 1008. The program led from the monastery for neophytes, to 'golden solitude' for the more advanced, and finally to 'the evangelization of the pagans', for those who desired 'to be dissolved and to be with Christ'.[11]

The Franciscan order in particular cultivated the evangelic ideal. The thirteenth-century Joachites took their inspiration from the apocalyptical vision of Joachim of Fiore, and believe in the imminent consummation of history. Peter John Olivi is credited with fusing Joachimism with the Franciscan ideology of mission. The Franciscan Saint Bonaventure (1221–74) brought this fusion to its highest expression. According to the Franciscan concept of their mission, the order's divinely inspired task was to renew evangelical life in the final age of the world.[12]

By taking its missionaries from the members of Spain's observant monastic communities, the Crown hoped to put their apostolic fervor to work in the colonies. Bataillon found it significant that the famous 'Twelve Apostles' who initiated the conversion of the Indians of New Spain were not just 'vulgar observants' of the Franciscan rule, but fervent sons of a particular subdivision, or province, already persecuted for its radicalism.[13]

These missionaries carried their militancy with them to the New World. The sixteenth-century Franciscan Jerónimo de Mendieta composed his *Historia eclesiástica indiana* in terms of an apocalyptic metaphor, in which the Indies appears as the New Jerusalem.[14] As late as the eighteenth century, the Guatemalan friar Francisco Vázquez divided his chronicle of Central America's Franciscans into five books, in imitation of the Pentateuch, recalling the prophets of Israel. Vázquez peopled his account with figures drawn from the Old Testament, frequently comparing his province's barefoot 'soldiers of God' with Elija, Elisha, Gideon, Joshua, Moses, Caleb, Ezekiel, Melchisedek, Jonah, Abraham, Noah, and others.[15] For Vázquez, as for other Franciscans, their evangelizing labors placed them closer to God as the millennium approached.

Chronology of missions

As the Crown paid for the sending of missionaries, its officials kept track of the many 'shiploads' (*barcadas*) of religious, and of the expenses they incurred. The records show that the Crown dispatched missionaries to more than sixty-five destinations, ranging from Florida and California to Chile and the Strait of Magellan. Between 1493, when the first mission left for Española, and Spanish-American Independence (which in Guatemala occurred in 1821), more than fifteen thousand missionaries crossed the Atlantic under royal auspices.[16]

The sending of religious continued throughout the period of Spanish rule, but fluctuated markedly in volume. Unevangelized borderlands persisted at the fringes of colonized areas, and missionaries continued to serve as priests even after the initial phase of conversion had passed. Nevertheless, the sending of missionaries peaked in the late sixteenth century (Figure 1). Beginning the year after Columbus' first voyage, ships carrying friars left the Old World for the New in accelerating tempo until, in the final decade of the sixteenth century, a precipitous decline set in. The traffic in missionaries closely paralleled other indicators of the Atlantic economy in the middle of the seventeenth century, such as Spanish imports of American silver, or total annual shipping tonnage between Seville and the American ports until 1650. All show the same rapid rise until about 1600, followed by a steep decline into what has been called Spain's 'seventeenth-century depression', which also affected some sectors of the American colonial economy.[17]

Missionaries thus did not escape the laws of intercontinental trade any more than other forms of cargo. Their passage depended upon a

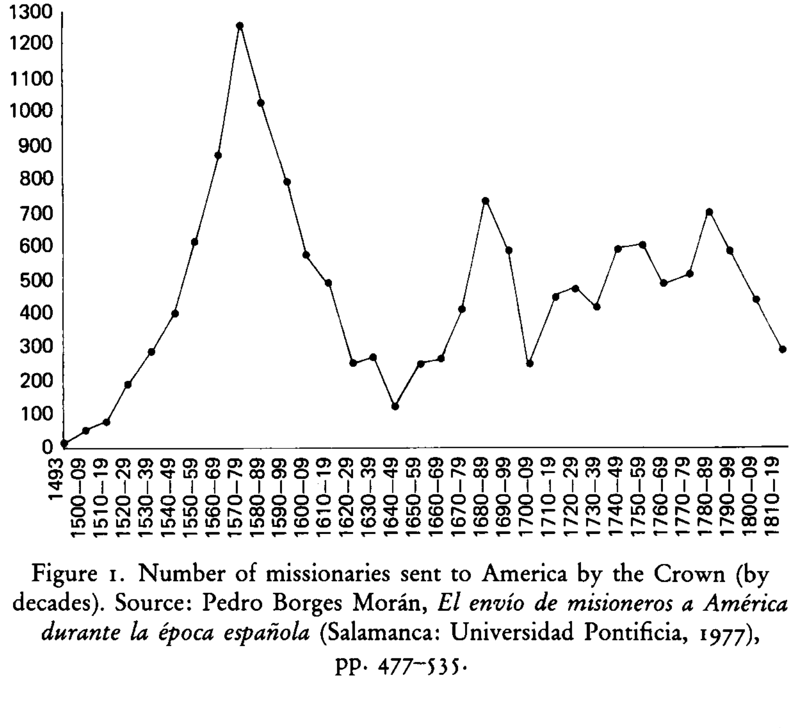

Figure 1. Number of missionaries sent to America by the Crown (by decades). Source: Pedro Borges Morán, *El envío de misioneros a América durante la época española* (Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1977), pp. 477–535.

favorable Spanish and Atlantic conjuncture. This improved during the second half of the seventeenth century. Henry Kamen dates the post-depression recovery in Spain from the decade of the 1660s.[18] A resurgence in the sending of missionaries paralleled the economic recuperation, although the sixteenth-century levels were never reached again. Expeditions continued at moderate levels throughout the eighteenth century, except for the decade 1700–09, when the Wars of Succession interrupted Spanish shipping.

Of the more than fifteen thousand missionaries sent to America during the colonial period, about a thousand, or six per cent, went to Guatemala. Table 1 compares the number of missionaries who went to Guatemala with those sent to other destinations. Guatemala thus emerges as an important center, less so than Mexico and Peru, but ahead of Quito, Chile, Yucatán and many others.

If we compare the chronologies of missionary sending to Guatemala and to other regions (Figure 2), we see that Guatemala followed the general pattern. Some areas reached their peak sooner than others, for example Española perhaps as early as 1510–20, but the trajectories of

Table 1. *Missionaries sent from Spain to different American destinations under official Crown auspices, 1493–1819*

Destination[a]	Missionaries		Destination[a]	Missionaries	
	Number	%		Number	%
1. Mexico	3,738	24.2	6. Española	549	3.6
2. Lima	1,769	11.5	7. Quito	526	3.4
3, New Granada	1,150	7.4	8. Florida	504	3.3
4. GUATEMALA	986	6.4	9. Chile	479	3.1
5. Paraguay	985	6.4	10. Yucatán	445	2.9
			Other	4,316	27.9
			Total	15,447	100

[a] As indicated in the documentation; as the case may be, the destination sometimes refers to a city, a point of disembarkation, a diocese, or a vaguely defined theater of missionary activity.

Source: Pedro Borges Morán, *El envío de misioneros a América durante la época española* (Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1977), pp. 477–535.

Guatemala, New Spain, New Granada, and Peru are in general agreement. They combine to display graphically the strong predominance of the second half of the sixteenth century. The most intensive activity took place during the reign of Philip II.

His reign marked an exceptionally propitious period in the religious life of Spain, a moment of monastic reform and expansion, the time of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. Until the 1588 defeat of the 'invincible' armada, it also marked a high point of empire, symbolized by the Christian victory at Lepanto, and on a more prosaic level, as we have seen, the peak in bullion imports from America. The three decades in which the greatest numbers of missionaries went to America (1560–89) coincided as well with that elaborate inward journey of Philip II, the planning and building of the monastery-palace of San Lorenzo at El Escorial (1563–84). Philip II spent two years choosing the site for his palace. The place he chose, some fifty kilometers from Madrid, is a thousand meters high, on a barren slope of the Sierra Guadarrama. Half monastery, half royal palace, the monastery came first. Philip II refused to occupy his quarters until the conventual community had installed themselves in theirs. In the second storey of the façade of the church, uniting the two halves of the complex, are six statues, each seventeen feet high, depicting the six kings of Judah and the house of David. The plan

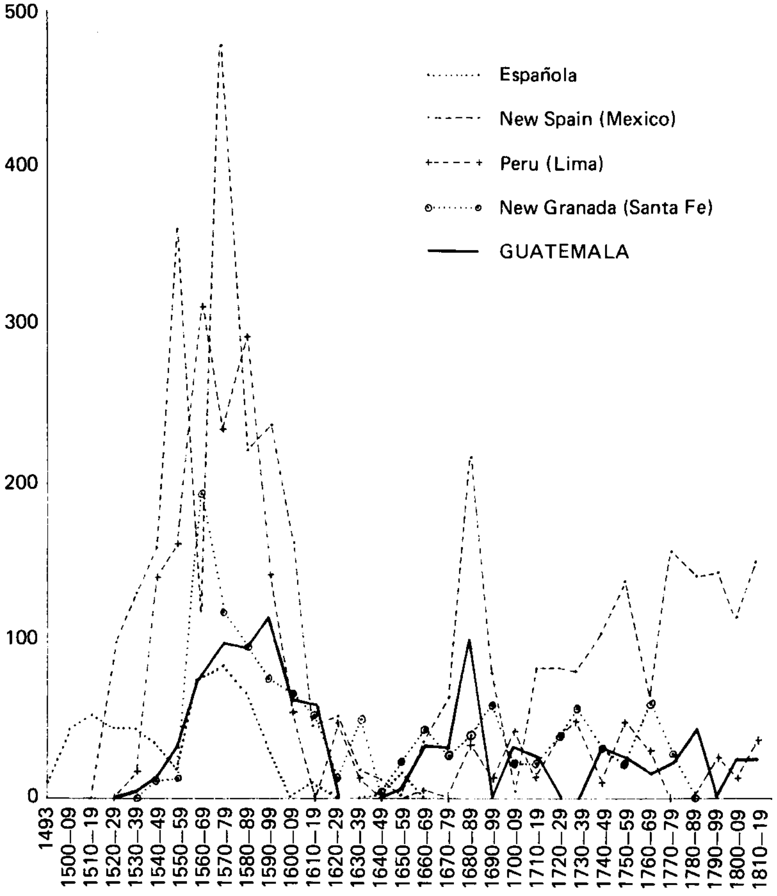

Figure 2. Number of missionaries sent to Guatemala and other selected centres (by decades). Source: Borges Morán, *El envío de misioneros*, pp. 477–535.

of this 'greatest holy house seen since the time of the apostles', in which Philip II personally collaborated, is a labyrinth of cabalistic references to Solomon's temple.[19] The Escorial stands as a silent testimony to the spirit in which the Spanish-American church was conceived.