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Judging how Appropriate the Methods used by Spanish Clergy were.

Our task is to judge the validity of this statement: "The Spanish clergy employed appropriate methods to convert the indigenous populations of colonial Latin America and their efforts were largely successful by the end of the 17th century." As I see it this statement has hardly any validity. I'll spend most of this paper working through examples of the methods which were used and why they weren't appropriate or adequate, but first let me note that my primary disagreement comes from the fact that if all traces of the indigenous religions had been eradicated, then the Spanish clergy of the time would've judged their work successful.

One basic method was the encomienda. The encomienda was a tool the Spanish crown gave to laypeople and clergy that rewarded the efforts of those in the conquests that effectively turned the Indians to slaves (González 29). Encomiendas gave Spaniards a specific area of Indians to use as slaves with the condition that they were treated well, protected, and Christianized (González 29). This method of converting the indigenous Indians didn't work too well because the Indians weren't actually treated well, and were pressured into Christianity.

Alternatively, some priests sought to speak on behalf of the Indians. One such priest was Antonio de Montesinos, who on the Sunday ahead of Christmas 1511 gave a sermon that enraged some of his fellow clergy and Spanish colonists to the

point that they protested to the Spanish crown (González 30). Montesinos' central line was "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Keen 66), referring to the Indians. He struck the Spanish congregants cold by laying out a clear picture of their blindness, calling attention to all that the indigenous people had, and from which they'd been stripped in the name of colonization for the Spanish crown. He declared that all the Spanish colonists, and even his fellow clergy, were in mortal sin for their actions against the Indians (Keen 66).

Another priest to seek to do so was Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1514. Las Casas became known as the "Defender of the Indians" (González 31). He originally had an encomienda himself, but renounced it and started making his case for the Indians straight to King Ferdinand after being energized by Montesinos' sermon. Not only did Las Casas make his case to the king, but he also wrote a book (published in 1552) that effectively discredited Spain's colonial efforts, by exposing the atrocities being committed to the Europeans (Keen 68). These advocates made it harder for the methods of conversion to propagate through Latin America.

The Spanish Christian church quickly morphed into a two-handed institution as the horrific experiences of the Caribbean came to light (González 32). One hand of the church, really a part of the state, focused on the needs of the settlers. The other hand of the church aimed to be the conscience of the conquest and colonization of the indigenous (it was this hand that included some of the Spanish clergy). With this split came the continued complications of the management of the conversion of Indians, and the sometimes-opposed views amongst the clergy themselves.

My first point was that not all the clergy held the same views of the goal and methods of conversion. Let me turn to my second point, which is that specific aspects of the native civilizations the Spanish colonists were aiming to convert using their methods, also played a role in these methods not working out so well. The “civilized” Spanish society (along with its neighbors back across the Atlantic Ocean) saw itself as making up the best of human civilization, as they knew it, and they looked upon the indigenous civilizations in the Americas as barbaric and uncivilized. My next few examples of methods of conversion will be described in view of their varied impact on these native civilizations (not simply upon individual members of these native civilizations).

Aztec civilization, for instance, had a prophecy-like view of their future. Therefore, when the Spaniards landed on the coast the Aztec leader, Moctezuma II, simply sat around and awaited defeat. The Aztecs saw the colonists as gods, and believed in and worshipped them as such. Ultimately the Aztecs’ hesitancy to contradict the gods led them to allow the colonists to march straight in and take over. Basically the Aztecs put up very little resistance.

However, when the Spaniards marched further into the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and built a church within the walls of a holy Aztec palace, their actions began to look not like those of gods, but rather like acts of desecration to the Aztecs (González 33), who belatedly tried to resist. Military might was one force the Spaniards could rely on, along with that of aligning with native Aztec enemies, because the sheer numbers and technology of the Spaniards outpaced that of the Aztecs. The other force that the colonists utilized was the hierarchical structure of

the Aztec empire: if you can take control of the leader you automatically have control of the entire empire. This was not a fool-proof method, however, because when you get down to the actual process of conversion by example you run right up against the engrained expectations and norms of the Aztec religion. When you violate those norms you can alienate the groups you mean to convert, as the Spaniards did when they built a church within the palace. Still, the Spaniards had some “success” with the Aztec civilization.

When the Spaniards took this method to the Maya civilization, however, it failed. Unlike the Aztecs, who had a centralized hierarchical governing structure, the Maya civilization was put together of many different tribes that operated largely independently of one another, and definitely independently of a central government location. As you can see, this made the methods the Spaniards used on the Aztecs impossible to repeat on the Maya. Far from the swift takeover of the Aztecs, more than a decade passed before the colonists had control of the Maya, and even then it took almost a century before the Maya were fully dissipated (González 34).

So, not all clergy held similar views on conversion, and even when they did, not all of the civilizations they encountered responded the same way to those methods.

Still, the Aztec and Mayan conquests set the bar for conversions and opened up two of the largest areas in the region in which clergy could convert indigenous populations to Christianity. They were also important events in the overall timeline of the Christianization of the continent. We also must not forget that the clergy involved in these conquests were some of the more influential voices of further

conquests, as their views helped instill the religion of Christianity while the rest of the conquests took place.

One of the methods used by the Spanish clergy that seem most barbaric to our society today, and perhaps even to Europeans living in Spain at the time, was torture, used in the Yucatan around 1545 (Clendinnen 32). A certain group of Franciscan friars would torture, sometimes to the point of death, the Indians if they continued to worship idols after being converted (Clendinnen 28). Spanish laypeople, as well as fellow Franciscans, condemned such behavior, but it still occurred. There is no question that many friars punished unresponsive Indians, and that these friars used brutal force in doing so (Clendinnen 30). Why did they feel justified in using such force? The Spanish clergy looked at the indigenous populations as if they were spiritual children (Clendinnen 42). Parents have the right to discipline children, so as such the clergy had the right to torture the Indians as a way of disciplining them. This was a method that we look at as unjust and dehumanizing, both secular clergy and laypeople of the time didn't see it as unusual. Nonetheless it was a method that ultimately didn't help the clergy's cause.

Judging how appropriate these methods were has to take into account not just the raw "success" of these methods, but also the acceptability of those methods in that historical context, not just how we would view such methods in today's modern world. It is possible to say that all of the methods used wouldn't be acceptable today, but would they have been acceptable back then?

These methods were acceptable to the majority of the Spanish clergy and laypeople. That means that those actually responsible for these methods, with a few

exceptions as discussed, believed that they were doing the right, just, thing. Of course, the oceanic void between them and their king made it easy for them to report anything they felt like and made it hard for Ferdinand to punish what he and others in Spain may have considered truly barbaric methods.

If it weren't for those priests who wrote letters back to the Spanish royal court to describe the events actually occurring, legislation to curtail the worst of these methods would not have been conceived. Fray Pedro's letter in 1552 was one of these influential letters (Mills 104). Pedro argues that if the clergy actually did as they were ordered great good would come, but that they hadn't followed those orders (Mills 106). His letter goes through his accounts of the clergy's actions and states that if something wasn't done soon the indigenous population would disappear entirely (Mills 107). It was only letters like this one that made the methods of the Spanish clergy known to the royal court.

The goal of conversion might have been labeled as just by the Spanish clergy, but taking that goal and embedding it in torture and forced removal from land calls that goal into question. Take the encomiendas for example. Putting aside their use earlier on the Spanish peninsula, if the specific requirement to Christianize the population was what the encomiendas really were about, then perhaps they could have been a method for ensuring fair treatment of the Indians. But the Spanish clergy who directed the laypeople who held the encomiendas (and in some cases the secular clergy who held the land grants themselves) wanted to get the job done as fast as possible so that they could get to the more familiar Christian, congregations

they had back in Spain. They had little if any interest in seeing the Indians as equally civilized and human, simply in a different mode.

The statement to evaluate the validity of was: “The Spanish clergy employed appropriate methods to convert the indigenous populations of colonial Latin America and their efforts were largely successful by the end of the 17th century.” I believe that forced religious conversion isn’t a just act, so by definition any methods the Spanish clergy used that were in themselves unjust, or which were not justly applied, could not be appropriate methods. This essay lays out in some detail a few of the methods utilized, background, supporting details, and analysis that makes this claim credible.

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