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PREVIEW

THE CHURCH-STATE CONFLICT IN MEXICO
AND ITS EFFECTS IN THE EL PASO
AREA AFTER 1910

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AREA AFTER 1910

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Mexico is predominantly a mestizo nation made up of a combination of the Spanish and the Indian, not only in its racial make-up, but in its culture. Along with customs, traditions, and language, religion was an important factor in the development of a Mexican nation. Mexico without its religion would be like a Mexico without its language or culture. They were intertwined. This fact was recognized by some of its governing leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Porfirio Díaz, Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón and later Lázaro Cárdenas. Although these men were in agreement with the majority of the Revolutionaries in their opposition to the Catholic Church, they dealt with the issue of religion by working around it rather than forcing a confrontation.

Religion not only played an important role in the lives of the conquerors but also in the native population. The conquerors justified their conquests by spreading their religious beliefs and converting the native population which stoically accepted the religion.

Because of the deeply religious culture of Mexico, this paper has provided an extensive background in an attempt to show that religion was the thread holding the Mexican

people together, whether it was a religion as pure as the Spaniards had wanted it to be, or whether, as it turned out, it was a syncretic religion, just like the people who believed in it.

It is also the purpose of this paper to show the results of the attempt to break this thread in 1926, and its effects on the border city of El Paso, Texas, a city to which many Mexicans fled in search of refuge, peace and freedom to practice their religion.

CHAPTER TWO

Conquest and Aftermath

In May 1910, the Mexican people awaited with anxiety and fear the coming of Halley's comet.¹ To the majority, the comet represented an evil omen prophesying a disastrous event in the near future. In the same manner, Moctezuma and his astrologers had awaited the return of Quetzalcoatl in the 1500s. The return of Quetzalcoatl had been prophesied and expected since this man/god had been banished from the valley of Mexico and according to the stars, his coming was close at hand.

On the Eve of Conquest

Aztec society was a fatalistic one which believed in the "brevity of life and its uncertain joys."² The people also believed that each age through which humanity had passed had ended in widespread destruction, such as flood, fire and falling sky. Hence, their world was destined to end in similar fashion. Therefore, their mission in life was to postpone this end, which astrologers had predicted for the

¹W. Dirk Raat, Revoltosos: Mexico's Rebels in the United States, 1903-1923 (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1981), p. 203.

²Alonso de Zúrita, The Lords of New Spain, trans. Benjamin Keen (London: Phoenix House, 1963), p. 5.

year 1519, by keeping their main god Huitzilopochtli happy with human sacrificial victims.³

Huitzilopochtli was not the Aztecs' only god, for they had adopted the gods of the tribes they had conquered. Some of these gods were Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent,⁴ Centeotl, goddess of land and maize, and Tonantzin, "Our Mother," whose temple was located on a hill to the north of Mexico.⁵

This militant society had followed its god's commands in every phase of its daily life. It had migrated south to the valley of Mexico, under the guidance of its god Huitzilopochtli. It had established the Aztec capital at the exact site Huitzilopochtli selected. And, it also firmly believed the astrologer's predictions of doom and the return of Quetzalcoatl. With these in mind, the Aztec society was ready, spiritually and psychologically, for the arrival of the fair-haired conquistadores.⁶ However, even though the Spaniards were expected, the Aztecs and other inhabitants of the valley of Mexico did not really know who they were or

³R. C. Padden, The Hummingbird and the Hawk (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967).

⁴Jacques Lafaye, Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 139.

⁵Francisco Javier Clavijero, Capítulos de Historia y Disertación (México: Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1944), p. 23.

⁶Zúrita, The Lords, p. 6.

where they came from.

The discovery of the New World had brought men who had been raised on chivalry, knighthood and the crusading spirit. They were highly individualistic, resourceful and religious (at times, fanatically so). They were also men who were willing to make the most of opportunities.⁷

The Spain they had grown up in had previously not existed as a nation as such. It was not until Ferdinand and Isabella had ascended the throne of Aragon and Castile, respectively, that a semblance of a nation took place. Prior to this, Spain's history was one of disunity, of invasions and conquests.

Among the many invaders were the Iberians, Celts, Romans and the Visigoths, all of whom left their mark in the formation of a Spanish character and culture. In between all

⁷ John Leddy Phelan, "Many Conquests: Some Trends and Some Challenges in Mexican Historiography (1945-69): The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," Investigaciones contemporáneas sobre historia de México (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1971), p. 127. Phelan mentions the romanticism of the age as a theme in Irving A. Leonard, Books of the Brave (1949) and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, in Amadises de America: la hazaña de Indias como empresa caballeresca (1948). Both authors document their theory that the "conquistadores were deeply influenced by the novels of knight errantry and that the principal chronicles of the conquest vividly reflect this lifestyle . . . that the ideal of chivalry with its reliance on faith and intuition and its scorn for prudence and reason were deeply embedded in the Spanish temperament." Paul V. Murray, The Catholic Church in Mexico (México: Editorial E. P. M., 1965), p. 15.

these groups, Jews had begun to live in the Peninsula.⁸ By the fourth century Christianity, which had entered during the Roman period, was firmly established after much trouble and persecution. The Visigoths converted to Christianity during their tenure but they came into conflict with the Romanized Iberians over Church doctrine,⁹ a fact which facilitated the entry of the Moslems.

The Moslems were the last group of invaders that entered the area. They invaded Spain in 711 and remained until the last stronghold was driven out in 1492. Even though Moslem rule was quite tolerant and "there were periods of peace, of intermingling, of cultural exchange . . . ,"¹⁰ the Moslem presence became the unifying force for the Christians who remained in the North.

These Christians had been influenced by the Crusades and the spirit of chivalry. Under this influence they prepared for a reconquest of their land from the Moslems. The discovery of the tomb of the Apostle James the Greater, in northwestern Galicia, provided the impetus needed and "Santiago" became the rallying cry for the Reconquista.

⁸Unless otherwise noted, the general history of the Iberian Peninsula has been based on Hubert Herring, A History of Latin America: From the Beginning to the Present, 3rd edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 101-130.

⁹The Visigoths preferred the Arian doctrine, which denied the Holy Trinity.

¹⁰Murray, The Catholic Church, p. 16.

St. James became the patron saint of Spanish knights and a symbol of "piety and pride . . . courage and faith." These revitalized Christians drove the Moslems to the far south, until Granada was their only stronghold in Spain.

Throughout the Reconquista, the nobility had been growing strong at the expense of the monarchies. However, by the thirteenth century, Castile and Aragon, being the strongest, had divided the other regions of the peninsula between them. Then, in 1469, through marriage, they also united the two royal houses and by 1477 all of Spain was physically under their crown.

To complete the unification, Ferdinand and Isabella decided to build up the cities, thereby decreasing the hold of the fiefs. They granted fueros (special privileges) to certain segments of society, developed hermandades (brotherhoods) and built up a militia to serve as shields between the monarchy and the nobility.

The Catholic Church, as chief landholder, did her part in serving the nation through her progressive farming methods. In addition, by the thirteenth century the Church had reached a high place in spiritual and intellectual leadership. Moreover, by the fifteenth century the Church had undergone a reformation and purification in Spain. This was what Isabella and Ferdinand needed to unify the country spiritually.

By the latter part of the fifteenth century Spain had a unifying national language (Latin had undergone changes and

with the Arabic contributions made up the Spanish language), the nobility had been put in its place and religion provided the final touch. All Jews and Moslems were invited to convert to Christianity. Many outwardly converted but in secret maintained their own religion. To make sure that all, especially those who had converted kept the Catholic religion pure and unchanged, the Inquisition was founded in 1477.

With a national language, a national religion and national pride, Isabella and Ferdinand rallied their forces against the last Moslem stronghold in 1482. Ten years later they drove the Moslems from the Peninsula.¹¹ Isabella and Ferdinand had made religion a "sine qua non" of their monarchy.¹²

Once the Moslems had been driven out, the religious, national and adventurous spirit of the Spaniards had to find an outlet. Hence, the expeditions of exploration which led to the discovery of the American continents and the conquest of Mexico began. The Catholic religion was no longer confined to the Peninsula but spread throughout the New World.

Shortly after their first discoveries, the Catholic monarchs had requested and received the patronato real for

¹¹Peggy K. Liss, Mexico Under Spain 1521-1526
(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 3.

¹²Ibid.

their services to the Catholic Church.¹³ Pope Alexander VI in a papal bull gave them authority to grant ecclesiastical tithes in their possessions in return for maintaining the Catholic religion and furthering conversions and instructions in the New World.¹⁴

Conquest

The conquistadores were men full of religious zeal who were ready to "destroy the idolators and make the religion of the Holy Cross triumph."¹⁵ The Aztecs, in turn, though religious in their own way, were not adverse to including another god into their religion.

Despite instructions from the Crown to study the religion of the natives, on their first encounters with the people of the valley of Mexico, these conquistadores destroyed idols and forced some native priests to cut their hair and change their bloody vestments.¹⁶ The priests accompanying Hernán Cortés had to constantly remind them to moderate their

¹³Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴Murray, The Catholic Church, pp. 21-22.

¹⁵Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Ally of Cortes, trans. Douglass K. Ballentine (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1969), p. xxi.

¹⁶Robert Ricard, The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1966), pp. 17-18.

zeal.¹⁷ However, they continued with their principal goal which was to extirpate the idolators. In fact, such was the speed by which Cortés and his men were forcing conversions that the natives were not given the means to replace their religion.¹⁸ Thus, the Lords of Tenochtitlan found themselves faced with invaders who had not only destroyed their religious ideology, but who tried to change their rites, customs and complete social organization.¹⁹

The Aztecs could cope with the conquest, but what they could not comprehend was the Spaniard's attempt to completely eradicate their religion. However, as it turned out, the conquest was a process of cultural as well as religious mestizaje (a blending or syncretism of culture and religion). Both "the conquerors and the conquered influenced each other reciprocally."²⁰

Aftermath

The first clergymen in Mexico came with Cortés' expedition. These were Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo and a secular

¹⁷Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁹Juan Friede, "Las Casas and Indigenism in the Sixteenth Century," in Bartolome de Las Casas in History, eds. Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 130. Lafaye, Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe, p. 15.

²⁰Phelan, "Many Conquests," p. 127.

priest, Licentiate Juan Díaz, who did not accomplish much in the way of conversions.²¹ After them came two Flemish priests who died within the year and a lay brother, Pedro de Gante, who worked with the natives and put into practice his beliefs and his motto for salvation.²² All these were forerunners to the arrival of the famous twelve who arrived in 1524. Their arrival marked the beginning of evangelization for Mexico. Among these twelve were Fray Martín de Valencia and Fray Toribio de Benavente (Motolinia), who dedicated himself totally to the indigenous tribes of Mexico.²³

This early evangelical period coincided with the Counter-Reformation, Luther's revolt and the sessions of the Council of Trent,²⁴ which accounted for the early missionaries' desire to return to "Christianity in its pure form."²⁵

After the initial contact in which the early missionaries had tried to instill in the natives the concepts of a pure religion and attempted to destroy all images and symbols of the old religion, the first two years of evangelization were devoted to getting acquainted with the country and the

²¹Ricard, Spiritual Conquest, p. 16.

²²Liss, Mexico Under Spain, pp. 70-71.

²³Ricard, Spiritual Conquest, pp. 21-23.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 35-36.

²⁵Richard E. Greenleaf, Zumárraga and the Mexican Inquisition 1536-1543 (Washington: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1961), pp. 26-27.

language of the natives.²⁶ Most of the other Spaniards were busy building up the city which they had destroyed in their zeal. Consequently, the missionaries neglected to impose their beliefs on human sacrifice, the eating of human flesh and other rituals of the old religion, which the natives continued in secret. At other times, they tolerated some practices of the old religion because they needed the natives' support.²⁷ This prefatory period over, they began to gather the natives to catechize them and baptize them.

There were mass baptisms, according to the numbers given by the early missionary historians.²⁸ Also, in 1526, the sacrament of Penance was introduced after much difficulty.²⁹

As the years went by, the methods of conversions and acculturation varied. Some missionaries preferred conversions through example rather than by force.³⁰ Others believed in maintaining the natives' folklore and language apart from the religious beliefs.³¹ Still others separated the natives in

²⁶Elizabeth Andros Foster, ed. and trans., Motolinía's History of the Indians of New Spain (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Printing Plant, 1950), p. 127.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 47, 84.

²⁸Foster, Motolinía's History, pp. 133-36.

²⁹Ibid., p. 40.

³⁰Friede, "Las Casas and Indigenism," p. 159.

³¹Lafaye, Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe, p. 142.

villages from the Spaniards.³² But, whatever the method used, the evangelization continued and Spain was reborn in the New World, "keeping alive a variety of plural society and contributing to cultural" as well as religious "syncretism."³³

Beginning of Nationalism

The natives' instinct for survival made them accept or pay lip service to the Christian religion just as they had with other religions in pre-Conquest times.³⁴ There were a few exceptions, such as the objections of the nobles to the destruction of their customs and rites.³⁵ They insisted that it would be difficult, if not "impossible, to force the old men to give up the customs in which they had been reared."³⁶ (This the Revolutionaries would find to be true as well in the twentieth century).

The Mendicant Orders failed to completely stamp out idolatry. Instead of accepting the Christian religion and forgetting their own, the natives replaced their idols with Christian images, oftentimes maintaining them in the same

³²Greenleaf, Zumárraga, p. 33.

³³Liss, Mexico Under Spain, p. 94. Foster, Motolinía's History, p. 159.

³⁴Friede, "Las Casas and Indigenism," p. 155. Ricard, Spiritual Conquest, pp. 267-68.

³⁵Ricard, Spiritual Conquest, pp. 266-67.

³⁶Ibid. Foster, Motolinía's History, p. 125.