The Role of Christianity in the
Conquest of the Americas

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The Role of Religion in the Conquest of the Americas

The purpose of this work is to deconstruct the role of Christianity in the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec and Inca civilisations in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century. The discourse identifies two faces of Christianity: one justifying violence and the other promoting peace. Underlying the paradox, myriad voices with myriad motives, ranging from a lust for material wealth, to a desire to save lost souls. The Spanish conquest of the Americas saw millions killed, enslaved, oppressed, and converted; with poverty, crime and lost identities, consequences that still prevail today. A glance back at pre-Columbian America and native religions, leads into an overview of initial encounters between Native Americans and Spanish conquistadors, colonists and missionaries. Agency of the Catholic Pope and Spanish Monarch are discussed, and their political, legal and theological justifications for the Conquest explored in relation to their medieval roots in canon law and crusading traditions. The violent face and underlying motives of conquistadors and missionaries are deconstructed vis a vis the peaceful face of voices defending rights of natives. Finally the paper ends looking to Latin America and prevailing existence of ‘holy wars’ in the world today, considering how this discourse of the past, may enlighten the present and future.

The most civilized Native Americans inhabited the valley of Mexico (the Aztecs) and the Andean region of South America (the Incas), each with ‘great religious traditions.’ These empires were ruled through a centralised theocracy, with an elite and priestly class using religious practices and ideologies to connect millions of people from various ethnic and linguistic origins. The art, architecture and rare books that survived the Conquest, demonstrate the rich culture, arts, science and religions of these peoples. Religion of the Aztecs focused on the relationship of humanity and the gods, revolving around a sacred calendar with time representing different ages that each end cataclysmically. The war god, *Huitzilopochtli*, stood at the head of the Aztec pantheon.

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ruling over Tezcatipoca, the personification of the breath of life, Centeotl, the ruler of agriculture, Tlaloc, god of rainfall, and the gentle Quetzalcoatl, god of the winds and heavens. To the Aztecs, death was crucial to the maintenance of life. This is reflected in their creation story, as the ancient gods sacrificing themselves in order to bring life to earth, and to ensure the sun and moon move through the sky. Being gods they did not die, but every day must continue the ongoing process of creation, ensuring humanity continues to survive. The Aztecs believed the gods required human blood as sustenance, hence the ritual of human sacrifice.³ The Incas practiced human sacrifice, to a lesser degree than the Aztecs, and had a different creation myth, involving Viracocha, the creator god, destroying humanity after they sinned against him. On his second attempt, he creates humans assembling stone in his own image, and whom he puts to a test, walking among them disguised as an old man. Again they fail him, so he leaves them to themselves, walking across the Pacific Ocean with a promise to one-day return.⁴ These superstitions proved to be a fatal flaw when it came to confronting the Spaniards. The leaders of the Aztecs and Incas, Montezuma and Atahualpa, first welcomed the white bearded men with their magic guns and mythical horses, as their gods or messengers of their gods, Quetzalcoatl and Viracocha, returning to them. They soon discovered that they couldn’t have been farther from the truth.

Initial contact between Christopher Columbus and American natives, on Hispaniola and another island in the Bahamas in October 1492, was peaceful. In his log, Columbus records the natives as a people of ‘handsome and of good disposition… a people who can be made free and converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force.’ ⁵ Less than thirty years later, in 1521, Hernando de Cortes seized Montezuma, held him ransom for gold and precious stone, destroying the capital Tenochtitlan, and in little more than two years, assisted by Aztecs’ enemy tribes, superior weapons and disease that natives had no immunity to, the Aztec empire fell to the Spanish crown. Ten years later, Francisco Pizarro entered Cuzco, the capital of Peru. Immediately taking advantage of the Incas’ superstitious welcome, he captured Atahualpa, accepted ransom


⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

⁵ Columbus, The Log of Christopher Columbus, p. 76, quoted in, Ibid, p. 27.
of literally a room full of gold, convicted him of idolatry and polygamy, and had him strangled to death.  

Fighting for Peru went on for several years, but with the head of the pyramid gone, the rest of the pyramid eventually crumbled. By 1950, the Spaniards had conquered Mexico and Central America, the Pacific coast of South America, across the Andes and down the Amazon to the ocean. Under the encomienda institution, the soldiers were granted labour of the natives, in exchange for treating them well and Christianising them. In theory they were free but in reality it was slavery, which combined with disruption to community structure, diet and their way of life, thousands to millions died. How the Spanish Monarch and conquistadors could justify acting out such atrocities is the subject of the discourse that follows. To begin, a look at the Iberian coast in the lead up to the discovery of the Americas, and the context of which those in control were to make such decisions.

At the time of the Conquest, ‘firmly entrenched in the Spanish psyche’ was a ‘conviction that the Christians had been fighting a centuries-long war for God’s glory.’ Many events of the previous five hundred years, led to this conviction. In 1479, the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon, to Isabella of Castile, unified the two separate kingdoms into one nation. The couple continued the traditions of the Spanish Inquisition, ‘to enforce both the purity of religions practice and political unity.’ Jews and Muslims in some territories of Spain were confronted with a choice, to convert to Christianity, or face expulsion or death. Even new Christians, known as conversos (ex-Jews) and moriscos (ex-Muslims), were suspected for not being ‘Christian enough.’ As J. H. Elliot, a historian of early modern Spain, writes, ‘there were political overtones

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6 Webster, 'History of Latin America', p. 75.
7 Ibid, p. 78.
8 The exact number of deaths is still debated. Gonzalez, and Gonzalez, 'Christianity in Latin America: A History', p. 29.
9 Ibid, p. 22.
10 Webster, 'History of Latin America', p. 40.
to the Spanish Inquisition that ensured there could be no clear distinction between religious and political accomplishments.'  

The new Spanish Monarchy centralized policies and laws, set up a society of rank based on land ownership and tax exemptions for the noble caste, built a national army and brought the Church under royal control. Ferdinand and Isabella’s royal consent was required for every church ruling and appointment of clergy, allowing them to exclude the pope’s appointment of foreigners, which effectively nationalised the Spanish Church and created an effective mechanism for government. At this time, Portugal had built up a maritime power, and Prince Henry the Navigator sought alternative trade routes by sea that would allow trade to the East to by-pass the Ottoman Empire. When Columbus approached the Monarch with the idea to sail west to get to the East, Isabella listened and negotiated a contract guaranteeing him various rights on successful completion, and ensuring the crown’s share of generated wealth. After Columbus returned with goals and treasures from Hispaniola (an island lying between Puerto Rico and Cuba,) the next step for the Monarch was to get approval for further exploration from Pope Alexander VI. With close ties between Alexander and Ferdinand, the pope set up the bull *Inter caetera*, granting Spain formal authority over all lands west of Cape Verde Islands, in exchange for a guarantee to Christianise the natives.  

The right of the Pope to grant such an entitlement is rooted in medieval history and Canon law developments of the preceding centuries, beginning with Gratian’s *Decretum* in 1140. The *Decretum* addressed the status of non-believers, mainly heretics and schismatics, and to a lesser degree, Jews and infidels. In 1234, Pope Gregory IX (1227-41) published the *Decretales*, a second volume of canon law, this time focusing more on Jews, infidels, and Saracens (Muslems.) Pope Innocent IV (1243-54), combined papal practice with legal skills from his previous career as leading canonist Sinibaldo Fieschi. Innocent developed the first theories of papal relations with non-

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14 Ibid, p. 28.  
16 Ibid, p. 4-5.
Christian societies, his decretal *Quod super his* questioning and justifying the invasion of lands possessed by infidels. Invasion of the holy lands, according to Innocent, was justified by the unjust war from which it was seized, the connection of the land with the life and death of Jesus Christ, and a Donation of Constantine, that was later found to be inauthentic.\(^{17}\) Regard infidels elsewhere, Innocent argued it was illicit to seize property or lordship just because they were infidels, however, since Christ, as God, created all things, and later in his human form, instructed Peter and his successors to ‘feed my sheep,’ (sheep referring to both Christian and non-Christian,) the responsibility for souls of all men, logically fell on the pope.

The pope, Innocent deducted, ‘has jurisdiction and power over infidels *de iure* but not *de facto*,’\(^ {18}\) meaning the pope was responsible to enforce ‘natural law,’ if an infidel ruler failed to do so. This included sexual perversion with right to intervene modelling on God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; and the worship of idols, given there is only one creator, who ‘was not to be identified with man-made idols worshiped by deluded people’.\(^ {19}\) The pope’s responsibility for all people’s spiritual welfare authorised him to send missionaries to instruct non-believers on the proper way to worship God, and if an infidel ruler blocked their entry, after a papal warning, troops could be sent to insure missionaries’ could preach in safety. In addition, if Christians were persecuted in other kingdoms, after papal warning, the troops could invade and force the ruler to retire.\(^ {20}\) When Innocent reversed the question and considered whether infidels had a right to send peaceful missionaries into Christian lands, his answer was simple, ‘no.’ Innocent explained that the Moslem faith and the Christian faith are not equal, and neither are their missionaries, ‘because they are in error and we are on the righteous

\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 6-7. This forgery purports emperor Constantine granting western lands of the Roman Empire to Pope Silvester I (314-35) and was added to the Decretum by Gratian’s successor.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, p. 10. quoted from Innocent IV, 3..34.8., fo.. 176v: “Papa super omnes habet iurisdictionem. et postestatem de iure, licit non de facto.”

\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 11.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, p. 11.
path.’ 21 This justification infers the ‘infidel dominium was invalid while the dominium of Christians was valid,’ 22 however, in precedential context this was not the case. Thus clever wording of the bulls, and a clever application was required. The Requerimiento (1514) was a declaration read aloud in Spanish to Indians before they were attacked. It explained the rights of the Spaniards to the land and people of the Americas, through the legacy passed on from Jesus to Peter to the pope, and from the Christian Creation story. It stated Pope Alexander’s bull granting rights to the Spanish monarch, and hence requiring that the natives become subjects to the king or face war. 23 Modern scholars agree that ‘the Requerimiento embodied Hostiensis’ opinion that infidels did not possess dominium,’ and the reason behind it was to create the illusion that they did. Reading without translation ensured natives would not understand, whilst allowing conquistadors to argue the point that that natives were unwilling ‘to admit peaceful missionaries,’ as such relieving them from sin - violent actions were the only reasonable response in line with the most important goal, to spread Christianity. 24 The Requerimiento alone did not end discussions regarding legitimacy of the conquest, and debates continued for centuries in intellectual and theological discourse, some of these voices for peace will be discussed shortly. It is through this canonical discourse that the political-religious dynamics surrounding the conquest of the Americas will continue to be examined.

By the fifteenth century, the role of the church in European states was changing. With failings thirteenth-century crusades and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the papacy, although still continuing in rhetoric, had lost its leadership role. As the Portuguese and Spanish explored and ‘discovered’ new lands of Africa, and islands in the Atlantic, they ‘informed the papacy of their activities in traditional rhetorical forms that stressed their desire to spread the word of God,’ whilst acting ‘according to their


24 This theory was originally proposed Las Casas,’ and there now exists a consensus among scholars. Muldoon, 'Popes, Lawyers and Infidels', p. 141.
own dynastic interests, seeking papal approval for courses of action already undertaken.’ 25 The pope’s Inter caetera bull granted to King Ferdinand enraged the Portuguese, and they took matters into their own hands, threatening Spain with war. Treaties between the nations were signed and the Line of Demarcation was negotiated at 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands.26 This was a demonstration of political and economic interests of nations taking precedence over spiritual interests of the papacy.27 In 1501 another bull granted the Spanish monarch the right to collect tithes in Americas to pay for Christian missionaries, and in 1508 Pope Julius II granted the patronato real, the right to the Spanish royals to appoint all American ecclesiastical positions, this reflected ‘an unparalleled union between crown and cross.’ 28 Papal-given rights, combined with Spain’s belief that ‘God had entrusted it with the defence of the Catholic faith against all Muslims, Jews, heretics and other unbelievers,’ 29 led to a new crusade: a ‘holy war,’ and a ‘just war,’ in the quest for foreign lands and Christians souls.

The idea that the Conquest was a ‘holy war,’ 30 being fought ‘at God’s command’ and ‘on God’s behalf by his duly authorized representative,’ has been demonstrated by the discussion above. Desires of the Spanish monarchs to ‘propagate right religion,’ adds another dimension to this ‘holy war’ status. The instructions of Valezquez to the Conquistador Hernando de Cortes explain these intentions:

You must bear in mind from the beginning that the first aim of your expedition is to serve God and spread the Christian Faith… you must neglect no opportunity to spread the

25 Ibid, p. 133.


27 Muldoon, ‘Popes, Lawyers and Infidels’, p. 139.


29 Ibid, p. 2.

30 The following discourse is based on a framework of justifications for holy war, provided by J. T. Johnson, 'The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions', (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 37-39.
knowledge of the True Faith and the Church of God among those people who dwell in darkness. 31

The propagation of Christianity was evident throughout the course of the Conquest, which soon involved methodical conversion of natives. In the centuries to come, the ‘holy war’ continued as Spanish missionaries fought to ‘defend the religion’s true form’, ‘enforce religious conformity’ and ‘punish deviation,’ 32 including a new Inquisition, attempting to purify the new Christians from the mestizaje (mixing) that had occurred with their old native religions and traditions. 33 Above all, the Conquest was perceived to be a war fought ‘by God himself’: the Spaniards saw their victories as a ‘sure sign that they were part of God’s great scheme to Christianise the Americas.’ 34 The natives on the other hand saw the suffering and violence they experienced as a sign that their old gods had been defeated and the new god had won. 35 The classification of the Conquest as a ‘holy war,’ was not a concept supported by everyone. Voices for peace including that of Friar Bartolome de Las Casas, the Archibishop of Chiapas, and Antonio de Montesinos, a Dominican priest, demonstrate the opposing face of Christianity in the Conquest. Las Casas and Montesinos, saw the actions of conquistadors and colonists as unjust, evil and sinful.

Montesinos’ sermon in 1511, declared to Spanish colonists it is they who:

are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery?... Be sure that in your present state you can no


34 Gonzalez, and Gonzalez, 'Christianity in Latin America: A History', p. 36.

35 Ibid, p. 34.
more be saved than the Moors or Turks who do not have and do not want the faith of Jesus Christ.  

Las Casas advocated peace through writing and theological discourses, travelling and debating the question of justice, drawing attention to the atrocities being committed in God’s name. Charles V called the Valladolid debates, one of Las Casas most famous, in 1550, to address the issue of the Conquest’s justness. The debate was carried out against Sepulveda who was a royal chaplain and advocate for the idea of Indian inferiority. Sepulveda argued that the natives were ‘almost as monkeys are to men,’ and hence could never be true human nor have complete use of reason, and the war was morally sound. Las Casas presented the case that the only morally just war was on the side of the natives, who had a right to defend their homes and possessions against a military invasion from which they did nothing to provoke. Las Casas noted that while the justification of saving victims of sacrifice and cannibalism was ‘a just cause in principle,’ a much larger number of innocents were being killed by the Spaniards than would have died at the hands of the natives. Against the argument that violence was just as the natives were heretics, Las Casas nullified with doctrine of ‘invincible ignorance,’ that those never exposed to the Gospel are not included in this category.

The debate had no real impact on the physical manifestations of the conflict, but this discourse is useful in demonstrating the two faces of Christianity. Sepulveda’s argument demonstrated the face of ‘the cross and sword inextricably intertwined, each serving the purpose of the other;’ and Las Casas demonstrated a Christianity standing up for peace, protecting the weak, ‘bringing “true” conversion by example, standing against prevailing culture.’ Within this framework of political, legal and theological arguments, both for and against holy and just nature of the war, the discourse proceeds to a deconstruction of motives, seeking to identify what, besides religion, was driving the battle.

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36 Ibid, p. 30. These words of Montesinos are what first inspired Las Casas to take a stand.
37 Ibid, p. 45.
38 Ibid, p. 44.
40 Ibid, p. 46.
Las Casas illuminates the motives and actions of the Spaniards in his account of Hatuey, an Indian leader from Hispaniola.\textsuperscript{41} When asked by other natives, whether the Spanish were ‘innately cruel and evil,’ Hatuey replied, ‘it is not simply that…’ and pointing to a basket of gold jewellery, he said, ‘here is the God of the Christians.’ Continuing along these lines, Las Casas, describes what he perceived to be the motives that underlay the Conquistadors actions:

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that the Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient, so easy to subject, and that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts.\textsuperscript{42}

Las Casas presents the extreme of the face of Christianity promoting peace. Not all Christians in America were led by greed and ambition, Spanish nationalism and the true belief that they were serving God, also come into the equation.\textsuperscript{43} Motivations of missionaries, as expressed in the \textit{Platicas}, demonstrate such a conviction:

We are only messengers sent to yo by a great lord called the Holy Father, who is the spiritual head of the world, and who is filled with pain and sadness by the state of your souls. These are the souls he has charged us to search out and save…We do not seek gold, silver, or precious stones; we seek only your health.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 29. Story told by Bartolome de Las Casas in \textit{A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies}.

\textsuperscript{42} Greider, 'The Maya 'Greening Road' of Reconciliation: The Pan-Maya Movement in Guatemala', p. 88. Las Casas’ writings (1542).

\textsuperscript{43} Gonzalez, and Gonzalez, 'Christianity in Latin America: A History', p. 3

\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Platicas} are the first sermons, conversations and discourses preached by the Twelve missionaries to the chiefs and pagan priests of Mexico. Ricard, 'The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico', p. 86, as quoted from the Platicas of Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, translated into Nahuatl, discovered by Father Pascual Saura and published in 1924 by Father Pou y Marti.
The missionaries were not after material wealth, but instead sought spiritual wealth, for themselves and for their converts. Underlying these motives, one can imagine the excitement of travelling and of accepting the challenge to save a new race of sinful people from their evil ways, providing them the True Religion, so that they may have eternal life. They believed what they were doing what was pleasing to God and for them there was no greater purpose for one’s life. The single character of Hernando de Cortes embodies the polemic nature of Christianity: greedy and destructive, but with deep Christian convictions. His passionate intentions were to, ‘give them [the natives] warning and to command them not to worship idols, nor sacrifice human beings or eat their flesh, or practice sodomy or other uncleanness.’\textsuperscript{45} Cortes was devoted to prayer, daily mass, carried the image of the Virgin Mary everywhere he went, and even drew a cross with his blood as he was dying, so it would be the last thing he saw. Cortes pursued political and military conquest simultaneous to a religious one.\textsuperscript{46}

As this discourse demonstrates, myriad motives are intertwined within and between different actors at different times: from evangelism and spiritual wealth, to nationalism, to spices, to material resources, money, and status. While some actors prioritise their allegiance to God, and others are more forthright in their materialistic desires, both poles are apparent in them all, distinguishable mainly by degree. The words of conquistador Bernal Diaz sum it up perfectly, we ‘came to serve God, and also to get rich.’\textsuperscript{47} The two faces of Christianity are evident throughout the course of Spanish-American relations. Even the most violent conquistadors were able to justify to themselves that their actions were pleasing to God.

The struggles of native-Americans and indigenous peoples in all colonial and ex-colonial countries are far from resolved. The idea of a ‘holy war’ prevails, and battles over Holy Lands and over ownership of the True Faith continue. By deconstructing and


\textsuperscript{46} Ricard, 'The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico', p. 15.

\textsuperscript{47} Hanke, 'The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America', p. 7. Bernal Diaz, was a conquistador under Herman Cortes.
analysing the conflicts of the past, lessons may be learned, and damages caused by previous generations, begin to be repaired.

Looking back over the struggle for justice in the Americas, and the two faces of Christianity, has demonstrated precisely how religion is used to both justify violence and to promote peace. The Christian God and Christ, justified the Pope’s right to all the land and all the people of the world, and the Pope’s granting of Spain rights to the land and people of the Americas, initiated a Conquest that saw the collapse of two great empires, and changed the course of history for millions of people. Political, economical and spiritual motives were evident in the intertwining of greed and ambition, with holy desires and theological justifications. As a consequence, hundreds of years of debate between the religious poles which still continue, with regards to Latin American issues, and conflicts around the world, to this day. Can a study of the past assist in bringing about a more peaceful future? Will the two faces of religion continue? Or, can the peaceful face overcome the destructive one? The writer is optimistic, but only in time will the answer to this question make itself known.
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