

The Mendicant Friars Arrive

Fray Marin de Valencia, the Pope's vicar, arrived in Mexico in the year '24, with twelve companions. Cortés received him with gifts, services, and honor. Whenever he spoke to them it was with cap in hand and one knee to the ground, while he kissed their robes as an example to the Indians who were to be converted.

Francisco López de Gómara (1964, 331)

In keeping with the conquistadores' creed of gold and glory but above all God, Cortés had smashed many idols and his chaplain had baptized numerous converts. But as Friar Motolinia, one of the first missionaries, put it, the conquistadores "were content to build their houses and seemed satisfied as long as no human sacrifice occurred in public" (Thomas). Unlike the conquerors, the emperor could not perform his duties halfheartedly. Charles V was granted extraordinary privileges by the papacy to head the Catholic Church in all of Spain's domains because the conquest was seen as a sign of God's favor for the emperor: he alone was entrusted with all those souls. And Charles V proved himself a devout monarch.

Perhaps Cortés's most profound legacy was his recommendation to the Crown that the mendicant orders—the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians—be charged with the responsibility for the Indians' salvation. These missionaries, as opposed to the secular clergy, were educated individuals recognized for their devotion and respected for their vows of poverty. The religious orders and monastic life sustained them, not the charging of fees for services. Cortés believed their humble character would speed the conversion of the Mexican people. The emperor agreed.

The Franciscan volunteers arrived first in 1524. They quickly impressed the native population by walking barefoot from the Gulf coast port to Mexico City. Their simple dress and the self-inflicted suffering endured on their 50-day journey could not have contrasted more with the greed of the conquistadores. Nor could their thinking: rather than seeking fabled cities of unimaginable wealth, many of the friars saw the New World as an opportunity to create the monastic kingdom of pure charity—Thomas More's Utopia or Augustin's City of God. Their zeal was often fueled by the belief that Christianizing the Indians would create these ideal societies and thus pave the way for the second coming of Christ. The Crown, too, took its religious obligations seri-

ously: when the first bishop, Juan de Zumárraga, arrived in 1527, he carried the title "Protector of the Indians."

The Spiritual Conquest

With millions to convert, the friars counted only in the hundreds, yet they remained undaunted in the task of spiritual conquest. They fanned out across the country—eventually they, not soldiers, would be the first to venture into new territories in the north in order to pacify the native populations. (They were also the first Europeans to see the Grand Canyon.) In Mexico they built their chapels atop pagan pyramids and established simple living quarters amid the most ancient cities of the Americas. Nine million people were baptized in the central region by 1537: Friar Pedro de Gante said it was not unusual to baptize 4,000 people in a day; Father Motolinia thought he alone had baptized 300,000.

As the number of neophytes swelled, the friars needed churches, but the size required was well beyond any immediate building capabilities. So a uniquely New World architectural form was created: the open



Sixteenth-century Church of Cuilapán in Oaxaca

chapel, a solution especially amenable to religious practices of Mesoamericans who had always gathered in large open-air plazas. Over time, open chapels were replaced by enclosed churches and vast monastery complexes such as the one at Cuilapán. Using Indian labor, the friars built 50 such establishments by 1540 and, eventually, a total of 400 dotted the land from Yucatán to Michoacán.

The rapidity of conversion was no less astonishing than the Spanish conquest itself. Given that Mesoamerican religion profoundly permeated the native view of the world, from the creation of the stars to the planting of corn, it is hard to understand how it could be so quickly eradicated. In fact, there is abundant evidence that it was not.

Similarities between the religions facilitated conversion. Both cultures believed in an afterlife and a world created by god(s). The cross was a symbol for both, being also the symbol for the Mesoamerican world tree that linked the supernatural and earthly realms; the Crucifixion of Christ was, for Mesoamericans, another example of their belief that sacrifice was needed for rebirth. Fasting, sexual abstinence, and even the ritual use of water, such as in Christian baptism, also resonated with indigenous practices. And both religions shared a ritual calendar that dominated the change of seasons and the march of the days. The Catholics honored their saints and the Mesoamericans their deities with religious processions, festively dressed idols, incense burning, music, and dance.

As the friars discovered, conversion often involved only the veneer of these similarities to Christianity: traditional beliefs and practices remained intact. It was one thing for the Indians to respect a new god so powerful as to have led the Europeans to conquer them. It was another to expect them to reject their own gods and not fear the consequences. Old ritual practices continued, most often in secret, although some were overlooked and even exploited by the priests—the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe, for instance, conveniently made her miraculous appearance to Juan Diego, a Nahuatl peasant boy, near the shrine of Tonantzín, Aztec earth goddess and mother of humankind.

In other instances, the vestiges of paganism proved intolerable: Friar Diego de Landa, for example, was scandalized by the persistence in the Yucatán of sacrificial rituals among his most dedicated converts. He instituted an inquisition into native idolatry in 1562, torturing the heretics and burning the Maya hieroglyphic books. He was ordered back to Spain: the Crown realized the Indians simply did not yet understand the true faith. The Indians were subsequently exempt from the punitive powers of the Inquisition.



Diego de Landa (1529–79). Although responsible for Indian torture and deaths during an inquisition, Diego de Landa also wrote the definitive work on Yucatec Maya customs, providing the key to decipherment of ancient Maya hieroglyphic texts that reveal the very Maya religion Landa hoped to repress.

Friars as Ethnographers

The priests understood that it was not just the Indians who required more thorough instruction. The friars needed a greater knowledge of native beliefs in order to eradicate them. From the beginning the fathers had been great linguists, learning the native languages and compiling dictionaries so that the catechism could be taught. Schools were opened for natives: one was a university for Indian nobles where they learned Latin so well they became the instructors for the Spanish settlers; others included the utopian communities established by Vasco de Quiroga in Michoacán where the Purépecha learned how to use their craft-making skills in order to be self-sustaining.

By the middle of the 16th century, the friars also became the first ethnographers, working in collaboration with the Indians and encouraging them to write about their own history and culture in their native languages. The most famous, Bernardino de Sahagún, working with a team of central Mexican nobles, compiled an encyclopedia of pre-Columbian Aztec life that described everything from sacred rituals to recipes for preparing hot chocolate. In the process, the nobles learned to write their own language, Nahuatl, in the Roman alphabet rather than in pictographs—a skill that greatly facilitated communication. On Sahagún's part, he left to posterity its greatest source of information on Mesoamerican life at the time of the conquest.

Mesoamerican Catholicism

Such collaboration did much to profoundly Hispanicize and Christianize many Indians. Once the native leaders changed, many of the commoners followed suit. The daily relation of the Indians with their land, the sacred landscape of their ancestors, and with their traditional communities, however, often remained untouched—the church seemed to think such “household” practices meaningless superstitions. In many instances, conversion only created what many anthropologists now call “Mesoamerican Catholicism,” a reworking of Christianity that incorporated, and partially modified, the Mesoamerican worldview, as can be seen in the distinctive imagery of this Nahuatl hymn:

*The roses, dark red ones, pale ones
The red feather flowers, the golden flowers
lie there waving like precious bracelets
lie bending with quetzal feather dew.*

Indian hymn to St. Clare (Burkhart 1993, 210)

Today most native-speaking Mexicans are devout Christians and many make pilgrimages to the nation's patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe. But most anthropologists believe the Virgin represents a powerful synthesis of the Christian and Mesoamerican beliefs: she is still called Tonantzin by the Nahuatl. Many such instances of a syncretic religion have been identified, including the performance of Ch'a-Chak rituals to the Maya rain god, common in years of drought. Perhaps the survival of such beliefs would not have been possible if the vibrant intellectual exchange between native and European had not ended late in the 16th century when the friars lost much of their power to the secular clergy. Outside the cities, the Indians, who had often been officially separated from the colonists to keep them free of Spanish corruption, lost their only viable link to European ways. Without the friars and their investment in native education, the traditional communities themselves provided the daily context for religious observances.

Mid-Century Reforms

The remarkable achievements of Sahagún and other friars, such as Vasco de Quiroga, occurred during the middle of the 16th century. In what has been called the “golden age of Christianity,” this was a period of unusual collaboration between the native population and the foreigners, from the Aztecs advising the new government on how to control the flooding of Lake Texcoco to programs that taught Indians European skills, such as blacksmithing and carpentry. There never was similar harmony among the colonists, the royal functionaries and the religious, however. The clergy wanted to protect the native population, of course, and provide them with salvation; the conquistadores wanted to work them like beasts of burden. But even among these factions, relations improved after the disputes immediately following the conquest.

The cooperative spirit certainly was promoted by two enlightened individuals during the founding of New Spain: Mexico's first viceroy (1530–50), Antonio de Mendoza, and its first bishop and archbishop (1528–48), Juan de Zumárraga. These two could not have carried out the enormous task of institutionalizing the power of the Crown and church in the conquered land more competently. Mendoza, the count of Tendilla and related to the royal house, had been a diplomat in Rome; Zumárraga, a true Franciscan in his poverty vows, was the executor of many royal commissions and a militant champion of Christian values (he risked his life challenging the abuses of natives by early officials). Mendoza was followed by another superb viceroy, Luis de Velasco

INDIAN RESISTANCE TO CONVERSION

Not all Indians willingly participated in the new societal order. Armed rebellion did occur sporadically throughout the colonial period. The Mixtón Rebellion in 1541 near Guadalajara was one of the most threatening: 100,000 native rebels rose against 400 Spaniards. They were defeated by 30,000 Aztecs, for the first time armed with Spanish guns. Native resistance to the religious and political conquest more often took the form of escape into remote regions—especially toward the end of the 16th century. The Lacandón Maya did just that, remaining unconverted and unassimilated well into the 20th century when logging operations and population pressures destroyed the Chiapas rain forest that had so long sustained them. The contemporary Tarahumara Indians of the Copper Canyon in northern Mexico, known so well by tourists, and the Huichol of the Colima plateau, famous for their peyote cult, are other examples. Their cultural survival also is threatened by environmental devastation.



A 20th-century Lacandón Maya Indian selling arrows at Palenque

(1550–64), who became known as “Father of the Indians.” These three shared many Renaissance humanist views and each was scrupulous in implementing the emperor’s policies. They set the best example for the future administration of the colony.

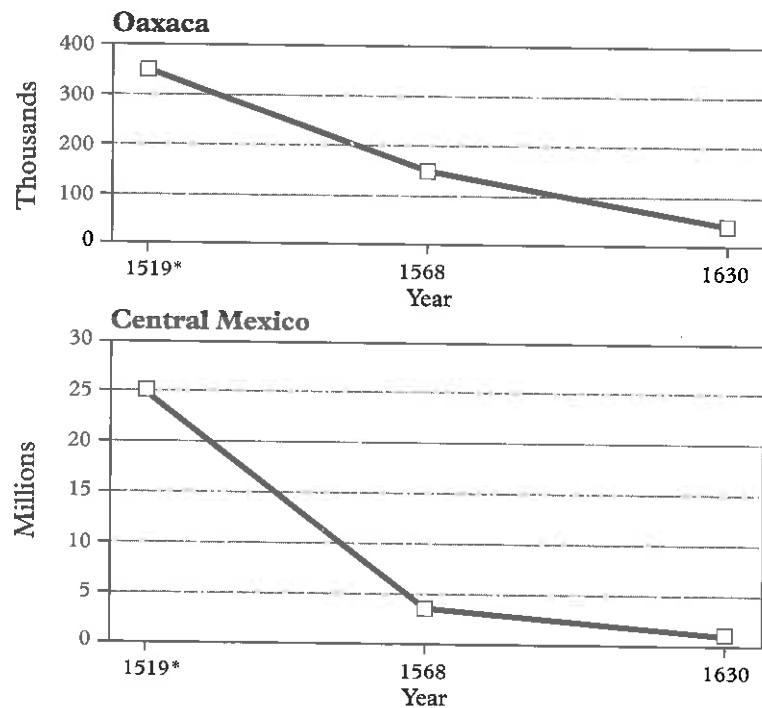
Their humanism, as well as that of the religious community, resulted in the passage of reforms that protected the native population. Both a papal bull (1537) and a royal edict called the New Laws (1542) settled the matter once and for all that Indians were human, capable of salvation, and worthy vassals of the Crown—principles that Bartolomé de Las Casas, bishop of Chiapas, had been lobbying for since he had witnessed the genocide in the West Indies. Indian slavery finally was outlawed.

The period of relative cooperation that permitted such radical reforms may have resulted, in part, from the low numbers of Spanish colonists. By as late as 1560, the Spaniards in New Spain probably numbered barely more than 20,000. Initially there was plenty of land and, usually, more than enough Indians to labor on the *encomiendas* or, at least, provide tribute to sustain the colonists in an acceptable manner. But as the Indian population declined catastrophically, the settlers’ demands for native labor increasingly clashed with the reforming goals of the church and government.

The truth was that Indian labor was too much in demand. The church required, and trained, artisans to build and decorate monasteries and chapels. The government expected its *tequio*, or public service, too, for building town halls or repairing streets. And then there was the *encomendero*, whose sugar cane and cattle ranches had to be maintained. Although the Indians had provided tribute and labor to Mesoamerican rulers, the Spaniards had tripled the levels of Aztec tribute despite the catastrophic declines in population.

The Crown attempted to protect the Indians from further loss, swayed by economic reasons as well as arguments from the religious that the exploitative colonists were at fault. (Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas claimed that the Spaniards’ abuses made the natives refuse baptism for fear of having to spend eternity in their company.) In addition to banning Indian enslavement, Mendoza lowered the amount of free labor and tribute permitted. To boost the economy, more African slaves were brought to New Spain. (No ban on their enslavement was considered.) Although these slaves somewhat reduced the settlers’ need for workers, they also cost money—unlike the Indians. Twenty thousand had arrived in the colony by 1553, and although their numbers equaled that of the European community, they hardly made up for the millions of Indians lost to infectious diseases and abuse.

DEPOPULATION



*There was no census until later in the 16th century, when the native population already was decimated, so reconstructed estimates of population size at the time of conquest may vary greatly. In this chart, the Oaxaca estimate is a conservative one from Ronald Spores; the central Mexican figures by Cook and Borah are among the most generous for that massive region.

Never having been exposed to European diseases, the Indians had no natural immunity to smallpox, measles, typhoid, chicken pox, yellow fever, or mumps. At least seven major waves of these diseases had washed through the native population by 1600. Famine often followed because so few individuals were able to work the land. These deaths added to those caused by abuse, homicide, and cultural dislocation resulted in what some have called “possibly the greatest demographic disaster in the history of the world” (Denevan). No one understood the nature of infectious disease at the time: Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas thought the encomienda system was the work of the devil to depopulate New Spain; the Mixtecs, too thought it was due to the supernatural and reverted to traditional curing rituals—called “witchcraft” by the church. By most estimates, the population decreased by 70 to 90 percent. Not until 1650 did the size of the native population begin to increase.

If restricted labor already was a cause for colonists to complain, the increased labor needs created by the first major mining strikes (1545–65) intensified the feeling. When, in 1564, the Crown tried to implement further reforms, it ignited treasonous ideas, especially since these reforms attacked the institution most sacred to the conquistadores’ descendants: the *encomienda*. All *encomiendas*, it was ordered, would cease upon the death of the holder. No longer would the privileged status and wealth of *encomenderos* be inherited. Outraged, Alonso de Avila, son of a conquistador, argued for independence from Spain. He suggested the new Marqués del Valle, Cortés’s son Martín, should be made king of the independent nation. And he thought armed resistance was in order. The talk didn’t get much further before Alonso de Avila was arrested and beheaded along with his brother. The more fortunate Martín Cortés was exiled forever, and his stepbrother, the son of Cortés and Marina, was tortured. Others of the New World aristocracy were beheaded. But not only did all talk of rebellion end, so did any serious effort to eliminate the remaining *encomiendas*: eventually the practice would simply fade away.

Utopian Experiments End

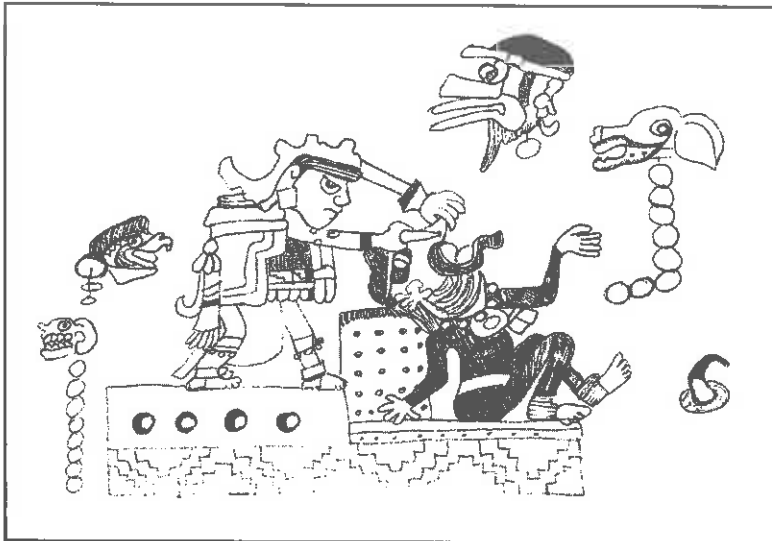
As the 16th century came to a close, the conflicts took a different shape. The Renaissance humanism that had so imbued the mid-century exchanges between Europeans and the native population with tolerance (and even a tinge of mutual respect) ended with the more dogmatic promulgations of the Council of Trent (1563). Following the Council of Trent, many books, such as those by Erasmus, were banned in Spain, although they circulated freely in Mexico and were part of the catechism.

Charles V was dead, as were Zumárraga and Mendoza; the native aristocrats who had been educated in Mesoamerican traditions were dying out. The official onset of the Inquisition in Mexico in 1571 marked the final demise of this most idealistic religious period. Not only did the friars no longer attempt to create utopian Indian communities, but such work bordered on the heretical. Treatises by former archbishop Zumárraga were banned; Sahagún’s work languished in archives until the 19th century. The early humanists were too often replaced by more corrupt individuals who saw the Americas as an opportunity to make a quick fortune or to hide their vices from European view. Even the clergy occupied themselves in building ever more ornate churches, replacing religious zeal with their own material comforts, and advocacy with authoritarianism.

MIXTEC CACIQUES THRIVE UNDER SPAIN

The *Codex Nuttall*, a pre-Columbian book, tells the story of the great Mixtec ruler, 8 Deer “Tiger Claw,” in A.D. 1103. His descendants continued to rule in the Sierra Mixteca of Oaxaca well into the 19th century, whereas Moctezuma’s dynastic line (more threatening to Spain) had lost the power to hold any office, however low, by 1565. In Oaxaca, the number of Europeans were fewer than in most parts of New Spain, never amounting to even 7 percent in contrast to 50 percent around Mexico City. The conquistadores could barely control Oaxaca City, which they founded; their influence was even less in the nearby rugged mountains, where they had sadly discovered during the conquest that “the terrain does not permit the use of horses.” Cacique rights and territories were recognized in order to gain the Mixtecs’ much-needed cooperation. The indigenous economy, not *encomiendas*, became indispensable to Spanish society; the traditional communities and native political order remained intact, including class distinctions.

In the mid-16th-century *Codex of Yanhuitlán*, Don Gabriel de Guzmán, cacique of the Mixtec principality of Yanhuitlán and descendant



In this section of the pre-Columbian *Codex Nuttall*, the Mixtec ruler 8 Deer (on right) undergoes a nose-piercing ceremony. (Drawing by Shannon Ernst)

of the pre-Columbian ruler 8 Deer “Tiger Claw,” meets with a high-ranking Spaniard. Below him is his Mixtec name glyph of 9 House. The Mixtec caciques, such as Don Gabriel, oversaw vast territories and functioned as they had for many centuries, except tribute was paid to the Spaniards instead of to the Aztecs. In return, the caciques received Spanish privileges: Don Gabriel was granted the gentleman’s title of *don*, a coat of arms, permits to raise livestock and the right to wear Spanish clothes, ride horseback, and bear arms.



The Mixtec cacique Don Gabriel (on right) confers with a Spaniard, from the *Codex of Yanhuitlán*. (Drawing by Shannon Ernst)

The new king Philip II reigned in these more severe times (from 1556 to 1598). Philip was more interested in the economy of New Spain than in the treatment of the native population. He was more sensitive to the jealousy of the settlers when Nahua nobles outdid them in schools than in attempts to enable the Indians to become fully realized vassals of Spain. The university was disbanded. Sympathetic to the colonists and their need for labor, Philip permitted the secular clergy, less educated and totally dependent on settlers' tithes, to take over from the meddlesome mendicant orders. The well-being of the native population became secondary to the need for a productive economy to sustain the Spanish empire.

Spain Flourishes

As the first century of European involvement in the New World came to a close, the potential wealth of the colony had already become apparent to all. Silver bullion weighted down the Spanish galleons—enough to pay for the entire cost of administering all the American colonies, with plenty left over for Spain. The China trade was established in 1564: silks and spices and porcelains from the Philippines arrived across the Pacific to Acapulco, and then, after being carried across Mexico to Veracruz, accompanied the silver in its transatlantic voyage. The galleons carried much of Europe's wealth. And Spain owned it all.

Piracy occasionally helped England and France to get their share of American bounty. Sir Francis Drake, for example, looted Spanish ships from the Pacific to the Caribbean with the full sanction of England. European powers also tried to colonize other parts of the Americas: for example, French Huguenots tried, but failed, to settle Florida. Wishing to protect his very lucrative domains, Philip looked for a port in California, sent colonizers to New Mexico, and Juan Ponce de León to Florida. He strived not only to secure the passage of his galleons but to guarantee the continued flow of New World tribute and exports.

New Spain Established

Before the end of the 16th century, a massive change had occurred: an indigenous civilization had been brought under the control of a European monarch. The wealth of a population of millions had been transferred to a few conquerors through *encomienda* and tribute; there was not a single aspect of the pre-Columbian culture that had not been transformed in the process: Indian writing had changed from pic-

tographs to the Roman alphabet; ritual sacrifice had been eradicated, ribbons had replaced feathers in religious costumes, and once proud Mesoamericans who had believed their cities were the sacred centers of the universe, had been taught that the true center was far away in a foreign land. The very names of people and places had been changed: the sacred city of Teotihuacán was now San Juan Teotihuacán.

Until recently historians thought the viceregal and ecclesiastic control of native society obliterated preconquest institutions. Yet archival studies by historians such as Charles Gibson and James Lockhart have demonstrated that Spain's success lay in manipulating the native institutions to serve its own purposes. Replacing the imperial rulers of the Aztecs, the viceregal government achieved only an overlay of authority; under it and supporting it through trade and markets, farming and artisanship, tax collection and tribute, was a "Republic of Indians." Even the security of New Spain depended on the peacekeeping efforts and garrisons of native allies. In many regions, Spaniards relied on the old Mesoamerican political and social order, with Indian elites acting as intermediaries between their people and the foreign officials.

In less than 100 years after the conquest, viceregal government was fully developed, and the Catholic Church had sent its missionaries into most, if not all, recesses of the country. Spain's new government branch, the Council of the Indies, promulgated regulations to New Spain that affected everything from the location of a town church to the kind of crops that could be grown. But the forms of government and religion succeeded only because they took on a distinctly pre-Hispanic cast: Mexican in nature, the New World's institutions were as composite as its people were increasingly racially mixed.

The 16th century witnessed the formation of a new people and new institutions: a characteristic Mexican fusion. The bureaucracy of New Spain was in place and, as the century closed, Spain managed to remain the sole European power in this New World.