

Lesson 3: The Spread of Christianity in the Western Hemisphere

Introduction

The Reformation ushered in new efforts on the part of Europeans to spread Christianity in the world. In this quest, however, the Roman Catholic Church had a decided advantage. Because it claimed that anyone could be saved, its missionaries were free to convert any human being anywhere regardless of race, culture, or location. On the other hand, early Protestants, particularly Calvinists, were constrained by their notion of the “elect.” Calvinists believed that God only chose a few people to be saved and all the rest were damned, no matter what they did or how they acted.

The Spanish, Portuguese, and French Catholics who colonized the Americas in the sixteenth century enthusiastically endeavored to spread Catholicism to the Native Americans they found there. The Society of Jesus, known as the Jesuits, played a major role in these conversion efforts.

One strong reason for the creation of the Society of Jesus was to counter Protestantism. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), who initiated the society, combined fierce piety and a military organization. Although the Jesuits were organized as an army with military ranks under the pope, all of its members were encouraged to think for themselves as “companions of Jesus.” The Jesuits’ goal was to halt the spread of Protestantism and to extend the reach of the Church by converting the “heathen.”

The Jesuits stressed education and an intellectual approach as the means of conversion. Jesuit colleges, staffed by Jesuits who learned local languages and tried to adapt to the local culture in each place they served,

grew up all over the world. One of their axioms was: “Give us a boy at the age of seven, and he will be ours forever.” During the sixteenth century, the Jesuits carried the Church’s message throughout Europe and the Americas, as well as to India, Japan, and China.

In the seventeenth century, the English and Dutch joined the race for colonies in the Western Hemisphere. Both the Anglicans (Protestant Church of England), in what later became the southern states, and the Puritans in New England, were ambivalent about the conversion of Indians. In general, Protestants did not encourage conversions, although a few Protestant missionaries did venture into native lands to convert small numbers. It would not be until the early nineteenth century, when most Protestants accepted the concept of universal salvation, that Protestant missionaries undertook major efforts in Africa and Asia.

Christian missionaries who traveled far from their home bases in Europe faced a daunting dilemma. Should they follow St. Paul’s dictum that they “Be all things to all people,” or should they insist that converts strictly follow established doctrines and practices? Generally, most of the missionaries believed that they alone had the keys to salvation and that their world-view was absolutely true. These assumptions frequently led to unrestrained violence against those “heathen” who resisted the word of God.

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Student Handout 3.1—The Origin of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits)

Ignatius Loyola was born in a feudal castle in Spain in 1491. His first job was in the Spanish army where, during a battle, one of his legs was shattered. While he was recuperating, he began to read religious literature, and he was soon dreaming of becoming a crusader to the Holy Land. This mixture of religious and military zeal impelled his commitment to “mystical militarism.”

Soon Loyola was trying to convince others to join him in his dream of a spiritual conquest of the Holy Land. In 1538, he and his followers created a permanent organization, the Society of Jesus, to carry reform and spiritual enlightenment to all Catholic countries and beyond. Many began to join this new mendicant order that soon acquired a reputation for piety, saintliness, and military style discipline. Jesuits begged for bread in the streets, slept in the poorhouse, cared for prisoners in the jails, and engaged in other acts of charity.

But the Society’s distinguishing characteristic was that its members cultivated close contacts with the nobility, especially men and women in important positions. It was not long before its influence spread from Spain to Italy and France. At the time when the Church was suffering from Protestant attacks, the Jesuits brought new vitality, enthusiasm, methods, and spiritual outlook to the Church.

The Jesuits became the leading instruments of the Catholic Reformation. The religious reconquest of southern and western Germany for the Church, and the preservation of the Catholic faith in France and other countries, were due primarily to their efforts. From the very beginning, the Jesuit missionary efforts in India, Japan, China, Canada, and Central and South America were as important as their activity in Christian countries.



Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)
Founder of the Society of Jesus (The Jesuits)

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Student Handout 3.2 —Spreading Christianity in the Americas

Excerpt from Pope Alexander VI, Papal Bull *Inter Caetera*, May 4, 1493

Wherefore, as becomes Catholic kings and princes, after earnest consideration of all matters, especially of the rise and spread of the Catholic faith, as was the fashion of your ancestors, kings of renowned memory, you have purposed with the favor of divine clemency to bring under your sway the said mainlands and islands with their residents and inhabitants and to bring them to the Catholic faith.

Source: Marvin Lunenfeld, ed., 1492, *Discovery, Invasion, Encounter: Sources and Interpretations* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1991), 187.

Excerpt from Letter from Christopher Columbus to Ferdinand and Isabella

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ... In consequence of the information which I had given your Highnesses respecting the countries of India and of a Prince, called Great Can, which in our language signifies King of Kings, how, at many times he and his predecessors had sent to Rome soliciting instructors who might teach him our holy faith, and the holy Father had never granted his request, whereby great numbers of people were lost, believing in idolatry and doctrines of perdition. Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith, and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet, and of all idolatry and heresy, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above-mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, people, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith; and furthermore directed that I should not proceed by land to the East, as is customary, but by a Westerly route, in which direction we have hitherto no certain evidence that any one has gone.

Source: Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *Writings of Christopher Columbus Descriptive of the Discovery and Occupation of the New World* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1892), 27-9.

Requerimiento

When the conquistadors encountered a Native American community they hoped to convert, a priest would read a *requerimiento* to them in Latin or Spanish, languages Indians did not understand. Sometimes the declaration was read even when no Indians were present. The *requerimiento* was the only warning the natives had to convert or otherwise suffer.

Requerimiento written by the jurist Palacios Rubio of the Council of Castille in 1510

On the part of the King, Don Fernando, and of Doña Juana, his daughter, Queen of Castille and León, subduers of the barbarous nations, we their servants notify and make known to you, as best we can, that the Lord our God, Living and Eternal, created the Heaven and the Earth, and one man and one woman, of whom you and we, all the men of the world, were and are descendants, and all those who came after us. But, on account of the multitude which has sprung from this man and woman in the five thousand years since the world was created, it was necessary that some men should go one way and some another, and that they should be divided into many kingdoms and provinces, for in one alone they could not be sustained.

Of all these nations God our Lord gave charge to one man, called St. Peter, that he should be Lord and Superior of all the men in the world, that all should obey him, and that he should be the head of the whole human race, wherever men should live, and under whatever law, sect, or belief they should be; and he gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction.

And he commanded him to place his seat in Rome, as the spot most fitting to rule the world from; but also he permitted him to have his seat in any other part of the world, and to judge and govern all Christians, Moors [Muslims], Jews, Gentiles, and all other sects. This man was called Pope, as if to say, Admirable Great Father and Governor of men. The men who lived in that time obeyed St. Peter, and took him for Lord, King, and Superior of the universe; so also they have regarded the others who after him have been elected to the pontificate, and so has it been continued even till now, and will continue till the end of the world. ...

So their Highnesses are kings and lords of these islands and land of Tierra-firme by virtue of this donation: and some islands, and indeed almost all those to whom this has been notified, have received and served their Highnesses, as lords and kings, in the way that subjects ought to do, with good will, without any resistance, immediately, without delay, when they were informed of the aforesaid facts. And also they received and obeyed the priests whom their Highnesses sent to preach to them and to teach them our Holy Faith; and all these, of their own free will, without any reward or condition, have become Christians, and are so, and their Highnesses have joyfully and benignantly received them, and also have commanded them to be treated as their subjects and vassals; and you too are held and obliged to do the same. Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it, and that you acknowledge the Church as the Ruler and Superior of the whole world, and the high priest called Pope, and in his name the King and Queen Doña Juana our lords, in his place, as superiors and lords and kings of these islands and this Tierra-firme by virtue of the said donation, and that you consent and give place that these religious fathers should declare and preach to you the aforesaid.

If you do so, you will do well, and that which you are obliged to do to their Highnesses, and we in their name shall receive you in all love and charity, and shall leave you, your wives, and your children, and your lands, free without servitude, that you may do with them and with yourselves freely that which you like and think best, and they shall not compel you to turn Christians, unless you yourselves, when informed of the truth, should wish to be converted to our Holy Catholic Faith, as almost all the inhabitants of the rest of the islands have done. And, besides this, their Highnesses award you many privileges and exemptions and will grant you many benefits.

But, if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their Highnesses; we shall take you and your wives and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their Highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us. And that we have said this to you and made this Requisition, we request the notary here present to give us his testimony in writing, and we ask the rest who are present that they should be witnesses of this Requisition.

Source: *Requerimiento* qtd. in Marcelo J. Borges, *History 130-10 (Latin American History to 1825)*, 2004, Dickinson College, <http://www.dickinson.edu/~borges/Resources-Requerimiento.htm>.

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Student Handout 3.3—Spanish Strategies for Converting Native Americans

The New World people the Spanish encountered were not without culture. Several Native American civilizations were complex and productive and in many ways equal to those in Europe. Tenochtitlán, the major city of Mesoamerica, was a huge city with great temples and beautiful gardens.

The Incas of Peru controlled an empire of thousands of square miles and practiced a sophisticated form of agriculture that was more varied than any European nation could equal.

Although Native Americans built empires, cities, and a complex agricultural system, they did not have the weapons or the knowledge of steel that the Europeans did. The superior European power, combined with the Spanish religious zeal to convert the world to Catholicism, impelled a major effort to bring the Native Americans to Christianity. The institutions for this massive conversion were the schools, churches, and energetic missionaries, who often used force in their conversion project.

The orders from the Spanish Church dictated that Native Americans be gathered into villages and that each village open a school for young children, where they would be taught Christian doctrine. These schools, where around fifty students learned the new faith, produced teachers to instruct other children. By 1500, there were many such schools in Mexico and Peru.

Fray Martin de Valencia, the “St. Patrick of Mexico,” sums up the general Spanish reasons for the mass conversion of Native Americans. “God has brought us here ... to seek ... your salvation. Wherefore, beloved brethren, it is necessary that you put your young children into our hands that they may be taught. ... Furthermore, they, being but children, will understand more easily the doctrines we teach. ... Afterward, they will aid us in teaching you what they have learned.”

By 1525, the Spanish began systematically to destroy the Aztec cultural and religious heritage. The colonizers destroyed Aztec temples, religious images, and manuscripts. Native American students were required to march through the streets of Mexico City on Sundays to smash all pagan objects. Student converts were encouraged to spy on their parents so that priests could go to their homes and smash idols. ...

The Catholic priests used both punishment and rewards to achieve their goal of conversion. Sometimes they whipped the Native Americans with a lash and then gave out gifts of grain and meat to facilitate conversion.

Because the Native American societies were so diverse, the Catholic leaders began to require that people learn Spanish. The Spanish produced simple books that explained concepts such as the Trinity and Grace, concepts not found in the local languages.

Source: Adapted and simplified from R. V. Farrell, *The Conquest of Minds: Lessons and Strategies from Latin American Educational History*, Florida International University, <http://www.cedu.niu.edu/blackwell/farrell01.htm>.

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Student Handout 3.4—Spanish Conversion Policy in Practice

Misunderstandings

The core of the religion [of the Tainos who lived on the eastern end of Cuba] centered on the cult of *cemies*, figures in animal and human form or in three-pointed shapes, formed from stone, wood, clay, and cotton. The objects contained spiritual power, which worshippers believed they could draw on with the figures' aid. The unhappy consequences of a lack of mutual understanding by the Christians and the islanders of each other's religious principles is evident in an incident that would be richly comic save for the result. When the Spanish gave the Tainos crucifixes and statues of the Virgin, the Tainos added these objects to their store of *cemies*. In keeping with their agrarian cult of fertility, they urinated on the sacred objects and buried them in the fields to ensure bountiful crops. The Spanish thought this blasphemy and so executed the offenders.

Source: Marvin Lunenfeld, ed., 1492, *Discovery, Invasion, Encounter: Sources and Interpretations* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1991), 143.

Profile of the Spanish Franciscan Missionary

Back in the 1960s, at the old Spanish Mission Concepción in San Antonio, I met a young priest, a Jesuit, as I recall, who had just arrived in the area. He came from Cincinnati. He spoke perfect Castilian Spanish. I could see in his eyes his enthusiasm for the history of the missions. "As soon as I can get time," he said, "I'm going to research the archives at the archdiocese to see if I can learn why the Indians kept running away from the missions during the days of the Franciscans."

"Father," I said, having just read the history, "the Indians came to the missions hoping for protection from the Apaches and a dependable source of food. The friars tried to force them to become Christians and Spanish subjects. They tried to destroy their old religions and rituals and customs. They tried to make them worship a new deity, learn the catechisms, sing new religious songs and attend the masses. They tried to make them work in the mission fields and workshops and give up old traditions and freedoms. If the Indians escaped the missions, the friars sent soldiers to recapture them. They punished and jailed and beat those they could catch. They made slaves of the Indians."

"Yes," the young priest said without a trace of irony, "but look what the Franciscans gave them: Christianity and civilization."

Source: Jay W. Sharp, "Profile of the Spanish Franciscan Missionary," *DesertUSA*, <http://www.desertusa.com/ind1/franciscan.html>

Bartolomé de Las Casas, Report on Treatment of Native Americans in Hispaniola

The Christians punched them, boxed their ears and flogged them in order to track down the local leaders, and the whole shameful process came to a head when one of the European commanders raped the wife of the paramount chief of the entire island.

Their (Taino) weapons, however, were flimsy and ineffective both in attack and in defense (and, indeed, war in the Americas is no more deadly than our jousting or than many European children's games) and, with their horses and swords and lances, the Spaniards easily fend them off, killing them and committing all kind of atrocities against them. They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting: "Wriggle, you little perisher." They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honor of our Savior and the twelve Apostles, or tie dry straw to their bodies and set fire to it. Some they chose to keep alive and simply cut their wrists, leaving their hands dangling, saying to them: "Take this letter" — meaning that their sorry condition would [serve] as a warning to those hiding in the hills. The way they normally dealt with the native leaders and nobles was to tie them to a kind of griddle consisting of sticks resting on pitchforks driven into the ground and then grill them over a slow fire, with the result that they howled in agony and despair as they died a lingering death.

Source: Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Nigel Griffin (New York: Penguin, 1999), qtd. in "The Slaughter that Came with the Arrival of Christopher Columbus," *International Tribal Charter, The Native American Indian Taino Tribe Of Turabo*, <http://www.indio.net/aymaco/slaughter.htm>.