

Theological Resistance to the Conquest of Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The Conquest of Latin America in the 16th Century was a colonial project which dispossessed millions. Its primary motive was to establish European economic and political dominance of the New World. This project proceeded with the blessing and support of the Church which was itself a major beneficiary of the aggression. This article examines the theological underwriting of colonialism and the extent to which some thinkers and churchmen raised objections and articulated a theology of resistance to colonial dispossession.

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The arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean in 1492 would begin a period of violence and dispossession unrivalled in human history. The genocides of the twentieth century pale to nothing by comparison. In Mexico alone, between 1532 and 1608 it is estimated that some sixteen million indigenous perished.¹ All across the Americas it would be the same – north and south. At the time of Cortez's arrival there were some 100 million people living south of the Rio Grande – by 1570 this number would be reduced by 90% to a mere 10 million. The arrival of the Europeans was apocalyptic.

To this genocide would be added the forced migration of African men, women and children who would arrive and work as slaves – three million to Spanish America and four million to the Portuguese possessions in Brazil by 1850.² The mendacity of Europe would have no limit. This dispossession would become known as La Conquista, the conquest, the invasion. It would establish a system of social, political and economic life that has continued to impoverish remnant indigenous and marginalised communities well into our present century. Its ramifications continue to be felt.

Like all imperial projects the Conquest of the Americas required a legitimating ideology. The architects of the European invasion would find this in the theology of Christendom – a term used to distinguish the religion of the

conquistadors from a reading of the gospel that would later arise to challenge European imperialism.³

It is the stuff of high school history to acknowledge that the base motive behind the age of empires was economic. 'God, Gold and Glory' is a phrase often quoted to summarize the reasons behind the Northern world's subjugation of the south. This remains true yet, it ignores elements that are important. Later English and Dutch colonialism will have an essentially capitalist motivation. Likewise there is no disguising the colonial lust for gold that preoccupied the Spanish conquistador in his plunder of the Americas. A bishop who rose to the defence of the Indians, Bartolome de Las Casas, suggests this motive when he records

'Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time...'⁴

Enrique Dussel admits this when he argues that:

'The complex of political, economic and cultural – religious motives presents itself as an invisible structure...and yet because we are in the first phase of the modern period, it is already an emerging mercantile, money capitalist world.'⁵

But what is this broader complex of motives that Dussel alludes to? What motive is there beyond base economic gain? The Imperial project emerging from the Iberian Peninsula will include a deep seated cultural dimension that is more or less absent from the later excursions by the English, Dutch, Germans and others. This cultural dimension will be the product of the Spanish and Portuguese political and social context.

In 1492 Christian Europe by comparison to the territories held by the Muslim world was peripheral. Islam was the 'only real ecumenical universality in the fifteenth century'.⁶ The Crusades, despite their apparent religious purpose, were 'in reality an instrument of an economic and political expansionist project of the trading powers of Christendom in the Mediterranean.'⁷ Islam was able to repel these incursions and so Christendom sought new places to expand.

In the conquest of the New World Christian Europe was able to 'evade the blockade maintained for centuries by the Muslim world.'⁸

In addition, the discovery of the New World came at a time in which the monarchies of Spain and Portugal had successfully asserted themselves against the Moors through the re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Conquest in the name of the Gospel became a legitimating principle that served to form and strengthen the political identity of the state. Christendom was a basis for requiring the loyalty of the people who naturally considered citizenship and their faith to be part of the one and the same identity. The victory of the Spanish over the moors was not just a political triumph; it was also a victory of Christianity over Islam. This medieval synthesis of Church and state, coinciding as it did with the age of discovery, ensured that this polity would soon be exported to the new world.⁹

It would be in this spirit of 'triumphalism' that the Spanish and the Portuguese would enter the new world. McKennie Goodpasture makes this point.

'The church that came on those ships was a part of Spanish and later Portuguese Christendom; it was not separate...the church was part and parcel of the state. Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand were faithful Catholics; they and their subjects considered Christianity to be the essence of Spanish life. Bishops, priests and religious orders were agents for maintaining civilization. Such intimacy between throne and altar was not unique to Iberia; it had been the tradition in medieval Europe since Charlemagne.'¹⁰

It is impossible in this context to distinguish between the political and religious dimensions of the colonial project. Colonization would need a justifying theology that legitimated the actions of the state. There was a 'theology of Christendom' of 'the expansion of western culture over the Muslims, the pagans, who die without salvation in their perversions and witchcraft.'¹¹

Evangelization would be the public justification for colonization that placed the project above mere self interest. In a letter to the Spanish King and Queen, Christopher Columbus wrote in 1492

'Your Highnesses, as good and Christian and Catholic princes, devout and propagators of the Christian faith, as well as enemies of the sect of Mahomet and all idolatries and heresies, conceived the plan of sending me to this country of the Indies...to convert these regions to our holy faith...'¹²

Dussel concludes that

'The religious motivation of the evangelization of the Indians became, as might be expected, the justification of the conquest. In the end it was the only rational case that could be made.'¹³

Gustavo Gutierrez, in his work on Las Casas, would call this a way of 'baptizing the wars.'¹⁴ Pablo Richard extends this idea by describing it as the 'violence of theology'.

'The genocide and massacre which began in 1492 would not have been possible without an appropriate theology. The historical violence was accompanied by theological violence.'¹⁵

Juan Gines de Sepulveda is a Spanish theologian (b1490) who makes the argument for colonization, albeit in extreme form. Pablo argues that he is indicative of the time in that he makes overt the world view of the conquistadors; a cosmology that was essentially Eurocentric, superior and racist. Sepulveda's treatise, known in brief as the *Tratado* was published in 1545 and makes a case for the necessity of the genocide. He is often quoted as he is the theological antithesis of Bartolome Las Casas and a group that will later be known as the New World Prophets.

Sepulveda's position articulates the white man's right to rule over inferior peoples...

'It is just and natural that prudent, honest and humane men should rule over those who are not so...and therefore the Spaniards rule with perfect right over those barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands who in prudence, intellect, virtue and humanity are as such inferior to the Spaniards as children to adults, women to men, as there exists between them as great a difference as that between wild and cruel races and races of the greatest clemency...and I would say between apes and men.'¹⁶

Colonization would be based on an inherently patriarchal theology. Sepulveda even manages to justify the torture of the Indians who 'thanks to terror combined with preaching have received the Christian religion.'¹⁷

Initially, Sepulveda's treatise was banned by the Spanish monarchs as it seemed to castigate the very notion of a benign evangelization yet it is eventually recovered by theologians seeking to justify the conquest – church and theology are suborned to the blunt logic of conquest. The impact in Dussel's terms is that 'evangelization justifies political power...indigenous peoples and black slaves were absolutely denied as historico-cultural subjects with their own rights.'¹⁸

Sepulveda was not alone; he belonged to a tradition now known in liberation circles as 'theologies of domination.' Dussel again: 'They justify the subjugation of the Indians, the slaves, and regard the conquest and slavery as civilizing or 'modern' processes.'¹⁹

As an example of the dominant colonial theology, Gutierrez records that the theologian Gomera, who lived and worked under the patronage of the conquistador Hernan Cortes, was able to argue that 'War and men under arms, is the authentic path to the removal of idols, sacrifices, and other sins from the Indians...'²⁰ In so arguing, Gomera, Sepulveda and others are presenting an extension of Just war theology; an extension that the New World Prophets would reject.

It was against this theological backdrop that Bartolome Las Casas and the other New World prophets, of whom there were many, mounted their doomed defence of the Indians and blacks. However, it would be Las Casas who would offer the most thorough theological appraisal of these events. What he did was

'To denounce the oppression and death suffered by the inhabitants of the Indias, stating clearly it was caused by greed for gold, which scripture calls idolatry.'²¹

Las Casas and the Dominicans would argue that evangelization could not proceed through force of arms, that coerced conversion was not conversion at all but oppression. He advocated 'evangelism without arms' and in favour of humane treatment of those unjustly treated... 'the Indian, the mestizo, the peasant, the labourer, the poor, and the uneducated.'²²

Las Casas was by no means the only bishop or cleric to raise objections to the manner of the European occupation. Gutierrez is keen to make this point as it has been a tactic of those who still defend the conquest to suggest that the opposition to the invasion was the prejudice of a single man as some documents of the time claimed.²³

There was in fact what Enrique Dussel calls a 'prophetic generation who were able to discern the various motives of the protagonists.' Dussel quotes Bishop Juan Ramirez of Guatemala referring to the impact of the conquest on indigenous women.

'A form of violence never heard of in other nations....women are forced against their wills, the married women against the wishes of their husbands, the unmarried women and girls of ten and fifteen years against the wishes of their fathers and mothers...they are taken from their homes...they are often made to be prostitutes for the master of the house...'²⁴

Dominicans often led the way but numerous other clerics took up the cause, among them the Jesuits, Franciscans and Augustinian missionaries. A contemporary theologian, Maximilliano Salinas, commenting during the quincentenary of the La Conquista remarked that these New World Prophets were remarkable in that they too were European yet were able to think and respond beyond the worldview of their contemporaries. He declares this a work of the Holy Spirit

'The Spirit enabled these Europeans to break out of the mind set of the invaders. In particular, the Spirit led them to abandon the invader's formal religion.'²⁵

One of the first public protests on record was witnessed by Las Casas; it took place in 1511 in Hispaniola. It was a comprehensive criticism by the

Dominican Friars of the structural sin of the occupation. It was delivered by a leading Dominican, Antonio Montesinos, in a Sunday sermon during Advent. In the week that followed shocked parishioners, themselves colonists and members of the local elite, demanded a retraction. The next Sunday, Montesinos renewed his attack. Las Casas describes what happened.

'Sunday having arrived Father Antonio rose to the pulpit...and took for the text of his sermon, which was written down and signed by the other friars, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness."...he began to speak of the sterile desert of the consciences of the Spaniards...and of the blindness in which they lived,...'you are in mortal sin...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? By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived mildly and peacefully on their own lands...where you have consumed infinite numbers of them with unheard of murders and desolations...'²⁶

Montesinos here is referring to the Spanish system of the *encomienda*. This was the system in which Indians were required to live and work on the lands and farms of the colonists for a certain period of time. The system was established by royal edict and although it was never intended to permit the excesses that followed, the common practice of the colonists led to the lifelong enslavement of the Indian.²⁷

Other New World prophets, such as Felipe Guman Poma de Ayala (1534 – 1616), would articulate a theology that later liberation theologians would appreciate as the 'Church of the Poor'.

'This is why he made me poor, placing me among the rest of the poor, because it suited this purpose, because it is well known that the poor are despised by the rich and the haughty, who think that where the poor are there is no God or justice. Now we must realize clearly from our faith that where the poor are, there is Jesus Christ himself.'

Salinas records that the opposition to the conquest echoed throughout the region... 'Venezuela, Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Cartagena and Santiago de Chile...'²⁸ Later yet another Dominican, Fray Diego de Humanzoro, the bishop of Santiago would write to the pope in 1666 claiming that

'The cries of the Indians are so great and insistent that they reach the heavens... those who oppress the poor to increase their wealth will be condemned by the Lord.'²⁹

Yet the protests of these churchmen met considerable opposition from those clergy who had made accommodations with the conquistadors and promoted their cause. The Franciscan Motolinia of Mexico would describe Las Casas as 'troublesome, inopportune, litigious and insulting'.³⁰ Las Casas would eventually be forced from his diocese of Chiapas by the colonists. The Bishop of Nicaragua, Antonio de Valdiviesos from 1544 to 1550, was assassinated on the order of the local governor in support of a conquistador family, the Contreras, who Valdiviesos had opposed on behalf of the poor.³¹ Others would face threats, abuse and exile.

The resistance of men such as Las Casas would ultimately be overcome even though at times they were in the ascendency and achieved success with laws that seemed for a while capable of securing the well being of the Indians. Las Casas and his supporters, the *lascasianos* would remain a minority.

Dussel believes these bishops should be regarded as 'Fathers of the Church' and be as well known to American Christians as those of the Patristic period.³² Gutierrez calls these men 'the best of Spain' ³³ as they not only provided an historical witness to the tragedy of the conquest but they

'managed to provoke a discussion on the legitimacy of the European colonial presence and its methods which no other Old world country had the courage to undertake.'³⁴

They did something more than this, they provided the conquered peoples with an alternative Gospel to the one proclaimed by the conquerors. This laid the basis for the eventual conversion of the peoples of the region who were able to discern for themselves between the claims of the rival religious projects of Christianity and Christendom.

Beyond this, these men also provide the contemporary church with an early model of ecclesial resistance to empire. They stood both in witness and in

opposition to the violent inhumanity of the conquest, in doing so they became the church of the poor. In this act of resistance this church of the poor came into being. As Pablo Richard concludes

‘The theology of liberation and the church of the poor came into being the instant there was a political and theological questioning of the conquest of Christendom.’³⁵

These men are rightly called ‘Fathers of the Church’ because they lay the basis for an ecclesiology that is as relevant today as it was in the period of the conquest. In subsequent centuries the church would remain divided between those who prefer the poor and those who side with the bourgeoisie elites and their backers. In the 1980s Rome and the church would be enlisted once again to forge a theological justification for Ronald Reagan’s contra rebels in their opposition to the reformist project of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas of Nicaragua. In similar vein to its justification of the Conquest the church continued to argue the position of the privileged throughout the modern history of Latin America. Nicaragua provides only one example of the general theme.

‘As in the rest of Latin America the church provided the moral imperative for colonial rule, it accumulated vast wealth and property through the expropriation of indigenous lands and the use of Indian slavery. In 1856 the church supported the intervention of US mercenary William Walker, and in 1912 gave its approval to the occupation by US Marines...blessing their weapons as they went off to fight...the church has never stopped defending an exploitative social order.’³⁶

The tension between the church of the powerful and the popular church is a continuing theme in the ecclesiology of Latin America. The political aspirations of the powerful, including their backers within the church will see the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and underwrite numerous dictatorships most infamously those in Chile and Argentina. Awareness of this traditional relationship between the church and those who maintain an exploitative economic, political and social order is a step towards constructing a theology of liberation.

Writing from a different context the Indian Jesuit Samuel Rayan speaks of the need for a decolonized theology, a theology decoupled from the political interests of the powerful and more receptive to the needs of the majority world. He argues that the first failure of colonial theology was a methodological one,

‘Colonial theology committed the *a priori* error of taking for granted that God had never been here, that Christ had not preceded them, that God had not been savingly active in the peoples’ history, that the Spirit had never been in liberating and life saving dialogue with the hearts and minds of the men and women of this land. They did not look first for God’s presence and action here, to acknowledge it and give thanks.’³⁷

The historical study of the Conquest and the church’s role in it leaves the present day church to reflect on its own continued involvement in the politics of power. How is theology currently used to reinforce privilege, social advantage and the prosperity of the few over the well being of the majority? Does the church perceive the world from the perspective of the poor? This is the most seminal question the church can ask of itself. In its daily struggle to answer to this question the church either loses or finds its own identity and future, it declares itself to be either for God’s reign or against it.

NOTES

¹ Pablo, Richard, ‘The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity’, *Concilium*, SCM Press, New York, 1990, 59

² *Ibid.*, page 60.

³ Goodpasture, H.McKennie, *Cross and Sword – An Eyewitness History of Christianity in Latin America*, Orbis Books, 1989, 2

⁴ Quoted in ⁴ Dussel, Enrique ‘The Real Motives of the Conquest’, *Concilium*, SCM Press, New York, 1990, 37

⁵ Dussel, 7

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Goodpasture, 2

¹⁰ Goodpasture, 1

¹¹ Dussel, 37

¹² Goodpasture, 6

¹³ Dussel, 39

¹⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo, *Las Casas*, Orbis Books, New York, 1992, 105

¹⁵ Pablo Richard, 61

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 62

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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- ¹⁸ Dussel 39
¹⁹ Dussel, 38
²⁰ Gutierrez, 104
²¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo, 'Towards the Fifth Century, *Concilium*, SCM Press, New York, 1990, 2
²² Dussel, 51
²³ Ibid., 2
²⁴ Dussel, 40
²⁵ Salinas, Maximiliano 'The Voices of those who Spoke Up for the Victims' *Concilium*, SCM Press, New York, 1990, 102
²⁶ Goodpasture, 13
²⁷ Ibid., 8
²⁸ Salinas, 104
²⁹ Salinas, 102
³⁰ Salinas, 103
³¹ Ibid.
³² Dussel, Enrique *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand rapid, Michigan, 1981, 51
³³ Gutierrez, *Concilium*, 3
³⁴ Ibid.
³⁵ Pablo, Richard, 64
³⁶ Robinson, William. *David and Goliath, Washington's War Against Nicaragua*. Zed Books, London, 1987, 209
³⁷ Rayan, Samuel sj 'The Decolonization of Theology' unpublished internet article [Accessed 15 Feb 2009] <http://www.sedos.org/english/Rayan.html>

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