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The Rise and Fall of the *Ecclesia Indiana*

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Resumen

El presente artículo trata el tema de la Iglesia autóctona desde una perspectiva histórica. La intuición de favorecer el crecimiento de iglesias locales maduras existe desde el principio de la evangelización en América. Desafortunadamente, estos esfuerzos se encontraron con muchos problemas de inculturación y también de incomprensión por parte de las autoridades civiles y eclesiásticas que terminaron por suprimir la naciente *Ecclesia Indiana*. La invitación es a aprender del pasado para no caer en los mismos errores.

Summary

This article treats the topic of the Autochthonous Church from a historical perspective. The intuition of promoting the growth of mature local churches exists from the beginning of evangelization in the Americas. Unfortunately, these efforts met with many problems of inculturation and also with the lack of understanding of civil and ecclesiastical authorities that ended up in the suppression of the emerging Ecclesia Indiana. The invitation is to learn from the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes.

In the current debate about the future of the autochthonous Church in Chiapas one hears argument for and against. Some Roman Offices consider it an ideology contradicting Catholic tradition. Its proponents, including the last three bishops of the Diocese in question, claim to base their ideal on the documents of the second Vatican Council, especially in those concerning the emergence of healthy, dynamic local Churches. Especially they cite the Decree *Ad Gentes* which declared the importance of developing an autochthonous Church with its own hierarchy, liturgical and theological expressions.[1] But the idea of establishing an Indian (hence native, autochthonous) Church in America is not new. That was precisely the aim of the first missioners in

[1] *Ad Gentes*, 6.

the New World. In this article we will consider the origins of their utopia, the means they used to implement it, the problems and limitations they encountered and, finally, the unexpected results that emerged from their endeavor. As expected, our intuition is that the past can help us not to repeat the same mistakes of our predecessors. Thus the article hopes to provide a general historical overview of the beginning of Christianity in this area of the world and why the inexistence of authentic Indian Churches is one of the main injustices that our Catholic tradition has committed against the Indian population of the Americas.

1. Early encounters and dis-encounters. The arrival of Christianity in Mesoamerica

Early in 1519 Hernán Cortés arrived in the eastern coast of Yucatan. He did not stay long there. Three months later he continued west towards central Mexico and the events we all know well. Little did he and the people he found suspect the incredible changes his arrival would bring. These two human traditions (European and American) had developed in isolation from one another for thousands of years. More than an encounter, this coming together of two radically different worldviews has been often referred to as a clash of cultures. A new reality would be build from it. This meeting of cultures took different forms and evolved in diverse paths. The stories of two of the first *mestizos* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish ancestry) seem to be paradigmatic of the future developments. Let us consider them now.

Cortés was not the first European to encounter the Maya. In the first years of the 16th century, Columbus described a canoe that he saw in the coast of Cuba, very different from what he had experienced so far in the Caribbean. The boat was larger and the clothes of the people in it were particularly rich and elaborate. There is a high possibility that he met a trading canoe from Yucatan.[2] A few years later (1511), a hurricane washed ashore the eastern coast of Yucatan a Spanish expedition traveling from Panama to La Española. All survivors died (some were sacrificed to the Maya deities) with the exception of two: Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de Aguilar. Both remained as slaves in the Peninsula. In 1517, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba

[2] Cf. R. KONETZKE, "Überseeische Entdeckungen und Eroberungen", in *Propyläen Weltgeschichte, eine Universalgeschichte*, Propyläen Verlag, Berlín 1986, 619.

passed briefly through this coast on his way to Florida. He never knew of the existence of his two countrymen in Yucatan.

When Cortés arrived in Cozumel, an island off the Yucatecan mainland, he heard of the existence of two co-nationals and asked to see them. Both had led quite different lives. Aguilar remained a Spaniard in the middle of the Mayan world. He kept his Spanish language and Catholic faith by praying each day the Liturgy of the Hours from a worn out devotional. He was very happy to see Cortés and join his expedition. Later on, he proved himself invaluable to the enterprise, since he was fluent in Maya.

Gonzalo Guerrero had followed a different path. He had adopted the Maya culture as his own, had been tattooed and pierced and he dressed as the people of the land. He married the daughter of the cacique Nacham Kaan from Chetumal, and had several children. He had been raised to the rank of *Nakom*, or military leader. When Aguilar, as envoy of Cortés, found him, he was shocked. He could scarcely differentiate Guerrero from the Mayas. When Aguilar offered him to join Cortés' expedition he declined.[3] He remained with the Maya and some authors believe that he was instrumental in organizing the Maya resistance in Yucatan, which kept the Spanish troops away for another 24 years.

Cortés continued his journey and arrived in Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs on November 8, 1519. With him came also Doña Marina, an Indian woman (her original name was *Malintzin*). She had been given to the Spanish as a slave, a token of good will from a cacique in Tabasco. She was fluent in both Maya and Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.[4] Cortés could now converse with the Aztec lords through Aguilar, who translated between Spanish and Maya, and Doña Marina, who interpreted between Maya and Nahuatl. Eventually Doña Marina became Cortés' mistress and the mother of his son don Martín.

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[3] The conquistador and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo quotes Guerrero as answering to Aguilar: *"Brother Aguilar, I am married and have three children and the Indians look on me as a cacique and a captain in wartime...You go and God be with you, but I have my face tattooed and my ears pierced, what would the Spaniards say should they see me in this guise. And look how handsome these boys of mine are! For God's sake give me those green beads you have brought, and I will give the beads to them and say that my brothers have sent them from my own country."*

[4] R. KONETZKE, *o. c.*, 620-21.

It is interesting to consider these two forms of intercultural marriages or *mestizajes,* to use the Spanish technical term for it. On the one side we have Cortés and Doña Marina with their son don Martín, an "illegitimate" child that grows in the margins of the colonial society,[5] although he considers himself "Spanish". On the other hand there are the children of Gonzalo Guerrero and his Maya wife, who are accepted as legitimate heirs to the Maya cacique. In them the Indian culture prevails. It is also worthy of note that the Mexican "official" history considers the "Spanish based" union of Cortés and Doña Marina as the paradigm of the national mestizo character, instead of the "Indian based" marriage of Guerrero and his consort. Likewise, much has been written of Doña Marina and her role in the founding of the new nation. We do not even know the name of the Maya princess who married Guerrero.

These historical bias shows, from the very beginning of this encounter of two cultures, which would have the leading role in the evolution of the new "nation". The discriminatory attitude that considers the Spanish heritage to be the superior one can be found in all areas of the colonial society, including the Church. Let us now concentrate on the encounter of Christianity, as presented in its Spanish cultural form, with the various Indian cultures of Mesoamerica.

2. The meeting of the Spanish and Indian cultures

Cortés and his companions came from a milieu used to cultural diversity, but striving to develop cultural uniformity. Spain had been (until 1492) a real melting pot of cultures. From its Iberian and Phoenician past, passing through its extensive romanization and the Visigoth kingdoms to the more than 700 years of Islamic presence. And from ancient times, Spain had a strong and influential Jewish population. However, with the fall of Granada, the last Islamic kingdom, this age of tolerance ended. With the geographical unification of the Spanish realm came the thrust to unify it culturally. This meant: one king, one people, one language, and one religion. The Jews that refused to convert were expelled already in 1492, followed shortly after by

[5] There are many other instances of these mestizo illegitimate children, for instance the famous Andean chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca. See the introduction to his work *Comentarios Reales*, Porrúa, México 1990, 9-16.

the Muslims and some converts of doubted loyalty (especially at the end of the Alpujarras uprising in the Sierra Nevada of Andalusia).

Cortés came to the Americas with the hope of obtaining fame and riches, but at the same time imbued with a sense of mission: the conversion of the infidels and the extension of the Christian empire that had proven to be so successful in Europe. In his expedition he brought a chaplain, although his choice proved to be not very good.[6] With regards to the conversion of the Indians, Cortés showed the common sense that came to characterize him. In each place he made sure that a brief summary of the faith be preached to the population, or at least to the leaders (although one can question how much of it the Indians understood). The romantic scenes of the conquistadors toppling idols down the pyramid steps were not part of his policy. He knew that such gesture would bring no desired results. It would rather raise the animosity of the natives against the invaders. So he was content to make them promise that they would suspend the human sacrifices.[7] In Zempoala, one of the first Indian cities he visited, he left a cross in the Indian sanctuary and appointed some Indian priests to bring flowers to it and to offer incense, both actions of worship being very familiar to the Indian mind. Later on, in Tlaxcala, a nation he specially favored since they were his main allies against the Aztecs, he left not only a wooden cross but also a statue of the Virgin Mary.[8] Both Christian images were placed next to the Indian deities in the high temple of the city and again Indian ministers were appointed to conduct devotional rites (flowers and incense). Through these measures Cortés enacts the first "capture" of the Indian sacred space for the Christian cause.

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[6] Don Juan Díaz, the chaplain of the expedition, was present in all its important moments. He officiated in the baptism of the four senators of the Tlaxcalan Republic (1520). However, when emperor Moctezuma laid in his death bed and asked to be baptized (all this in the middle of the hectic Spanish retreat from the Aztec capital), he died without this consolation because *"the chaplain could not find time to perform the rites, he was too busy collecting riches for himself"*. T. TODOROV cites Tovar in: *La conquista de América, el problema del otro*, Siglo XXI, México 2001, 62.

[7] C. DUVERGER, *La conversión de los indios de la Nueva España, con el texto de los coloquios de los doce de Bernardino de Sahagún (1564)*, Abya-Yala, Quito 1990, 15.

[8] See B. DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España (1568)*, Porrúa, Colección Sepan Cuántos No. 5, México 1980, 133.

He seemed to have understood that the Christian message needed some reference to the Indian religion in order to be understood and accepted.[9]

With the fall of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec empire, the Indians were placed in a position of inferiority and dependence that has prevailed until today. In the eyes of the conquistadors they had lost the war, thus proving that they were inferior to their captors. This applied also to the Indian divinities (considered demons by the invaders), who were incapable of protecting them from the Spaniards. God had certainly shown to be on the side of the Christians and against the idolaters. This ideology of European superiority remained central throughout the colonial times and is still dominant in present day Latin-American societies.

Todorov considers that the Spanish victory was the result of supremacy in technology. Not only the usually recognized superiority in weapon technology, but especially the Spanish advantage in human communication technology.[10] The Aztecs, even though they had developed a pictographic system of writing, could still be considered an oral culture. Also, the cultures of Mesoamerica had produced an epistemology that favored human-world communication rather than the human-human communication.[11] They looked for cosmic laws that could explain everyday events as part of a general discernable order. As a consequence, the present was made intelligible to the Indians only when it had been predicted somehow in the past.[12] Their understanding of time as a cyclical process, with a strong emphasis on interpreting the future based on past events made it very difficult for them to comprehend the unprecedented situation created by the arrival of the Spaniards. They were just not ready to react effectively to it.

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[9] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 18-20.

[10] As stated in his conclusions: T. TODOROV, *La conquista ...*, 261. Before, this author had expressed: "*there is a technology of the symbol, as susceptible of development as the technology of instruments,…, thus the societies with writing are more advanced* [technologically] *than those without it. It is a difference of degree* [in the evolution of symbolic skills]", *Ibid.*, 172.

[11] Human-world communication places an emphasis on the dialogue with the social group, the natural world and the religious universe, as opposed to the human-human mode, which enhances the exchange between individuals. Cf. T. TODOROV, *Ibid*, 75.

[12] See T. TODOROV, *Ibid*., 82.

We see this difference in the attitudes of the main characters of the conquest drama. Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler, just wanted Cortés to leave, so that the accustomed order of his world would return. He could not "explain" the invader, Cortés perturbed the harmony of his worldview, and so the best would be to get rid of him. He shows no interest in Cortés, the Spaniards or their culture. Cortés, on the other hand, seemed to be always curious about what he found, he wanted to know more about these new people. He refused to leave, kept asking about the customs and history of the Aztecs, he was inquisitive. With this attitude he takes the lead in the encounter of cultures, even though Moctezuma is far more powerful and would be expected to be in charge. When the Spanish conquistadors definitely take the active role in this intercultural exchange, it provides them with a superiority that would remain in effect for the next 500 years.[13] This situation will be also important in the evangelization process, where the missioners assume a directive role that they later refuse to give up.

It is hard to grasp the magnitude of the shock that the conquest produced in the minds of the Indian population. Much has been written about it.[14] But the defeat of the Aztec armies was just the beginning of the total collapse of their world. The description most often found in the native accounts of the conquest is that they were suddenly "orphaned". They had lost their leaders, their freedom, and their society.[15] Their deities seemed to have abandoned them. And what made everything more difficult was that they had no categories to interpret the situation they were experiencing. Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta, a Franciscan chronicler at the end of the 16th century describes the despair of the Indian survivors: *"Once they were put under the Spanish rule, the Indians lost all courage and remained intimidated. They lost their style of govern-*

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[13] T. TODOROV, points out the importance of the fact that Cortés had many more intellectual tools to interpret the new world he encounters than Moctezuma had to *"understand the Spanish realities", Ibid.*, 137.

[14] An excellent account of the conquest as seen from the point of view of the defeated is the anthology *Visión de los Vencidos*, edited by Miguel León-Portilla (UNAM, México 1984) with various texts from Indian authors.

[15] J. DE VOS, *Vivir en la Frontera. La experiencia de los indios de Chiapas*, CIESAS-INI, México 1997, 56, expresses it poignantly: *"Due to someone else's decision,* [the Indians] *found themselves all of a sudden, as people belonging to an inferior race, subjects of a ghost king, redeemed by an unknown God..."*.

ment without taking up the Spanish style, thus remaining in the state, capacity, and talent of 9 or 10 year old boys."[16]

The consolidation of the Spanish rule brought the enslavement of the Indian population. The people became the most important commodity in the land, because they were needed to work for their new masters extracting gold and silver, producing food, building the new Spanish cities and transporting the goods on their backs. It was not until 1537 that Pope Paul III declared the natives of the Americas to be human beings, with a soul, capable of being converted and becoming Christian,[17] thus destroying the main argument used by the slave owners to justify their exploitation.

It was in these especially dark years after the conquest that the first missionaries arrived in Mexico with the desire to bring the gospel of Christ to the Indians.

3. The *Colloquium of the Twelve*, a prototype for the early evangelization

From the beginning of his rule in Mexico, Cortés asked the Spanish crown to send missioners. He also made clear that it would be preferable to send religious (especially Franciscans) since they would make a better impression on the Indians. Cortés had a very poor concept of the secular priesthood. He believed that they were only after money and that they liked to be treated like princes.[18] It seems that he considered that the conquistadors were enough bad examples for the natives. The first Franciscans arrived in August 1523. They were three Flemish friars: Juan de Tecto, Juan de Aora and Pedro de Gante. The Spanish court did not send them; they came on their own initiative with the purpose of evangelizing the Indians. The mendicant Orders had already been present in the Americas for two decades. The Franciscans arrived in the Antilles in 1502, followed by the Dominicans in 1510.[19] As soon as the first three friars arrived in Mexico they started learning the local language, a pastoral option that would remain central to the Franciscan evangelization effort

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[16] Cited in J. GARIBAY, *Nepantla, situados en medio. Estudio histórico teológico de la realidad indiana*, CMCR-CRT, México 2000, 220.

[17] Bullas *Veritas Ipsa* and *Sublimis Deus*, both from June 1537.

[18] As quoted by DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 22.

[19] F. J. GÓMEZ, *El impacto de las religiones indígenas americanas en la teología misionera del siglo XVI*, Desclée de Brouwer, Bilbao 2000, 73.

in the coming years. As a matter of fact, Fray Juan de Tecto used to say that the Indian language was a "theology in itself", stressing the importance of studying it and all the insight that could be obtained from it.[20]

In Spain the Franciscans of Extremadura took up the challenge of establishing the first "royally sanctioned" community in New Spain (the colonial name for what is now Mexico). A group of twelve missioners had volunteered to go to the newly conquered lands, led by their Provincial, Fray Martín de Valencia. They were all part of a reform movement within the Friars Minor that sought to restore the Franciscan spirit of poverty and zeal to the order. Even their number was filled with symbolic meaning. They were to be the new apostles, called to found a new Church. The missioners were also imbued with the ideas of election and compensation.[21] These ideas meant that in America, through the actions of the Spanish Nation, the only true Church would recuperate what it had lost to the "Lutheran heresy" in Europe. Thanks to the conquest and evangelization of the newly discovered lands the souls of the converted pagans would "compensate" for all the souls that were being lost through heresy. The Spaniards would have received this most glorious call (that is, they had been "elected"), due to the bravery they had shown in their fight against the Jews and Moslems. The Spanish armies would be God's militia against what was considered the four diabolic squadrons threatening God's Church: the Jewish treachery, the Muslim falsehood, the idolatrous blindness and the soul poisoning heresy. Only Spain felt it had implemented the right solutions to these dangers: expulsion of the Jews, permanent war against the Muslims, conquest of the idolatrous Indians and establishing the Inquisition against heretics.[22]

Soon after the arrival of the twelve friars, Cortés organized a meeting between them and the leaders of the Indian community. It is the famous *Colloquium of the Twelve* (*Coloquio de los doce*), which has reached us in the rendering of another famous Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagún.[23] Accord-

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[20] J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 231.

[21] Cf. E. C. FROST, *La historia de Dios en las Indias. Visión Franciscana del Nuevo Mundo*, Tusquets Editores, México 2002, 235-247. Also J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 45.

[22] See F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 62.

[23] Sahagún, considered the father of ethnography for his detailed accounts of the life and customs of the ancient Mexicans, arrived in Mexico a few years after the *Collo-*

ing to Duverger the meetings took place most probably between June 25 and 30, 1524.[24] In the text, we can follow the exposition of the twelve missioners who presented the Christian faith as the only true religion, declared the Indian beliefs to be the work of the devil, and expressed their will to help the Indians to attain salvation through conversion to Christianity.[25]

The first meeting with the lay leaders of the Aztec community ends when the latter declare themselves incapable of answering the questions posed by the Franciscans. For this reason, a subsequent meeting is arranged with the attendance of the priests and spiritual leaders of the native community. The friars repeat their thesis that the Indian religion is a delusion created by the devil to procure worshipers for himself. Confronted with this, the Aztec religious authorities answer that their religion is an old and proven one. They manifest having experienced the presence of their deities, articulated in the metaphorical expression: *"we know the Lord of the near and next* (Señor de lo cerca y junto)*,…, we know because of whom we live"*, a beautiful way to describe that their religion, as basis for their worldview, had always been effective to explain their world and guide them through reality.[26]

But this affirmation does not discourage the missioners. They proceed to unfold an argumentative discourse to show that the religious experience of the Indians is false and the work of their enemy, the devil. Their thesis are the following: 1. The missioners had been sent by the highest authority in the world, that is, the pope, known for his sanctity and wisdom, being the chosen representative of the only God. Also, the pope has been entrusted by God himself with the keys to heaven; 2. The doctrine that they expose has no human origin, but rather it has been revealed by God. It is contained in the Sacred Scriptures; 3. The Indians can see that the friars are not moved by worldly interests, such as riches or power, they only came in order to help

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quium had taken place, but he knew personally all the friars that took part in it. There is a good chance he had access to documents that described the event, which now are lost. He wrote his rendering of the *Coloquio* around 1565.

[24] C. DUVERGER, *o. c*, 33.

[25] E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 167. The author considers that a citation from the *Vulgate* (Dt 32:17, "They sacrificed to the demons and not to God") served as a Scriptural basis for the widespread belief, among the missioners, that the devil was behind all non-Christian religions (and their rituals) that were not Christian.

[26] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 85.

the Indians attain their salvation; 4. The Reign of God is already present in this world and it is called the Catholic Church. Its leader is the pope. The Church is filled with spiritual riches and it wants to share them liberally with the Indians.[27]

In spite of these argumentations, the Aztec priests do not seemed to be very convinced. Instead they want to hear what the friars have to say about the Indian deities and ask the missioners to elaborate on it. At the end of this exchange, they agreed to have another meeting.

When they came together the following day, the speaker for the twelve started once again by affirming that the Indians had no idea who their gods were, since they had been blinded by the devil.[28] However, the Christian missioners could see through this deceit. In reality these gods (the demons) were the enemies of the Aztec people, they demanded their blood. The friars had come to free them from this slavery. Still the Aztecs were not convinced. Finally, the Christians used their strongest argument (one could say the only one understandable to the Aztecs): these gods of theirs were not able to deliver them from the hands of their conquerors, who were assisted by the only true God.

In Sahagún's text this is a breaking point in the discussion. The Aztec spiritual leaders seemed to have nothing to answer to this painful reality.[29] Their expression of despair is poignant: *"Is it not enough that you have destroyed our State and dispersed our institutions? You also want to destroy our religion? It is thanks to the gods that we live. Let us die, because our gods have also died!"* [30] The following chapters of Sahagún's report have been lost, but from the table of

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[27] *Ibid.*, 61.

[28] The missioners also saw the demonic character of the Indian religion in the way it "enslaved" the people through fear, cruelty and naïve dependency on necromancy and divination. See F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 169.

[29] Actually, from the beginning, the Indian elite started to elaborate explanations for the cataclysm of the conquest based on their worldview. Most of them attributed their defeat to the inability of the Aztec leadership to maintain a healthy communication with their deities. Because of that, they could not "foresee" what was coming and how to cope with it. See T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 69.

[30] The Spanish text: *"¿No es bastante que nos hayan destruido nuestro Estado y dispersen nuestras instituciones? ¿También quieren destruir nuestra religión? Es por los dioses por quienes se vive. Déjennos morir, porque ya murieron nuestros dioses."*

contents of the whole *Colloquium* that has survived, we get the impression that the friars were able to convince the Indians that this was a cause of rejoicing and not of hopelessness. Eventually they would have agreed and let themselves be baptized.

There has been much debate as to the historicity of the *Colloquium*. Some authors are suspicious of the way it was presented by Sahagún. Other scholars doubt such event ever happened. However, there seems to be a general consensus that some form of exchange took place between the Christian missioners and the Indian religious authorities at the beginning of the evangelization process. These exchanges may have taken a longer time, perhaps even years. But it is very possible that both sides used the questions and lines of argumentation presented in the *Colloquium*. In any event, the text shows how the Franciscan missioners understood their apostolate and the Indian religions at a very early stage of the process (1565).

We can consider the *Colloquium* to be illustrative of an intercultural dialogue that went wrong. It is especially important for our field of study because it set a trend in the relationship of the Catholic Church (of all Christian Churches, for that matter) with the Indian peoples, their cultures, their worldviews and the faith systems that sustained them. This trend would prevail for the next five centuries and, in some instances, is still in use. Outsiders took the liberty of deciding which were the tenets of the Indian religion, which were the aspects considered right and which wrong, all this without any attempt to understand the Indian position, and expecting always a total assent on the part of the Indians to the European argumentations.

As we have already pointed out, the first missioners arriving in Mesoamerica came from a land with a long experience of organizing "dialogues" between exponents of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths. Not all of these dialogues were very fruitful, but they made the participants develop a better grasp on the tenets of their faith systems and ways to prove their points. They were versed in apologetics. But the encounter with the Indian religions was something radically new. Even though Judaism, Christianity and Islam held somewhat contradictory doctrines they all were in essence based on a common logic.[31] They were religions "of the Book", all had claims

[31] E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 169. Also C. BERNAND and S. GRUZINSKI, *De la idolatría. Una arqueología de las ciencias religiosas*, FCE, México 1992, 20, where the authors consider

to universality and developed metaphysics to sustain their claims.[32] In a few words, the Spanish adherents of these three faiths could "converse" with one another. That was not the case in the exchanges going on between the missionaries and the Aztec spiritual leaders. They had so few in common in their worldviews that any dialogue could be considered impossible, without first learning to speak each other's "symbolic language". Let us consider some of these basic differences that affected (and still affect) the process of evangelization of the Indian cultures.

4 A dialogue that never took place

Islam, Judaism and Christianity, each one considered itself to be the only true way of reuniting human kind with the divine. History has proven that such claims to universality can easily develop into arrogance and eventually intolerance. In his analysis, Todorov considers that this "intolerance" was instrumental for the victory of the Spaniards, not only for the military defeat of their Indian opponents, but also for their spiritual and cultural downfall.[33] We can certainly observe this intolerance in the *Colloquium*. The results, however, are not so clear-cut.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam to share a common historic and cultural patrimony: *"They emerged from an analogous mold, all of them similarly obsessed with the primacy of monotheism or the written dogma, as well as with ambitions of universality. They all excluded* [the possibility of accepting] *any other creed."*

[32] We consider that through their adoption of Greek Philosophy these three major faith systems considered themselves capable of understanding and describing the underlying structure of reality, and using it to demonstrate the validity of their doctrine. Even though this ultimate structure of reality could not be empirically proved (because it was "meta-physical", beyond the realm of the physically perceived), their adherents felt human kind could attain knowledge of these meta-realities through a sound logic deduction of their principles. In turn, the philosophical systems thus developed would be used to explain and prove the doctrinal principles.

[33] He even states: "[historically] *intransigence has always defeated tolerance"* (T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 115) On a first impression that seems to be the case with the Indian worldview and the religion that sustained it, as opposed to the Spanish/European/Christian one. Later on we will be able to return to this question and to why its answer is not so simple and straightforward.

Frost considers that one can find enough historical data to prove exactly the opposite: that the Indians were not impressed by the friars' arguments and that there was no massive conversion brought about by a discursive demonstration of the superiority of the Christian faith.[34] Toribio de Benavente "Motolinía", one of the twelve first missioners, writes that during the first five years after their arrival (and the supposed date of the *Colloquium*) the Indians remained "cold" towards the gospel. He declares: *"hearing the Word of God is for them a great annoyance."* [35]

This rejection on the part of the Indian population seems to be more probable when we take into account the incredible limitations encountered by the first evangelization effort. The discrepancies of the two worldviews were so radical that one could say such dialogues never took place. Not that these encounters of the Indian intelligentsia with the missionaries did not factually "happened", but that the exchange of concepts and ideas that may have taken place cannot be considered a dialogue.[36]

We have talked about the way the Spanish missioners understood their faith and the intellectual tools they used to make it "rational". However, that faith exposed in the Spanish terms was completely irrational for their Aztecs counterparts. It will be important to consider some aspects of the Indian rationality to explain this affirmation.

Perhaps most important at this stage is to understand that the Indians were not used to the claims of a universal God and a universal faith to the exclusion of other religious practices. The Indians were accustomed to a multitude of deities that personalized different aspects of their perceived reality.[37] They did not construct what could be considered metaphysics in the occidental concept of it. They experienced their environment and then tried to name the forces at play in it, entering into a relationship with them.[38] These

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[34] Cf. E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 174.

[35] As cited by *Ibid.*, 179. The original Spanish reads: *"les da un gran fastidio oír la Palabra de Dios."*

[36] See FORNET-BETANCOURT, "El cristianismo: perspectivas a futuro en el umbral del tercer milenio a partir de la experiencia de América Latina", *Revista Pasos*, 51 (1994) 10, § 4 and 5, where he makes an analysis of the colloquium.

[37] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 110.

[38] S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización de lo imaginario. Sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español, Siglos XVI-XVIII*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 2001, 158.

deities are by no means "sovereign". All of them were subject to larger cosmic forces, specially the one that embodied the notion of the Time-Space continuum. So it was especially difficult for the Indian spiritual guides to understand the idea of a sovereign personal God. According to Duverger, this represented a "supplement of essence" on the part of the Christian God that was not easily grasped by the Indian mind.[39] Finally, it placed the Spanish divinity beyond the ultimate reality in the Indian worldview, that is, the Time-Space continuum.[40]

Another important aspect of the Mesoamerican rationality is the principle of reciprocity. Each desired result requires an investment. Someone gives so that in turn he or she can receive. The main arena of this exchange is nature. All the different needs experienced by humans pertain to a particular domain in nature, which in turn is personalized in the form of a deity. The vast majority of them are related to agriculture, and specifically to the growth cycle of corn, the main staple.[41] Humans perform rituals that speak of their desire to enter into relationships of reciprocity with these deities/forces and, consequently, ensure the orderly functioning of the universe.

The relationships of reciprocity speak of a cosmic harmony, of a primordial order. This order is fragile and can be thrown out of balance when one of its actors (human or divine) breaks the reciprocal duties. That is why the Indians are so worried about not offering the gods their due. It could destroy the cosmic equilibrium and bring about the destruction of the known world. The Indians do not ask the Spanish to take on this heavy burden of reciprocity with the gods. So they cannot understand why the missioners would not let them continue their most important care for universal harmony. This conduct was, to the Indian eyes, irrational.

Social entities were also personalized by the Indians in the form of a deity. This way each nation (or even tribe) has its own "patron" divinity. When a nation is conquered, its gods are not destroyed, they are "captured" in order

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[39] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 118-119. The Nahuatl word to describe conversion to Christianity was *teotia tlatoani*, which means "recognizing God as Sovereign".

[40] Such affirmation would make no sense to the Indian mind, especially that the ultimate reality would be personal and that humans would have the ability to communicate with such a transcendent being.

[41] Cf. E. FLORESCANO, *Memoria Indígena*, Taurus, México 1999, 43.

to incorporate their capacities into the power of the conquering nation. They are part of the order of the universe. These "captured" gods are cared for and eventually assimilated into the religion of the triumphant nation.[42] For a Mesoamerican, the destruction of the gods of a conquered nation is an act of utmost irrationality. Since the national gods are the personifications of a people, their destruction can also be read as an attempt on the survival of the people they represent. All this makes Gruzinski assert that *"regardless of how brutal the aggressions and demands of the Aztecs and their allies may had been, they always respected the equilibrium of the local cultures in their relation to reality, to time, to space, and to the human being."*[43] Since the Indian conquerors shared a common worldview with their conquered, the "rules of the game" were understood and respected. This is not to idealize the Aztecs, who were especially harsh to the nations that resisted their rule, but that once they were incorporated into the Empire knew what was expected from them and could continue their accustomed lives.[44]

Even more baffling to the Aztecs was the affirmation that their gods were in reality demons that had been deceiving them for a long time. For one thing the idea of an absolutely evil creature made no sense to the Indian mind. The Mesoamerican gods had positive and negative aspects, interpreted as moderation and excess, with their consequences for the cosmic order.[45] One could empirically corroborate this dual character by observing the natural phenomena that the deities personalized. To the Aztec priests the affirmation that they were completely evil just made no sense, it could not be proved. These deities had made a pact of reciprocity with humankind and they had delivered, so far.

For the Mesoamerican Indians, the demand for human blood on the part of the Indian gods, which horrified the Christians, was not something the dei-

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[42] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 110.

[43] S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…, o. c.*, 153.

[44] Even the rewriting of history on the part of the Aztecs respected the same worldview common to all Mesoamericans. About a hundred years before the Spanish invasion, the Aztec ruler *Izcóatl* had burned all the ancient books that he could get his hands on. Then he had them rewritten incorporating in them the Aztecs in their new "messianic" role as keepers of the universal order. But that order was explained in Indian terms, enacted by the ancient gods. See T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 65.

[45] J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 223.

ties instituted for selfish purposes; it was part of the universal order, to which the deities themselves were also bound. If the laws of reciprocity were broken then chaos would settle in.[46] Humans were created through the sacrifice of the gods, now humans responded sacrificing themselves to nourish the gods. It was a sharing of life.[47] The sacrifice of individuals so that the community (and the universe for that matter) continued on, seemed very logical to the Mesoamerican worldview. The killing of people without a clear reference to the laws of reciprocity and cosmic order (such as the massacres perpetrated by the Spanish conquistadors), certainly seemed irrational to the Aztecs. Todorov expresses it acutely: *"One could speak of societies with [human] sacrifices (such as the Aztecs) and societies with massacres (such as the Spaniards). As religious homicide is a form of sacrifice, massacres are an atheistic homicide."* [48] To a fundamentally religious society, such as the Aztec, this was simply absurd.

Another important point of conflict between the friars and their Aztec counterparts made reference to the ancestors. The Indian priests mention again and again that they received their religion from their forebears, who had left them the good rules that have kept their society together and vital for many years. They felt that those alive now had no authority to change the customs honored by countless generations. To this the missioners answer that those ancestors had done what was evil in God's eyes, which meant they had been condemned to eternal damnation.[49] Not only that, "the twelve" declare that the present suffering of the Aztecs under the Spaniards (including the epidemics brought by them) was God's punishment precisely for the sins of the ancestors.[50]

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[46] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 113-114.

[47] J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 116.

[48] T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 155.

[49] See F. J. GÓMEZ, *El impacto de las religiones indígenas...*, 44. The idea that outside the Catholic Church there was no possibility of salvation was one of the main stumbling blocks for the evangelization process. It was the result of an apparent no win situation: if pagans that lead "good" lives (judged from the standards of Christian morality) were saved without being baptized, then that would mean that the Christian evangelizing was superfluous for one's salvation. If, on the contrary, this "righteous" pagans were nevertheless condemned, regardless of their good lives, then that would speak very poorly of the justice of God.

[50] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 86.

If all the previous arguments had not made it clear enough for the Aztecs that the missioners were malevolent, this one would certainly convince them. The relationship to the ancestors, and especially to the founders of a lineage, was central to the Indian worldview. We find in all Mesoamerican cultures the worship of the "sacred bundles", always venerated as the relics of their founding fathers and mothers.[51] In order for the community to maintain its vitality it had to honor (and in many cases nurture through sacrifice) this personification of their history/identity. Condemning the ancestors to damnation meant that the people they embodied would follow their fate. Not to mention that many of these "ancestors" were concrete human beings whose piety and zeal had edified the Aztec priests. They may have even known and loved them personally. Their condemnation on the part of the Christian missioners was preposterous. Also, personal experience contradicted it.

We can see from these arguments that this "mass conversions" being the fruit of a conscious acceptance of the gospel, as portrayed in the *Colloquium*, were more wishful thinking than reality. We will corroborate this with the assertions that missioners themselves wrote towards the end of the 16th century. What in fact happened will be the theme of our next Sections. Suffice it to say here that the aggressiveness of the missioners against the Aztec religion is clear. Their intolerance makes any conciliation impossible.[52] The situation that the *Colloquium* describes was not an exchange of ideas, an intercultural dialogue, but an attempt to impose the religion/culture of the conquerors at the expense of the religion/culture of the vanquished. It is easy to understand why the Indians see the Franciscans as "monstrous creatures", that have arrived to destroy humanity, as "living dead", with evil powers.[53] This images pervade until today many Indian folk tales and legends, such as the "headless priest" (*Xk'ulkal K'in*) from Yucatan; the most dangerous of evil spirits for the Tzeltal in Chiapas, the "dark/nightly Padre" (*Padrenul Ahk'abal*), and the Pan-Andean demon *Kharisiri* or *Ñakaj*.[54] All this evil entities appear dressed as

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[51] S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…, o. c.*, 156. Also Florescano, *o. c.*, 115, 189.

[52] Cf. E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 177.

[53] Cf. S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…o. c.*, 25.

[54] See E. MAURER, *Los Tseltales: paganos o cristianos? Su religión, sincretismo o síntesis?* Centro de Estudios Educativos, México 1984, 399. We will return later to these personifications of the antithesis of a good "minister" in Chapter 6.

Catholic priests, some even more specifically in the habit of mendicant friars. All of them prey on human beings, robbing them of their vital forces.[55]

Of course the Franciscan missioners that came to New Spain did not mean to do harm to the Aztecs or to destroy their culture. On the contrary, they felt a deep love for them and meant only good for them. They were trying to share with the Indians their most esteemed treasure: the Good News of salvation in Christ. All the more poignant to see how they failed to communicate their faith with the natives because of their inability to understand the Indian culture, and for that matter, their own Spanish tradition.

These difficulties did not keep the early missioners from continuing their apostolate, pursuing their dream of constructing a new Church without the vices found in the religious practices of the old continent.

5. A change in trends: From rejection to acceptance. Early colonial policies, and the conversion of the Indians

We pointed out that no multitudinous conversions happened in the first years of missionary work among the Mesoamerican Indians. Nevertheless, the baptisms of non-Christian Indians increased significantly towards the end of the 1520s and throughout the 1530s. There are multiple reasons for this. We cannot undervalue the evangelizing work of the first missioners. However, it is important to consider other important variables.

Even though no actual military force was used to compel the Indians into becoming Christians, there were some practices that amounted to coercion.[56] For instance, in 1525 the Spanish colonial government prohibited all public "idolatrous" worship (meaning traditional religion), making it impossible for the Indians to practice their faith.[57] This same year the famous school for

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[55] N. WACHTEL, *Dioses y Vampiros. Regreso a Chipaya*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México 1997, 67-69.

[56] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 126, cites the chronicler Mendieta as saying that fray Toribio de Benavente, Motolinía, baptized more than 400,000 Indians during his lifetime and that 15 years after the arrival of the Spaniards, and without the coercion of the civil authorities, there were 6,000,000 baptized Indians.

[57] Cf. S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…*, 23. This prohibition pertained to the more inoffensive rites such as offering incense and flowers to their deities, organizing proces-

the Indian nobility, the *Kalmekak*, was closed and dismantled. It meant that the Aztecs could no longer publicly transmit their heritage to their children.[58] Also important is to consider that the Indians learnt soon that being a Christian had many civil advantages, for instance, Christian Indians were treated better in court and could not be enslaved or marked.[59]

At the same time, as more and more Indians were baptized, the continuation of their traditional religious practices was not regarded any more as the ignorance of pagans, but as a deliberate and conscious rejection of the Christian faith. They were no longer gentiles, they were idolaters, relapsed. In his work, Gruzinski speaks of the many spectacular and violent persecutions of the "idolaters" that took place between 1525 and 1540.[60]

Therefore, one must consider these socio-political conditions as a background for the first structured evangelization, the remarkable effort of the first missioners to develop an Indian Church.

6. Building a Christian society. The Franciscan utopia and the Indian Church

Soon the Franciscans were no longer alone in the evangelization endeavor. The Dominicans arrived in Mexico in 1526 and the Augustinians in 1533. In 1538 there was a provincial meeting to organize the missionary work. As a result of it, the territory of the New Spain was divided between the three orders. The Franciscans were to be responsible for spreading the gospel in

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sions, going to the mountain peaks to bring sacrificial gifts of food, etc. Human sacrifices had been banned from the start of the Spanish rule.

[58] This Aztec "university" was the place were the children of the Aztec nobility learned their history, philosophy and religion. Several generations of Indian leaders had been formed there. It was a most powerful institution and the main transmitter of their culture. It was also a meeting place for the spiritual intelligentsia of the nation. See S. GRUZINSKI, *Loc. Cit.*

[59] This horrible practice of marking people in the face with a hot iron, just like cattle, was widespread during the first years after the conquest (the practice was suffered by the black slaves well into the XVIII century). The Christian missioners opposed it from the beginning. They refer cases of people completely disfigured because of multiple marks, a testimony of all the merciless masters they had had (they would be marked again each time they were sold). See J. DE VOS, *Vivir en la Frontera*, 89.

[60] S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…*, 24.

central Mexico, the immediate south and eventually Yucatan and the Gulf Coast. The Dominicans received Oaxaca and Chiapas. The Augustinians took the areas to the northeast of Mexico, all the way into the Huasteca.[61]

But it was the Franciscans who envisioned and developed the idea of building up a "new Church", the *Ecclesia Indiana*, or "Indian Church", which would restore Christianity to its original purity and zeal. They came from communities that had "reformed" themselves, leaving the life of riches and privileges of many Franciscan convents of that time in order to go back to the simplicity of their original lifestyle. They considered the contemporary European society (including large segments of the Church) to have lapsed far away from the Christian ideals of brotherly love, and to have given themselves to the worship of Mammon. The friars had the expectation of building a new Church with the Indian neophytes who had not been tainted with the vices of the traditional Christian societies. They envisioned the establishment of a Christian Indian government, of theocratic inspiration.[62] The Indian Church would be characterized by its poverty and simplicity, with a hierarchical structure that would emphasize these virtues.[63]

The friars loved the Indians and admired their culture. Even though, according to the missioners' view, the Indians had been deceived by the devil for many years, this very ignorance, paradoxically, had kept them from the corruption that had affected the European society. For the early missioners, the Indians with all their virtues were called to embody the Pauline "new man".[64] This initial fascination with the Indian cultures and their potentials

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[61] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 135-137. Other missionary orders, such as the Jesuits, arrived later, in the last quarter of the XVI Century.

[62] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 209.

[63] See J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 83.

[64] Almost all the Chroniclers of the time exalt the integrity of the Indian society. There are numerous lists of their virtues. Among the most mentioned ones: equanimity, excellent understanding, prudence, obedience, diligence, spirit of freedom, simplicity, innocence, humility, honesty, meekness, hospitality, frugality. See f. J. F. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 88, 147. Also J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 246, where among the good qualities found in Indians (that would make them excellent Christians) we find: "the responsibility they take in sustaining with their own resources the missionary effort, their generosity and love for all things that belong to God and God's worship, their affection for building churches and Christian altars in their homes and their deep respect for priests. They

allowed some of the first evangelizers to listen with empathy to what their Indian counterparts had to say. One can perceive an openness and desire to understand, which unfortunately would be lost as the first major discrepancies emerged. Even though all the missioners were certain that the God presented by Christianity was undoubtedly superior to the ideas of the native religion (which were believed to be concoctions of the devil), they realized that in matters of piety the Mesoamericans were far more advanced than their European counterparts.[65]

All future missioners, partakers of this Christian endeavor, were supposed to share the same conviction: that the New Church was to be founded in America, its members coming from the Indian population under the direction of the reformed Franciscans. The friars who were to work among the indigenous population had to show a deep love and respect for them and their culture, which was considered as intrinsically good. Those who did not, were sent back to Spain.[66] As stated above, language learning was a priority for the Franciscan mission from its start. Some came to argue, like Mendieta,[67] that the Nahuatl language was no less elegant and precise than Latin and that perhaps it was richer in its compositions and derivation of new words. In any event, learning the Indian languages well was indispensable for the successful preaching of the gospel. Even the Indian temperament had to be appreciated and imitated for the sake of proclaiming the gospel. Mendieta again states: *"if you pretend to do a good job cultivating this vineyard of the Lord, it would be convenient that you let go of the* [customary] *irascible character of the Spaniards, their arrogance and conceit, and you should make yourselves Indian with the Indians, phlegmatic and patient like they are, poor and bare, meek and most humble, such as they are."*[68]

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honor the images of the saints, offer themselves to keep the Churches clean and have a special gift for organizing solemnities."

[65] Cf. T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 200. Joseph de Acosta, a Jesuit missioner exclaimed: *"in the service of Satan they do many things that we refuse to do in the service of God the Highest,…, this is to confound those of us who with a little penance go around boasting and full of pride"*, cited in Gómez, *o. c.*, 172. See also C. BERNAND and S. GRUZINSKI, *De la idolatría*…, 22.

[66] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 159.

[67] Cited by *Ibid.*, 170.

[68] J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 194, cites MENDIETA, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, Lib. III, Cap. XV.

Therefore, a fundamental point of the evangelization endeavor was the insistence on the life testimony given by all missioners. Even the Indian chronicles register the good impression the Indians received from the poverty and humility of the friars.[69] This most simple but essential of evangelization techniques, the witness of life, was instrumental to the increase of baptisms during the first 15 years of evangelization. With time, the numbers of people asking to be admitted into the Church was so large that the friars started baptizing the people on demand, leaving their Christian formation for later.[70]

This formation in the faith required texts: catechisms, devotionals, etc. Soon the missioners were writing and publishing works in the original American languages. Some of them were grammars to aid the newcomers learning the indigenous languages. Around 1537, fray Juan de Zumárraga, first bishop of Mexico, brought the printing press, to support the evangelization effort.[71] Much care went into the precise translation of theological terms, although not always with good results. There were two positions. Some argued for the utilization of early Indian terms, saying that the natives could then better understand the Christian meanings. Others argued that terms previously used in pagan worship carried too much "idolatrous" connotations that would eventually taint the Christian message. There are a balanced number of representatives of both positions.[72]

Parallel to this discussion there was another one dealing with the adoption of Indian religious practices, adapting them to the Christian context. Cortés soon understood that the Indians needed a native reference to understand the new religion. Any attempt to impose from above something completely new would be unsuccessful if not disastrous. The Franciscans also understood it. We can picture them trying to explain the Christian doctrine in

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[69] Cf. F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 98. Also C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 122.

[70] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 128.

[71] Cf. *Ibid.*, 174.

[72] Interestingly enough this debate remained open for centuries. Even today, with all the care given to inculturation and the many positive experiences emerging from it, there is criticism against the approach of using native concepts. This comes from more (and sometimes unconsciously so) ethnocentric individuals. These detractors of the inculturation practices consider that the European philosophical references (often named by them as "perennial") are the only ones appropriate to present the Christian mystery.

categories totally alien to the Indian mind and getting only puzzled looks as a result. And then, when they used terminologies and references to practices familiar to the natives, they could see how their message finally got across. So slowly they used more and more Indian references to communicate the Good News. This need of inserting the Catholic teachings in a non-Christian preexisting religious experience is what Duverger calls *"the un-confessable secret"*:[73] everyone knew about this "indianization" of the Christian kerygma, but no one openly admitted it, even though it became part of the evangelization process.

There were different opinions as to the ongoing formation of the newly baptized. Some favored a more structured catechesis. In this case the Indians were expected to attend regular sessions at the nearest convent. The Eucharist would be celebrated as part of the coming together and communal worship, but normally the Indians were not invited to take communion. There were several pastoral instructions that encouraged the acceptance of the baptized Indian to Holy Communion, but their very insistence shows that the practice was often neglected.[74]

7. First attempts at creating a native clergy and lay ministries

The missioners realized soon enough that in order to "plant" Christianity in the New World, an indigenous Church had to be developed.[75] And essential for the consolidation of an Indian Church was the development of its own leadership. Already in 1525 some Franciscans, especially the Dan-

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[73] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 195.

[74] For instance the Ecclesiastical Meetings held in Mexico (1524, 1535, 1546); the Councils of Lima (1551, 1567 and 1582); the Councils of Mexico (1555 and 1585) and the Synod of Quito (1545). See footnote 532 in Gómez, *El impacto de las religiones indígenas*, 246. The Jesuit missioner Joseph de Acosta inverts the usual argument of the opponents who declared *"let them grow in the faith so that they can receive communion"*. Acosta would answer: *"No, let them be nourished by the Holy Communion so that they can grow in the faith"*, F. J. GÓMEZ, *Ibid.* 247.

[75] J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*¸ 58, states that the Franciscans had the conviction that there was no possibility of founding an "Indian Church", without also founding a new Christian society.

ish Franciscan friar Jacobo Daciano, wrote in favor of the ordination of Indians to the priesthood.[76]

By the beginning of the 1530s the missioners developed a pastoral plan and methodology for the construction of the *Ecclesia Indiana*. Crucial to it was the opening of schools to educate the children of the Indian elite.[77] They realized that the children, not having grown into the practices of "idolatry", would be much more receptive to the Christian doctrine than their elders. At first the nobles were not willing to give up the education of their children and instead sent the children of their servants. But when they saw that these children returned with a comparative advantage and started to get positions of power within the colonial system, the nobles hurried to send their own offspring. Eventually these boarding schools gained the confidence of all the Indian nobility,[78] and soon after the Indian lords were demanding that their children receive an education comparable to the one given to the Spaniards.[79]

In the schools, the young Indians would learn Spanish, Latin, and the Humanities considered basic in the European educational system of the time. The friars were amazed at the incredible achievements of their pupils. They learned soon to read, write and speak fluently in Latin, Spanish and Nahuatl. Already in 1530, an Indian composed a complete Mass.[80]

Some of these children proved to be great allies of the missioners in the evangelization process. They shared what they had learned with their parents and many times they served as spontaneous spies when they reported

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[76] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 148. This author even considers that *"the driving idea of the Franciscans was to allow the Indians to take control of the Christian worship"*, 197. The original Spanish reads: *"La idea motora de los franciscanos, es que hay que permitir que los indios se apoderen del culto cristiano*."

[77] This was not a new idea. The Dominican friars Pedro de Córdoba and Antonio de Montesinos, missioners in the Antilles, envisioned the possibility of sending the children of the caciques to be educated in Spain, with the intention of bringing them back to help with the evangelization of their people. Although some may have been sent, there are no clear records. The idea was dropped soon afterwards, perhaps due to the demise of the Indian population in the islands. See GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 250.

[78] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 124.

[79] Cf. F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 248.

[80] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 129.

to the friars everything they saw at home, especially what seemed to be against the Christian religion.[81] But soon some conflicts emerged, when the zeal of the neophytes made them violent. There was the notorious case of the children attending the Franciscan school in Tlaxcala, who stoned to death an Indian traditional priest. When asked to explain their conduct, the children declared that they were certain they had killed a demon.[82]

In 1535 the College of the Holy Cross (*Colegio de la Santa Cruz*) is founded in Tlatelolco, a suburb of Mexico City.[83] Its purpose was not only the formation of the children of the Indian nobility. It was also conceived as a proto-seminary that eventually would be adapted to educate the future Indian Catholic priests. During its best years (until the 1570s) it maintained an average of 80 students. Originally the pupils came from a junior seminar called San José de los Naturales, especially created to educate Indian children that showed talent for the priesthood.[84] With the crisis of the Franciscan utopia and the belief that the Indians were not fit for the Catholic priesthood, Santa Cruz ceased to be considered a seminar in 1546.[85] It continued as a school for the formation of the Indian intelligentsia. Several famous figures of the era graduated from Santa Cruz. Among them the well known chroniclers Fernando de Alva Ixtlixóchitl, Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, and Antonio Valeriano, the author of the *Nikan Mopoua*, the first complete story of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

However, some of problems emerged already in 1527 when the Franciscans of New Spain decided to suspend the incorporation of Indian candidates to the order. At the time, they considered it to be a momentary policy, until the Indians understood better the nature of Christian ministries and the Franciscan lifestyle. They cited as ground reasons for this suspension the inability of the Indians to comprehend and practice the vow of celibacy and a certain tendency to abuse alcohol.[86]

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[81] Cf. F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 60.
[82] Cf. J. GARIBAY, *o.c.*, 188.
[83] See C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 47.
[84] *Ibid.*, 210.
[85] *Ibid.*, 214.
[86] *Ibid.*, 214.

The friars soon found out that much more than language skills was needed to understand the Indian soul, and that only by knowing the Indian ways in depth could the gospel be preached to them with some fruit. As the 1540s and 1550s went by, more and more we hear that the missioners were disappointed with what seemed to them as lapses into idolatry on the part of their new converts. The previous lists of virtues are substituted with complains and declarations of the inability of the natives to live up to the gospel standards. In an attempt to solve this problem, the evangelizers and their Indian partners started their monumental exploration into the antiquities of the conquered nations. In the coming years (until the middle of the 17th century) the Spanish and indigenous chroniclers produced the most complete documentation of a traditional society ever done to date.[87]

With time, the difficulties of finding Indian candidates that would conform to the characteristics of the Latin rite priesthood (most of all, the discipline of celibacy which appeared as irrational to the Indian mindset) forced the friars to look for alternative possibilities. They realized that the *Ecclesia Indiana* would never take hold without some form of a native leadership. The adaptation of the Catholic priesthood to the Indian cultures was something beyond the imagination of the early missioners.[88] Rather they opted to develop alternative, non-ordained, ministries. They built a catechetical structure that would ensure the pastoral care of the native population through native ministers. They instituted a dual office in each community. One of these services dealt with the Christian ongoing formation of the people, and the assurance of their fidelity to the teachings and practices of the Church. Thus, each village had its own *Tepixki*, who promoted the devotional life of the Indian Christians, making sure it remained within orthodox parameters, free from

[87] Cf. T. TODOROV, *o. c.*, 212. This already extensive wealth of information was farther enriched by the numerous *encuestas*, or administrative surveys, organized by the Spanish government to have an ever clearer idea of the nature of its possessions: types and numbers of peoples, form of local government, customs, rites, tributes, natural resources, etc. They were even interested in the way these peoples reacted to social change. See C. BERNAND and S. GRUZINSKI, *De la idolatría…, o. c.*, 82.

[88] And unfortunately this remains the case among some of the more conservative circles of the Catholic Church today, as proven by the constant harassment suffered by the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, its autochthonous Church, culminating in the prohibition to ordain more permanent Indian deacons.

idolatrous contamination. The second ministry had a more liturgical character to it. The so-called *Tlapixke* were a sort of sacristan-liturgists, responsible for safekeeping the Church ornaments, the parochial registry, collection, etc. When needed, they could substitute for the friars in para-liturgical celebrations (such as burials). To conform to the Indian custom of serving always in pairs (thus supporting one another and learning from the one with more experience), there were always two *tlapixke* in each community.[89]

Even Mendieta, writing towards the end of the 16th century, and in spite of his generally good attitude towards the Indians and their ability to grow in the Christian faith, shares the same opinion of his contemporaries in considering them unsuitable for the Christian ordained ministries. He states: *"It is better not to admit them to the dignity of the priesthood, or in religious communities… they have a strange nature, shared by all Indian groups, that makes them unsuitable to govern and rule, but well suited for being governed and ruled."* [90]

8. Indian discontent: the insurrection of the mind

We know that the Spanish occupation of Mesoamerica was a catastrophe in all terms for the Indians. Due to the infectious illnesses brought by the invaders, to the casualties of war, to the unbearable work conditions, and to the many that just lost their will to live, the Mesoamerican population plummeted throughout the XVI century. From an estimated population of 25 million people at the time of the first contact, there were only 17 million left by 1532; 6 million in 1550; two and a half million in 1570 and about one million (its lowest level) at the beginning of the 17th century.[91]

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[89] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 216-217.

[90] The Spanish text reads: *"…no los admitir a la dignidad del sacerdocio ni de la religión...un natural extraño que tienen por la mayor parte los indios...que no son buenos para mandar y regir, sino para ser mandados y regidos"*. Cited by GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 254.

[91] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 208; J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 207. Both authors base their numbers in the researches of Cook, S.H., and W. Borah, *The Indian Population of Central Mexico, 1531-1610*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1960; See also: C. BERNAND and S. GRUZINSKI, *De la idolatría o. c.*, 130, where the authors state that in 1625 the Indian population was only 5% of what it had been in 1519. For Chiapas, DE VOS (*Vivir en la Frontera*, 57) estimates a 75% reduction of the native population between 1521 and 1550. This faster reduction could have been due to the fierce resistance of the local population to the Spanish rule.

This prompted one of the first missioners, Toribio de Benavente *Motolinía*, to declare that the greed of the Spaniards had destroyed and desolated the land in a way never done by the human sacrifices, wars, and murders of the time of the Aztec rule.[92] This decimation of the natives affected profoundly their society. For one thing, the Indian elite of nobles and intellectuals ceased to exist.[93] Not only that, the negative influence of the Spanish colonists was already causing damage to the Indian population that had permanent contact with them. Again we read from Motolinía's rendering: *"everybody agrees that the Indians that have more contact with the Spaniards develop the worst conduct."* [94]

We have already stated that from the beginning there was resistance to the Spanish rule and all the foreign elements brought about by it, including the Christian religion. It is not surprising that the former rulers and Indian priesthood were among the most recalcitrant opponents. But with time we see this opposition gaining some unexpected supporters, such as the alumni of the Christian schools.

Some explanation for the discontent can be found in the innumerable times that the Spaniards deceived and betrayed the Indian population. For the native cultures of Mesoamerica the word given represented a binding commitment that was always honored, even to the point of laying one's life to honor a pledge. The Indians just could not understand why the Christian Spanish would lie and discredit their given word. A famous case that reverberated throughout the New Spain was that of King Caltzontzin, of the Purhepecha.[95] These traditional enemies of the Aztecs, when hearing of their downfall, sent spies to inform themselves of what was going on. Impressed by their account of the behavior of the missioners, Caltzontzin asks to be baptized and requests that preachers be sent to his people. All this in 1525. Five years later, the Spanish forces of Nuño de Guzmán, hoping to extract gold from him, captured,

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[92] See E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 206.

[93] Cf. J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 211.

[94] F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 203.

[95] The Purhepecha (or Tarascos) was an Indian nation established to the West of the central Mexican valleys in what is now the lake region of Michoacan State. They spoke a language completely different from Nahuatl. They were extremely zealous of their independence, which they were able to maintain until the time of the Spanish invasion.

tortured, and executed this first willingly Christian king.[96] We can imagine the message that such actions sent to the native population.

Another famous occurrence was the trial of Don Carlos Ometochtli, a cacique from Texcoco, an important town situated to the northwest of Mexico City. He was an alumnus of the College of Santa Cruz. He was accused of lapsing into idolatry and the "old ways". His case is most interesting. He was a good student of the Spaniards and learned very well their rhetoric techniques, which he used to defend himself in court and to substantiate the right of the Indian population to live according to the customs of their ancestors. During his trial, he pointed out very cleverly the inconsistencies in the doctrine that had been preached to them, especially in the field of morality.[97] He also countered the traditional argument that the Indian gods did not exist since they had not defended them from the Spaniards and their violence. Cleverly, don Carlos Ometochtli responds saying that the same argument could be used against the Christian God and his silence in face of the injustices committed against his followers. In any case, it was evident to don Carlos that the moral standards of his nation were much higher than what he could appreciate in the Spanish population.[98]

In this case we find an Indian who "knows" the European mind, is willing to play its game and even ridicule it. For all this he was considered too dangerous, both by the civil and religious authorities. He was condemned to death, and his punishment was carried out publicly, to serve as a warning lesson to any future rebellion. Duverger declares, with a poetic twist, that *"don Carlos was sacrificed on the altar of conversion."*[99]

By this time, it became clear that when given the possibilities, the Indians were quick to learn the Spanish *modus operandi* and use it to their advantage.[100] The native elite, in particular, learned soon to use "occidental" intro-

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[96] Cf. C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 125.

[97] For instance, Don Carlos declares that the Spanish authorities have no right to prohibit the Indians, among other things, to consume alcoholic beverages, since the same Spanish authorities themselves were so often drunk.

[98] In numerous occasions the rebellious Indians declare that they do not want to embrace a "civilization" where violent aggression seemed to be one of its main characteristics. See J. DE VOS, *No queremos ser cristianos*, 195.

[99] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 224.

[100] Cf. E. FLORESCANO, *o. c.*, 257.

spection in order to understand better their world (and the traditional Indian worldview that made sense of it), structure and systematize it, and finally express it in innovative ways.[101] And many times they found their ancient traditions to be more coherent and rational than the European counterparts. Of course the Spaniards soon became aware of the subversive possibilities of this revitalized native culture. In the next years, the new Indian intelligentsia was to be neutralized, either by death or by deportation to Spain.

9. The "return to the idolatry." The Indians develop a new faith

With time, more cracks appeared in the idealized edifice of the *Ecclesia Indiana*. We have already considered the problem emanating from trying to force Indian candidates into the parameters fixed for the ordained ministries of the Latin rite, especially the demand of celibacy. These difficulties surfaced soon enough, given their overt character. But the attentive eyes of the missioners would eventually perceive other more subtle inconsistencies. These unanticipated setbacks amounted to what would be defined as the endurance of "idolatry" in the hearts and minds of the Indian population, not only the recent converts but also in those raised and educated as Christians (as we have seen in the previous Section). This situation first puzzled, then angered and finally disillusioned the early enthusiasts of the Indian Church. These new and unexpected developments shook the foundations of the Franciscan utopia to the core.

It is clear that, by the middle of the 16th century, most of the friars were disappointed with their neophytes. They did not live up to the expectations of evolving into *"evangelical men"*.[102] The "new men" should be characterized by the two most desirable qualities of love of poverty/simplicity and the ability to lead contemplative lives. The Franciscan felt that the natives could fulfill the first expectation but it seemed as if they were not capable of developing the second. But perhaps what became more disillusioning to the friars

[101] Cf. J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 239. See also S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización…*, 12, were he states that in many villages in Mexico the Indians were using the written language more often an perhaps better than their contemporary European counterparts.

[102] *"Hombres evangélicos"*, the ideal living cell of the renewed Church. See J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 135.

was that the Indians seemed prone to deceit: they affected to be *"demure and honest, when they really are not so, this* [deception] *is something that the Indians do very well"*.[103]

But not all voices were pessimistic. For instance, the Franciscan chronicler Mendieta suggests that the missioners should not be so fast and harsh in their judgment of "idolatrous" practices.[104] Also, the Jesuit Joseph de Acosta proposed a more realistic approach to the problem of the endurance of "idolatry". He emphasized the responsibility of the Europeans in the crisis of the Indian Christianity. For instance, he stressed the role played by the poorly educated clergy, the bad example that many of them gave to the Indians, and their ignorance of Indian languages and culture.[105] Another exponent of this more impartial approach had been Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who cautioned against the forceful eradication of all pagan rites because that way whatever good was in them would also be lost, i.e. the Indians would grow "cold" towards religious practice, the way the Europeans had gone before.[106]

But in spite of this more sympathetic voices, the general sentiment was against the emergence of any Indian led institution, be it civil or religious. The fate of the Indian Church had been sealed.

10. The fall of the *Ecclesia Indiana*, from hope and trust to suspicion and repression

One must recognize that, from the beginning of the colonial period, not only good words about the Indians had reached the Spanish court. Soon enough the conquistadors and their descendants tried to undermine the work of the missioners on behalf of the Indian cultures. This was so, because the defense

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[103] E. C. FROST, *o. c.*, 212.

[104] Cf. *Ibid*., 216.

[105] Cf. F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 159.

[106] Las Casas, going far beyond the spirit of his age, considered that both paganism and Christianity shared a common logic: both were attempts by the people to please God, both spoke of a common need found in the human soul. The difference was the object of veneration, in the case of the Christians, the true God, in the case of paganism, a false image, a "mask". See C. BERNAND and S. GRUZINSKI, *De la idolatría o. c.*, 45 and 66.

of the natives very often meant placing limits to the greed of the colonialists. Later on, some Church figures also joined the anti-Indian field, especially secular priests who had been criticized for exploiting their flock.[107] In general terms, there was a growing despair of ever reaching the Indian hearts. This situation, of course, baffled also the more sympathetic Spanish missioners who just could not understand why the natives preferred their old ways to the Spanish "civilization". Expressing this perplexity Archbishop Cortés y Larraz exclaims: "[the Indians] *see the Spaniards and the mestizos as aliens and usurpers of these kingdoms, for which reason they loathe them with unquenchable hate and if now they obey them is only out of fear. They do not want anything to do with the Spaniards, nor with their religion, doctrine or customs.*"[108]

Another illustrative case, the rural priest Bartolomé Alvarez, sent countless letters of complaint to the crown. Instead of the usual list of virtues of the Indians found in the friars' accounts, Alvarez sent abundant lists of defects and faults.[109] He demands that the Spanish Crown come to protect the suffering missioners against these "beasts". He recommends that rigorous Spanish judges should be appointed to rule the Indians and he gives a list of needed practices to control the native population: 1. Indians should be forbidden to carry on their pagan traditions and should be forced to live like Spaniards; 2. Their testimony should be given no credit in court; 3. They should be treated with the same severity as they were treated by their previous rulers; 4. Their freedom of movement should be curtailed; 5. Corporal punishment should be used more freely against Indians;[110] 6. They should be compelled to live according to Christian moral standards; 7. They should be forbidden to learn Latin and other "lofty subjects"; 8. All privileges should be taken away from them, for one, they should be put under the jurisdiction

[107] See J. DE VOS, *Vivir en la Frontera*, 111. Already in 1561 the Indians from the Soconusco Region in Chiapas, petition the Spanish Crown to remove all secular priests and to send in their stead Franciscans or Dominicans.

[108] Cited by E. MAURER, *o. c.*, 473.

[109] He considers the Indians to be by nature violent and perverse, hypocrites, liars, foul, alcoholic, lazy, without any appreciation for virginity and celibacy, adulterous, thieves, envious, greedy, cowards, etc. See F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 153.

[110] Just like Alvarez did, actually that was one of the accusations against him.

of the Inquisition.[111] Alvarez also accused the Jesuit missioners of his area of "not making any differences between the sons of *'old Christians'* (cristianos viejos), *and the sons of the idolatrous; they make no deference to us who were born of a licit birth within the Church of God, and these* [the Indians] *who were aborted and brought to life by force"*.[112]

Soon the attacks on the foundations of the *Ecclesia Indiana* increased in number and force. By 1555, the First Provincial Council of Mexico ordered the confiscation of all printed sermons in the hands of the Indians. The Second Council, in 1565, endorsed the prohibition and extended it to the Sacred Scripture. That meant that the Indians were not allowed to have even segments of the gospels and other books of the Bible.[113]

By the 1570s the mistrust to both the *Ecclesia* and the *Res Publica Indianae* becomes the official policy of the Spanish State. Philip II, King of Spain, declares in 1577 that all publications dealing with the Indian cultures had to be approved by the central State censorship. And even those approved should never be made available to the Indian population. Before these new restrictions came into place, the *Nihil Obstat* and *Imprimatur* of the local religious authorities had been sufficient. Philip II and the Spanish government had become extremely worried about the resurgence of the Indian cultures.[114]

Soon to follow was the prohibition to teach theology and other "elevated" subjects to the natives. There had been a fear that educated Indians (which started to be numerous) would then contradict poorly educated priests, correcting their dogmatic errors. This of course could not be allowed, since it would also undermine the authority of the Spaniards and of the whole colonial regime.[115]

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[111] Cf. F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 232-235. The Spanish Inquisition had no jurisdiction over the Indian population. It could only judge Europeans, their American descendants and mestizos.

[112] F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 243. In the second half of the XVI Century we see an increase in voices that support the violent repression of all Indian resistance. We see priests and bishops calling the Spanish troops to punish rebellious populations, and then favor the deportation of the natives. See J. De Vos, *No queremos ser cristianos,* 193.

[113] Cf. J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 212. This prohibition proved to be one of the main obstacles for the continuous evangelization of the Indian population. See also E. MAURER, *o. c.*, 147.

[114] C. DUVERGER, *o. c.*, 9, 38.

[115] F. J. GÓMEZ, *o. c.*, 147.

All these measures amounted to the end of the quest to develop an Indian Church. Mendieta's words express the sadness felt by the early evangelizers about the ill fate of the *Ecclesia Indiana*: *"God's grace enabled me to enjoy a good part of those most promising beginnings, and now I must also witness the adverse end to which it all has come… if I had the gift for composing lamentations, it would be most appropriate that I would sit with Jeremiah over* [the ruins of] *our Indian Church and with tears, sighs and cries that reached over to heaven, such as he did over the destroyed city of Jerusalem, I would mourn and grieve her, recounting its miserable fall and great misfortune, and for this endeavor the words and sentences of the prophet would certainly come in hand."*[116]

11. A short recapitulation

The utopian *Ecclesia Indiana*, as conceived by the early Franciscan missioners, ceased to exist, at least in the form envisioned by its initiators. We have seen how this was due mostly to the inability of the missioners to understand the Indian mind and to present the gospel message in categories accessible to the local population. This also impoverished the friars and the whole Catholic Church because they failed to recognize the wealth of spiritual wisdom present in the indigenous religions. Without it, they remained constrained to a partial understanding of God's Revelation. All this brought about the demise of the Franciscan *Ecclesial Indiana.* But Indian Christianity continued to develop, perhaps in a more unpretentious way, in forms that were *"condemned to a marginal existence and a status of minority"* to use the expression of Gruzinski.[117] It took almost five hundred years for these Indian Christian Communities to emerge as a healthy, wholly Christian and wholly Indian church. Perhaps for the first time they claimed their role in this process of

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[116] Cited by J. GARIBAY, *o. c.*, 272. The original Spanish: "*Mas como yo, habiendo gozado (por la gracia divina) de buena parte de aquellos prósperos principios, haya visto los adversos fines en que todo esto ha venido a parar... (si para componer endechas tuviera gracia) me venía muy a pelo sentarme con Jeremías sobre nuestra indiana Iglesia y con lágrimas, sospiros y voces que llegaran al cielo (como él hacía sobre la destruida ciudad de Jerusalén), lamentarla y plañirla, recontando su miserable caída y gran desventura, y aun para ello no poco me pudiera aprovechar de las palabras y sentencias del mismo profeta*". From his *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, Lib. IV, Cap. XLVI.

[117] S. GRUZINSKI, *La colonización...*, 71.

ecclesiogenesis, together with their pastors. It is evident that they are not willing to end their story with another "lamentation" over the demise of this true *Ecclesia Indiana*. Let us hope that all those involved understand the past and the present, remaining open to be enlightened by them.