

The Catholic New World

Jim Pederson *Dyed-in-the-Wool History* January 20, 2025

The Spanish

The French and Spanish presence in the New World is generally seen as a foreign cultural and political influence from the perspective of US history built from the vantage point of New England. In the South, however, these were key parts of the diverse cultural mix that distinguish this region and have a large regional influence in certain areas along the gulf coast and in parts of Texas. Catholicism and Catholic derived cultural influences were generally accepted in the South and were not seen as foreign although they were a minority as the area became more heavily populated in the early 1800's.

Spanish and French settlement preceded the English colonization of the east coast of modern America by some time and was fundamentally different in a number of ways. First, Spain and France were Catholic monarchies and were more consistent in the way they structured their exploration and colonization for that reason. Spain and France also did not have a growing over population problem that would have encouraged them to displace excess people to a new land as did England(1 p. p. 21). Spain and France sought economic objectives and to spread their culture and religion but not to transplant their population and, ultimately, this would cause them to lose a demographic war for the control of the Americas but this would have been very difficult to see or understand at the time.

As part of the Colombian exchange between the old and new world, populations would be exposed to diseases that they had not built up immunity to. The most significant example being smallpox which took a fairly devastating toll on American Indian groups over an extended period of time. This happened consistently everywhere Europeans came in contact with Indians and would have ultimately been unavoidable unless the two geographical regions were permanently separated. The Spanish are held most accountable for this as they were the first and encountered the largest populations of Indian peoples. For this, in post modern history they are frequently accused of genocide. Unless the Spanish are to be held accountable for not having an understanding of germ theory, however, moral condemnation of their role in this process would not be reasonable. Apart from this process, however, reaching general conclusions about the treatment and effect of the Europeans on the Indians is an exercise in blending unlike things together and has the effect of hiding the guilty and condemning the innocent or at least the less guilty. To start with, American Indians were by no means a homogeneous population and were constantly at war with each other. To some extent people groups from roughly the same region would share some common characteristics and could be reasonably grouped together but to claim, for example, groups from Meso-America would have anything significant in common with tribes from what is now the North East United States would be a very hard case to reasonably make. Next, the timeline of European exploration and settlement also stretched over three hundred years encompassing rapidly changing political and economic circumstances. Finally, the Europeans were from distinctly different groups as well and had increasingly little in common as Christendom collapsed in the reformation. The ways in which they saw and interacted with the native populations varied greatly and

the low point in the treatment of Indians by Europeans could well have been reached in 19th century America and not 16th century Mexico.

Moving on to the Spanish conquest of Indian civilizations, while Columbus and the Spaniards who followed him took control of the Caribbean Islands displacing a relatively small and unorganized native population there, the more notable conquests are of the Aztec and Inca. Hernando Cortez landed at San Juan de Ulua near Vera Cruz on April 12, 1519 having only app. 600 infantry, 16 cavalry, 13 cross-bowmen, and 14 cannon as his entire force (2 p. 32). Cortez was originally to go on a rescue mission for an earlier Spanish mission that didn't return but the remnant of that mission did make it back shortly before Cortez was to depart for Mexico. Cortez's mission was cancelled but he left anyway making him technically a fugitive (3). When he arrived in the Yucatan he disabled the vessels which is at least a partial source for the expression "burn the ships". He encountered Mayas and was received as a foreign visitor. The Spaniards were given 20 female slaves by their hosts (3). They encountered a survivor from the previous expedition who was living as a Mayan peasant farmer (3). There was another Spaniard who had married into Mayan nobility. One of the female slaves was a fourteen year old girl named Marina who had been sold several times and moved around the broad area which enabled her to learn multiple languages. She would become the interpreter. (3)

The Aztecs were well aware of the Spaniards arrival and their presence in the Caribbean. They were relatively new arrivals to central Mexico who are more correctly referred to as the Mexica arriving in central Mexico from the north (Aztec was a term referring to a three tribe coalition of which the Mexica were dominant and the term wasn't commonly used until later) (4 p. 152). They initially acted as mercenaries in a hotly contested region that was characterized by constant warfare. Their capital was established in the early 1300's on a marsh largely because the other land around a sprawling fresh water lake was previously occupied (4 p. 106).

The Spaniards arrived at the time and place corresponding to the Aztec Quetzalcoatl legend that could possibly be based on Europeans who had arrived there several hundred years earlier but left or were driven out (this is presented as an interesting possibility and not a claim). This story, however, didn't get traction for several decades after the event and it is more probable that the Aztecs and their leader Montezuma were assessing their potential adversary (3).

The Spaniards initially made contact with the Tlaxcalans (2 p. 32) where they came under attack. The Tlaxcalans were adversaries of the Aztecs and were in effect surrounded by them and under a continual state of siege. They retreated to defensible high ground and could have been annihilated had the Tlaxcalans not realized they were strategically useful (3). The Tlaxcalans then misrepresented the neighboring city of Chula as being allies with the Aztecs and the Spaniards joined them in laying siege to it for several days (3). Montezuma and the Aztecs observed this and thought it better not to move against them at that time. Cortez and his men, along with a contingent of Indian allies, entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in November of 1519 taking up residence in a compound of the city which was built on a marsh and connected by causeways. In June of 1520 Cortez left the Aztec capital for the coast with some of his troops in response to news that a larger force of Spanish had been sent to arrest him for insubordination. Cortez defeated those sent to capture him and the survivors of that group joined up

with Cortez to return to Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs were attempting to make contact with the Spanish forces to form an alliance against Cortez but didn't get there in time(3).

Popular history of the Aztecs quickly turns to the subject of human sacrifice. The ritualistic sacrifice of human beings was known to some extent in most pagan religions but in Central America this occurred on a large scale and in the case of the Aztec Empire, which had only held power for less than 200 years, it appeared to be almost an industrial process. The victims were typically young men, and to a lesser extent, women who were harvested from the surrounding tribes they dominated. This practice shocked and disgusted the Spanish, much as it would someone from modern western society, and has stood as their legacy despite attempts by modern historians to overlook or downplay it and an awareness of all of this is necessary to appreciate what was to happen next.

After increasing tension over a period of months and running low on supplies while under almost constant attack, Cortez and his chief lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado determined that their best option was to fight their way out of the capital and retreat towards the coast. On June 1, 1520, they attempted to make their escape under cover of rain but were noticed before reaching the main causeway. A large scale-battle ensued involving possibly as many as 20,000 combined Spaniards and Indians and as many as 50,000 Aztecs. After several days and fairly heavy losses, Cortez and his allies escaped towards the coast, along with a vast amount of treasure, where they planned their return.

In 1521, Cortez, Alvarado, and their Indian allies returned to take the Aztec capital and bring the Aztec empire to an end. This became a prolonged conflict and the outcome was not entirely certain. The Aztecs appear to have acquired some cross bows lost by the Spanish in their earlier tactical retreat and had developed tactics to deal with both horses and muskets(3). Over the next several decades the Spanish conquered the remainder of central and upper South America culminating in 1572 with the conquest of the Inca. In doing this they used a combination of more advanced military technology and tactics along with native alliances to make up for drastic numerical disadvantages and in each case they extracted a great deal of wealth, largely in the form of precious metals. If we were to apply modern social standards to the Spanish alone, it would be easy enough to declare them guilty and move on but conflicts have more than one party and judging only one never creates an accurate or balanced perspective on events. In the case of the Aztecs and Incas, the Spanish defeated and displaced empires that had been in place a short time and were far worse by way of comparison. (2 p. 32)

Understanding the way Spanish rule developed and contrasting it to English colonization provides some very significant insights into the development of Spanish civilization in the new world. The Iberian Peninsula in 711 was conquered by Muslims who triumphed over Visigoth King Roderick. A Christian remnant took refuge in a cave in Covadonga under the leadership of Don Pelayo I and began an eight century campaign of reconquest which ended in 1492. Starting from the Kingdom of Castile, which was named because of the castles built against the Moors and other centers of resistance, gradually developed including Navarre in the Pyrenees, established by a French count, and Aragon. Portugal was freed by a Burgundian nobleman. There was no real central planning and the kingdoms that developed were significantly and distinctively different. As the kingdoms were united to form Spain (or the Spain's as it was referred to into the 19th century), they were a loose confederation where regional differences

were accepted and local societal structures were left in place. There was no intent to make everyone the same or to transfer populations from one area to another and this was the pattern of Spanish empire. This was a model of empire that was common throughout history in other places at other times because it was economically and politically efficient and this was the pattern that was extended to the Spanish colonization of the new world. (2 pp. 20-24)

When the Spanish and their Indian allies conquered the Aztec kingdom they treated the conquered harshly for a period of time. Based on atrocities they witnessed and accounts from the subject Indian tribes that were now in a position to take vengeance, this seemed appropriate(2 pp. 32-34). Ultimately though the social structures and even most of the nobles were left in place. Indians were governed by their own rulers. The foundations of International law derived from discussion of Catholic Theologians regarding the rights of the indigenous peoples(5 p. 96). Catholicism spread rapidly although the drastic religious transition did present challenges and sometimes developed hybrid beliefs and practices that the church tried with varying degrees of success to control. As the Spanish influence spread both to the south and north through modern Texas, the clergy generally found willing converts and there are numerous accounts of miraculous events which can't be proven or disproven but they are at least interesting to note and many Catholics firmly hold them to be true.

Through the Spanish colonial period, very few Europeans came here apart from St. Augustine and Pensacola. The major towns the Spanish established and settled were Los Angeles and San Jose in California; Tucson, Arizona; Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico; and San Antonio, El Paso, Laredo, and Nagadoches, Texas. The Spanish and especially the Spanish clergy were not interested in destroying or displacing the native people but in making them Catholic and Spanish(2 p. 40). In comparison to the eventual expansion of Puritan culture in modern America, the Spanish and Catholic culture was not highly prescriptive but left a good deal of room for local cultures and traditions so long as they weren't specifically anti-Christian. The Anglo-American model, on the other hand, generally sought to replicate a highly common culture that would displace local cultures almost entirely. One demanded uniformity and the other did not.

Economically, the Spanish who came to the new world represented the clergy and the aristocracy or warrior class and were overwhelmingly male. This led to extensive intermarriage and interbreeding with native populations and also required the development of a native or imported work force. Most appointed officials in the Americas were "peninsulares", who were natives of Spain(2 pp. 38-39). This was to prevent the growth of a native oligarchy which might one day take over control and political power was, as a result of this, generally in their hands. Peninsulares only made up a small minority of the population. The Criollos (this is where the word Creole came from) were the native-born Spaniards. Few rose to high positions in the Spanish administration, but many were very wealthy and some bore Spanish titles of nobility. Indians were originally used as cheap labor in mines and in fields but did not hold up well to the work. Mestizos were people of mixed white and Indian blood who tended to form a sort of middle-class, comprised of artisans, farmers, and foot soldiers(2 pp. 38-39). Going back to the male/female ratio, there were very many more of them than of the criollos or peninsulares. It's notable that amongst the Conquistadores there were a small number of blacks from Seville and other Spanish cities. Some used military service as a pathway to emancipation and inclusion in Spanish society with

some receiving land grants and other recognition for service. One well known Black Conquistador was known as Estavanico. Black conquistadores participated in most or all of the major Spanish expeditions in the New World(6).

Fr. Bartolome was the chief advocate for the Indians. One of the initial questions the Spanish had to address was whether the Indians were fully human or were an inferior race or species. The church concluded that they were fully human but in need of Christian salvation and instruction. They were not equals necessarily but had the potential to become equals through the redemptive work of God and the Church. (2 p. 38)

Fr. Bartolome advocated the importation of African slaves to replace the Indians as a labor source and this led to the beginning of slavery in the new world. Note here that because the Spanish didn't import a European population there weren't indentured servants or convict labor as there was to be in the English colonies. The form of slavery that developed in the Spanish New World was more humane than in the British Caribbean Islands such as Barbados. There were protective regulations regarding housing, food, work, and punishment. Slaves could choose their own wives and change masters if they could find their own buyer. They were also able to purchase their freedom at the lowest possible rate. By the end of the 18th century, freedman outnumbered slaves in the Spanish colonies. Masters were also required to instruct their slaves in the Catholic faith and to make religious services and rites available to them.(2 pp. 38-39) There were also free blacks from Spain who immigrated to the Spanish colonies who identified as Catholic subjects of the king and had the same rights and privileges and white Spaniards. Juan Garrido (1480-1550), who introduced wheat harvesting to the Americas, was the most well known of these(6).

The French

The French experience in the New World differed from the Spanish in some fundamental ways. Whereas the Spanish were able to build on a semi-civilized foundation in the Aztecs, Maya, and Incas, the native inhabitants encountered by the French, the Huron and Algonquin Indians, were essentially hunter gathers. They were not hostile but had a low population density living in a colder climate that did not offer easy riches in the form of precious metals. The main economic product of the French exploration was the fur trade. The French were also generally occupied with European conflicts which prevented them from focusing on the New World until the reign of Louis XIII (1617 – 1643) who was able to take a significant interest in New France. The French supported Jesuit missionary efforts to Indian tribes across what is now eastern Canada and the Upper Midwest including the Abnaki, the Illinois, the Ottawa and many others in addition to the Huron and Algonquin.

The Iroquois were a coalition of five tribes in Upstate New York consisting of the Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca that were consistently at war with the Huron and Algonquin and, by association, the French. By 1646, The Iroquois had decimated the French and their Indian allies including taking a large toll on the missionaries and clergy. Neither the French nor the Huron were destroyed however, and continued a long guerilla war against the Iroquois that hardened the French settlers around what is now Quebec and they maintained a semblance of French culture.(2 p. 46)

Starting around 1700, the French determined that controlling the Mississippi would be of strategic advantage in their ongoing struggles with the British and by 1712 had established the towns of New Orleans, Natchitoches, Biloxi, Mobile, Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes. New Orleans came to rival Quebec as a center of French culture and a unique culture was established along the gulf coast that was distinctly Catholic and blended French and, to a lesser degree, Spanish influence. Throughout the colonial period, the three main powers of France, Spain, and England were consistently at war with each other as well as other European rivals. Generally in the New World, the Spanish and French were pitted against the British but also fought each other at times. This led to the pirate era in the Caribbean and along the east coast of modern America. Some of the major conflicts were The War of the Grand Alliance or King William's War (1689-1697), the War of Spanish Succession or Queen Anne's War (1701-1713), the War of Austrian Succession or King George's War (1740-1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) which is generally known in America as the French Indian War. These were all to varying degrees world wars.(2 pp. 47-48)

The point of recounting the colonial history of the Catholic powers of the day isn't to vindicate or condemn them but to portray the cultural, demographic, economic, and religious differences when compared to English colonization and to highlight the largely different objectives. Perhaps as importantly, while Catholicism tended to form loose confederations, the followers of the enlightenment tended to move towards centralization.

The Columbian Exchange

Although the Columbian exchange, or the exchange of diseases, plants, and animals between the old and new worlds, isn't a topic that directly involves religion, it brought about such dramatic changes in economics and demographics that it should at least be noted in that they would indirectly impact all aspects of society.

Starting with diseases, Europeans did bring a variety of serious diseases to which the native populations didn't have natural antibodies. These included measles, smallpox, influenza, mumps, typhus, and whooping cough. These diseases had a disproportionate toll on children but those who survived would carry partial to total immunity except for the flu which would mutate(7). Malaria and yellow fever also crossed the Atlantic from Africa. The heaviest population losses fell on the Caribbean Indians whose losses were as high as 95% between 1600 and 1650. Syphilis and tuberculosis traveled from the New World to the Old. The loss of population damaged the Indians but not all to the same severity or in the same time frame(7).

Horses, pigs, cattle, sheep, and goats all came from Europe and thrived in the Americas. Some pigs went feral and continued to thrive while sheep did well only in managed flocks. Ranching was readily adopted by Indian groups to the point where these domesticated animals are often seen as an integral part of some Indian cultures. Horses also became important economic and military assets for Indian peoples. The horse entirely changed hunting methods and enabled a much greater range of travel. Oxen were also used to perform work along with donkeys and these led to wheeled vehicles. Without beasts of burden, the wheel was of only limited value to Indians prior to harnessing the European newcomers.

Imported animals had important economic advantages to Native Americans and the easy adaptation to the new environment also served European colonial and economic interests.(7)

The greatest long term impact was provided by crops that went from the new world to Europe and Africa and European crops that grew well in the new world creating large scale exports to European markets. Primary high caloric density New World crops included the potato, corn, and the sweet potato. The potato, which originated from the Andes, had great impact in Europe where, due to the cooler climate, it grew well at lower elevations. It's large-scale adoption across northern Europe and Russia reduced famine, improved nutrition, fueled economic expansion and generally advanced civilization. Adequate caloric intake could be generated from much smaller plots of land than was previously possible and the potato stored well and didn't require timely harvesting to avoid spoilage. It was, however, subject to airborne fungus and overreliance on the potato eventually led to mass starvation especially for the Irish. Corn altered agriculture in Asia, Europe, and Africa. It grew in places unsuitable for other grains and provided multiple harvests per year. It was famine resistant and also served as food for livestock. Secondary food crops also found large European markets such as tomatoes, peanuts, pumpkins, squash, pineapples, chili peppers, and Tobacco. (7)

The Colombian Exchange enabled rapid demographic and economic expansion that couldn't have taken place otherwise.

Bibliography

1. **Walsh, Don Jordan, Michael.** *White Cargo The Forgotten history of Britian's White Slaves.* New york : New york Univesity Press, 2007.
2. **Coulombe, Charles A.** *Puritans Empire A Catholic Perspective on American History.* s.l. : Tumblar House, 2008.
3. **Cooper, Paul.** Fall of Civiliations. *Episode 9.* [Online] December 16, 2019. <https://fallofcivilizationspodcast.com/>.
4. **Mann, Charles C.** *1491: New Revelations of the Americas before Colombus.* New York, New York : Vintage Books, 2005.
5. **Woods, Thomas E. Jr.** *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization.* New York, New York : Regnery History, 2005.
6. **Marthal, Barbara.** Abbeville Institute. [Online] October 15, 2020. [Cited: October 30, 2020.] <https://www.abbevilleinstitute.org/blog/removing-guilt-and-shame-from-the-study-of-slavery/>.
7. **McNeil, J.R.** Britannica.com. [Online] September 30, 2019. [Cited: May 05, 2020.] <https://www.britannica.com/event/Columbian-exchange>.

