The Radical Shift in the Spanish Approach to Intercivilizational Encounter

Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo

Brooklyn College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Uniqueness is the product of a large number of repeated, normative and predictable elements. —Pierre van den Berghe

The modern age of the world may be said to have begun in 1492 when the dimensions of the globe were finally known. But perhaps more important than geographic expansion into two hemispheres was the inauguration of a technology increasingly able to bridge the distances, real and social, that previously had isolated civilizations. Hence, for its long-term civilizational effects, Columbus' arrival in America was significantly different from Marco Polo's journeys to China. This 16th-century capacity of civilizations to interact made subsequent colonization fundamentally different from conquest in the classical and medieval epochs. The imperialism launched in America ultimately stoked the fires of European capitalism, which thrust the world into a confrontational mode of intercivilizational relations that has yet to be completed. Without the cultural influences generated by Spain, however, the result of such economic factors alone would not have produced today's Latin America. Elements unique to 16th-century Spanish civilization made the colonization of America what Lewis Hanke called "the eighth wonder of the world" (Hanke, 1945:10).

In this paper, I will outline the transition from Medieval Spain's encounter with Islam to the imperialistic patterns that developed in the 16th century. Guided by Foster's observation to the effect that "cultures never meet, only people who carry culture come into contact with each other" (Foster:v), my focus is upon the mentalité of the individuals who initiated and achieved the colonizing project in America. I trust it will help establish a preliminary reinterpretation of the initial stages of Spain's American experience.
The Problem

The problem of the conquest and colonization of America by Spain can be focused by recall of the purposes of Columbus in 1492 and the achievements of Cortés in 1519. If Columbus came to establish new commercial relations with the kingdoms of China and Japan, why did Cortés ruthlessly destroy the Aztec empire he found in Mexico by his attack on its essential structure? Surely Spanish trade would have more easily prospered without the burdens of subduing a populace and replacing Aztec rule. When compared with the Portuguese in India, as well as the British and French somewhat later in Africa and Asia, the Spanish derived less commercial success overall from their American colonies than other European states did from theirs. Columbus wanted commercial trading rights from the Great Khan he hoped to meet, not the responsibilities of governance. His insistence on hereditary claims to rule the new lands he discovered flowed from his Genovese commercial background. He sought long-term benefits for his explorations such as had accrued to his Portuguese wife, whose family held hereditary title to the island of Porto Santo. Recognizing that access to a new commercial route between Spain and China would be jealously guarded, he sought to convert islands linking the trade lanes into waystations his family controlled, extracting fees from the expected commercial traffic (Zavala:19; Floyd:9-10).

Initially, Columbus' goals characterized Spain's cautious moves from island to island. Each step in the Caribbean was extensively debated. In contrast, Hernán Cortés swept through Mexico in 1519 as did Pizarro and Almagro later in Peru. Virtually without official controls, the conquistadores explored and subdued the greater parts of two continents from sea to sea in about the same amount of time it had taken to ply the tiny Caribbean Ocean. If they had been left intact, the empires of Mexico and Peru would have served the Castilians as well commercially as China or India did for England and Portugal. What caused the Spanish to turn from the original idea—which would have benefited them enormously—to a need for empire, which proved a Faustian exchange?

The period 1492-1519 begins with a slow, cautious and gradual
approach to intercivilizational encounter and ends with another, as rapid as it was ruthless. To account for this shift, it will be necessary to analyze the *Reconquista*, the seven-century effort to free the Iberian peninsula from its Moorish conquerors that concluded the same year as Columbus' first voyage, and to examine briefly how it shaped the *mentalité* of the individuals who came to America.

*The Reconquista: Booty and Bragadoccio*

Spain had been the scene of intercivilizational encounters since 711 when Islamic forces routed the Visigoth armies. The Moors inherited rule over loosely linked cities that had absorbed the urban-rural provincial structure of the late Roman Empire (Wiseman:63, 75 *et passim*). These cities had generated intellectuals like Marcus Annaeus Seneca (BC 55-c. AD 12) and his more famous son, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (BC 4-AD 65), Lucan (AD 39-65), Quintilian (AD 35-100), Martial (AD 40-120) and Prudentius (AD 348-405). They gave the Emperors Trajan (AD 98-117), Hadrian (AD 117-137) and Theodosius (AD 379-395) to the throne and contributed countless soldiers and steel for the Roman Empire. They were strong provincial cities, not backwater places (Vicens Vives:18-21; Wiseman:204-205). Although overrun after AD 416 by the Vandals and Visigoths, these Romanized cities had preserved a vigorous commercial society because they easily switched payment of tribute from Rome to a barbarian chief. When confronted in the 8th century with a similar option by the Moorish conquerors, these Romanized Iberians chose cooperation and coexistence over confrontation. The Mozarabic rite and a continuous string of Christian bishops in these Moorish cities is the legacy of this choice to acculturate to Islamic society peacefully (Glick, 1979:27-35), ultimately assimilating by 1100, when it appears some 80% of the Christians of the Roman Hispaquia had converted to Islam, becoming *muladís* (Arabic, *muwalled*) (Glick, 1979:34-35, fig. 1).

Even the Mozarabs (Arabic, *musta’rib*), who did not convert, adopted the Arabic language, its science, its foods, its clothing and manners (Glick, 1969:145-150). Spanish contact with Islam made it a special part of the medieval world (Foster:7), giving cause to observers like Américo Castro to describe Spanish civilization as a
Christian and Islamic synthesis (Bercia, 43-52), a conclusion somewhat controversial, but assuredly insightful (Glick, 1979:290-99).

Stripped of romantic idealization, the Reconquista appears to have been shaped more by petty squabbles among feudal lords, piratical raids and commercial adventurism than by crusaders’ zeal (Lomax: 173-178). The legends created in La Chanson de Geste present a false picture, since the Moors were ill inclined to venture north of the Duero River, which more or less marks the climatic zone in which olive trees will grow (Glick, 1979:78). Moorish forays north of the Duero were generally in search of tribute, not land. Ensnconed in the Pyrenees mountains, the Christian princes were safe from Moorish attack, but they eventually came to seek access to the grazing land in the bleak plains below. Generally unsuited for farming because of the aridity south of the coastal mountains in Galicia and León, the land north of the Duero was fortified with castles as defense against sporadic Moorish raids, hence its name “Castilla”. Spanish chroniclers sometimes described the Reconquista as a bloody, unrelenting, crusade parallel to campaigns in Palestine. But in fact, the Reconquista seldom achieved enough attention for papal proclamation as a crusade, and when it did, the foe was not always the Moors but sometimes Christians, like the Albigensians (Lomax: 58-63; O’Callaghan: 249-250). Rather than as fervent Christian crusaders, Cluniac monks and Northern European knights tended to view the Iberian Christians as somehow corrupted by the Islamic influences.

At the beginning of the 9th century, Castile witnessed a process that is key to understanding the early phase of Spanish conquest in America. What happened to Castile was resettlement (repoblación) or repopulation. It was the peculiar nature of this process that it could begin only after a military conquest, but not always immediately. In the process of repopulation, peasants had to be enticed to move from a settled region to an unsettled one on the frontier. The blandishments required for turning this trick included offers of land and social liberties. The presura (in Aragon, aprisio) or squatters’ contract even allowed property acquisition without permission of the nobility (Glick, 1979:89; see 308). In Medieval Spain, the constantly expanding frontier multiplied landowning families because any warrior who brought in settlers could climb into the nobility. Although such a process was not
unknown in the rest of Europe, it was characterized in Spain by its massiveness (Glick, 1979: 162). Even if the peasant did not achieve land ownership, his role in a labor-scarce economy held a decisive edge over the feudal lord: without the work of the cattle raiser or farmer, the reconquered land had no monetary value. By the 15th century, the migrant agricultural worker, the gañán, had become a wage laborer (Zavala: 98, ftn. 1).

When there were no peasants to repopulate the land, Christian knights generally spent a good deal of time not in reconquest, but in piratical raids upon Moorish cities. Since they would have been unable to hold the land even if they conquered it, knights were content to engage in forays for booty, or in what Angus McKay describes as “the protection rackets” (p. 15 et passim). Such prizes taken from the Islamic civilization carried both monetary value and social prestige. They were usually luxury commodities: jewelry, silks, crystal, dyes, spices, and soap. The Spanish Moors were able to part with these items with little or no real disruption to their economies. In fact, the goods ordinarily purchased from Northern Spain—wool, flax, grains—were more valuable in the Islamic world than in Europe (Glick, 1979:129-134).

Hence the interchange of luxury items from Al-Andalus for ordinary commodities from Castile was a kind of alchemy. Goods common in one civilizational set became uncommon and therefore valuable in the other. Those exchanging—Iberian Europeans and Andalusi Muslims—were bound in a symbiotic trade that made them both wealthy. In this context, any war that would destroy the ability of these civilizations to interface would be disastrous for both.

The shrine of St. James (Santiago de Campostela) in Galicia offered a means of distributing these Moorish origin goods to Europe (González López) and eventually produced a healthy maritime fleet of the Castilians on the Bay of Biscay that confronted and in 1453 triumphed over the Hanseatic League for commercial rights in Europe (O'Callaghan: 621-622). The Muslims in Spain, for their part, drifted further and further from the Middle Eastern orbit and developed direct trade with Africa for gold and ivory. This rich trade, centered in present-day Morocco in order to capitalize on trans-Saharan caravans through Timbuktu, gradually made Al-Andalus into a sort of economic buffer region (Lomax: 129-130).
The Iberian peninsula was therefore a unique region in which Europe mingled with the civilizations of the Orient and Africa. Although there were parts of the peninsula that consciously imitated France, and times when al-Andalus was merely an extension of Morocco, the dynamism of each society was inextricably linked to the other.

Because warriors regularly outran the ability of societies to assimilate the civilization of the conquerors, the boundaries of the no-man's-land rarely matched the location of a much wider region of mixed Muslim and Latin Christian societies... Between the northern [Christian] and southern [Muslim] regions of the peninsula, an intermixing of Muslim and Christian populations formed a zone where religious and social pluralism was the common order (Hess:5).

Medieval Spain was a land of many religions and two great civilizations: indeed, Spanish kings like Fernando III (1217-1252) proclaimed their royalty in four languages—Latin, Castilian, Arabic and Hebrew. Merchants, farmers, adventurers, theologians and soldiers crossed these civilizational frontiers with such frequency that at times they seemed not to exist at all. The famous Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, El Cid (c. 1043-1090), fought as a knight for al-Mu'tamin ibn Hud, the King of Zaragossa and for King al-Qadir of Valencia after spats with his Christian lord in León (Lomax: 73-75). The Franciscan Ramón Llull (d. 1315) developed a cybernetic logic machine to convince Islamic philosophers of the divinity of Jesus. Christian mystics imitated Muslim Sufism within the convents of Catholicism, and Arabian love poems served as a model for ballads of courtly love (McKay: 198-203).

Glick and Pi-Sunyer (1969: 152-53) suggested that Kroebel's notion of stimulus diffusion may be utilized to explain how the Muslim ribat and the crusading military orders are homologous. Américo Castro called the process “convivencia” and suggested that Campostela which housed the shrine of St. James was the Christian response to the Islamic Meccan pilgrimage (Barcia: 18; see ftn. 12 and González López; 91-112). It is relevant to note, however, that much of the tolerance came from the literate elites of Iberian cities. Rural contact with the Moors was generally sharper and more likely to be hostile (Glick, 1969 citing Vicens Vives).

The dialectical and contrasting approaches to civilizational diversity in Medieval Spain helps explain the American experience.
When one assesses the patterns of Christian-Moorish encounter diachronically, a counterbalanced amalgam of alternating hostility and tolerance emerges (cf. Glick, 1979: 194-96 et passim). The carrot and the stick were never absent from any period of the Reconquista. Indeed, I think that either approach would have been ineffective without the imminent possibility of its opposite.

The Ordinary Course of Conquest of the Moors

The roughly even division of Medieval Spain into two separate climatic zones and two separate but interconnected civilizations was ended when the Christian King Alfonso VIII (1158-1214) of Castile overcame the Moorish forces at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. Although this date is pictured here as decisive, the real change had come from within Islam with the religious dissensions of its Medieval theology. Simply put, fundamentalist Muslims—Almarovids, Almohads and Marinids in seceding waves—felt the easy cooperation of Andalusi Moors with their Christian counterparts was condemnable. These Moroccan fundamentalists set out to end the tolerance which had existed for several hundred years (Lomax: 68-172). Indeed, the transmutations of Islamic orthodoxy in Al-Andalus stimulated Ibn Khaldun into an interpretative history for this cultural difference (McKay:27-28).

Dissension from within Spanish Islam helped disintegrate the cohesiveness of the Muslim cities and the tenuous unity which had made them superior to the Christian forces was lost as each of the petty rulers adopted opportunistic policies likely to forestall intrigues. Al-Nasir (1199-1213), called Amir-Almiminin, “Prince of Believers” or “Miramamolín” by the Spaniards, was the leader of an attempt to end Christian-Muslim cooperation in Spain. His defeat was at the hands of Spanish armies in which other Muslims fought with the Christians against the destructive fundamentalism and its companion intolerance. Ever afterwards, the Muslim cities each ruled by its own hajib were disassociated from any Caliphate and became the taifa (muluk al-tawaif), comparable to the pearls of a strand without string.¹

The social role of Spanish Jews was also altered by this victory. As dhimmis, believers of the book, Jews were afforded a privileged position within Islamic society and in the climate of freedom they enjoyed, Spanish Jewry had developed an impressive rationalistic
and philosophical depth. Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) stands as a paragon of this excellence. Moreover, as merchants and money-lenders, Jews were essential to the economy of Al-Andalus where no Muslim could legitimately charge interest from another Muslim. Jews served a similar function in Medieval Christendom. Hence, in the climate of the symbiotic relationship, Jews were valuable to both sides. But after Las Navas, absorption into a Christian Spain became inevitable and Spanish Jews were confronted with a more difficult choice. Many chose to convert to Christianity, a phenomenon that was not necessarily coerced. Secular and rationalistic in their beliefs, some Spanish Jews opted for Christianity as preferable to a rabbinical Jewry, dominated by obscurantism and fundamentalism.

The fact that conversos were willing to be assimilated into Spanish Christian society can only be understood in the light of the process of Jewish cultural and religious decay (marked by religious confusion, the permeation of the community by radical, rationalist ideas, and the shattering of faith in providence) (Glick, 1969: 154).

Strikingly, the acceptance of these conversos was more common than rejection, at least before the 15th century (McKay: 184-186). For instance, Solomon Halevi, the chief rabbi of Burgos converted in 1391 and as Pablo de Santa María (d. 1435), was elected the Bishop of the same city (O'Callaghan: 607)!

The dissimilarities of Spain with the rest of Christian Europe also extended to the view of the Muslims under Christian rule (moriscos = converted and mudéjares = not converted). The Chronicles of Alfonso are at great pains to note that at the battle of Las Navas, the French knights complained at the presence within Christian ranks of Muslims. When Alfonso refused to dismiss the Moors, the French withdrew and the battle was fought and won without them. Clearly, Spain was one place in the world where encounter with other civilizations was not fraught with fearsome images of hostility.

Under a regime of religious pluralism this society was intellectually very productive. The science of ancient Greece and medieval Persia and India was translated into Arabic in Syria, imported into Spain by the scholars of Ummayad Córdoba, augmented by Spanish scholars like Averroës and then translated into Latin by Christian scholars who spread the knowledge to the rest of Europe. Astronomy, physics, medicine, optics, mathematics, alchemy and magic suddenly burst upon a world which had known little beyond Bede and Isidore. So too did stories from Asian
bazaars, new types of mysticism, new legends about the after-life and new philosophical theories. Thanks to the translators, both Spanish and foreign, doctors in Europe learned new cures for diseases, merchants and administrators could calculate accounts with positioned Hindu numbers and overseas discovers could rely on tables of the stars for the voyages to Africa, Asia and America. It was the Reconquest which provided suitable conditions for these translations, for only in reconquered territory did Christians have the opportunity and interest to make them. None were made in Muslim Africa, where all educated men read Arabic, and even in Sicily such translations were fewer and dependent on capricious royal patronage. In Spain these translations crowned a political, economic, social and cultural revolution as profound as any in medieval Europe. (Lomax: 176-177).

Ironically, the victory which broke the back of Muslim resistance also launched intense rivalries within the various Christian kings. Since it rapidly became no longer a question of whether the Moors would be conquered, but only a matter of by whom and when, the kingdoms of Castile, Aragón, León, even Portugal, Barcelona and Valencia vied with each other to claim the ultimate victory and resulting hegemony on the peninsula. But bitter dynastic struggles, which ended only with the joining of Castile and Aragón by the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand in 1469, precluded a concerted effort to finally conquer Al-Andalus. Moreover, factors such as the plague of the Black Death in 1348 accelerated a decline in trade and brought economic stagnation (McKay: 165-173).

The Significance of the Granadine Campaign: Orthodoxy as Geography

Besides the political issues already raised, there are basic economic reasons for the slowdown in the pace of the Reconquista. The engine of Christian expansion had been the search for booty and the possibility of repopulation. But Al-Andalus had always concentrated its population in the south, indeed Moorish Seville was larger than any of the cities of Castile (Glick, 1979:86-87). The further south the Christians pushed, the less disposable was the land. Moreover, irrigational engineering was required to provide water. González Jiménez has effectively proven that the repopulation of Al-Andalus forced changes on previous patterns of subduing reclaimed territory, so that the result of the Andalusian conquest on both conquerors and the conquered was different
from the experiences in central and northern Spain. Feudal relations between warriors and lords, among merchants of the three religions and the requirements for acceptable social and civil conformity were altered in Al-Andalus.

In the case of Granada, without the blandishment of new lands, Spanish knights preferred the sure return of booty as an annual tribute rather than seek a once and for all extermination of the Moors with whom they had lived for centuries. Moreover, as already explained, Morocco, not Spain was the real economic heart of the Moorish presence (Glick, 1979:129-130), and campaigns on African soil were more promising than the projected effort to drive out innocuous rulers from a few cities in mountainous Granada.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to focus upon only the last phase of the Reconquista and make it paradigmatic for the entire Spanish Medieval period. Unfortunately, this has been the tendency of older historiography (e.g. Moses), which often examines legal institutions without a diachronic perspective that discloses distinct phases of encounter. True enough, seven centuries of confrontation with Islam had generated a "conquest culture" (Foster:11), but as noted above, this culture had different resonances based on class factors. One may further distinguish between the formal institutions of conquest and the unplanned mechanisms of cultural encounter among individuals (Foster:12), such as the exchange of food, language, clothing, artisanry, etc., which often follows rhythms alien to official pronouncements or even individual self-perception.

The Granadine conquest is also atypical from the preceding six and one-half centuries of Reconquista because, from its inception, the campaign was motivated by political, rather than economic or strategic reasons. Ferdinand and Isabella did not launch the costly and prolonged struggle to reconquer Granada in 1481 for booty or new lands, since Granada was neither particularly rich nor fertile. Reasons of state, such as centralization of power in a single dynasty and the need to absorb otherwise idle military forces in an enterprise of the crown's bidding have all been detailed by Lomax (178).

The immediate stimulus to the crown's effort was the Catalán revolt of 1481. The rebellion against a centralized monarchy and restoration of civic and feudal exemptions on the
part of city inhabitants can be viewed as a popular rejection of the crown’s efforts to refashion the economic and social patterns of intercivilizational cooperation. Despite its appeal for common rights and individual privileges, the Catalán revolt and its homologues in the 15th century did not constitute a liberal revolution for new rights, but the claim of Medieval Spain for a restoration of ancient ways (McKay:177-184). Moreover, Isabella and Ferdinand favored the church as a centralized institution which gave the crown control over the many military orders as a counterweight to regional claims (O’Callaghan:662-663). Orthodoxy was reduced to a mechanical formula: one peninsula, one crown, one faith. Hence, whatever the degree of piety for the Catholic kings, Ferdinand and Isabella, Catholicism served for them the function of legitimizing war and royal dominance.

Colonial policy in the Americas was shaped against the 16th century backdrop of an assertive crown, eager to produce homologous uniformity in politics and religion. Much attention was given to limiting the possibility in far off colonies of a new landed nobility which could effectively challenge the new centralized power structure that was being developed. Already, by the Granadine conquest, grants were made not to land, but over people (McKay:175-176). The Spanish crown gave titles to the conquistadores over Taíno vassals, but not over the lands they inhabited (Moses:92-93). Moreover, as I will show, the discovery of the Indies opened up the opportunity once again for repopulation. But instead of Christian peasants, the new labor force was to be Christianized Taíno Indians. The native naborí of the Indies that lived on a Spanish estate instead of his own village was supposed to be the equivalent of the peninsular ganán (Zavala:98). But the crown was reluctant to extend to the American indians the feudal prerogatives of cartas pueblas or the fueros, which recognized the legal rights of a collectivity (Zavala:87). The missionary effort of the Church was essential for enhancing royal power. If the Taínos did not become Christians, the Indians could be taken in repartimiento by local masters and if they revolted, would be held as personal slaves. Conversion provided entry into the realm for the Indians as vassals of the king under a temporary encomienda to individuals responsible for maintaining them in the faith (Zavala:91).²
The Canary Islands and the West Indies: Coincidence of Homologues

In 1479, Spain reacquired the Canary islands off the African coast by appealing to a 1344 grant from Clement VI to Luis de la Cerda, son of Alfonso of Castile (Aznar Vallejo:200-03: Zavala:18). Norman knights in 1402 had been the first Europeans to attempt systematic conquest there. The Canaries became a target for Spanish repopulation in 1496, at a time when the magnitude of the discovery of the Indies was still not fully realized. Not enough attention has been paid by historians of the period to the homology of problems encountered by the colonizers in both places.

The key similarity of the Indies and the Canaries was the tribal organization of the native peoples on both islands (Fernández-Armesto). The Guanches of the Canaries and the Tainos of the Caribbean wore no clothes, spoke no written language and were dedicated to elementary hunting, fishing and agriculture in scattered villages. Unlike the sophisticated Islamic Empire, the clan organization and chiefdoms of the Indies and the Canaries were incapable of responding to the overtures of alliances, compacts and tributary agreements that had been the backbone of the piratical raids and repopulation policies of the Reconquista. Other contrasts are too many to completely enumerate: the Muslims had luxury goods, the island natives had none; the Muslims wanted Spanish goods like cloth and grains, the natives had no use for them; the Muslims had written languages, developed arts, philosophy and writing, the natives entertained mythology and ritual celebrations that seemed crude, obscene or even idolatrous to the Spaniards.

These differences quickly forced the Spanish colonizers into accommodation with a new reality that simply would not allow for continuance of the repopulation and booty patterns of the Reconquista. Hence, the traditional pattern for intercivilizational encounter that had developed in Medieval Spain was squeezed on the one side by a monarchy anxious to build up its power in the model of other European states and on the other by the reality of a preliterate culture of island natives on both sides of the Atlantic (Aznar Vallejo:205-211).
Fantasy, Famine and Fornication

Unwilling or incapable of distinguishing the native reality from his self-dramatized illusions, Columbus used the strangeness of the Taínos as a device to procure time and assistance from the crown for further explorations. Consistently viewing the Taínos as vassals of the Great Khan, Columbus ever believed that he had sailed close to the coast of India and Japan. As Todorov has aptly stated, "Columbus discovered America, but not the Americans" (p. 49).

The soldiers who accompanied Columbus found themselves deprived of booty in the islands. While there was gold to be mined in the rivers, the work was hard and required either dedication from the soldiers or forced subjugation of the natives. The later was the preferred course of action of those who stayed in America, but it was not easily accomplished. Indeed, some early colonists to America migrated to the Canary Islands, where they built an impressive sugar plantation economy, albeit on the work of slaves (Serra Rafols; Marrero Rodríguez).

Rather than return from the Indies empty-handed, the soldiers substituted the fantasy of magic and mythology for booty. The strange flora and fauna discovered in America were considered to be the legendary animals and plants of fables about unicorns, Amazons, golden cities, etc. Fed by the chivalrous novels of the day, this fantasy helped obscure the contradictions of the intercivilizational encounter that was at hand (Hanke, 1959:1-11). This notion of fantasy should not be interpreted as a substitute for realism, however. I suspect much of the fantasy about America was based upon an adventurer's need for braggadocio. For all their talk of mythical creatures, the Spanish explorers generally perceived the natives—particularly the women—as ordinary human beings who just happened to belong to another civilization, much like the Muslims of Spain (Mörner:14-15). Bernal Díaz, the chronicler of the Mexican conquest notes "... they formed groups of fifteen and twenty and went pillaging the villages, forcing the women and taking cloth and chickens as if they were in Moorish country to rob what they found" (cited in Mörner: 14 fn. 15, italics added).

The Spanish "conquest culture" was a complex amalgam of attitudes towards the alien, some of them contradictory. During
the Reconquista, Spaniards had accepted aspects of foreign culture (often the informal elements) that pragmatically proved useful, while proclaiming opposition to the institutions of Muslim culture, especially its religion (Foster:228-232). In America, this same contradictory pattern held. Few conquistadores questioned the dual purpose of serving God and getting rich (Zavala:44). Their proclamation of a formal adherence to Catholic orthodoxy was generally accompanied by a disregard of Catholic ethical norms on sexuality, theft, violence, obedience, etc. While denouncing the Indians as "heathens," the Spaniards were quite willing to have them work the land or serve as concubines. One supposes that orthodoxy for the conquistador was produced by convenient rationalizations rather than the application of rational principles.

Despite such contradictory attitudes, the Guanches survived in the Canaries first as a work force and later as the intermarried native population. In the Indies, however, famine and disease divorced policy from such models of repopulation. Because the Taínos lacked acquired immunity to European diseases, tens of thousands died during epidemics compounded by famine. The Guanches, in contrast, escaped this fate because they had already confronted Old World diseases.

Columbus vs. Roldán

Francisco Roldán provided a serious challenge to Columbus' commercializing, Italian-Portuguese influenced colonizing plan for the Indies. A sailor, a mercenary in the Granadine campaign, and nephew of Canarian colonizers, Roldán has been given a villain's role by most historians (see Floyd:35-36). Because he revolted against Columbus' rule in 1497 by retreating with his men to a Taíno village, he is usually characterized as a renegade. But Roldán's battles with the Spaniards were precipitated by attacks upon the village where he had established his rule, and were in self-defense. Some say that in contrast to Columbus, Roldán had a sensible policy towards life in the Indies and was precursor of what later evolved as criollo society (Floyd:39-40). His cohabitation with the Taínos, his assimilation into their less complicated clan system, his acquiescence to Taíno agriculture
and its foods—all are traits of an adaptation of the intercivilizational encounter pattern derived from the Iberian-Andalusi model. A similar pattern of merging was achieved over a longer period of time by the Guanches whose intermarried ancestors are now part of the Canary Island population. Had the Taínos not succumbed to the epidemics induced by contact with European diseases, Roldán might have succeeded in forging a new tolerant coexistence in America. The supposed superiority of Europeanized political, social and religious forms would have been replaced with a model of intercivilizational encounter that accepted tribal structures. In effect, Roldán's Taíno acculturation would have been an extension of the Mozarab model of frontier tolerance towards the other.

Roldán's revolt was put down by Columbus in 1499, however, and the ship carrying him and his ally, the Taíno Caonabo, was shipwrecked in 1502 before it could return to Spain. Columbus enforced his notion of the Indies as a waystation on the journey to the Indies, in imitation of the Portuguese factorías which lined the African coast on the route around the Cape to India. But by the time the vanity of this effort was clear, the devastating effects of disease, famine and political strife had wiped away not only the chance to continue Columbus' design, but also the chance to adapt Spanish life to the rhythms of Taíno reality (Floyd:162-165).

The Jeronymite Reforms:  
The Inefficiency of Theological Bureaucracy

The effort to recast the Spanish colonial effort in the Indies was left to the Church. Las Casas was the most famous, but by no means the only cleric to articulate the need to revert to the tolerance and cooperation of intercivilizational encounter that had prevailed in Medieval Spain. The polemical works of Las Casas utilize arguments for civility and acceptance that derived from tracts urging tolerance towards Jews and Moors in Spain's Reconquista.  

Standing in the way of such an enlightened policy were the interests of soldiers who reflected the hostile belligerence of Spain's rural frontier. Unwilling to surrender European values of wealth and success in the mode of Roldán, the soldiers became
conquistadores, seeking to subdue the American reality to exploitation. They also refused to heed the pious attempts of Columbus to treat a tribal people as representatives of an advanced civilization. Instead of treaties, alliances and contracts, these conquistadores simply took law into their own hands. There was no real economic reward, no booty to be found in the Indies, and if there had been no Mexico or Peru filled with gold and silver, the Hispanic Antilles might well have faced the abandonment that became the fate of the Lesser Antilles.

But as Columbus had foreseen, Spain needed the islands as waystations to maintain the support lines for further exploration. To forestall the disintegration of the Antillian colonies, the Regent, Cardinal Cisneros, invited the Church to plan a pacification of the Taínos, even if it entailed limitations on conquistador behavior. This plan was offered by a commission of Jeronymite Friars who toured Hispaniola and Puerto Rico in 1517. The Jeronymite Reforms adopted a policy of resettlement of Taínos in new villages of approximately 500 natives. Each of these settlements was to be placed near the Spaniards' farms, so that the Taínos could provide willing hands for agricultural labor, as if they were gañanes. The friars supposed that by segregation of the two peoples some sort of peace could be secured. In fact, the reforms suggested a kind of apartheid, which simply avoided resolving the issue of intercivilizational interface (Floyd: 168-193; Hanke, 1945: 42-53). Moreover, the kind of crops to be raised on the farms were largely of European origin and often removed the natives from the fishing and hunting grounds necessary to sustain their traditional diets.

In order to satisfy the conquistadores, the Jeronymites permitted coercion of the Taínos into these villages and remanded them to serve as serfs in the encomienda formula of feudal Spain's Reconquista. But instead of satisfying everyone with this compromise formula, the Jeronymites wound up satisfying no one. Their enforced pacification of Taínó inhabitants was effectively the destruction of the native way of life. They insisted upon evaluating Taíno labor according to a European norm (Zavala: 105). Moreover, their restrictions on the conquistadores' use of force was unrealistic because the Taínos had no motivation whatsoever to work for others. The disregard by the conquistadores of these reformist provisions as well as the revolt of the Taíno Enriquillo in
1519 (Floyd:192-193) proved the inefficiency of such theological bureaucracy.

Cortés and the Gordian Knot

Hernán Cortés was to cut through the morass of confusion and polemics about policy in America like Alexander cut the Gordian Knot—with a sword. Without rehearsing the many facets of Cortés' experience in Mexico, I wish only to underscore the differences between his mode of operation and that of Columbus and Roldán. In a sense, these other two explorers had treated the Taínos as if they were a continuation of the Medieval Spanish experience. Columbus sought treaties, much as if he were in the presence of another empire: Roldán took up life in the Indies as the Christian Mozarabs under Muslim rule in Spain, accepting native ways and seeking to rise in the society by personal pluck. Cortés, on the other hand, did not look for treaties nor did he offer acceptance to the Mexicans. In a sense, he treated the Aztec and Mayan civilizations as if they were nothing more than extensions of the Táíno clan culture, ignoring their developed society and making a jugular attack on their political structure (Todorov:98-101).

Thus, upon reaching Mexico where there was an Emperor nearly equal in riches to the Great Khan of China, Cortés did not seek treaties or commercial franchises as might well have benefited his enterprise. Nor did he follow Roldán and "go native," as had his interpreter Aguilar, a shipwrecked Spanish sailor who lived among the Mayans (Mörner:28-29). Instead, he ruthlessly conquered an empire, destroying a dynasty and inheriting the instability of rule over exploited peoples.

Hernán Cortés, Francisco Pizarro, Diego Almagro and Fernando de Luque in Peru represented a new type of warrior. Employed by the king, somewhat in the manner of privateers (Zavala:110-14), the Spanish crown more or less set these conquistadores free to plunder Mexico and Peru. The singular lack of an evangelizing or commercializing plan in their exploits suggests that their preference for destruction over tolerance reflected the mentalité of the Reconquista's rural frontier that has been described above. Assuredly, their pragmatic acceptance as allies of Indian peoples who were antagonistic to rule by the Aztecs or
Incas is suggestive of the strategies employed in Medieval Spain's *Reconquista*. Once in power, however, Cortés turned on his Indian supporters, selling them into slavery to Caribbean landholders (Zavala:50-52), while Pizarro and Almagro turned on each other. The ruthlessness which gave these men and their troops such rapid and spectacular success ultimately proved their undoing. Pizarro was assassinated after his treachery against Almagro. Cortés left Mexico for a fatal expedition into new lands and until today is so ignored in the subsequent history of the Mexican people that he has virtually no monument or memorial in the nation he ripped from Aztec rule.

This strange lack of common sense in the long range prospects for the conquest by Cortés (and later by Pizarro and Almagro) is the core of what I call "the radical shift" in Spanish intercivilizational policy. Had Cortés sought a formal commercial treaty with Moctezuma, while allowing some of his men to assimilate to Mexican life, the Spanish enterprise would have been far more cost efficient. Like the Portuguese in Japan and the English in India, such a foothold on the American continent would have lent the Spanish a trading hegemony that probably would have become a political one as well. Of course, that would have meant that the Mexican, Peruvian and other American languages would have endured just as India has maintained its indigenous languages. Moreover, Aztec, Mayan and Incan religions would likely have had a future akin to Hinduism in India. Just as India dropped into English hands like an overripe fruit, one could have expected that Mexico and Peru would have followed a similar pattern had Cortés not chosen to conquer the Mexicans as if they were Taínos.

Because Cortés chose to conquer the peoples of Mexico immediately in spite of the very good reasons not to, such things did not happen, and Latin America was made a unique part of the world. Abandoning the Medieval Spanish no-man's-land, he did not treat Mexico as a frontier zone between civilizations, nor did he adapt to the native culture as the Christian Mozarabs, who had been surrounded by Arabic peoples and culture; he did not patiently wage a *Reconquista* war against the Mayan cities as if they were *taifa* kingdoms, bleeding them for as much booty as possible without destroying their economy. Nor did he seek to build a continuing structure of exploitation by extracting an annual tribute while he gathered his forces. Nor did he wait for more and
more settlers in order to follow the pattern of repopulation which gradually assimilated to Christian rule the peninsula's conquered peoples. Cortés broke with these patterns of Spanish intercivilizational encounter, substituting his desire for lordship over people, and all their riches as booty, even if such a conquest demanded a huge drain on resources. Thus, although it was not without precedent when compared with the fifty-year period immediately preceding the Mexican encounter (1470-1520), Cortés’ course of action represented a radical shift from the general policies of seven centuries.

I believe, however, the crucial cause for this radical shift lies not in the attitudes of Cortés, Pizarro and Almagro but in the absence of the counterbalancing tolerant approaches to intercivilizational encounter. Because of the experience with the Taínos and Guanches, the 15th-century policies designed to encounter a sophisticated Moorish, Chinese or Japanese empire state were rendered useless at the dawn of the 16th century. In this ideological vacuum, the strongest tradition was that of the rural frontier warrior. Until Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) and other clerics were able to fashion alternatives grounded on success in America, the mentalité of these men dominated Spanish activity. Indeed, as late as 1580 the cleric Alonso Sánchez suggested to Vatican officials a crusade to conquer and evangelize China and Japan as Cortés had conquered Mexico and Pizarro, Peru (Donnelly:189, ftn. 29).

The Crystallization Process

In technical terms, I am suggesting that the experiences in Mexico in 1519 and in Peru in 1533 provided the impetus for cultural crystallization (Foster: Glick, 1979) in which the intercivilizational outlook of the rural frontier warrior became dominant. I am not suggesting, of course, that this mentalité was created ex nihilo: it was already present within the seven century long Reconquista. But the process of crystallization of a certain cultural form involves the decrystallization of other cultural relationships (Glick, 1979; citing Thomas Smith and Reyna Pastor 194-195 ftn. 2). Thus the radical shift may also be described as the survival of only the most conflictive and least rational of the Spanish modes of intercivilizational encounter. Alternatives from clerical and urban elites that had generally balanced and mollified
the instincts of the warrior at the frontier during the medieval period had been eclipsed by the failures in the Indies (and the Canaries) in the early 16th century.

It would go a long way towards substantiating this explanation of the total dominance of the rural frontier mentalité if the men responsible for these alterations in conquest policy were from the rural and southern regions of Spain. This indeed was the case. Foster provides a chart that shows that among the immigrants to America, persons from Seville and other parts of Andalusía far outnumbered those from other parts of Spain between 1509 and 1534 (p. 31).

The Aftermath

As Talleyrand observed to Napoleon. “You can do anything with bayonets, sire, except sit on them.” The administration of a far-flung empire, the concern to Christianize a hemisphere and the headaches of colonization helped to bleed Spain of its power and glory. Hence, Spanish hegemony was over almost before it began, leaving the way open for the commercial empires of France and England who never had the experience of intercultural encounter with another worthy of acceptance. The legacy of the brief Spanish glory, however, was to encode within its peoples a unique blend of contradictory attitudes towards an alien civilization.

No other European society could have done this at that date. . . Only Spain was able to conquer, administer, Christianize and Europeanize the populous areas of the New World precisely because during the previous seven centuries her society had been constructed for the purpose of conquering, administering, Christianizing and Europeanizing the inhabitants of al-Andalus. (Lomax:178).

Moreover, Spain made its colonies a unique reflection of itself, so that ever since, Latin America has been unlike any other part of the world.

Ironically, the European concerns of this new Spanish Empire forced the crown to halt the destructive mode of the conquistadores encounter with the native of Mexico and Peru. Even Cortés abandoned the ruthlessness of his approach to the Aztecs and became a landholder and entrepreneur who sought to make the Mexicans into serfs rather than enemies (MacLachlan:79-80, 159). And
although the threat of *conquistador* coercion was never absent, the Spanish colonial enterprise gradually assumed a less confrontational mode. Indeed, one may suggest that the Jesuit Reducciones and the Franciscan California missions were the final revindication of Roldán and the restoration of the medieval mode of intercivilizational contact. However, the radical shift in policy that developed at the crucial time of the colonization of the Indies (and the Canaries) had irrevocably altered the course of the Americas, so that by the time the tolerant intercivilizational mode was restored, it could no longer have the effect of allowing coexistence of distinct civilizations (cf. McKay:211-212).

*Brooklyn College*

NOTES

1. Glick attributes the breakdown in the caliphate to ethnic conflicts caused by a heavy Berber immigration, pp. 200-204.

2. The distinctions between *repartimiento* and *encomienda* are both subtle and complex, and merit a detailed study that is beyond the scope of this paper. See Hanke, 1949:19-20, 84, 182-183, 189.


4. This reference is not intended to resolve the dispute about whether or not Las Casas was a *converso*.

5. For a description of the prestige and social power of the Jeronymite order, see McKay:190-195.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


