



Church - State Relations In South America

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Introduction:

South America Covers The Present Day Territories Of Panama And Colombia, Venezuela, The Guyanas, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina And Chile. All Of These Countries Followed A Very Similar Course During Their Historical Development, Especially With Regard To Religion And Its Relationship With The Power Structure.

This Common History Had Its Start 20 Thousand Years Before Christ. At That Time Fierce Warring Tribes Commonly Known As The "Caribes" Attacked The Peaceful Tribes That Were Settled In What Is Now Northern Venezuela And Colombia, Pushing Them Down Into The Broad Expanses Of South America, Whose Geography Had Been Significantly Changed By The Last Glacial Period.

In The Course Of Their Long Migration, These Tribes Found Themselves In A Rugged And Varying Terrain That Worked Strongly Against Their Peaceful Evolution. They Were Forced To Adapt To The Immense And Inhospitable Amazon Jungle; To The Harsh Conditions In The Andes Whose Snow-Covered Peaks Soared To Mythical Heights; To Deserts Of Burning Sands And Pampas Stretching Endlessly Into The Distance.

In The Process, These Migrating Tribes Began To Attribute A Special Importance To The Varied Nature That Met Their Eyes And To The Manifestations Of That Nature. The Importance They Attached To That Nature Was Such That It Was Deified In Their Eyes And The Tremendous Force It Enfolded They Considered To Be The Very Origin Of All Power.

All Of South America Shared A Common History Of The Beginning Of Religion And Its Relationship To The Power Structure. These Two Elements Underlay The Entire Process Of Its Evolution: The Divine Meaning Of Nature And The Force It Generates As The Origin And Justification Of All Power.

It Is Impossible In A Few Short Minutes To Give A More Or Less Detailed Presentation Of The Historical Process Followed By The Relations Between The Power Structure And Religion In Latin America. However, In An Effort To Give A Very Brief Outline Of The Process, We Should Like To Refer Very Briefly And Generally To The Four Main Stages, Which Are:

The Period Of Consolidation Of The Most Important Cultures Prior To The Inca Empire;

The Inca Empire;

The Spanish Presence In America; And

The Independent States.

Precolombian Cultures

As A Result Of The Cited Migration And Prior To The Advent Of The Inca Empire, A Series Of Important Cultures Made Their Appearance In South America. The Monumental Remains Of These Cultures, Which Were Socially, Politically And Artistically Advanced For Their Age, Are Today The Object Of Admiration And Study. Among Those Which Offer Us The Clearest Testimony Of Their Times Are The Chibcha Culture Located Geographically In What Are Today The Countries Of Colombia And Ecuador; The Chavin, Mochica, Chimu, Paracas, And Nasca Cultures In The Area Now Occupied By Peru; The Tiahuanaco Culture In Present-Day Bolivia And Northern Argentina; And Finally The Aracaunos And Mapuches, Who Flourished In What Are Now Argentina And Chile.

According To Peru's Jesuit Historian Ruben Vargas Ugarte, The Precolombian Or Preinca Cultures Were A Religious People. Religion Permeated Their Entire Lives And The Acts Of The Nation As Such Were Subject To The Calendar Imposed By Nature As Incarnated In The Power Structure. In A Departure From The Idea Of An Impersonal God, They Worshipped All Beings From Which Flowed Bounty Or Of Whom They Could Fear Some Evil. Their Religion Was Imbued With Animism And Their Extreme Sensitivity And Nature Led Them To Endow Immaterial Objects With Life, Spirit And Power. Mountains And Rivers, Sea And Land, Condor And Tiger, Sun And Moon, Lightning And Rainbow –All Of These Were Manifestations Of A Hidden And Superior Power They Were Unable To Individualize, But Which They Needed To Appease Or To Have On Their Side.

Their Failure To Individualize A Personal God Led To The Unification Of Power And Religion, Making The Two A Single Concept. Whosoever In Any Way Was Connected With The Sacred Became The Holder Of Social Power.

The Inca Empire:

The Origin Of The Inca Empire That Once Dominated A Large Portion Of South America Is Vague. Most Historians Who Wrote About The Subject, However, Are In Agreement That Its Origin Has To Do With A Migration Of The Tiahunaco Culture That Developed –As We Have Already Stated— In What Is Today Bolivia And Northern Argentina. That Migration Headed For The Urubamba Valley In Peru. It Was There That The Capital Of The Empire, Cuzco, Was Founded. Apparently, A Great Cataclysm Of Some Sort In The Original Territory Of The Tiahuanacos Touched Off That Migration.

For Purposes Of Our Study, It Is Interesting To Look Into The Inca Legend Explaining The Origin Of The Empire. According To That Legend, A Mythical Brother And Sister, Who At The Same Time Were Husband And Wife And Children Of The Sun God, Emerged From Lake Titicaca, Born Of The Fertilization Of The Earth By The Sun. Their Order Was To Found A City That Would Become The Capital Of A Great Empire At The Point Where A Golden Scepter Called Topayauri Carried By Manco Capac Sunk Into The Ground. That Site Is Today The City Of Cuzco, Erstwhile Capital Of The Great Inca Empire. So The Incas Explained The Origin Of Their Great Empire.

The Legend That Gave The Inca A Divine Origin Gave Him The Status Of A God In The Eyes Of His Subjects. As José De La Riva Agüero, An Erudite Scholar And Expert On The Subject, Says, The Inca Was Effectively God. All Of The Rights And Freedoms Of His Subjects Evaporated Before The God, Inasmuch As His Presence And That Of His Representatives Was Sacred. The Transgression Of His Mandates Constituted A Sacrifice. To Riva Agüero, This Regime Had Its Advantages And Disadvantages: In The First Place, It Gave Obedience A Dignity And Grandeur; It Is Neither Unworthy Nor Servile To Obey A God. Thus Was Power Legitimated. In The Second, It Assured The Happiness Of The Subjects, To Some Extent, For The Inca, In Not Encountering Any Resistance, And Adored By Those He Ruled, Had To Strive To Build Their Prosperity. The Drawbacks, However, Were Extremely Serious, According To Riva Agüero: It Destroyed The Personality Of The Indian, Accustomed Him To Blind Obedience, Subjected His Happiness And Most Cherished Interests To The Whims Of The Inca And The Fortunes Of The Inherited Dynasty, Set A Limit On His Native Intelligence, And Destroyed His Will. It Turned Free And Active Subjects Into Working Machines. Society Was Everything And The Individual Sacrificed Himself To It.

The Inca Empire Did Not Flourish Overnight. It Painstakingly Gained Sway Over The Immense Territory It Was To Cover At Its Zenith. During This Period Of Conquest, Especially Of The Most Important Precolombian Cultures Cited Earlier, The Incas Did Not Impose Their Religion Over The Beliefs Of The Conquered Peoples. Rather, The Gods Of The Conquered Were Assimilated As Minor Dieties, While Maintaining The Divine Priority Of The Sun God Or Inti And The Inca As His Son. It Was In This Way That They Were Able To Conserve The Political Unity Of Such A Far-Flung Empire.

They Practiced A Polytheistic Religion With A Defined Hierarchy, Which They Adroitly Manipulated To Maintain The Unity And Power Of Their Empire, Covering Almost All Of South America.

The Spanish Presence In America:

The Arrival Of The Spaniards In South America Brought To The New World Their Power Structure And Their Religion, For At That Time Spain Was Governed By An Absolute Monarchy And Professed The Catholic Religion.

Curiously Enough, And Contrary To What One Might Think, The Spanish Presence In South America Did Not Introduce Any Great Changes Into The Lives Of Its Inhabitants, Who Put Up Very Little Resistance To The Process Of Adaptation. In Effect, Once The Spanish Presence In South America Had Been Consolidated, The Spanish Monarchs, For Reasons That Are Too Complex To Go Into Here, Worked Diligently To Obtain Certain Ecclesiastical Benefits From The Authority Of The Catholic Church. So It Was That With The "Inter Caetera" Of May 4, 1493, The Papacy Placed The Inhabitants Of The New World In The Spiritual Keeping Of The Spanish Kings. It Gave Those Monarchs Both Spiritual And Secular Jurisdiction Over The New World. Subsequently, Through His Papal Bull Of July 28, 1508, "Universalis Ecclesiae", Pope Julian Ii Gave The Spanish Kings The Indian Patronage, Allowing Them To Have A Voice In The Appointment Of The Authorities Of The Catholic Church In America. The Papal Bull "Eximiae Devotionis" Issued By Pope Alexander Vi Awarded The Spanish Monarchs The Tithe, Or The Payment The Faithful Were Obligated To Contribute Toward Maintaining The Worship And The Church Itself. Considering All Of These Privileges, Spanish Jurists Considered That What The Spanish Kings Actually Possessed Was The So-Called Royal Vicariate, Or Authority Over The Catholic Church In America In All Matters Not Having To Do With Its Dogma. In This Way, Both Civil And Ecclesiastic Power Was Consolidated In The Spanish Crown, Making The Spanish King And His Representative, The Viceroy, A Kind Of Political And Social Inca Without His Divinity And With No Power To Intervene In Matters Of Religious Truths. Therefore, It Was Not Hard For The South American Inhabitants, Once The Inca Had Disappeared From The Scene, To Replace Him With The King.

This Substitution Also Took Place In The Sphere Of Religion. Considering The Polytheism Of The Inca Religion And The Practice Of The Incas Of Incorporating The Gods Of The Conquered People Into Their Pantheon Of Gods, The Native South Americans Had No Trouble Accepting The Religion Of The Conqueror And Assuming It As Their Own. In This Sense, And As Vargas Ugarte Maintained, We Can Say That The Native South Americans Put Up No Formal Objections To The Faith Being Preached And Apparently Accepted It Meekly, Without Raising Any Issues That Needed Explanation. The First Catechizers Of The Catholic Religion And Even Many Of The Preachers That Followed Them Gave Little Or No Attention To The Religious Beliefs Of The Native South Americans. They Did Not Take The Trouble To Search Out

The Truths In Those Beliefs Which Could Be Then Used To Convert Them To The True Faith.

The Result Of This Lack Of Interest In The Autochthonous Was That The Native South American, Without Considering The Spanish Culture, Embraced A Mixture Of Religious Beliefs. He Had No Problem Accepting The Explanations Given About The Beginning Of The World And Christ's Divinity, For To Him It Was A Given Fact That The Inca Was The Son Of God And Therefore He Could Accept The Existence Of A Man Who Was True God And True Man And At The Same Time The Son Of God. He Had No Doubts Over The Origin Of Adam And Eve, For Was It Not True That Manco Capac And Mama Ollo, Created By God Himself, Had Emerged To Form A Great Empire? In This Way, The God Inti, The Sun, Was Replaced In His Mind By Christ The King And The "Pachamama," Or Earth Goddess Of Fertility, By The Virgin Mary, And So On Successively, To Such An Extent That Even The Holy Days Were Made To Coincide. Historians Cite The Case Of The Worship Of Lightning, Or Illapa, Which Was Replaced By That Of "Santiago," Of Saint James, Who Became Venerated In America, Perhaps Because The Preachers Called Him, As The Gospels Say, The Sun Of Thunder Or, As Others Maintain, Inasmuch As The Horse And Gunpowder Were Associated With The Spanish War Cries Of "For St. James And Spain." This Mixture Of Beliefs That Has Been Handed Down, Is Today Known As The People's Religion And Was A Matter Of Concern And Reflexion For The Catholic Church. Documents Submitted At Latin American Episcopal Conferences In Puebla And Medellin Refer To The Subject With Special Respect And Consideration.

To Sum Up, The Spanish Presence In America Has Been Manifested In Two Basic Circumstances:

A. On The One Hand, Power And Religion Remained United In A Single Person. The Spanish King And His Viceroy In America Assumed The Administrative And Political Role Previously Played By The Inca, But Without His Divinity And Without Being Able To Intervene In Matters Of Dogma.

B. A Mixture Of Inca And Catholic Beliefs, Today Known As The People's Religion, Was Produced And Manifested In Certain Expressions Of The People's Devotion.

The Independent States:

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With Their Independence From Spain Between 1820 And 1821, The Governments Of The American States Demanded The Right To Exercise The Religious Prerogatives Granted By The Holy See To The Spanish Monarchs, For They Considered Themselves To Be Heirs To The Crown In All Matters Of Government.

Initially The Holy See Did Not Accept This Situation And The American Governments Began To Make Use Of Those Prerogatives. A Kind Of Tacit Agreement Grew Up Between Those Governments And The Authorities Of The Catholic Church, Which Had Its Origin And Justification In A Series Of Elements: On The One Hand, In Order To Obtain International Legal Validity, The New Governments Needed For The Nations Constituting The International Order To Recognize Their Independence; And On The Other, Their Meager Resources And Initial Administrative Disarray Did Not Allow Them To Make Effective Use Of The Prerogatives Of Power In Distant Spots In Their Respective Republics. In This Situation, The Catholic Church, By Merely Recognizing Their Recent Independence, Could Bring Several Important Nations Around To That Acknowledgment Without Any Major Scruples, Thereby Confirming Their Political And Military Independence. Furthermore, After More Than Four Hundred Years Of Painstaking Missionary Work, The Catholic Church Possessed An Ecclesiastical Administrative Network Linking Up The Farthest Flung Corners Of The Continent, Which Could Permit The Civil Authority To Exercise Its Power Through That Network.

For Its Part, The Catholic Church, Far From Its Center Of Authority, The Holy See, And Its Political – Administrative Center, Spain, Needed Respect And Protection From The Infant Republics, Together With Freedom To Proceed With Its Evangelical Work.

While There Are Differences Over The Alleged Existence Of That Tacit Agreement, The Fact Is That Important Sectors Of The Catholic Church Supported The Consolidation Of The New States As Independent Republics And Many Of Those States Declared Catholicism To Be The Official Religion And Committed Themselves To Protect It. A Testimony To This State Of Affairs Are The Constitutional Provisions Enacted For That Purpose.

Aside From Whether Or Not That Tacit Agreement Existed, What Was Undeniable Was The Existence, At The Same Time, Of A Struggle Between Church And State, In Which The State Sought To Extend Its Power Over The Church Itself And To Consider It An Extension Of The Government's Administrative Structure. This Pretension Is Not Difficult To Understand, If We Consider The Latin American Historical Background, In Which An Inca Deemed To Be God Was Succeeded By A Monarch With Similar Political And Ecclesiastic Powers, But Without His Divinity, And Some Heads Of Republican States Who Considered Themselves Heirs To The Powers Of That Monarch. It Cannot Be Seen As Strange For Some Heads Of State To Attribute To Themselves The Status Of President – Inca – Viceroy. This Struggle – Tacit Agreement Was To Last Almost To The Present.

In Effect, Recently, As A Result Of The International Human Rights Agreements Signed By Most Nations At The Close Of The Second World War And Of The Reflexions And Precepts Of Vatican Council Ii On Freedom Of Religion And Conscience, The South American States Proclaimed The Religious Freedom Of Their Citizens And Signed Agreements To This Effect With The Catholic Church, In Which

They Declare Themselves To Be Mutually Autonomous And Independent. These Pacts And Declarations Are A Departure From A Historical Tradition Of The Exercise Of Power And In Which The Civil And The Religious Were Juridical Concepts Tied In With A Single Reality: The State.

It Will Be Very Difficult For These Countries To Operate In A World In Which Civil Power Is Autonomous And Independent From Religious Power. In Countries Like Ours, Peru, On Both Sides –That Of The State And That Of The Catholic Church— The Separation Is Difficult, Especially The Getting Used To The Idea That We Are Facing A New Reality That Puts An End To The State Of Affairs Thousands Of Years In The Making. The Challenge Ahead Of Us Is A Major And Important One.