

CHAPTER

4

*THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST:
TOWARD THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN
TWO WORLDS?*

The friars assumed responsibility for the destruction of idolatry. They boasted that they were conquistadores of the spiritual domain. And when the Indians observed the daring and determination with which the friars burned down their principal temples and shattered their idols... they knew that the friars must have had some reason for doing this.¹

I now turn to two new figures: the *spiritual conquest* and the *encounter* of two worlds. By such terms, I refer to the power the Europeans exercised over the imagery (Sartre's *imaginaire*) of the conquered natives. Contradictions abounded, however, since the Spaniards preached love for religion (Christianity) in the midst of an irrational and violent conquest.

It is also difficult to understand how the Spanish could have cruelly imposed cultural re-education and at the same time focused that re-education on a crucified, innocent victim, the memory that lay at

the foundation of Christianity.² Further, while the conquest depicted itself as upholding the universal rights of modernity against barbarism, the indigenous peoples suffered the denial of their rights, civilization, culture, and gods. In brief, the Indians were victimized in the name of an innocent victim and for the sake of universal rights. Modernity elaborated a myth of its own goodness, rationalized its violence as civilizing, and finally declared itself innocent of the assassination of the Other.³

THE SPIRITUAL CONQUEST

One year after 1492, Fernando of Aragon requested of Pope Alexander VI to grant a bull conceding him dominion over the discovered islands. Conquistador praxis required divine legitimation. Cortés, too, like Descartes, needed God to escape the enclosure of his *ego*. When Cortés considered the numerical advantages the millions of indigenous Mesoamericans possessed against his handful of soldiers, he decided not to elicit his army's valor and tenacity by an appeal to banal wealth or honor. Instead, he endeavored to give their sacrifices an ultimate significance, as is evidenced in his exhortation on the verge of the conquest of Mexico:

We understand the task upon which we embark, and *through the mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ* we have to prepare ourselves fittingly for the battles to come and we will triumph in them. For should we be defeated (*which I hope God will not permit*), we will never escape, given our small numbers. Since we no longer have ships to flee to Cuba, *the only recourse left to our fighting, strong hearts, is to turn to God*. Beyond this, he [Cortés] drew several comparisons with the heroic deeds of the Romans.⁴

God provided the foundation (*Grund*) for their enterprise, just as Hegel later affirmed that "religion is the *fundament* of the state." God is thus used to legitimize actions that modernity would consider merely secular. After the Spanish had discovered the geographical space and conquered bodies geopolitically, as Foucault would say, they needed to control native imagery by replacing it with a new religious worldview. Thus the Spaniard could completely incorporate the Indian into the new system coming to birth:

mercantile-capitalist modernity. But the Indian remains modernity's exploited, dominated, covered-over "other face."

Before battling the Indians, the conquistadores read them the *requirement (requerimiento)*, which promised to exempt the Indians from the pains of defeat if they would merely convert to the Christian-European religion:

I *require* that you understand carefully this proclamation, take it utterly seriously, and deliberate about it for an appropriate amount of time. I require you to recognize the church as queen and superior of the world, to acknowledge the pope in the church's name, and to obey his majesty, the pope's vicar, who is superior, lord, and king of these lands.... If you refuse or try to protract this process by malicious delay, I certify that with the aid of God I will wage mighty war upon you in every place and in every way.... I will seize your women and sons and sell them into slavery. I will rob you of all your goods and do to you every evil and injury in my power.⁵

Of course, the Indian would have been unable to grasp this proposal, since it had been read in Spanish. The *earthly* defeat of the Aztec armies of Moctezuma or the Incans of Atahualpa would have signified that their gods had been conquered *in heaven*, as Mircea Eliade has pointed out. According to their mythic mindset, they were compelled to incorporate the conquering gods within their imagery. The Spanish conqueror, however, never entertained the idea of appropriating anything from the world of the conquered. As a unique exception, the Franciscans edited and presented more than two hundred works of indigenous *sacramental authors* in popular theaters—that is, in the atria of immense colonial churches. Generally, the Spanish regarded the entire indigenous imagery world as demonic and worthy of destruction. They interpreted the Other's world as negative, pagan, satanic, and intrinsically perverse. Since the Spanish considered indigenous religion demonic and theirs divine, they pursued a policy of *tabula rasa*, the complete elimination of indigenous beliefs, as a first step in replacing those beliefs with their own:

Idolatry remained... as long as the temples of idols still stood. The ministers of demons had to flee there to exercise their offices.... So the Spaniards concentrated... on tearing down

and burning temples.... They began this practice in 1525 in Texcoco, the location of the most beautiful and towering temples.... Later they demolished the temples in Mexico, Tlaxcala, and Guexozingo.⁶

José de Acosta insisted that the Spaniards be cognizant of ancient indigenous beliefs to avoid being deceived:

It is not only useful but totally necessary for Christians and masters of the law of Christ to know the errors and superstitions of the ancients in case the Indians employ them furtively.⁷

Similarly, the great founder of modern anthropology, Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who recorded for forty-two years the ancient Aztec traditions in Texcoco, Tlatelolco, and in Mexico City, wrote in the prologue of *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*:

In order to recommend medicines for the sick, a doctor must first know the humor or cause of the sickness...: in this case one must be familiar with these worthless and idolatrous sins, rites, and superstitions.... Those who excuse idolatry as a mere trifle, child's play, or something insignificant, ignore the very roots of this activity. Confessors neither ask about it, nor think that there is such a thing, nor know the language to ask proper questions, nor would they understand those who admit sins of idolatry.⁸

The twelve first Franciscan missionaries to Mexico in 1524 formally initiated the *spiritual conquest* in its strong sense. This conquest lasted approximately until the first provincial council in Lima in 1551 or Philip II's great meeting in 1568.⁹ During this brief space of thirty or forty years, missionaries preached the Christian doctrine in urban regions throughout the continent. They touched more than fifty percent of the entire population, from the north in the Aztec empire in Mexico to the south in the Inca empire in Chile.

Since all Europe accepted as unreflectively valid the doctrine eventually recorded in the Catechism of Trent, the Franciscans were unable to present it with any veneer of rationality to those other cultures. Fernando Mires's recollection of the intercultural debate at Atahualpa, related by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, reveals that

proper evangelization would have taken more time than the missionaries wanted to spend. After Father Valverde explained the *essence of Christianity*—much better expressed by Feuerbach—his Incan counterpart responded:

You listed five preeminent men whom I ought to know. The first is God, three and one, which are four,¹⁰ whom you call the creator of the universe. Is he perhaps our Pachacámac and Viracocha? The second claims to be the father of all men, on whom they all piled their sins. The third you call Jesus Christ, the only one not to cast sins on that first man, but he was killed. The fourth you call pope. The fifth, Carlos, according to you, is the most powerful monarch of the universe and supreme over all. However, you affirm this without taking account of other monarchs. But if this Carlos is prince and lord of all the world, why does he need the pope to grant him concessions and donations to make war on us and usurp our kingdoms? And if he needs the pope, then is not the pope the greater lord and most powerful prince of all the world, instead of Carlos? Also you say that I am obliged to pay tribute to Carlos and not to others, but since you give no reason for this tribute, I feel no obligation to pay it. If it is right to give tribute and service at all, it ought to be given to God, the man who was Father of all, then to Jesus Christ who never piled on his sins, and finally to the pope.... But if I ought not give tribute to this man, even less ought I to give it to Carlos, who was never lord of these regions and whom I have never seen.¹¹

Such argumentative acumen threw the conquistadores and Father Valverde into confusion. They simply reverted to modern irrationality instead of presenting better reasons:

The Spaniards, unable to endure this *prolixity of argumentation* [!], jumped from their seats and attacked the Indians and grabbed hold of their gold and silver jewels and precious stones.¹²

The feebly based spiritual conquest could only *replace* the ancient indigenous vision of the world without accommodating it. Hence, it differed from the first three centuries of Mediterranean Christianity which transformed Greco-Roman imagery *from within* by reconstructing it. As the mature fruit of such accommodation,

Christianity diversified in its Armenian, Byzantine, Coptic, Russian, and Latin versions.

At best, the Spaniards considered the Indians coarse, childlike, immature (*unmündig*), needy of patient evangelization. José de Acosta asserted that they were barbarians who "reject right reason and the common mode of humanity"¹³ and thus act out of barbarian crudeness and savagery."¹⁴ He contrasted these Indians with the Chinese, Japanese, and East Indians, who, although barbarians, nevertheless deserved to be treated "analogously to the manner in which the apostles preached to the Greeks and Romans."¹⁵ For this European life-world (*Lebenswelt*) taking itself as the parameter and criterion of rationality and humanity, the Aztecs and Incas appeared as an inferior grade of barbarians, "because they do not yet use Scriptures or know the philosophers."¹⁶ The indigenous peoples outside American or Andean urban cultures constituted a third class of barbarians to be defined in this way:

The third-class savages resemble wild animals.... There are infinite numbers of these in the New World.... For all those who are scarcely human or only half-human, it is fitting to teach them to be human and to instruct them as children.... One must also contain them by force.... and even force them against their will (Luke 14:23) so that they might enter the kingdom of heaven.¹⁷

For this reason, the spiritual conquest was obliged *to teach them* Christian doctrine and to inculcate in them every day the principal prayers, commandments, and precepts until they knew them by rote. This spiritual conquest also imposed a different time cycle (liturgical cycle) and alternative notions of space (sacred spaces). The whole indigenous sense of ritualized existence underwent change.¹⁸ The present-day, ecclesial-Vatican triumphalism which *celebrates* these events, ought to return to painful history and comprehend the ambiguity of this spiritual conquest. This conquest appears more as a coercive or hopeless religious domination, subjecting the oppressed to the religion of the oppressor, than as an adult's free conversion to a religious belief system he or she has come to recognize as superior.

ENCOUNTER OF TWO WORLDS?

The sixth figure consists in the euphemism of the encounter (*encuentro*) of two worlds,¹⁹ of two cultures—an interpretation favored today by dominant Latin American *criollo* and mestizo classes. This figure elaborates a myth: the new world as a single culture harmoniously blending the European and the indigenous. The contemporary advocates of this figure are the white or *criollo* (or white souled) children of Cortés by a Spanish wife or the Malinche's children (the mestizos), both of whom control the reigning, hegemonic culture.

To speak of a *meeting* is to employ a euphemism, a Great Word as Rorty would put it, and to conceal the genocidal shock that devastated indigenous culture. The new syncretistic, hybrid, predominantly mestizo culture was born neither from a freely entered alliance nor from steady cultural synthesis, but from the originary trauma of being dominated. If one wishes to affirm authentically this new Latin American culture, conceived in such ambiguous origins, it is imperative never to forget the innocent victims, the Indian women, the overworked men, and the crushed autochthonous culture. The idea of *meeting* covers over reality by occluding how the European ego subjugated the world of the Other.

A meeting between two cultures, an *argumentation community* in which all are respected as equal participants, was impossible. Rather the Spanish asymmetrically *excluded* the world of the Other from all rationality and all possible religious validity. Further, they justified this exclusion through theological reasoning only disguised as argumentation and based on the recognized or unconscious supposition that Christendom was superior to indigenous religion.

No meeting could have been realized because the Spanish totally disdained indigenous rites, gods, myths, and beliefs, and sought to erase them through the method of *tabula rasa*. Nevertheless, in the clarity/obscurity of everyday practices a syncretistic religion formed, which not even the purest Inquisition could have snuffed out. Popular creativity shaped this mixed religion contrary to all the intentions of European missionaries.

I cannot condone dominant elites in Latin America or Spain who continue speaking of the meeting of two worlds.

The great Colombian writer Germán Arciniegas, whom I met in Paris in 1964 during a Latin American week, also examines the ideology of a meeting in his *Con América nace la nueva historia*:

America is the only continent whose precise date of origin is known and whose formation occurred through universal participation. Millions of *immigrant Europeans* created it when they came to build homes and take advantage of unheard of opportunities. They joined creative forces with Indians dreaming of a republic and with Africans fleeing to find emancipation unknown in their homelands and among their own blood, which had enslaved them.²⁰

First of all, since Arciniegas takes 1492 to be the beginning of Latin America, he attributes no historical significance to the indigenous peoples with their splendid cultures. Secondly, Latin Americans are the sons of immigrants²¹—that is, *criollos* first and afterward mestizos. Third, these immigrants are said to join with *emancipated* Indians, as if the Indians had been dominated *before* the conquest but suffered nothing *in* the conquest except what was necessary for emancipation or modernization. Arciniegas construes the Indians as republican participants in the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*). Fourth, like Vieira,²² a Portuguese theologian in Brazil, Arciniegas believes that Africans freed themselves *by becoming slaves* (!) since in Africa "their own blood had enslaved them" and they found freedom only when unshackled in Latin America. Such revisionist history amounts to another Hegelian²³ rereading of Africa's history—but now by a Latin American. For Arciniegas, there was no meeting, but only the self-realization of the Europeans in American lands. In this obviously *criollo*, Eurocentric interpretation, like O'Gorman's, the indigenous peoples either disappeared or were transformed.

Miguel León Portilla, an organizer of the fifth centenary celebrations, suggested that these celebrations concentrate on the topic of the meeting of two cultures. The 1988 debate in Mexico regarding the significance of 1492,²⁴ however, revealed much confusion regarding the meaning of *meeting*. The different interpretations of 1492 reflect more or less explicitly held *ideological positions* of authors or their institutions. Spain, for instance, has manifested a preference to understand 1492 in terms of the meeting of cultures.

When Felipe González became prime minister of Spain's social democracy in 1982, his inaugural address promised a special celebration of the *discovery* in ten years. Spain, eager at that point to enter the European Common Market, claimed 1492 as one of its glories, on which it prided itself as no other European nation could. Spain now emphasizes this *glory* more than it did before, since it is promoting its own politics of integration with Europe.

Europe understands the last five hundred years in its own terms since its 1492 celebrations manifest little intent to comprehend or help Latin America, and since it fixed 1992 as the year for its progress in economic and political unity. Five centuries ago, Europe broke through the Islamic wall which had hemmed it in for eight centuries, and 1992 recalls a new cycle in world history initiated by Portugal and Spain. Since Spain could not celebrate the conquest, it focused positively on the ideology of meeting in order to buttress its politics of integration with Europe and its supposed openness to Latin America.

In 1984, I entered this debate denying the validity of the concept of *meeting* in a seminar organized in Mexico, "The Idea of the Discovery."²⁵ I prefer to understand 1492 as a covering over (*encubrimiento*), and I have stressed the need for Indian compensation (*desagravio*).

If the *meeting* (*encuentro*) of two worlds were to signify the new hybrid, syncretistic culture that the mestizo race is articulating, its content would be acceptable. Popular culture in its own creative consciousness would then be producing this meeting, and not the brutal event of conquest.