

What factors favoured rapid evangelisation of native peoples in colonial Latin America? What factors hindered this process?

(Danny Concha)

The evangelisation of native peoples in colonial Latin America proved to be a highly complex and problematic process. This is due to a combination of physical, strategic and psychological factors which resulted in a fundamental misunderstanding between both the missionary and native parties involved. Focusing on the Andean experience from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, it becomes apparent that the diverse nature of the challenge, together with missionary ignorance and force, overwhelmingly damaged hopes of a straightforward campaign. By emphasising rapid conversion over gradual and meaningful change, the Christian missionaries often proved to be the architects of their own failure.

In what was effectively a clash of two worlds, one cannot downplay the challenges that geographical, social and cultural differences posed to evangelisation efforts. Firstly, the inaccessibility of the Andean landscape, coupled with a dispersed and often remote population proved an immediate hindering factor in terms of reaching native communities. Restall and Lane argue that such dramatic geographical differences also had a role in shaping exceptionally diverse communities and ethnic groups¹. The obstacle of geographical diversity in the Andes thus created socio-cultural diversity which was further enhanced by the social fragmentation following decades of pre-conquest civil war. The pre-existing heterogeneity present in both the physical and human geography of the Andes meant that any hopes of a sweeping campaign were doomed from the start.

This is due above all to the linguistic and religious differences amongst native communities. In the case of language, local variations meant that missionaries faced a multitude of language barriers. Even predominant languages such as Quechua and Aymara had many dialects, making the task of communicating (an essential first step for evangelisation) both multi-faceted and immensely time-consuming. Of equal significance was the diversity of cults and varying belief systems within Andean spirituality. Whilst the Sun represented the highest God of the Incas, it could just as equally be absent from the pantheons of other Andean religions². The absence of a single, unifying religious institution left evangelisation efforts without a fixed target for conversion, as each differing community required a tailored missionary campaign.

However, the underlying political interests behind such campaigns allowed missionaries to overcome several of these obstacles. MacCormack argues that the endeavours of the church were to some extent eased by the needs of the state, referencing the implementation of *reducciones* as a key example³. *Reducciones* were colonial, parish-like settlements constructed by the state in order to organise and govern native peoples. By removing native communities from their scattered and heterogeneous Andean environments and relocating them into concentrated, 'Christianised' ones, the state established conditions which promoted the infiltration of Christianity into every aspect of native life from their landscape (with churches and town structures) to their lifestyle (clothing, food and Christian names). Forms of ecclesiastical legislation date right back to the early colonial *encomienda* system of taxation and labour, which legally

¹ Matthew Restall and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 16-18

² Jeremy Mumford, 'The Taki Onqoy and the Andean Nation: Sources and Interpretations', *Latin American Research Review* 33:1 (1998), p. 157-8

³ Sabine MacCormack, 'The Heart has its Reasons: Predicaments of Missionary Christianity in Early Colonial Peru', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65:3 (Aug. 1985), p. 454

obliged Spanish settlers to provide religious instruction for the ‘spiritual wellbeing’ of their workers⁴. Viceroy Francisco de Toledo’s mass-scale *reducción general* project in Peru from 1572-75⁵ reflects state emphasis on Christianity as a key tool for political conquest and control. This association greatly favoured rapid evangelisation by providing the process with legislative weight and state support.

Yet despite this seemingly favourable relationship, the influence of the state often proved to be a double edged sword. Whilst encouraging surface-level infiltration, state-imposed strategies like the *reducciones* prevented missionaries from gaining any real understanding of the cultures they were dealing with, thus depriving evangelisation efforts of crucial information. MacCormack’s view that ‘missionary Christianity in Peru is a story of lost opportunities’⁶ very much applies here as the state’s short-sighted attempts at rapid transformation actually compromised the very factors that would allow such change to happen. By brutally transposing Andean life into a Christian framework, missionaries were denied the opportunity of working and engaging with communities within their own native frameworks. This generated ignorance and a fundamental misunderstanding of the structures and inner mechanisms of Andean society, reflected in the relative scarcity of available information about native life and customs in general. This lack of native context hindered the evangelisation process by breaking down any opportunity for cultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

The excessive use of coercion in missionary campaigns was another key hindering factor. In the case of Peru, Mills notes a general shift away from the persistent and persuasive tactics of early missionaries towards a more forceful approach in the mid-colonial period.⁷ This emphasis on coercion hindered rapid evangelisation by encouraging dissimulation. This was firstly due to the increased threat of punishment, as devotion became increasingly about self-preservation rather than genuine conversion. Secondly, the emphasis on force reduced Christian teaching to basic performative acts such as mass baptisms and prayer recitals; acts that could be administered by force. This substitution of patient, meaningful methods for immediate and superficial ones created a culture of theatrical conversions which natives were quick to exploit. Such basic performative acts could be used to mask continued native practices as illustrated by Clendinnen’s description of the Maní monastery in the Yucatán. After seventeen years of apparent devotion, these seemingly ‘Christian’ natives were discovered to be worshipping their own indigenous gods in secret⁸. This issue equally applies to the Andes and represents a major hindrance, brought about by the combination of punitive pressure and simplified Christian teachings.

Native resistance and rebellion presented a more explicit hindrance to rapid evangelisation. Mumford illustrates this with his analysis of the Taki Onqoy movement in 1560s Peru, whereby adherents sought to supplant Christianity with a revived form of ancestral spirituality⁹. Whilst the movement was short-lived and suppressed with relative ease, it reveals the deeper challenge of native resentment and consequent rejection of imposed authority. This is reflected by the fact that adherents of Taki Onqoy emphatically renounced their Christian names, refused Old World food and rejected colonial clothing. This non-compliant, anti-authoritarian sentiment clearly hindered hopes of achieving any form of rapid transformation, either with or without force.

Ironically, it was the missionaries themselves who delivered some of the most damaging campaigns to their hopes of rapid evangelisation. This came in the form of the Extirpation of Idolatries in Peru during the seventeenth century, which consisted of violent missionary-led inspections to identify and destroy any traces of perceived native idol worship¹⁰. Sparked largely in response to cases such as Taki Onqoy, these Extirpations proved to be monumental strategic misjudgements that epitomise the shortcomings of both missionary ignorance and coercion. In their failure to understand Andean life, Christian extirpators

⁴ Restall and Lane, p. 140

⁵ Kenneth Andrien, *The Human Tradition in Colonial Latin America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD., 2013), p. 46

⁶ MacCormack, p. 447

⁷ Kenneth R. Mills, ‘The Limits of Religious Coercion in Mid-Colonial Peru’, *Past and Present* 145 (Nov. 1994), p. 102

⁸ Inga Clendinnen, ‘Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan and Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatan’, *Past & Present* 94 (Feb. 1982), p. 33

⁹ Mumford, p. 150-1

¹⁰ Restall and Lane, p. 179

mistakenly aligned the Andean notion of *huacas* (the cult of ancestral worship) with the Christian concept of idols. This led missionaries on a futile quest to eradicate and destroy what were essentially indestructible forces. The intangible, immaterial and fluid nature of *huacas* massively hindered the evangelisation process by directing missionary efforts towards an obsessive task that was in most cases both physically and religiously impossible.

This was firstly due to the fact that *huacas* often existed in the Andean landscape itself. Mills cites a failed extirpation attempt to dislodge a giant stone *huaca* in Canta, 1659¹¹ to illustrate the sheer physical impossibilities of the challenge at hand. The fact that *huacas* could exist as trees, rocks and even mountains exposes the irrationality behind these ceremonial desecration campaigns. Even in cases where *huacas* could be physically destroyed, the essence of the *huaca* persisted. A 1657 Jesuit account of the burning of the local *huaca Marcayan* in Cajatambo reveals how the meaning of such *huacas* could persist even if the object itself was destroyed. Extirpators would have to secretly dispose of *huaca* remains out of fear that natives would continue worshipping the destroyed remnants¹². Such absurd testimonies reflect the hindrance that the *huaca*/idol misidentification provoked. By obsessively focusing missionary efforts on these impossible extermination campaigns, evangelisation processes were reduced to desperate acts of destruction. With little to no meaningful teaching taking place (aside from the superficial gesture of replacing *huacas* with crosses), the Extirpation campaigns offered nothing but a hindrance to any hopes of evangelical progress.

In addition to this, the fluid and flexible nature of Andean spirituality brought about further challenges in the form of religious syncretism. This native tendency to integrate and mix Christian and Andean elements together created an enormous spectrum of problematic religious fusions that continue to hinder evangelical progress even to the present day. Whilst it can be argued that certain shared practices such as fasting and confession would aid missionaries in their attempts at dialogue¹³, this greatly overlooks the potential for confusion and misinterpretation that such overlap created. As Mills notes, Andean natives were often highly experimental and adaptable in their religious frameworks, thus making them difficult missionary subjects. A case in Huamantanga during the 1660s illustrates this. Here, an extirpator is said to have uprooted a *huaca* tree, burning it and erecting a Christian cross in its place. Upon returning to the consecrated site, the extirpator discovered ancestral remains buried under the cross, with a native accused of conducting pagan worship before this seemingly Christian symbol. Such integration of ‘supremely Christian symbols in[to] deeply Andean contexts’¹⁴ inevitably hindered rapid evangelisation by undermining its strictly orthodox ambitions. The Quyllurit’i festival near Cusco is a testament to the continuation of religious syncretism in the present day, whereby the continued fusion of native ritual into Christian celebration makes us constantly question the extent to which evangelisation efforts were successful.

Given that the evangelisation of native peoples proved so arduous, it is clear that the hindrances were far greater than any favouring factors. Whilst the diverse and impenetrable nature of the Andes and its native population proved an immensely challenging prospect for missionaries, many of the obstacles they faced were of their own making. By so fundamentally overlooking the importance of Andean life and so often resorting to force when patience was required, these missionaries jeopardised any chance of meaningful let alone rapid evangelisation. With costly strategic misjudgements provoking both resentment and confusion, Christian missionaries condemned the evangelisation process to an ongoing struggle that continues right up to the present day.

¹¹ Mills, p. 111

¹² Mills, p. 111-2

¹³ MacCormack, p. 450

¹⁴ Mills, p. 116

Bibliography

Andrien, Kenneth, *The Human Tradition in Colonial Latin America*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD., 2013).

Clendinnen, Inga, 'Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan and Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatan', *Past & Present* 94 (Feb. 1982), pp. 27-48.

MacCormack, Sabine, 'The Heart has its Reasons: Predicaments of Missionary Christianity in Early Colonial Peru', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65:3 (Aug. 1985), pp.443-66.

Mills, Kenneth R., 'The Limits of Religious Coercion in Mid-Colonial Peru', *Past and Present* 145 (Nov. 1994), pp.84-121.

Mumford, Jeremy, 'The Taki Onqoy and the Andean Nation: Sources and Interpretations', *Latin American Research Review* 33:1 (1998), pp.150-165.

Restall, Matthew and Kris Lane, *Latin America in Colonial Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).