

MISSIONARIES AND COLONIALS IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

PROBABLY no issue is more important for the Christian Church than that created by cultural contact. The problems raised are tragic and difficult; the prejudices created have led to misery, injustice and fraud, dishonesty and cruelty on a gigantic scale. Well-meaning and gentle individuals have been, and are, transformed by social and cultural pressures into overlords and oppressors. Bad history, bad anthropology, bad biology have been, and are, invoked to mask the real issues involved. Very few people can bear to consider themselves exploiters, or are so far devoid of good sense as seriously to consider themselves a better kind of person than other people. Yet given a commercial issue, some point of security or prestige, and at once our real feelings hide themselves under noble-sounding verbiage. It used to be the white man's burden, then it was the development of colonial areas, so successful have we been in hiding from ourselves that it is with surprise that we discover that colonialism is a bad word, and the honour of white men very comic.

It may be that our materialistic folly or criminal blindness have closed the East and Africa to the effective preaching of the Gospel for generations; before the rising tide of rejection and protest we may be able to do nothing save accept the judgment of God; but that at least we must do, and so doing clarify our minds and reform our activity.

In helping us to do this Professor Hawke's book¹ is a tract for the times. It is not only well-documented and arranged, but also relevant. All the elements involved in culture contact are illustrated, and the issues that emerge as he tells the story of the Spanish activity in America, present problems that still arise in a form easily understood by the Christian.

The first conquerors were descendants of the crusading medievals, brave, greedy, legalistic and Christian. Men, whose imaginations were full of phantasies about wild men and strange animals, who were only too ready to use might to justify their own desires, yet felt that some kind of justification had to be given of their activities in the new world. At least they had to justify them in their own eyes—with the rather naïve assumption, common to all conquerors, that if they were justifiable in their own eyes, then the conquered and God would also be satisfied. They disliked and despised manual work, and were

1 *Aristotle and the American Indians*, by Lewis Hawke. (Hollis and Carter; 18s.)

ignorant and distrustful of the cultures they attacked, and were only too prone to see themselves as members of a privileged class or people whose very presence brought benefits and whose methods of coercion could be justified by the gifts bestowed on the Indies and the Americas; for did they not bring the blessings of conversion to a people limited in understanding and cowardly in battle? Was it not evident that the Spaniards were sober, continent and brave, a strong and civilized people destined for rule over their natural inferiors?

The argument seems crude enough, but it is not an uncommon one; and it appears in various forms among different people, sometimes expressed in economic terms, sometimes nationalistic or racial in tone, and sometimes wearing a religious dress.

John Major, the Scottish nominalist, had, in 1510, argued for the use of force as a necessary preliminary to the preaching of the Gospel, and a large number of missionaries, as well as of colonials, maintained that the Indians were too stupid to be treated in any other way than as children or slaves. Perhaps the greatest apologist for this view was Juan de Sepulveda (1490-1573), a humanist and Aristotelian of distinction, who attempted to apply the Aristotelian doctrine of natural slavery to the American situation. It was justifiable, he said, to use force because the Indian was barbarous by nature and his whole culture was vicious; indeed, the use of force was necessary to protect the weak among the natives from their co-tribesmen. For their own sakes, these rude and naturally inferior persons should be taken as soon as possible, by force even, under the care of civilized peoples.

This smug argument sounded specious enough, but it ignored three things, stressed (and it is one of the great boasts of the Order) time and time again by Las Casas, both before and after he became a Dominican.

First, it is wrong to deny to any human being his right to liberty and property, to lead his life in peace and according to his own customs. The Indians, Las Casas asserted, were rational and it is wrong to treat them as bits of wood that can be cut off a tree and transported for building purposes. The high-minded phrases of Sepulveda simply meant in practice the destruction of cultures, and the ruin and despair of peoples. Even at this time there was evidence of the havoc caused, not merely by wars of conquest, but even more by forced labour and the destruction of traditional ways of life. Evidence sufficient to move not only the Bishop of Mexico, but the Pope himself, Paul III, to demand that the Indians should not be treated as animals or deprived of their liberties and property, even though outside the Faith.

Secondly, to the contention that this is just sentimentality, Las Casas and his followers replied in detail. Las Casas argued from long personal experience, and could support his contentions from men like

Ferrer who wrote on Indian archaeology to prove the rationality of the Indian, and Domingo de Santo Tomas who studied their languages in order to be able to interpret their thought. Neither Las Casas nor his followers were contending for any theory of absolute equality, whatever that may mean. They were simply pointing to the evidence—and there was no other—that the Indians were human, and maintaining that if they and the Spaniards were to be judged by the same standards, it would be found that the Spaniards did not have a monopoly in virtue. Las Casas was too hard-headed to think, as did some of his romantically-minded colleagues, that all Indians were good and pure and all Spaniards bad and corrupt, but he did point out that the faults of the Indians did not justify either their exploitation or the judgment that their culture was, as culture, inferior to that of the Spaniards. They were human beings whose culture must be respected by Spain if she was not to forfeit her claim to those values that she regarded as being peculiarly her own. More than that if the Spaniard was a Christian, then he must love the Indian as he loved himself.

But there remains the contention, the practical argument that there is no other course to follow; the West must live, and living means expansion, and expansion means force. No, replied Las Casas, even if Indian and Spaniard have to live side by side, the way of peace, if tried, will be even more successful—it is practical, and it is moral. And from his own experience he brings cases to show that the way of peace is far more successful than is usually thought, if it is really tried. This is the way that demands discipline, courage and sobriety, as well as faith in the Gospel.

