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Expansionism and Religion:  
The Fatal Flaws of the Aztec Empire

By

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*“Who could conquer Tenochtitlan? Who could shake the foundation of heaven. . . ?”<sup>1</sup>*

Tenochtitlan, like the mythical lost city of Atlantis, has drawn curiosity for centuries. In the recounting of the Aztec capital’s tragic apocalypse many have emphasized the actions of two men, Cortes on the Spanish side, and Montezuma on the Aztec. Yet, few historians, especially those writing before the twentieth century, have really explored the relationship between the Aztecs’ politics and the collapse of their empire. However, time has gradually revealed the Aztec’s past, and with the coming of the twentieth century and postmodernist thinking, the Aztec’s story and identity has begun to be heard. It is now possible to reveal the relationship between the Aztecs’ violent and arbitrary rule and the demise of their empire. Both Cortes and Montezuma were key figures in Tenochtitlan’s downfall, yet, it was the Aztecs own politics which had made the city vulnerable to conquest long before Cortes’s feet touched the Mexican beach.

Regardless of historians’ attempts at neutrality, their writings regarding Tenochtitlan’s fall are all somewhat biased. In the sixteenth century historians described the righteousness of Spanish might, and the holiness of their actions. Of course, this view did not last forever. As the Spaniards of the original conquest laid long buried, the native population began to rebound, and eventually Mexico gained its independence, historians began to turn away from the conquistadors and turn towards the Aztecs and its neighboring or subordinate peoples. It wasn’t until recently, in works such as Hugh

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<sup>1</sup>Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 5.

Thomas's *Conquest* (1993), that both sides of the story, Aztec and Spanish, were given their proper due.

Through Thomas's work, a different story emerged. The destruction of Tenochtitlan was not so much one of Spanish conquest, but of Aztec mismanagement, expansionism, and exploitation of other Native Americans. They built their empire with a policy of military subjugation and brute force. The Spanish did not defeat the Aztec with a handful of men, but with an alliance of natives who sensed a chance for revenge, plunder, and an end of servitude and vassalage. Like Rome centuries before, the Aztecs their own vulnerability.

Earlier, Spanish writers like Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a soldier under Cortes, and author of a detailed manuscript on the Conquest of Mexico, saw history differently. In his book, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, Diaz del Castillo says of the destruction of the Aztecs: "I, Bernal Diaz del Castillo...one of the first discoverers and conquerors of New Spain...speak about...all the true conquerors my companions who served His Majesty by discovering, conquering, pacifying, and settling most of the provinces of New Spain."<sup>2</sup> In this same work, Diaz del Castillo does his utmost to highlight the part the Spaniards played in the defeat of the Aztecs, and tries his best not to mention what even Cortes called a "numberless people,"<sup>3</sup> who were the Spaniards native allies. Perhaps Diaz del Castillo sought to glorify the conquistadors, or perhaps he truly believed it was Catholic Spaniards which did all the 'hard' work. Though, it could be easily argued that the plagues unleashed by the Spaniards' European diseases did that.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, 1517-1521, ed. Genaro Garcia, trans. A.P. Maudslay (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Castillo, xxx.

In Diaz del Castillo's work, one finds numerous references to God's will, and Grace. Indeed, one might get the impression that God himself was there with the Spaniards, sharpening their swords and urging them to commit murder for the sake of righteousness. Truly, the author's voice was influenced by his environment and upbringing, his culture of Catholicism, and his values, which not surprisingly mesh with most of his European contemporaries. In a nutshell then, he believes Spanish might and Spanish steel, guided by God's Will enabled them to defeat Tenochtitlan and extinguish the Aztec Empire.

Three centuries later, William H. Prescott, a well known New England historian, saw some of the flaws of Cortes's and Castillo's accounts. Yet, Prescott was perhaps, above all, concerned with narrating a good story. His work *The Conquest of Mexico* is still widely read and enjoyed. Unfortunately, Prescott suggests the antiquated notion that the conquest of Mexico was actually good for the natives, whom, as population studies now show, were almost nearly annihilated by their 'good fortune.'

However, Prescott was no Spaniard, nor did he live during the conquest. His different perspective therefore, marked a huge step forward in describing the Aztec downfall, regardless of the many splashes of added color in the text. Most refreshingly, Prescott shows an understanding of the importance of values in history, and further he reveals to one the purpose of his work: "I have endeavored to surround him (the reader) with the spirit of the times, and...to make him...a contemporary of the sixteenth century."<sup>4</sup> Prescott nearly admits that he picked the conquest because it seemed dramatic and "...has the air of romance rather than sober history."<sup>5</sup> Prescott's work generally

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<sup>4</sup> William H. Prescott, *The Conquest of Mexico* (New York: The Junior Literary Guild, 1934), xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Prescott, xxvii.

sympathizes with the Spaniards and Europeans. Like Bernal Diaz, he too believes that the conquistadors were the major force behind the collapse of the Aztec Empire.

It is important to note that though Prescott is mainly on the side of the Spaniards, he speaks in his work with a wisdom that his predecessors lacked. He admits, though it seems somewhat hesitantly or disappointedly, that the Spaniards did not defeat the Aztecs on their own, but, with native help; help which Prescott loosely realizes was given to them because of the Aztec Empire's abuse of power towards its own people, tributary states, and neighbors. Prescott believes that though the Spaniards did cause a lot of suffering, that it was and is still the nature of war to do so, and if the Aztecs were say Moors, then the Spaniards would have inflicted them with equal amount of death and destruction (minus the diseases).

Almost two centuries later, Hugh Thomas expands on Prescott's perspective of Native American participation in the conquest, stating that, "The conquest of 1520-1 required Cortes' capacity and determination to win over the Indians..."<sup>6</sup> Thomas goes on to say that if Cortes had failed in his conquest, the Aztec empire might have survived and prospered as an independent state for centuries, perhaps even to the present day. As with Prescott, Thomas believes that without the arrival of the Spanish the Aztec empire would not have fallen. Tenochtitlan might exist today in nearly its original form.

Thomas's thesis, however, ignores the Aztecs' own self-destructive policies. Cortes was not the key to the downfall of Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs. Indeed, if Cortes hadn't conquered them, some other European would have. A European empire and an Aztec empire could not live in harmony together. Thomas seems to forget the major driving force behind Cortes' and Spain's rationale for conquering the Aztecs was

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, 601.

religion. The Aztecs worshipped many deities, performed human sacrifices, and even practiced cannibalism. They could not have lived in a peaceful state with a European empire, nor would they have embraced Catholicism fast enough to halt any aggressive action from a European state. Thomas compares Japan to the Aztecs, a comparison which is preposterous. Japanese culture was much different than that of the Aztecs, and much more isolated from the west. Finally, by the time the Europeans faced the Japanese in battle, the Japanese were better armed and prepared than the Aztecs, who died en masse from European diseases.

Thomas also overlooks the United States own record in dealing with Native Americans which was harsh and unforgiving up until the 1960's. Until the sixties the United States did its best to try to Europeanize (or Americanize) the native population. The only reason such a drive truly ended, I believe, is because the Indians were too small a group to pose any kind of threat. They were defeated, and for the most part, converted, thus it was time for the government to say they were sorry. I believe the Aztec fate would have been equally sealed and quicker too.

The only way the Aztecs may have prevailed for a time, would have been for the Aztec government to be more benevolent. Yet had they become more tolerant could they have held on to all their vassals? Could they have satisfied the human sacrificial demands of their gods, especially Huitzilopochtli? This is doubtful, but it is possible that the Mexican people could have formed alliances, which, might have held off European aggression for a time.

The Aztec Empire fell because Cortes struck alliances with native 'rebels.' Rebellions occurred for some time before Cortes, but he gave the rebellious natives more

hope, that he, a representative of a god (if not a god), could help them destroy the Aztecs. The Spanish did not defeat the Aztecs; they merely sped up the implosion of a bloated, corrupt, cruel, and expansionist empire.

This point is emphasized in *Religion and Empire* by Conrad and Demarest. The authors help one to understand what made the Aztec empire fall as swiftly as it did. The author's state: "The loosely knit empire flew to pieces as tributary states rose in revolt or in actual support of the Spanish, blindly thrilled at the prospect of any force that could free them from Aztec oppression."<sup>7</sup> However, like most historians before them, they believe that the Spanish entrance into Mesoamerica was the catalyst that spelt the end of the Aztecs. Further, they believe the Aztec's fatal flaw did not so much rest in its military policies but in its "...imperial reforms and the state cult."<sup>8</sup>

Though the arrival of the Europeans did mark the end of native empires as a whole, the Aztecs themselves had undermined their hegemony long before. Historian, Ross Hassig, in his book *Aztec Warfare*, allows one to see an in-depth account of how the Aztecs surged to power, and how their own methods in the end doomed them to swift destruction. He makes a journey through the entire history of the Aztec military conquest; yet he fails to see these conquests as spelling the end of the Aztecs. Hassig, in fact, on the whole, views Aztec military policy as an "achievement,"<sup>9</sup> and does not focus a great deal on the weaknesses which it created within the empire.

Why did the Aztecs chose such a system of expansionism and military oppression? Some historians have argued that the key factor in making the Aztecs so

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 69-70

<sup>8</sup> Conrad, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 12-13.



militant was not their culture, but the very ecology of the Valley of Mexico, with its fertile soil and moderate environment. The Aztecs, unlike most of their neighbors had more than enough to feed their entire people. They developed a distinguishable class system which emphasized warriors in addition to nobility and religious leaders. Warriors do not exist merely to train and sharpen their weapons, but, to test their strength against an opponent. Thus, the Aztecs saw quick and easy victories by their warrior class, which increased the power of the elite, and unfortunately, encouraged Aztec expansion all the more.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, in time the Aztec leaders feared the growing power of their warrior class, and partly to subdue them, and maintain friendly relations with nearby larger cities, the Aztec state set up a large number of rules regarding when it was right to engage in warfare. Many of these rules regarded already conquered people in an attempt to ensure their vassals that their military should not attack without provocation. The latter included: open rebellion, blockage of roads, failing to pay tribute, and not worshipping the Aztec king.<sup>11</sup> It is doubtful that such assurances pleased many of their conquered vassals, which is clearly evident by the vast number of cities that aided and abetted Cortes's conquest.

If one still doubts the theory that Tenochtitlan would have fallen without Spanish intervention, one should look back to the fall of an earlier great empire some seven centuries earlier. The great city of Teotihuacan fell and crumbled due to what most experts agree were "internal troubles."<sup>12</sup> This is especially significant for the Aztecs whose culture and government were very similar to the people of Teotihuacan's. Of

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<sup>10</sup> Conrad, 13-25.

<sup>11</sup> Hassig, 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad, 13.

primary importance is the similar role which state religion combined with military expansion in both societies. When Teotihuacan fell, the door was left open for foreigners to come in and claim the land for their own, which, is just what happened when the Spaniards defeated the Aztecs.

Historians sometimes have a bad habit of focusing their attention too narrowly when it comes to important historical events. Misunderstanding Hernan Cortes in the Conquest of Mexico is a perfect example of this. It is not wrong to conclude that Cortes played a significant role in the Aztec defeat, yet, it is wrong to attribute their downfall to Cortes's so-called genius and skill and ignore the most significant reason, that being Aztec politics.

To illustrate this point it is necessary to examine the Aztecs and their policies prior to the arrival of Cortes in 1519. Unfortunately, much pre-Spanish, Mexican history has been lost; many of the Aztecs Codex's were burned (for religious reasons) by the Spaniards shortly after they arrived. Yet, over the past few centuries a small number of Aztec writings have been discovered and translated. Luckily, these writings, along with those written by conquest-contemporary natives and Spanish priests, have helped shed more light than ever before on the ancient Aztecs.<sup>13</sup>

It is a well known fact that the Aztecs were not the original inhabitants of the valley of Mexico; they were foreign invaders who settled in the valley sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. To this day, the origins of the Aztecs are not known for sure, though most ancient stories point to the plains north of the valley, since many nomadic tribes inhabited

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<sup>13</sup> Conrad, 13.

the north plains at that time.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, the Aztec story starts with conquest, and, not surprisingly, would end the same way.

When the Aztecs or Mexica arrived at the valley of Mexico they had little farming skill. Their primary activity was that of warriors. To earn a living, the first Mexica became mercenaries for the nearby Toltec lords. Their skill in battle was unrivaled in the region and their power grew until the Toltec's royals began marrying into the Mexica line, increasing their power and prestige. The more powerful they grew and the more wealth they accumulated, the greedier they became. Eventually the Mexica subjugated all the tribes around the valley and gained dominance in the region. Their capital was Tenochtitlan, a city that rested in the middle of a lake.<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning of Aztec rule, their political system was a simplified version of the Toltec's. Political control rested in the hands of a ruler and several Calpollis who oversaw different wards (or clans) in a city. Overall, this first Aztec system had a weak central government, and eventually the Aztec adopted the system of government that prevailed in the cities around them, which had more power invested in the central leader or emperor. The Aztecs first supreme ruler one Acamapichtli, was in fact not Aztec but a member of an older imperial family of the region, giving the new Aztec capital (Tenochtitlan) legitimacy and opening up trade with her neighbors.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, in these early years of the Aztec political system, it was the Aztecs which paid tribute and were vassals. Up until the reign of Itzcoatl (r. 1427-40), tribute was paid to the leader of the Tepanec Empire at Azcapotzalco, a city just west of

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<sup>14</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *The Aztecs: Rise and Fall of an Empire* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> John Pohl and Charles M. Robinson III, *Aztecs and Conquistadores: The Spanish Invasion and the Collapse of the Aztec Empire* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> Hassig, 125-26.

Tenochtitlan. Therefore, the first of the Aztec conquest of the region, prior to Itzcoatl, were presumably in an effort to increase the Tepanec Empires power. This is important to note, for the Aztecs would continue this same policy when they obtained vassals, forcing their tributaries to fight for their cause and betterment as well. Many of the Aztecs first battles were the so-named flower wars, which were mainly attempts to show military prowess and to capture prisoners for religious sacrifices.<sup>17</sup>

The Aztecs would benefit from the battles their overlord forced them to fight, becoming stronger and richer with each successful campaign. After a major campaign in 1427 the Aztecs were given control of at least three cities. This makes it easy to see how it came to pass that the Aztecs would, very shortly, turn on their former lords and thus seize power and command of the valley of Mexico for themselves. It was in 1428 that the Aztecs became an independent state and shortly thereafter subjugated many of the surrounding lake cities.<sup>18</sup>

One of the flaws in the Aztec political system rested in the inheritance system of its rulers, which took its final form around 1428. Though there were quite a few competent rulers among the Aztecs, there were many who were not so, but, became leaders regardless. This came about when they decided that the eldest son would inherit the throne, however, they also considered military ability in determining their rulers. Instead of electing rulers based on political ability, the Aztec's put blood and brawn before brains. This would cost them dearly in the end, as political mismanagement would breed and encourage rebellion among their vassals.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hassig, 127-30.

<sup>18</sup> Conrad, 44-53.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, 7-8.

In 1428 the Aztec ruler Itzcoatl finally found himself independent and free from relying on the support of the Calpolli leaders. After the successful campaigns he had his own lands, which he would distribute to prominent warriors, in return for tribute and service. He created a large noble class which was directly loyal to him and gave him a free hand and military control over internal threats.<sup>20</sup>

What allowed the Aztec Empire to grow more than anything was their strong geographical position on Lake Texcoco. The city of Tenochtitlan was located on an island in the middle of Texcoco. Realizing that their position was not too strong they formed an alliance with two other cities, creating a Triple Alliance. The Aztecs had a large positional advantage within the alliance and neither of their allies dared to attack Tenochtitlan directly. Furthermore, Tenochtitlan was strategically secure, because the lake was a formidable barrier against invasion.<sup>21</sup>

Once free from an overlord, the Aztecs gained and maintained power not through political strength and stability, but with the might of their military. There were very few years when the Aztecs were not at war with both nearby and faraway cities. They fought to maintain their dominance and to spread it across Mexico, all the while feeding their gods with more sacrificial captives. With the exception of human sacrifice, this is a similar story to that of the Roman. They first expanded because they felt their security threatened and themselves vulnerable, but then made warfare a permanent policy which became a necessity to their political system.

Aztec political power and its maintenance was almost solely based on its military. The Aztecs found excuses for attacking city after city until they secured the entire lake

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<sup>20</sup> Hassig, 146.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad, 44-57.

basin. Thereafter they pushed further to the east and west and then to the south and north. The conquests were relatively swift and easy, for, as the other city-states saw the Aztec Empire grow, instead of challenging them, which would have been hopeless, they surrendered. They then granted the Aztecs military passage, tribute, supplies, military support, and open trade routes, and of course, a promise of their loyalty.<sup>22</sup>

There is a clear weakness in any government that does not directly oversee (at least in part) all those under their control and influence. The Aztecs demanded obedience, even worship for their ruler, while at the same time letting their tributary city-states set their own policies and run the day to day affairs of their areas. Though such autonomy may be efficient for a certain period (mainly as the Empire flourishes), and allow for less rebellion at the beginning of over lordship, such a system allows subjects to grow in power, and to even direct their own foreign policies. In the end, such decentralization allows the subordinated group to rebel against the empire, whenever it begins to show weakness. Examples like a military defeat, inheritance controversies, a bad harvest, or a weakening economy, present opportunities to rebel. The Aztecs grew into an empire for the very reasons mentioned above. It is puzzling why they would continue the autonomous system which had led to the ruin of their previous masters. They failed to realize that maintaining those same policies would only foreshadow their own downfall less than a century later.

The Aztec's policy did work for some time, and allowed them their quick expansion. Tenochtitlan grew into one of the greatest cities in the world.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the further outwards the Aztecs pushed from Lake Texcoco, the more it cost them to field

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<sup>22</sup> Hassig, 150-57.

<sup>23</sup> Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), xxxvi-ii.

their troops, and the more resources they demanded from their newly conquered or submitted vassals. In just over ten years, for example, Itzcoatl extended the Aztec empire for over three hundred miles around Tenochtitlan, successfully taking over most regions previously controlled by the Tepanec Empire.<sup>24</sup>

The expansion of the Aztecs continued, and it wasn't until the reign of Tizoc (1481-86) that the Aztec political structure showed severe weaknesses. Tizoc was one of the few Aztec leaders with a fairly bad military record, immediately this would make him appear weaker to the Aztec's neighbors, tributaries, and enemies alike. Further, in his first battle as Emperor, Tizoc was unable to conquer the relatively small town of Metztitlan. He only captured forty warriors for the traditional coronation sacrifice the Aztecs held. Within two years after Tizoc's blundered attack, several Aztec tributaries were in open rebellion, draining Aztec military abilities, and forcing Tizoc to re-conquer the rebellious towns and sacrifice many warriors. Finally, as more cities rebelled, more formerly-loyal vassals joined them, stretching the Aztec military thinner, and putting more pressure on its vassals to provide support, thus encouraging greater rebellion.<sup>25</sup>

It's not at all surprising that Tizoc's reign lasted only six years. Historians believe that his successor, Ahuitzotl (1486-1502), along with other Aztec nobles, had him assassinated.<sup>26</sup> Such an action shows a severe weakness in the Aztec political system, and again brings one back to recalling the many Roman 'Caesars' who often ended up dead long before old age claimed them. Clearly, before the Spanish arrived on the shore of Mexico, the Aztec empire was already showing increasing signs of weakness which had nothing at all to do with a Spaniard named Cortes.

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<sup>24</sup> Hassig, 153-54.

<sup>25</sup> Hassig, 190-95.

<sup>26</sup> Hassig, 200.

The reign of Ahuitzotl was a prosperous time for the Aztec empire. Upon securing his position, Ahuitzotl immediately began to strengthen the Aztec empire. However, not all the people in the Aztec empire benefited equally. While the nobles and priests did relatively well, for they controlled a great deal of the local power and wealth, the commoners were still the tools used for achieving wealth for the upper classes. The commoners had to obey their immediate lord. In addition, they were often coerced into serving in the military, and in large part, had little land for themselves. In essence the majority of the Aztec Empire's people lived in a state much like the *encomiendas* the Spanish would force them into a few decades later. Clearly, the Aztec's class system was another factor which weakened the Empire, as the vast majority of the Empire's people had little love of, or allegiance to, their lords and much less their Aztec overlords.

Nevertheless, according to historian Ross Hassig, "...the lower classes probably favored imperial expansion."<sup>27</sup> Though the commoners were in many ways servants of the other classes, there was a 'trickle-down' effect for them. As the military conquered and plundered more regions, wealth, captives, and new tribute, improved the lives of a majority of Aztecs, especially those living in Tenochtitlan. However, it is important to note that the people of the Aztec tributaries did not benefit as greatly from the Aztec's military successes, for though they did get a share of the plunder, they did not share in the annual tribute which the emperor would receive.

Though Emperor Ahuitzotl did enjoy greater wealth and military success than Tizoc, he did not enjoy strong loyalty from the many different armies his vassals provided. Oftentimes tributary-soldiers would desert before battles. Further, traitors were rampant, on either side, a potent foretelling of things to come and evidence of the

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<sup>27</sup> Hassig, 201.



continually shifting loyalties in the Aztec empire. In addition, Ahuitzotl's many conquests put the empire in a position where its administrative abilities could no longer meet the empire's growing demands.<sup>28</sup>

Another example that things were deteriorating in the empire during Ahuitzotl's time, even though the military campaigns were succeeding, is the great number of sacrifices during his reign. On one occasion, the dedication of the temple of Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan, over 80,000 captives were sacrificed.<sup>29</sup> Obviously, the Aztec's ruled in large part through fear, and a perceived divine right, yet, what is also obvious by such a large number of victims, is the fact that the Aztecs had more enemies than ever before. Hugh Thomas provides us with the most apt description of the Aztec sacrificial process, stating:

“The normal procedure was for the victim to be held down on a stone block by four priests. His heart would be plucked out professionally by a chief priest...using a flint knife. The heart would be burned...The head would be cut off and held up. The limbs would be ritually eaten, with maize or chili, by noblemen and successful warriors.”<sup>30</sup>

The sacrificing of so many citizens could not have boded well for the Aztec empire, though it seems very intimidating. One must remember, the villages that the victims had come from, were now once again part of the empire, vassal states, supposedly loyal, but, it is extremely unlikely that they felt any real loyalty to or love of an empire which had put to death so many of their sons. The more atrocities the Aztec's committed, the more enemies they created; enemies that would jump at any opportunity to do unto the Aztecs what was done onto them.

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<sup>28</sup> Conrad, 61-62.

<sup>29</sup> Hassig, 205.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, 25.

As the Aztecs expanded their empire they maintained political, military, and economic dominance more and more through terror and tyranny. The more troubled the empire became, the more violent the tactics that were used. In 1488-89, Ahuitzotl and his troops massacred all the adults in two towns which were once tributaries of the empire and had gone into open rebellion against them. Hoping to have more loyal people, Ahuitzotl transplanted people from Tenochtitlan and other towns to the brutally-vacated villages.<sup>31</sup>

It is easy to get the impression that the Aztec empire was standing on an abyss. By their continued expansion, the Aztecs had created a large empire that required vast tribute and a large, loyal army. They also had many enemies to watch and be wary of. Even though they were successful at putting down numerous rebellions, at nearly any given time, there was a war in progress with one town or another. When there was no full blown war they engaged in flower wars to get sacrificial victims. The perilous state the empire was in is no doubt the very reason why the Aztecs needed so many sacrifices. The greater challenges the empire faced, the more sacrifices were needed to obtain the gods aid.

The Aztecs turned to religion to not only assure themselves of success and safety, but to justify their acts of cruelty and tyranny. The ‘hummingbird’ god, Huitzilopochtli, gained prominence as the Aztec empire grew in size. Huitzilopochtli: “...presides over calculated brutality and human slaughter; he inspires terror and despair; he justifies Mexican rule and the rule of others by the Mexica...”<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the Spanish were far from alone in their use of religion to justify their atrocities. Religion and state were

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<sup>31</sup> Hassig, 207-8.

<sup>32</sup> R.C. Padden, *The Humming Bird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503-1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967), 11.

connected with greater eagerness in the Aztec empire than even fervent Catholic nations like Spain.

As the Aztec state grew into an empire, it became impossible to separate Aztec religion from Aztec politics. In fact, the Aztecs often went to war because they believed their enemy had offended their gods. Yet on further examination, an economic or a political reason is often the real cause, and the Aztec state had used their religion as a convenient excuse to assert its power.<sup>33</sup>

Religion and politics in the Aztec state mixed so thoroughly, that eventually the gods did indeed set the policy of the Aztec state. At first the Aztecs used their gods to aid their own desires, yet as such use became institutionalized it was in fact the gods which began to use the Aztecs so-to-speak. More and more sacrifices were preformed to appease the gods and to grant victory, and if the Aztecs could not get sacrificial victims, they believed that the empire and the universe would end. This was strong motivation for all to follow the will of their gods.<sup>34</sup> Thus the Aztec state, by using religion as their ‘serpent’ of justification, had, just begun to eat its own tail.

This helps explain why the Aztecs were continually at war after their 1428 independence. The Aztecs had dug a pit too deep (expansionist policy), and had no way to get out of it; they became so desperate, in fact that their faith in the gods deepened swiftly and insatiably. Importantly, such an explanation helps to explain Montezuma’s reception of Cortes when he arrived on the Mexica’s eastern shore and said: “Our Lord Quetzalcoatl has arrived.”<sup>35</sup> Cortes didn’t need to trick the natives into believing he was a god, or a representative of a god. As many of the natives were easily convinced he was,

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<sup>33</sup> Conrad, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Conrad, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Maurice Collis, *Cortes and Montezuma* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1999), 66.

after-all, Cortes and the Spaniards were so alien and different, that they had to do little more than play along, something any intelligent and greedy-hearted Conquistador could have managed.

Such reasons explain clearly why it is unnecessary to emphasize the role of Cortes or even Montezuma in the fall of the Aztec empire. The two figures were merely the end pieces in an inevitable outcome set in stone by Aztec policy. The Aztecs had copied too closely the policies of the previous empires of Mesoamerica, and like those empires, they formed a government that had no hope of standing for long. Eventually, the Aztecs made so many enemies that it found it could trust in very few of their 'allies,' and thus had to assert their will through terror, threats, and when that didn't work, slaughter.

This was the tenuous state of the empire when Montezuma Xocoyotl began his reign in 1502. By this time, the Aztec military machine had conquered a large part of modern day Mexico. Not surprisingly, Montezuma was far from ceasing the empire's expansionist policies, which could truly no longer be reasonably or safely stopped. Not surprisingly, Montezuma (who was the ninth Aztec ruler), conquered large areas south of Tenochtitlan before the coming of the Spaniards, stretching the empire's strength even thinner, while creating a greater number of enemies who would be sure to flock to Cortes's standard when he arrived.<sup>36</sup>

As Cortes began to conquer the Aztec empire Montezuma first blamed his generals and soldiers for failing him and the empire. Further on, like the majority of the Aztecs, Montezuma began blaming and lamenting the gods. Despair had gripped all those loyal to the Aztecs, and many who had waited long for an opportunity to destroy

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<sup>36</sup> Conrad, 45.

them had joined with the Spaniards.<sup>37</sup> The Aztecs, even in the end, did not realize that it was their own militaristic policy that defeated them, not gods, not Spaniards, not even the tens of thousands of natives that plundered and burnt their capital, just as the Aztecs had done so many times to many of their cities.

In *Religion and Empire*, the authors conclude that before even Cortes came it was clear that, "...the era of the Triple Alliance was coming to a close. From their...beginnings the Mexica people had been launched on a truly irreversible course..."<sup>38</sup> Though the coming of the Spanish did speed up the Mexica collapse by an unknown amount of time, it by no means was the cause of it. However, somewhat confusingly, Conrad and Demarest also state that, "...the Triple Alliance...perished before the onslaught of Cortes's few hundred men."<sup>39</sup> Which, clearly, was not at all the case.

To the eyes of the conquistadors, who had little if any knowledge in the way of Aztec and Mesoamerican history, they were unable to see the big picture, or to understand the true reasons why they were able to defeat the Aztecs so easily. Instead, they would give credit to themselves, their religion, and naturally, God, as Castillo gives us repeated evidence to: "...thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ and our Lady the Virgin Santa Maria, His Blessed Mother. Amen."<sup>40</sup> Ironically at the same time the Aztec's were blaming their own gods for abandoning them.

More and more modern scholars have concluded that religion dominated all aspects of life in the Aztec empire. As Hugh Thomas states, "The life of the people, after

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<sup>37</sup> Conrad, 69.

<sup>38</sup> Conrad, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Conrad, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Castillo, 454.

all, revolved round religion. All actions, public or private, were touched by religious implications.”<sup>41</sup> There was nothing so powerful in the Aztec state as religion; it dictated the people’s daily rituals, including, most importantly, those of the emperors themselves.

The conquest and defeat of the Aztecs happened in less than three years, and finally as Prescott wrote: “It was the hour of vespers when Cuauhtemoc (the last Aztec emperor) surrendered.”<sup>42</sup> Yet even the flowery speech of Prescott failed to recognize the true defeat of the Aztecs happened a long time before then.

Shortly after the conquest Cortes began to act extravagantly, and fancy himself above all reproach. Indeed, so confident was he in his position of control that he was heard to say such things as, “The country which we have won is ours and, if the King does not give it to us, then we shall take it.” Further, Cortes insisted on people calling him “Highness.”<sup>43</sup> Not only would Cortes take the majority of the credit for the success of the Conquest, but, obviously, he also hoped to be the ultimate ruler of the new region. Not only was Cortes obsessed with the thought of ruling over Mexico (what the Spaniards would call New Spain), but, he also questioned and even tortured his many Aztec prisoners (including Cuauhtemoc) repeatedly about “The treasure of Mexico,”<sup>44</sup> which he was sure existed somewhere nearby.

Once all the Aztec gold had been counted, it was discovered that the Aztecs had not been nearly as wealthy in gold as the Spaniards had believed. Cortes’s men were very unhappy with the payment they received for their service during the conquest. Like the Aztecs, Cortes soon became fearful that his men would stage a rebellion against him,

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas, 186.

<sup>42</sup> Jon Manchip White, *Cortes and the Downfall of the Aztec Empire* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1996), 260.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, 543.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, 545.

and so, hoping to dilute their anger, he began dispatching his men to various locales, and telling them to set up a new Spanish community, presumably a community mainly containing natives inhabitants which would labor for their new Spanish masters, whether it be in mines or in agriculture.<sup>45</sup>

Cortes was a much different leader than any the Aztecs had ever known, not only was he reluctant to disburse a great deal of his power (even fellow Spaniards said Cortes had a "...taste for tyranny."<sup>46</sup>), but, he also understood the maintenance of political control to a greater degree, and often he would manipulate events and people in his favor. Quite simply, Cortes was politically savvy and devious. Almost immediately after the fall of Tenochtitlan, the king ordered a governor to New Spain to take over rulership from Cortes. Cortes did his utmost to delay this new governor, having no intention to relinquish his control of Mexico. Eventually, Cortes and his loyal officers managed to get the new governor to go the way he had come, back to Spain leaving Cortes in a more powerful position than ever before.<sup>47</sup>

Now, the question must arise as to what happened to the Aztecs and the other indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica once the Spaniards took over? In 1522 the King, Charles V of Spain, named Cortes captain-general and governor of New Spain, further, he was also named the distributor of Indians, a title which Cortes would, unfortunately, make the most of. Even before Cortes had the authority to do so, he was already granting encomiendas to conquistadors and even Mexicans of high birth.<sup>48</sup> The encomiendas were

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas, 545-50.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, 574.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, 549-55.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, 576.

gifts of land and natives to work said land. Some of the encomiendas which Cortes gave away included whole towns.

All in all, these encomiendas that were set up by Cortes were worse for the natives than the previous Aztec system had been. The Spaniards, who used Montezuma's old tribute gatherers, demanded more tribute from the natives than did their previous masters. Though the granting of numerous encomiendas may be seen as limiting to Cortes's power and control, not granting them may have very well ended with open rebellion of the conquistadors against Cortes. Additionally, Cortes granted himself huge pieces of land and it was said a million or more Indians to work for him alone.<sup>49</sup>

Further, starting in 1523, Cortes began a policy of bringing in vast numbers of monks and friars to begin converting the Aztecs to the Catholic faith. Yet, the first generation of native converts, were more or less illiterate to what the Catholic men were trying to teach them. While the men of the cloth claimed thousands and thousands of converts, most of the Indians did not give up their old beliefs, nor could they really understand the new ones.<sup>50</sup> The gods of the Aztec's were often vengeful and bloodthirsty; most of the Indians had witnessed at least some of the numerous amounts of sacrifices to the gods. Catholicism was so radically different in nature than the Natives own religion that it is highly unlikely that even the most basic of concepts could be correctly interpreted or understood fully by them.

In a very short while the many native allies that had supported Cortes against the Aztecs soon realized that Cortes was not going to give them high positions of power. In 1523 there was a small rebellion, but the Spaniards quickly snuffed it out. Unlike the

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, 577-78.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas, 578-79.



Aztecs, Cortes dealt with a native population that had been devastated by European diseases, and by war, most of the Native people were unable to resist the Spaniards.<sup>51</sup> Another key of control for the Spaniards over the natives had to be the many horses the Spanish had brought with them, along with their advanced weaponry and armor. The Spaniards were swift and deadly, they outmatched the remaining natives in most every way, except perhaps, in knowledge of the terrain, but, the Spanish had plenty of native collaborators to help them in that respect.

The end of the Aztec empire would also mean the end of all the native kingdoms in Mexico both tributary and free. Once the Europeans gained their foothold, they were not going to give it up. The natives who had supported Cortes in the defeat of Tenochtitlan and the Aztecs, doing only what they had done for years: struggling for power and independence from an overlord, had thrust upon themselves a new master that would be unbeatable, and would destroy their old way of life, both the good and the bad, forever.

Like most historical events, the conquest of the Aztecs can not be painted with only two colors. Today, the conquistadors are painted as evil and heartless, greedy and murderous. Though true in many cases, it is vital to remember that the Aztecs committed many of the same acts of violence in which the Spaniards did. The Aztec empire had terrible flaws and committed horrendous atrocities just to maintain its power and continue its military expansionist policy. The Spaniards, though coming from a completely alien culture, ruled over the conquered people in much the same, oppressive way. It is fortunate indeed that the history of the Aztecs and those that came before them has been somewhat preserved, for even now their descendants have risen in number and influence

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas, 587.

once again, and continue to thirst for their long forgotten past; a past, imperfect as most, yet as rich and interesting, barbaric yet developed, as any in the west.

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