

Research Article

# The Evangelization of Indigenous People in Spanish America: Motolinía and Las Casas

Maria Izabel Barboza de Moraes Oliveira\* 

Department of History, Federal University of Maranhão, São Luís, Brasil

## Abstract

The aim is to highlight two divergent conceptions regarding the evangelization of the original peoples of Spanish America. In this sense, a comparison is established between the thoughts of the Spanish Franciscan friar Motolinía with the thoughts of the Spanish Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas on the topic. The source is the *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (conceived from 1536 to 1541) and the *Carta ao Imperador Carlos V* (1555) by Motolinía as also the *Único modo de atraer a todos los pueblos a la verdadera religion* by Las Casas (written between 1523 and 1437). As a theoretical-methodological reference, we use the notions of the Russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin. According to this author, there is only an object of thought and research where there is text. Every text has an author and this author has an intention. There is an interrelationship between the text and the author's context. For the Russian philosopher, the work is a statement, as its author is always responding to the works of his predecessors, basing himself on and agreeing with the works of the same current, criticizing and combating the works of opposing currents.

## Keywords

Motolinía, Las Casas, Evangelization, Indigenous People, Spanish America, 16th Century

## 1. Introduction: Evangelizing Idealism of the Franciscans and Dominicans in Spanish America

At the beginning of the 16th century, the papacy granted Catholic kings royal patronage over the Church of the Indies. Thus, submitted to Catholic sovereigns, the official Church in America did not stand out in the defense of indigenous people; it will be through religious orders that the Catholic Church will play an important role in defending the natives. In this sense, in Spanish America the Franciscan Toribio de Benavente stood out, one of the 'Twelve', nicknamed by the indigenous people de Motolinía, the Poor, and the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas. [10]

Missionaries from different religious orders, such as Franciscans and Dominicans, came to the West Indies with the task of evangelizing it. Knowing her well, however, with divergent projects and looking at her from different perspectives. For Carlos Josaphat, the big question that was presented to the religious groups was "How to evangelize America? In catechesis, in preparation for the sacraments and in its administration, what place should be given to the demands of justice, to great norms or ethical models of a society of equality and solidarity between races?" [12]

\*Corresponding author: iza.barboza@outlook.com (Maria Izabel Barboza de Moraes Oliveira)

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The evangelizing idealism of the franciscans and dominicans converged in some points and differed in others. In general, both the franciscans and the dominicans did shine their traditional title of mendicants, which led them to fraternize with people humble, “returning to their historical roots in the aspirations of a new Pentecost, with the poorest, now with the poor of the New World”, in this case, the indians. They should be evangelized and converted, forming renewed and enthusiastic communities, living the holy community of Jerusalem again, hastening the arrival of the promised Kingdom. At America, and particularly in Mexico, evangelization work was accompanied and warmed by millennial hopes and dreams. [12]

In this article, the aim is to highlight two divergent conceptions regarding the evangelization of the original peoples of Spanish America. In this sense, a comparison is established between the thoughts of the spanish franciscan friar Motolinía with the thoughts of the spanish dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas on the topic. The source is the *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España* (conceived from 1536 to 1541) and the Carta ao Imperador Carlos V (1555) by Motolinía as also the *Único modo de atraer a todos los pueblos a la verdadera religion* by Las Casas (written between 1523 and 1437). As a theoretical-methodological reference, we use the notions of the russian philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin. According to this author, “where there is no text there is no object of research and thought”. Every text has an author and this author has an intention. There is an interrelationship between the text and the author's context. [9]. For the Russian philosopher, “The work is a link in the chain of discursive communication; (...) is linked to other works - statements”. [9]

## 2. The Evangelizing Mission of the Franciscans in Spanish America

At the beginning of the 12th century, the franciscan movement was born in a context of reform of the Catholic Church in which the catholic friar Saint Francis of Assisi sought to establish a new spirituality, based on the vow of poverty, itinerant life and simple preaching. The franciscans, “the lesser brothers”, were the first to arrive in the Americas. In the New World, the order is established in the Province of Santa Cruz das Indias with headquarters in Santo Domingo. The first franciscans who arrived in Santo Domingo and Mexico had a conception of evangelization whose roots were in the Middle Ages, precisely in the 11th century, in the ideas of abbot Joaquín de Fiore. In the understanding of this calabrian abbot, time was divided into different ages of the world, five of which corresponded to the Old Testament, the sixth to the New Testament and the seventh to the beginning of the next millennium in which the end of the world would occur. This prophecy, which influenced several reformist movements within the Catholic Church, mainly in the 15th

century, idealized that, with the beginning of the next millennium, the Church would renew itself, renouncing ecclesiastical structures, in which the poor, the last of all, would build a new spiritual church with religious people to bring salvation in the face of the end of the world. This prophecy also indicated that religious orders would be formed upon the arrival of the Antichrist. In the face of the new continent and its original populations, the ideal of apostolic poverty was revalued as well as the interpretations of the end of the world; the possibility of building a new church before the advent of the new millennium and the fight against the antichrist. In the conception of the observant franciscans, the evangelizing mission in the New World meant the fulfillment of Joaquín de Fiore's prophecy, the new age of the end of the world, in which they would find a fruitful space for the renewal and salvation of Christianity. [8]

At the request of Queen Isabella of Castile, the Catholic, Cardinal Cisneros, belonging to the Franciscan Order, more precisely to the observant branch, will exert a strong influence on the reform of the secular clergy, having an important role before the kings of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, in the preparation of the first expeditions of the Franciscan order in America. The first expedition with twelve religious sent to Venezuela in 1515 failed, due to problems with the conquerors and the revolt of indigenous groups originating in the region. [8]

The second expedition organized by Cisneros to America arrived in 1524. The arrival of the twelve franciscan friars, in a number equal to that of Jesus' apostles, was thought by members of the order as an important milestone for their activity, as well as a model for the efforts of conversion of native peoples. [14] The Twelve landed on the island of San Juan de Ulúa, in the city of Veracruz, off the coast of Mexico, in may, arriving in Mexico City, capital of New Spain, almost five weeks later, on june 18, after having traveled 400 kilometers. As narrated by friar Gerónimo de Mendieta, in his Indian Ecclesiastical History, completed in 1596, the friars traveled this entire route barefoot, with little food and wearing simple clothes, being very well received by the natives. Due to their simple posture, the natives understood that they would be different from other christians and spanish soldiers. [5] The spanish chronicler and conqueror Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who participated in the ceremony, reports in his work completed in 1568, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, that, in june 1524, Hernán Cortés received the 'Twelve' in the City of Mexico, “with great apparatus and difference”. The spanish conqueror went to meet the franciscan friars accompanied by soldiers and Guatemuz, the lord of Mexico, with his most important chiefs. Cortés got off his horse and went to meet the friars, kissing their habits, as they did not consent to having their hands kissed; this gesture was imitated by everyone who accompanied the conqueror. [4]

Among the twelve franciscans who disembarked in the

city of Vera Cruz in 1524 was friar Toribio de Benavente, who would soon rename himself Motolin á. He would serve in the apostolic mission in New Spain for four decades. [18] It is said that, on the long journey from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, when they were passing through Tlaxcala, friar Toribio heard the indians say “motolinia”; upon learning that this term meant “poor” in the náhuatl language, he promptly adopted it as his name. [15] According to Hernando and Guerra, this franciscan is “considered as the most outstanding personality of those called the Twelve Apostles of Mexico”. [11]

Motolin á was appointed guardian of the monastery in the city of Tlaxcala in 1536, remaining in the position until 1542. During these seven years as guardian of the monastery, he dedicated himself to evangelization and preaching as well as compiling information for his work. [16]

In the first five years, the franciscans gained the support of important indigenous leaders who led the indigenous population to mass baptism. Several regions and indigenous leaders joined the evangelization of the franciscan friars: Mexico City, Puebla, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guadalajara, Nueva Galicia and Texcoco. In the first six years of preaching and through the abbreviated ritual, mass baptisms reached one million believers; adding another five million in the following nine years. The policy of the franciscans consisted of first baptizing everyone they encountered and then dedicating themselves to evangelizing them. Theologians and historians opposed to the franciscans insinuated that mass baptisms were forced. [8] Among the theologians who criticized the conception and practice of baptism of the franciscan friars in relation to the amerindians, the dominican Las Casas stood out, who became a great opponent of Motolin á.

### 3. Divergence Between Motolinia and Las Casas

During the years he lived in Tlaxcala, Motolin á created *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*. This book was written from 1536 to 1541, mainly in the first three years. One of the events that influenced the conception of the text was the dispatch of the *Altitud Divini Consilii* on June 1, 1537 by Pope Paul III. This leaflet expressed the decision of the Pope regarding a pastoral dispute between dominicans and franciscans, giving a small advantage to the dominicans. [13] Second Paulo Suess, “the franciscans opted for mass baptism, with little ritual formality and little preparation in catechesis. On the other hand, the dominicans were supporters of a deeper baptismal preparation. The leaflet favors the practice of dominicans”. [17] The leaflet's proposals had repercussions throughout Europe and America.

Influenced by the dominicans' denunciation of the mistreatment suffered by the indians, the day following the issuance of the bull *Altitud Divini Consilii*, another bull is

issued by Paulo III. Thus, on June 2, 1537, the bull *Sublimis Deus* was issued by the Pope. In this bull, the pope corroborates the gentle method of evangelization propagated by Las Casas. Given the repercussion of these leaflets throughout Europe and America, Motolin á feels that the method of evangelization adopted by him and other franciscans is threatened. So run to complete his book in 1541, undertaking a strong defense of the method of evangelization of the franciscans.

Motolin á helps the friars recently arrived in Mexico and participates in the disputes that existed since the beginning of the conquest between the different religious orders, especially in the disputes arising from the criticisms of the augustinians and dominicans regarding baptisms in *pasta*. Generally, Motolin á is shown by chroniclers as one of the most active baptists. [7] Friar Juan de Torquemada, for example, in his *Monarquía Indiana*, praises Motolinía for having been “very friendly with evangelical poverty, zealous for the honor of God, very observant of his rule and fervent in the conversion of the natural, of whom he baptized, according to what he had written, more than four hundred thousand, apart from those that could be forgotten”. [6]

In the same spiritual sphere of evangelization in Spanish America, Motolin á was a great opponent, almost enemy of Las Casas. During this period, in February 1539, there was the first meeting of the two religious. In his Letter to the Emperor, dated January 2, 1555, Motolin á recounts his first meeting with Las Casas. This was surrounded of indians who carried the books and papers on which he wrote the information obtained in the books. Motolin á was scandalized by the bookish excesses and the large procession of indians around Las Casas. Furthermore, Motolin á introduced an indian to Las Casas so that the baptized and he refused to do so, as he was not sure that the indian was well prepared for such. [2]

At this meeting, Motolin á confronted Las Casas for refusing to baptize an indian. As Motolin á reports in this letter, Las Casas, a simple friar, landed in the city of Tlaxcala bringing with him 27 or 37 indians. An adult indian, who had requested baptism several times he came to be baptized; so, he and the other friars begged Las Casas a lot to baptize him because he came from far away and was catechized, well prepared to receive baptism. However, Las Casas refused and he questioned him: how could a friar who said having so much love and zeal for the indians, he refused to baptize an indian; It would be nice if you paid for it work of the indians he brought behind him, loaded and tired. [2] Motolin á is referring to the books and papers with notes from Las Casas taken by the indians who accompanied him.

As previously noted, in the bull *Altitud Divini Consilii*, dated June 1, 1537, Pope Paul III prohibited the practice of mass baptisms practiced by the franciscans. At the Ecclesiastical Synod celebrated in April 1539, the Mexican bishops determined the application of such a leaflet in Mexico. In the second part of his History, particularly in the fourth chapter, Motolin á talks about the divergent positions regarding the

administration of baptism existing in the Church in Mexico and expresses opposition to the order of the bishops to apply it. [7] In 1541, Motolin á concluded *Historia*. The following year, the his term as guardian of Tlaxcala ends.

The conquest of the New World consisted of a victory for the Catholic Church. Dozens of thousands of indians were baptized by the friars. If we consider Motolin á's report, in his *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, from the year 1521, when Mexico was conquered by Cortés, until 1536, the year in which he began to write his text, they were baptized approximately five million souls. [1]

In Bellini's conception, there are two explanations for the mass conversion of indigenous people: they were influenced by the grandiose performances, like the one described by the chronicler Bernal Díaz de Castilho, which was starred by Cortés, and followed by all those who they accompanied the conqueror, when he kissed the habits of the religious; as well as, in view of the destruction of their world, the indigenous people certainly perceived the urgency of putting themselves in security, and embraced the new religion to save their lives. [10]

Enthusiastic about their millenarian dream, the franciscan friars considered themselves to be possible to establish the new 'Kingdom of God' in America. The fight was against the devil who, in conception of the friars, prepared traps for the indians. [10] Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, in his *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*, said that the devil had hidden in Mexico to carry out his wiles. Friar González de Oviedo, in *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, interpreted the discovery and conquest of New World as God's victory against the Devil. Motolin á's mind was also dominated by the presence of the devil. In the *Carta al Emperador Carlos V*, in which he criticizes Las Casas, Motolin á requests that the Kingdom of God be established. In the eyes of the franciscan friar, Cortés was the man chosen by God for the great evangelizing mission. [10]

Las Casas's opinion of Cortés is very different from Motolin á's. Las Casas highlights Cortés' cruelty in his conquest of Mexico, comparing him to Nero in the fire from Rome. [10] It is important to remember that the Las Casas family maintained friendship ties with Colombo's family. Las Casas and Colombo were close friends. Thus, he never criticizes this conqueror.

In his fifth *Carta de Relación* to Emperor Charles V, Cortés defends his conduct honored in the conquest of Mexico. He states that, in his venture of conquest, he not only extended imperial power but also opened up immense scope for religion catholic, so much so that a new church would soon rise in these lands, where God would be honored and served more than in other parts of the world. [10]

There was a progressive repudiation of the franciscan priests towards the conquerors, except Cortés. Before the spanish conqueror stood the indian, subjugated, deprived of all. The franciscans understood that it was necessary to defend them from the spanish conquerors and so they fought a hard

battle. Among them, Motolin á stood out. [10]

In the religious sphere, the friars instilled in the indians so much fear of the devil that they trembled when they heard what they were told. In his *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, Motolin á reports that, after hearing the words of the friars, many indians went to them, tormented, crying and sighing, in search of baptism and the Kingdom of God. (Motolin á, 2014). In Motolin á's text there is no indication that he suspected that the indigenous people were going in search of God, through baptism, moved by another reason, such as conservation of your life. [10]

In his *Historia*, Motolin á makes it clear that he considered the indian to be a childish, weak creature. But, in his own way, the friar was a defender tireless struggle of the indigenous people against their spanish explorers and developed a against the violence of explorers towards indigenous people. [10]

Motolin á appears horrified at the destruction of the indians. Denounce cruelty the injustices, exploitation and mistreatment committed by conquerors and colonizers spanish in relation to the natives of New Spain. Despite conceiving the indian as a victim, not placing him on the same level as the European, Motolin á's accusations show his side human, his sincere participation in the history of the men of Spanish America. [10]

In *Historia* and in the countless letters he wrote, the battle of Motolin á is evident so that better treatment could be given to the indians. [10] He undertook intense activity in defense of the indigenous people of New Spain. He was a most worthy expression of the Franciscan Order. Strangely, this franciscan friar had great aversion to the dominican Bartolomeu de Las Casas, who, after his conversion to the cause indigenous man, in 1514, dedicated his entire life to the same cause. [10]

The *Unico modo* of Las Casas had already been disseminated in Mexico, where "there was a serene atmosphere and bold evangelization". [12] There is some similarity in the projects of the franciscans and dominicans, particularly the dominican project put into practice by Las Casas and his companions in Vera Paz. Franciscan Friar Andrés de Olmos, a friend of Las Casas, adopted the same means indicated in the *Unico modo*, he had the same love for the indigenous people, he trusted in their conversion without the recourse the weapons. [12] The franciscan Motolin á was the opposite of Las Casas.

The fact is that Las Casas defended a peaceful, gentle and caring method of evangelization. Motolin á defended and applied a method of evangelization contrary to that defended by Las Casas. Motolin á was concerned with quantity, he sought rapid evangelization of indians, did not believe it was necessary to do extensive work to prepare the indians, nor worried about whether they were well informed about the christian religion and were accepting it freely. In his effort to hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God, Motolin á hurried in baptizing multitudes. He was in favor of military intervention to dominate the indians, imposing respect on them, which would facilitate the missionaries' actions. [12]



Las Casas conceived that the evangelizing mission was the only justification for the presence of the Spanish in America. He defended evangelization in a gentle, peaceful way [3], and acted as a missionary among the natives, however, the imposition of mass baptism was condemned by him. Motolin á was already in favor of the use of constraint, of force, to spread the word. Gospel, and boasted of having baptized more than four hundred indians at once. [10]

## 4. Conclusion

In Motolin á's understanding, the indian was a naive being who, regardless of his will, he had to convert. In his Carta a Carlos V (1555), Motolin á talks about the three hundred thousand baptisms carried out by him, strongly criticizes the performance of Las Casas respect for the evangelization of the natives and in all honesty says what is the best method of evangelization: "V. M. should (...) hasten the preaching of the Holy Gospel in all these lands, and those who do not want to voluntarily hear the Holy Gospel (...), either by force; because here comes the proverb: good is better through force than evil through will". [2]

In the work of evangelization, Las Casas trusted in the intellectual capacity of the indigenous people, believed that before baptism it was necessary to give the indians a training careful and patient and refused the use of force for the conversion activity [3]; now Motolin á defended the opposite.

Motolin á denounced the colonists for exploiting the indians, but he saw them as inferior to Europeans. Las Casas, on the other hand, saw them as equals; charged and demanded that the colonists were fair and respected the rights of indigenous people.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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