

The Coming of Europe
by Professor Maria A. Brown

The peopling of the western hemisphere resulted from two migrations. In migratory waves over a period of thousands of years, the first migration took place some 30 to 25 thousand years ago. It is believed that the people in those migratory waves were of Asiatic origins. The second migration to the New World began in the late 15th and early 16th centuries and has continued until the present day. However, our concentration is on the continuation of the second migration into the mid 19th century. As we examine this migration and the evolution of the Americas, with particular emphasis on North America, we realize that the expansion of Europe is regarded as one of the most critical and pivotal moments in the history of the modern world.

By setting out in ships to explore distant shores, conquer strange people and plant "Christian" colonies-- both Catholic and Protestant--on other continents, Europeans decisively changed

the world between 1400 and 1650. These early voyages began a process of conquest and settlement that ultimately shaped the future of North and South America and—through the importation of new foodstuffs, raw materials, enormous mineral wealth, and unexpected knowledge of exotic lands, people, animals and plants—profoundly altered European life. The Old World rivalries took on new significance when played a much larger and more global stage. The value of such prizes as the wealth of Africa, the East Indies and the newly discovered Americas shocked the imagination thereby quickly become the European frontier, inspired new heights of heroism, and new depths of greed.

Is this an adequate justification explaining both the causes and consequences of Europe's sensational expansion in the New World? Why did expansion succeed in some places and not others? What impact did European expansion, i.e., imperialism have on both the conquerors and their victims around the world, particularly in the Americas?

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a soldier under Hernan Cortez during the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the author of *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* written some 40 to 50 years after the conquest, describes the impact of Europe on the New World. In this alleged eyewitness account del Castillo writes:

It is proper that I should relate the good effects of our exertion for the service of God and His Majesty, by our illustrious conquest. . . In the first place, we purged the land of its wickedness and evil customs, as for instance that of human sacrifice. By the accounts taken by certain;. . . Franciscan fathers. . . it appears, that in the city of Mexico and some adjacent towns. . . they sacrificed every year above two thousand five hundred beings, young and old.. . They were addicted to abominable practices, especially on the coast. . . where boys wore female attire. They eat human flesh, as we do beef . . . and in every town they kept and fatten . . . these who were destined for that purpose. . . They had as many wives as they pleased, and all these and other abominations, it was the will of our Lord Jesus Chris that we should be the instruments to sweep from the substituting . . . a good policy and holy doctrine. . . Since the destruction of idolatry. . . They have been baptized in this country, all the natives, whose souls formerly were sunk and lost in the infernal pit . . .

According to del Castillo,

. . . natives of these countries have also learned the trades most used amongst us in Castile and have their

shops, manufactories and journeymen...The gold and silver smiths excelled, other became weavers of silk.

He goes on,

Tillers of land they were before our arrival; and now they rear stock. . .They now plow, sow wheat . . . and make bread. . . . They have planted their lands with the fruit trees of old Spain.

Other advantages and profits are also derived from our illustrious services. By them our mother country has obtained gold, silver, precious stones, grain wool,. . . hides. . . to the benefit of his majesty's revenue. . . .

. . .There never existed in the world men who by bold achievement had gained more for their Lord and King, than we the brave conquerors; amongst the valiant of whom I was considered as one. . . .

As the focus of European encounters shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and the weight of Asia and the Americas were thrown on the European scale, its balance of power was altered----the World had entered a new age. The 15th century was a period of awakening, the beginning of the modern period--the rebirth of man--the changing of the religious and intellectual foundation of the Old World. The old principles of feudalism---service and exchange, based on land and kind began

to give way to those of money and wages, labor and capital. This movement, in part, was accelerated by the wealth coming from overseas— and in effect laid the foundation of a new economy—Capitalism.

What was does all this mean for European expansion?

Changes in European societies over the previous centuries had initiated political consolidation, religious strife and commercial development. These forces in turn fostered overseas exploration and the seizure of overseas territory—trade and conquest.

What impact does religion have on this expansion?

Religion, to a lesser degree, drove people overseas; however, it is one of the forces that helps them once they are there. Religious convictions nourish boldness in battle, endurance through ordeals, aggression after victory—When the Europeans began their conquest, they were more concerned about mammon than about Lost Souls.

Religion supplied the pretext—justification for the course of action taken by the Europeans against the people of the New

World, and gold, the motive—technological progress accomplished by Atlantic European during the 14th and 15th centuries provided the means. Thus, the Age of Exploration-- European countries competing against each other take full advantage of their laid claim to the New World.

Religion also gave justification to the Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch, and English notion of Divine right (God-given right) and the theory of empire. The Portuguese emphasized their right as discoverers not so much of the land as of the sea routes between Europe and the newly discovered Atlantic coast. Portuguese captains were required to register navigational details of their discoveries as well as mark them with a stone cross. The Spanish monarch claimed to rule the Americas by a God-given right of conquest—so long as the ceremony of “Requirement” demanding peaceful submission had been secured. (Supposedly, the Aztec and Inca rulers’ refusal to submit to the Spaniards peacefully and having obstructed the Spaniards’ free movement justified their conquest). The French believed that the Spanish

“Requirement” and conquest were a mockery of Christian behavior and violated the God-given natural rights of the indigenous peoples in the New World. Therefore, the French, upon their arrival, appeared to be the friends and allies of the natives and supposedly established colonies only with consent of the colonized. The Dutch asserted their right not simply as navigators but principally as traders, in contrast to the Iberian powers. They believed that it was their God-given right to sail the high seas in pursuit of trade, and the better life that commerce brought with it. The Dutch were never viewed as an imperial power in any meaningful sense until the 19th century, nor did they ever regard themselves as such. Finally, the English stressed the belief that their colonists , as cultivators or ‘planters’, were making better use of the land than the native hunter-gathers or colonial rivals, and thus enjoyed Divine sanction.

As we examine the most important features European imperial ideology we find, that in practice the competing powers

constantly sought to imitate one another's successes and learn from their mistakes. But their competitive success depended upon the resources and institutions each could dispose of. While the Spanish approach, at one extreme, was highly dependent on state initiative control, the English, at the same time critically depended competence of the colonists, themselves.

The European notion of Divine right reinforced the ideas that they were God-chosen people, superior to all others; in particular to all non-Europeans. In a sense, the Americas were the Promised Land—and if God had not intended for them to control the New World it would have never been revealed to them.