

# 1492 And All That

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*David Brading's The First America and some questions for theologians in Latin America.*

In 1982 I drove with friends from the city of Puebla to Mexico City by the rather hazardous route between the volcanoes Ixtaccihuatl and Popocatepetl. That is the route which Cortés and his followers travelled in 1519. From the top, they caught Europe's first glimpse of the Aztec capital, glistening below. Bernal Diaz, in his eyewitness chronicle, describes their amazement at its size and beauty. Now you cannot see the city, but only the pulsating orange-brown glow of its pollution. What was more interesting to me was that in order to find the right track to the pass, we had stopped in a village to ask the way, and had been guided by indians speaking the Spanish of Cervantes, rich in forms and courtesies quite unused in modern Spanish.

In 1990 I spent a weekend in Sucre, the historical capital of Bolivia, a beautiful university city in the Andes. I was attending a national charismatic conference, which had borrowed a military academy during the summer holiday. In the evening there was a big Mass in the Cathedral, presided over by the newly appointed Bishop, a Spaniard. The next morning the Feast of the Epiphany, I stumbled out of bed to celebrate Mass at six with the (enclosed) Carmelite sisters in their 17th century Carmel. To my amazement, the church was full, mostly of indians, in multi-coloured costume; the sisters in their choir made sprightly song with the help of a number of Spanish and Andean instruments, and every time they did so, a small indian girl, quite unprompted, danced with delight in front of the image of Our Lady.

These are dense experiences, and informing them, a huge wealth of pathos and delight, grind, cruelty and comedy. It is in the light of these that I would set a discussion of 1492 and its quincenary. For some, the occasion should be one of celebration of a discovery; for others, it should be the mourning of a rapacious conquest. The one attitude that seems entirely perverse is that it is of no real interest, since anyhow the Vikings (or whoever be your pet first Atlantic crosser), got there long before. The opening of relations between Europe, the Americas, and Asia, which began in 1492 was and is momentous, whatever its moral valency, in a way for which it is difficult even now to find comparisons outside the theological—the greatest event since the Incarnation was how it was seen by some in the sixteenth century. Certainly, landing on the moon has had no such effect, and even the discovery of penicillin has not had such universal consequences.

For a Catholic, and indeed, an English Catholic, looking 1492 in the face

requires unravelling a number of confused threads of information, hostile propaganda, loyalties, and self-deception with a view to asking "where is God in all this?", "how am I implicated?", "to what sort of church and world do I belong?". This is no merely historical exercise. None of us comes neutral to any information about Latin America. We adopt half-formulated attitudes which make sense because of other half-formulated attitudes we already have. So, we read reports about Liberation Theology with a mixture of attitudes of the sort "Spain = bullfights = cruelty = Inquisition = Catholicism = revolutions in unstable and operatic republics", and we are fed messages of the sort "Exploitation = U.S. Government = Conservative clerics = Roman centralism = persecuted liberation theologians". The result is a potent emotive brew which shades, with degrees of intensity, varying according to the depth of your interest, how you perceive your faith, your relationship to the dominant culture, your history, even if you have never left the shores of Albion.

For instance, over the last decade, readers of a variety of national newspapers and journals have been treated to accounts of the conflict over Liberation Theology and, more recently, to interpretations of the conflict over various nominations to the episcopate. These appointments have been seen, amongst other things, as part of a Vatican policy to undermine the Liberation 'wing' of the Church. To what extent, it could be asked, are readers of such literature aware of being fed a vision of the problems in question in order to reinforce their own ideas of what such problems might be? Are they being given a vision of what it takes to be a "goody" or a "baddy" deriving from what might be called the transcendental liberalism of educated journalists in matters religious. How many readers are aware that this sort of reporting is itself part of a history of the formation of European attitudes to the Americas which is not neutral, but is involved in a cross-fertilization of campaigns, for or against European values, praising or denigrating the local oligarchy, exalting or decrying liberal economics, defending or ridiculing the Church, praising or slandering the Spaniards, the Portuguese, or whoever? These campaigns; have been going on for five hundred years.

### **The First America.**

It is in the context of this cross-fertilisation of campaigns that informs, and pre-forms, how we begin to look at Latin America that I would like to recommend, for any interested party, a new book by David Brading, Lecturer in Latin American History at Cambridge University. Beautifully produced, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State 1492-1867*<sup>1</sup>, is certain to be the standard text on the subject for many years. The result of decades of reading and research into the chronicles, pamphlets, novels and archives, it begins to reveal the story of how those Spaniards who settled in the Americas, and the generations of their descendants, began to acquire an identity, a culture, and a set of

attitudes relating their pre-hispanic past, their current ties with Spain, and other people's attitudes towards them.

Dr. Brading's central theme is the creole quest for an American identity. The creoles,<sup>2</sup> being American-born Europeans with gradually increasing fusions of blood, were not of course the only inhabitants of the Americas. Dr. Brading's account is set against a perpetual backdrop of the huge indian populations of America, the growing black population, as the slave trade developed, and of course, the European presence; the Europeans who came and went, and, who, for most of the period under study were the governors, the bishops, the writers. It is in the fabric of this tapestry that the creole identity, which, with substantial modification is the identity of the governing class in modern Latin America, was forged.

Dr Brading's tale starts with the European discovery: the curious mixture of technical developments that made certain sorts of navigation possible; the culmination of the "reconquest" of Spain from its last remaining Moorish rulers, which allowed the military and crusading tradition which that had inspired to spill across the Atlantic; the idiosyncratic Genoese mariner who remained convinced to his dying day that he had discovered the shores of Asia; the rôle of the Franciscans in encouraging what they took to be fulfilments of Joachim of Fiore's millenarian prophecies. Immediately, after the discovery European opinion was fed with tales of wondrous savages, with astonishing artefacts, cast in pre-lapsarian terms familiar from Ovid. Yet, at the same time, it was recognised that they were much given to killing, and even eating, each other. There were accounts of tribal savages, and of stupefying civilisations: the Aztec, the Inca and the Maya, for thinkers to choose their image of the Americas. Simultaneously, tales of the extraordinary boldness and heroism of the first Spaniards in the New World became crossed with accounts of gratuitous massacres, and undisciplined rapaciousness. All this confusing evidence was to enter the European mind, and has been reedited ever since, to prove almost anything.

After the conquest of Mexico, in 1521, the Spaniards themselves started to talk about their ventures, having previously left it to Italian writers. Cortés' letters to the King, in which he justified his conquest of Mexico on the acceptance by Moctezuma of Charles V' sovereignty, were published. Moctezuma had initially recognised Cortés as the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy. Cortés also emphasised the importance of preaching the Gospel to the natives, thus managing to set up a new colony, separate from the Antilles, in New Spain, in which the Aztec treasure and lands were distributed to the newcomers. In the 1540's however, news came of the far from glorious conquest of Peru, with the calculated murder of Atahualpa, the huge plunder of the conquerors, and the descent into interminable civil wars between Pizarro, Almagro and their successors. Spanish chroniclers, such as Oviedo and Gómara began to publish accounts, reflecting a Spanish Imperial perspective on events, that differed from the accounts of combatants. Nowhere but in Chile, where Ercilla published his account of the wars from the Araucanian viewpoint, did Spaniards write of the natives

sympathetically. If ever there was a case of an evil conscience, incapable of the perception of fraternity, denigrating its victims so as to justify its violence, it is to be found here.

In the light of this, the figure of Bartolomé de las Casas O.P., to whom Brading dedicates a full chapter, and much of a second, comes to be seen in a powerful light. One of the few admirable characters in a highly ambiguous story, he understood, as a converted slave-owner, the nature of the violence that was being done, and, in his remarkable life, dedicated himself to defending the indians, revealing what was being effected and who was responsible. He counted on the support of the Crown, whom he endlessly persuaded, arguing against those who supported the interests of the conquerors and vilified the indians. He succeeded, in the *Historia de las Indias* in “installing his campaign on behalf of the indians at the very centre of all future accounts of the foundation of the Spanish Empire in the New World” (p 76). Yet, De las Casas’ views were highly contested by men like Sepúlveda, with whom he argued in the 1540’s. It was the view that despised the indians and exalted the interests of the conquerors that came to prevail. De las Casas views were quickly used by Dutch and English propagandists to create the Black Legend—a propaganda war whose effects are still with us. A tale of Spanish cruelty and horror that was told not for the purpose of freeing the indians, but to legitimise the eventually successful attempts to wrest European hegemony from Spain. In subsequent generations De las Casas himself was seen as a traitor to Spain, more because of the use that had been made of his revelations than for what he had in fact said. However, where in the annals of any imperialism is there a parallel to the devastating critique of what was happening while it was happening? Even that has been used in the propaganda war as evidence of the seriousness and virtue of the Spanish Crown’s approach to the Indies. De las Casas, in his evangelical revelation of the truth that flows from the victim, is the (as yet) uncanonized Doctor of the Americas. He was faithful to Augustine’s City of God and avoiding any sort of triumphalism, either Spanish, or Christian, managing to leave a permanent question mark over the “entire legitimacy of the Spanish Empire” (p 78).

Brading is particularly good in his exploration of the Augustinian emphases in the mendicant orders in Spain. De las Casas was indebted to Augustine, modified slightly by Aquinas and Aristotle. The Franciscans, however, began with great optimism on their “spiritual conquest” of Mexico, many of whose effects are to be perceived in modern Mexican life. A huge, mediaeval mission conducted by recently reformed Spanish Franciscans produced a remarkable Church. Only later did it become apparent how much of the previous religious life survived under cover of this Church. Motolinia was the architect and eulogist of this mission, telling the story of the rescue from the Egypt of human sacrifice and devil worship of the indians to form a new Israel. Thus was born a tradition, borrowing from Augustine’s critique of the Roman Empire, of the demonic past of the Aztecs, untempered by De las Casas’ delight in the anthropology of the native cultures. This was to

have echoes way into the modern era. The early euphoria changed to gloom, as witnessed by Mendieta, whose chronicles became increasingly akin to De las Casas' denunciations. We learn of the educational work of Sahagún, and the production of the great Nahuatl codices. We learn of the mass baptisms, and the alliance formed with the Indian élite, so as to preserve the memory of the culture that was disappearing. All these are fascinating insights into the ways in which many of the sixteenth-century Europeans were able to enter into the world of the other. It is this sense of the (mysterious) "other" that has been part of the draw of the Americas ever since.

Continuing his movement back and forth from Mexico to Peru, we hear of de Toledo, the viceroy who "rationalised" Peru as a colony. The gauleiter servant of dynastic absolutism, de Toledo transformed the basis of Peruvian society, turning it into the Spanish Crown's most profitable possession. He did this by terror, and by the enforced mobilisation of the Andean peasantry into the great annual migration of the *mita*, which kept both the mercury mine at Huancavelica, and the silver navel of the world at Potosí pouring out to the benefit of the Spanish crown and its creditors. Toledo was not thanked by Philip II, who reproved him for his cruelty, and died within a short time of his return to Spain. However, he had rationalised Inca forms of government into something much more efficient and much harsher. This structure was to last as long as the colony. We hear another voice from below in the story of Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Inca descendent, and his indictment of the colonial authorities. He rejected neither Spanish rule, nor Christianity, but appealed to the King against his servants. His chronicle, written in 1614, was faithful to the doctrine of De Las Casas and manifests a deep understanding of Christ's love for the poor and humble. For him, as for the great Dominican, Christian grace did not destroy, but fulfilled the Andean society, which, he implied, should thus be respected much more than it was.

Enter the Jesuits, provoking the envy of the mendicants, and the suspicion of the hierarchy. We meet Sandoval, who worked in Cartagena (now in Colombia) catechising the arriving black slaves; we learn of the setting up of the Paraguay reductions, of the work among the indians of northern Mexico. The Jesuit presence was extraordinary both in the rapid acquisition of a huge amount of real estate, and in the heroic generosity and abnegation of the Company in moving further away from settled lands, to conduct missions in places no other missionary penetrated. That they also specialised in educating the creole élite gave them a special place in the formation of a creole identity. The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 was to be bitterly contested by the creoles in the colonies, and their return guaranteed soon after Independence from Spain. It is perhaps only in the Arrupe generalship that the relationship between the Jesuits and the élite of Latin America has been similarly threatened since.

It was the Jesuit Acosta who wrote one of the key accounts of the Americas, differing from De las Casas in an eclectic reading of Augustine, which permitted him both to insist on the diabolic origin of pre-hispanic

Indian society, and yet to ignore Augustine's suspicion of worldly power, in his celebration of the providential nature of Spanish rule. Acosta was, nevertheless, a strikingly modern figure, who dismissed mythological accounts of the arrival of the indians from Atlantis, from Solomon, from the Lost tribes of Israel. He thought they probably came from Asia via Alaska. A curious figure spanning mediaeval, renaissance, and Constantinian ideas, views such as his came to be influential in the growth of creole understanding of how they related both to Europe and the Indies. At the same time Herrera published, from the Imperial perspective, a skilful history of the Spanish in America, exculpating the massacres, and even using the fact of De Las Casas' being heard in Spain to praise him as part of the glories of the Imperial tradition. All this while anti-Spanish propaganda was kept alive by successive editions of the Dominican's works in translation.

The Imperial propagandists kept up their work throughout the 17th century, Solórzano borrowing from Acosta and Herrera. However, it was Solórzano's very need to demonstrate that the Spanish American kingdoms were fully-fledged realms that led to his being seen as a forerunner of the creole independence movement, and as "advocate of the political rights of the American Spaniards" (p 227). One of Brading's best chapters is that in which he describes the vicissitudes of the career of Juan de Palafox, Bishop of Puebla. The servant of the Catholic Monarchy, he was not backed up from Spain in his attempt to break up the self-serving arrangements of the colonial establishment. In his alienation of them, and in the Crown's failure to stand by him, there was, as early as the 1640's, evidence of the fatal weakness of the Imperial system in its inability to govern its colonies from a distance.

One of Brading's heroes is the Inca Humanist, Garcilaso de la Vega, who, far ahead of his time, living in exile in Spain, was to exalt the Inca past. In the first years of the seventeenth century he laid a basis for the positive appreciation of his own country that was to be used as a key text in the Inca uprising of the 1780's. He had no real contemporary equivalent in New Spain until the 18th century Jesuit, Clavijero. Ixtlilxóchitl had not the same breadth of perspective or talent, and the Franciscan Torquemada, whose work was contemporary to Garcilaso's insisted still on the demonic origin of Aztec culture, thus making it unpalatable to creole patriots. Garcilaso had already left that world behind.

We meet creole patriots, the colonial society in Lima and Potosí, extraordinary fervour, whose finest flowers were St Rose of Lima, St Martin de Porres, St John Macias (all of them Dominicans.). We move to Mexico to watch the growing debate about the appearance of Mary at Tepeyac, and the growth of her cult as The Virgin of Guadalupe. The extraordinary way in which this figure has become the focus of national identity, in a way that generations of liberals, masons, and now, protestants, have been unable to dislodge, is revealed. Strangely, Brading seems unaware that the famous words "non fecit taliter omni nationi" frequently applied to the Guadalupe phenomenon, is a simple quotation from Psalm 147. We taste the life of the creole élite, amidst the overwhelming ecclesiastical world of Mexico City.

Just as creole culture was being strongly exalted, the European Enlightenment arrived, ending the Baroque cycle of creole patriotism, and challenging the colonies to participate in a wider world.

This was the period of scientific expeditions, Condamine and, much later, Humboldt (of whom Brading gives as fascinating a condensed account as could be desired). It was the beginnings of a new cycle of European attacks on things Hispanic, and particularly the supposed backwardness of the inhabitants of the Americas. The Enlightenment was not content merely to display its arrogance intellectually, but its new form of government, that of the ministers of the Bourbon Kings of Spain, greatly hastened the demise of the Empire by its obvious prejudice against the creoles. In the last years of the eighteenth century, it was even rarer to find creoles in high office than during the Habsburg period. It was new and complex systems of taxation that fuelled the uprisings of these years. It was by its economic dismantling of the local church and religious orders that the Spanish crown cut away the branch on which its legitimacy was perched. All over the Americas creole priests were in the forefront of the struggle for independence. Particularly notable among them is the brilliant, but eccentric Mexican Dominican, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, subject of an earlier work<sup>3</sup> by Brading, and here presented in a magnificent cameo.

We are shown the curious mixture of circumstances which fired, and still do fire, reforming groups in Latin America. It was the Royalist army which freed New Spain from Spanish rule (against the liberal reformers in Spain), while it was Creole patriot republicans who freed South America on the battle field. The rhetoric of liberation is by no means a simple monopoly of the "left"! The career of Bolivar, surely a figure who deserves to be better known in the Anglo-Saxon world, is succinctly depicted. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Saxon historians like Prescott had begun to write their histories of the Spanish Empire, beginning a particular form of the liberal and protestant critique of Latin America that is very much alive and kicking today in what many people suppose to be "wrong" with that part of the world, including many who come from, and live there. It is also obviously present in the attitude of successive U.S. administrations to the problems of the hemisphere. It was not until the 1860's that there was consolidated in Mexico, a centrally organised strong state, and this was achieved by the liberals. It meant, and this is still in evidence today, the rule of radical liberals, quite divorced from sympathy with the nationalistic, and conservative, Catholicism of the overwhelming majority of their population. Here, with the execution of Maximilian in 1867, Brading draws his story to a close.

The First America offers over 600 pages of text. It is a mine of description, analysis, well-constructed biographies, illustrated careers. Elegantly written, nothing but its length and price should deter the amateur, and it has much breadth to offer even the specialist. A veritable triumph of the English tradition of studying the Americas. It is also, as I hope to show, of considerable importance for some understanding of the arguments

surrounding Liberation Theology, and, written by a distinguished English Catholic layman, has much to offer anyone interested in that field.

### Some questions for theologians . . .

Some knowledge of history changes perspectives on familiar problems. For instance, one of the great vindications of the Liberation Theologians is that they are producing their own, authentically Latin American theology. Easily ridiculed by some, on the grounds of the wealth of European doctorates possessed by these thinkers, and the dominance of Europeans such as Moltmann, Hegel, Rahner, Althusser, and even, just occasionally, Marx, in their thought, this claim might be looked at afresh. It is interesting that most of the principle Liberation Theologians are of a recent generation of immigrants to America. The "creole complex" is particularly acute in them. When they denounce "European thought", and seek to go autochthonous, how much is this to do with their own search for identity along lines familiar to readers of Brading? It is a quest made all the more acute by their awareness of what separates them from belonging to a continent in which their own European backgrounds place them in an élite. Boff... Dussel... Assmann... There is something authentically Latin American in this, but is it really new?

Is it "Europe" as such that is being denounced (much as it may deserve it), or is it part of the anguish of the "mauvaise conscience" of the creole whose life takes its privileged place against a background of the multi-secular oppression of the Indian and the Africa? Again, when Marxist analysis is used to demonstrate the caducity of the middle-class, is it not the bad conscience of the colonial class that is being attacked? This of course, helps us to understand some of the reaction to the liberation wing of the Church in Latin America. Do they not exalt foreign, liberal, ideas over local conservative ones? Do they not share too many of the attitudes of the Enlightenment, always anti-clerical, anti-popular religion, and often anti-catholic tout court? For many in the Latin American Church, this spate of new "european" ideas looks like the nineteenth century battles being waged, this time by those who are apparently "inside" the Church. Is the "Enlightened" arrogance of the liberators not part of the same anti-Constantinian attitude that persecuted the Church over much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

Perhaps the success of Opus Dei, particularly in Peruvian and Mexican society, where it often acts to give new dignity to the values of the declining former aristocratic creole society, largely intact in those places, is itself also part of the vindication of an authentically Latin American tradition of theology. The attitude of local diocesan clergy in places like Recife, not exactly friendly to the wave of foreign liberator priests and social workers who came in under the previous archbishop, may have something to do with that. What does anyone make of offers to liberate dressed in the rhetoric of "our enemies" and which share Prescott's North American contempt for latin and catholic society, and are ashamed of loyalty to Rome. Cardinal Arns of



Sao Paulo enunciated the principle that everything that comes from Rome, has gone to Rome first. I think the various factors above illustrate a lot of the thinking that goes into what gets reported to Rome.

As the twentieth century draws to a close a combination of complex factors have made various forms of protestant, and sub-protestant, groups emerge as huge crowd pullers. A reaction to the encroachment of secularism, they are also (as in nineteenth century England) its vehicles. The second or third generation Latin American protestant (from a poor background) has a family history which has passed from rural catholicism to urban individualism in thirty years. The same journey has taken modern 'Northern' Europeans five hundred. The reaction of the middle classes, whether of left or right, is to despise this authentically Latin American movement, and to blame stock enemies: it is the fault of the reactionary traditional Church linked to the élite, say the left, that they have let such people fall prey to such an "alienated" form of religion. The right blame it on the "spiritual vacuum" left by the secularised and over-political preaching and presence of the "liberators". Here is a discussion not a hundred light years away from the traditional difficulty the élite has encountered in entering the imaginational world of their subject peoples. For the Christian faith in Latin America to be Catholic, is not the question of finding a way of integrating the Faith of the liberators, that of the heirs of the colony and that of the sectarian dispossessed, of considerable importance? Remembering Dominican origins in the preaching to the Albigensians, is it not also a particularly Dominican question?

Latin American society was founded on a bad conscience. Witness to that are the five hundred years of discussion, argument, search for, and defence of, identity. The Catholic Faith has been used to denounce that bad-conscience, and it has been used to cover it up. Both denunciation and cover up are part of the world of violence. Reading Brading has made me more than ever aware of the colossus De las Casas was, bestriding the whole of Latin American history with his voice: he was, and is, the Great Revealer and Advocate, surely one of the Holy Spirit's most illustrious adoptees. How, I ask myself, at the juncture of five hundred years of the violent foundation of the Americas, do we best continue and develop the work of this prophet? In his rôle as denouncer of the evils? Or as upholder of the authority of the Crown to undo the evil? I suspect that an original tack would be to see whether the victims of the last five hundred years may not become the forgiveness of the bad conscience that is everywhere present. It is only as people become aware of their own complicity in the violence and the bad conscience that they can seek forgiveness; the denunciation becomes not an accusation, which would be motive for yet another cover-up, but the possibility of forgiveness. It is, after all, the Resurrection of the forgiving victim that is the unique centre of the Catholic Faith. I suspect that while theology in Latin America is still tied to people who say "Our fathers murdered the prophets, the indians, the slaves, and on and on; if we had been alive then we would not have done that" it is still unable to assume the need

for forgiveness in order to be the Church. It is only the people who recognise that they would, and do murder, and are murdering the prophets, the indians, the slaves, who can receive forgiveness from their victims, and thus have the equanimity to preach the Gospel of the forgiving victim. Until our complicity in the *mauvaise* conscience of creole society is assumed, the accusation of Huancavelica, of Potosí, of untold deaths “antes del tiempo” produced by our covetousness, will toll like a deep, uncomfortable bell, unable to be laid to rest, in our theology, in our Gospel, in the life of the Church. No Liberation without complicity, no freedom without assuming our past. This will not re-found the Church in those countries, but it will bring us back to the one foundation, that of the forgiving murdered one, that must be rediscovered by any age or people or culture who would be Catholic.

- 1 The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots and the Liberal State, 1492 to 1867 by D.A. Brading, Cambridge University Press 1991. Pp xviii + 761. £55.00.
- 2 Criollo in Spanish has the sense of ‘born in America’; in Portuguese, however, Crioulo is largely synonymous with black, and used as a friendly term of abuse among people who are black, or of black mixture (about 50% of the population of Brazil). I have used it throughout in its Spanish American sense.
- 3 Brading *The Origins of Mexican Nationalism* Cambridge 1985.

## Accents in Theology

Francis McDonagh

More than in the case of any other school of theology, it is important to assess liberation theology in its social context. Liberation theology not only asserts a necessary correlation between belief and action; its adherents are also normally active in work with poor communities or one of the many church-linked sectoral support organisations. Liberation theology has also acquired wide influence within the magisterium of the Latin American church: the meeting of the General Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) adopted key concepts, and for the past twenty years a liberationist outlook has shaped the thinking of the Brazilian bishops’ conference, the largest on the continent.

The impact of liberation theology in the Latin American church has been profound, though not universal. Where its ideas have been adopted, the church, from being in alliance with the elites and out of touch with the