

Article

Settlement and Civility as Pre-Requisite of Evangelization in the Chichimeca Frontier

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Abstract: This paper delves into the process of evangelization undertaken by the Spanish in the northern frontier of New Spain during the 16th century, specifically targeting the nomadic Indigenous populations known as Chichimecas. Missionaries encountered unique challenges due to the absence of religious infrastructure, robust political authorities, and the nomadic lifestyle of these groups. To overcome these hurdles, the Spanish implemented a strategy that intertwined evangelization with colonization. The text highlights the significance of constructing physical infrastructure in these frontier territories, such as churches, schools, and dwellings, to facilitate the process of evangelization and colonial control. Moreover, it emphasizes the need to impose a social and political structure on these nomadic communities, transforming them into obedient colonial subjects.

Keywords: Chichimecas; Christian mission; northern frontier New Spain; evangelization; settlement and colonization

1. Introduction

The justification for Spanish expansion in the Americas was framed as an attempt to extend the boundaries of Catholicism in the face of a predominantly pagan population. The initial encounters with the Indigenous peoples of the Americas sparked evangelistic enthusiasm, yet this zeal was confronted with limitations due to the cultural diversity and varying levels of development among these groups.

The recognition of cultural differences simultaneously led to the creation of ethnographic narratives aimed at distinguishing between different pagan peoples. On one hand, as Bernardino de Sahagún and José de Acosta did in their time, the Spanish described pagan nations such as the Incas, Tarascans, Mexicas, and Tlaxcaltecs, who had cities, commerce, and social distinctions. On the other hand, there were still groups, such as the Guamares, the Tepehuanes, and the Xiximes, that were described in terms that were scarcely distinguishable from animals. In the words of the Franciscan scholar Jean Focher, these people “do not work but live by hunting and gathering wild foods. They worship neither God nor idols, are indecently naked, and are highly skilled in archery from a young age” (Focher 1960, p. 343).

This paper aims to highlight and enhance the intended missionary practices with nomadic pagans without recognizable so-called civility signs in the northern frontier of New Spain. In the northern frontier of New Spain, missionaries claimed they faced significant challenges, including the absence of religious infrastructure and the lack of political authorities with sufficient power to support conversion efforts. In such cases, the conquest and establishment of governance structures were essential prerequisites before attempting any serious evangelization. This was particularly apparent when dealing with groups perceived to have archaic ways of life, where missions were tasked with creating civil conditions—such as forced settlement, the introduction of agriculture, and the adoption of clothing—alongside with the propaganda of the Catholic faith in strictu sensu. This led to the construction of physical structures for the settlement, education, and



Citation: Mendez Alonzo, Manuel. 2024. Settlement and Civility as Pre-Requisite of Evangelization in the Chichimeca Frontier. *Religions* 15: 1414. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121414>

Academic Editor: Katharine Olson

Received: 27 October 2024

Revised: 17 November 2024

Accepted: 19 November 2024

Published: 22 November 2024



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evangelization of the nomadic Indigenous nations in territories where such establishments did not previously exist, as was the case along the northern frontier of New Spain.

The overarching aim of this paper is to examine the discourses surrounding the nomadic populations on the northern frontiers of New Spain, as well as the proposed solutions for their settlement. This study will place significant emphasis on the requests made by civil and religious authorities to create spaces dedicated to the settlement and the oversight of these populations in the practice of the Catholic faith, which had to be constructed *ex nihilo*.

Thus, the objectives of this article can be enumerated as follows: (1) to highlight how the varying and sometimes conflicting missionary methods depended on the societal circumstances in which the mission was established, focusing on the Great Chichimeca during the 16th century. (2) The proposals for the establishment of infrastructure for the mission with pagan nomadic populations. This involved settling the population to instruct them in the principles of Christianity, while simultaneously compelling them to behave as loyal Spanish subjects. In this paper, the different approaches among religious orders, Spanish colonial authorities, and the secular clergy regarding the evangelization of nomadic peoples such as the Chichimeca are recognized. However, it will highlight the commonalities in terms of the prerequisites for this population to settle, lead a civil life, and subsequently be properly Christianized.

2. Spreading Catholicism Among the Wild People: The Difficulties of the Mission in the Great Chichimeca

One of the primary challenges encountered by the Spanish during their colonization of the Americas stemmed from the nomadic populations inhabiting the frontier regions. As observed by Resendez (2017, p. 304), these groups had demonstrated the ability to resist Spanish military advances on the frontiers and, apparently, to undergo evangelization. These groups included the northern nations of New Spain, the Mapuches, the peoples of the Venezuelan plains, and some Indigenous nations in Paraguay.

The imposition of Spanish institutions upon vast territories with sparse populations proved to be a challenging endeavor due to various problematic geographical conditions, such as a lack of water and suitable land for large-scale agriculture. However, a more significant obstacle was the absence of centralized political leadership with whom negotiations could be conducted among these nations. In contrast to the relatively “civilized” Mexicas, the populations inhabiting the vast territories of what is now northern Mexico and the southern United States consisted of tribal groups without cities or established economic systems, many of them relying on hunting for survival. These individuals soon overcame their fear of the Spanish and their weapons, opting for a type of warfare that was both costly and time-consuming, as they adopted guerrilla tactics, attacking caravans, churches, and unguarded ranches (Powell 1977, p. 50). Moreover, the military successes of the native population against the Spanish hindered any attempts at peaceful colonization (Bolton 1964). Despite the failure to secure the northern frontier of New Spain, the Spanish had compelling incentives to colonize and populate their northern frontier due to the promising silver deposits found in Zacatecas in Nueva Galicia (Powell 1977, pp. 21–22). Nevertheless, concurrent efforts were made to prevent, at least initially, the mistreatment or enslavement of this population.

Since the time of the Mexica (despite considering themselves their descendants), there existed a prejudice against the nomadic populations north of Tenochtitlán, using the pejorative term to characterize them *Chichimeca*.¹ It is important to mention that the term does not refer to a specific people, but rather to a diversity of populations, without cultural or linguistic homogeneity, and it was understood derogatorily as barbarism. Among the main characteristics attributed to them were their lack of a fixed settlement, their savage lifestyle, their childishness, and their propensity for violence, as well as their inability to comprehend the principles of Christianity on their own.

Spanish missionaries often characterized the Chichimeca peoples as the greatest military and religious challenge in the conquest of the New World. Their resistance culminated in a costly war, significantly affecting the second half of the 16th century in New Spain (Carrillo Cázares 2000a, p. 39). This confrontation, characterized by immense bloodshed, had far-reaching consequences for miners, cattle ranchers, and the emerging urban centers of New Galicia (Carrillo Cázares 2000a, p. 43).

As the war intensified and impacted the lives of Spanish settlers and religious figures, these narratives became increasingly radical, framing the conflict with the Chichimeca as a crusade.² This animosity gave rise to defamatory rhetoric against this enemy, attributing to them all the negative traits associated with barbaric pagans.³ These descriptions were far from trivial, as such behavior placed these groups in an intermediate position between humanity and bestiality. Typically, these narratives were accompanied by accusations of crimes against nature, such as ferocity toward innocent non-combatants like children, missionaries, and women, and, notably, cannibalism.

The Spanish depictions of the Chichimecas from 1550 to 1600, as Ruiz Guadalajara (2010, p. 24) notes, portrayed the inhabitants of the Great Chichimeca (in Nahuatl, *Chichimecapan*) as unfit for civilized life and barely distinguishable from wild animals. Furthermore, these discourses often exaggerated the hardships faced by missionaries in these remote regions, such as hunger, arduous labor, and temptations, frequently drawing comparisons to the trials endured by various ascetic saints. (Green 2014, pp. 154–55). As Torres (2006, pp. 118, 120) emphasizes, missionary activity in this territory resembled the chivalric literature, as a heroic endeavor against witchcraft and the devil itself. Therefore, it is necessary to concur with Hausberger (2017, pp. 121–22) who said that victory in this “conflict” depended on transforming this “savage population” into good subjects of the Spanish king and devout Catholics. This would need to be accomplished, at least in the case of the most primitive and irreducible peoples, through a form of tutelage that would first teach them to behave according to the principles of natural law.

It is important to note the so-called barbaric behavior attributed to these nations (such as eating insects, alleged ritual cannibalism, and extreme cruelty toward their enemies, including women and children) was seen, as Pagden (1981, p. 24) has pointed out, as a failure to discern the innate principles of natural law. Nonetheless, even among the tribes considered the most barbaric, such as the Chichimecas, missionaries believed there existed potential for moral elevation and, with proper education, the possibility of becoming good Christians (Lara Cisneros 2014, p. 11). In other words, despite their fear of and critiques of their behavior, the Spanish clergy acknowledged their capacity to understand and accept the gospel.

Dogmatically, missionaries grounded their initial encounters with the Chichimeca on the principles of *ius gentium* (the law of nations). In this way, as Abascal Sherwell (2022, p. 70) aptly noted, it became possible to theorize about the customs of the various nomadic groups on the frontiers of New Spain, to act according to their perceived level of barbarism, and to develop tailored strategies for engagement and evangelization. For example, the *Ordenanzas* of Philip II of 1550 recommended that the first encounters with pagan peoples in the Indies be conducted peacefully, ensuring the safety and modesty of missionaries.⁴ Caution was necessary to avoid misunderstandings or potential acts of violence against those entrusted to spread Catholicism.⁵

All of this led to the construction of a contradictory image of the Chichimecas by New Spain clergy. On one hand, their belligerence and resistance to Spanish advances portrayed them as a formidable task with terrible enemies who would not hesitate to kill and torture those attempting to teach them the Gospel. On the other hand, as their intellectual capacities were infantilized, the missionary’s work was essential for teaching them *ex nihilo* the principles of natural law in order to elevate their behavior to that of humans and, subsequently, good Christians.⁶ For this reason, the friars responsible for evangelization in the Chichimeca frontier criticized the Spanish colonizers for obstructing evangelization efforts through their exploitative behavior (Carrillo Cázares 2000a, p. 43).

This situation fostered hostility toward the missionaries making any attempts at peaceful promotion of Christianity in their discourse extremely difficult.

Missionary work among the Chichimeca was frequently portrayed as being in constant peril, threatened not only by Hispanic settlers—including Spaniards, mestizos, some Africans, and allied Indigenous groups—but also by internal and external enemies from other Indigenous groups (Hausberger 2017, p. 122). In practice, it was prudent to conduct the Christian propaganda with a measure of security in the field. To further these objectives, the Spanish should establish defensive structures for their protection and to facilitate certain bureaucratic functions on the land, such as marriages, baptisms, and the construction of convents and churches, ultimately aiming to pacify and assimilate the Chichimeca and, in the long term, introduce them to Catholic doctrine.

Lastly, to evangelize the Chichimecas, communication channels appropriate for their simplicity must be sought, as they “have to be driven out of the jungle and into settlements and there be instructed in the ways of true men like children before they can be converted” (Pagden 1999). As we will see, this would take place in spaces where, under a controlled environment, through gifts and disciplinary control, these peoples—due to their condition—needed to learn not only the religious virtues that would make them good Christians but also those that would make them “good men”.⁷

3. Settling and Educating: Establishing Catholic Missions Ex Nihilo in the Chichimeca Frontier

The increasing insecurity and bold attacks on settlers and missionaries venturing into the northern frontier of New Spain after 1550 turned the conflict with the Chichimecas into the most costly and bloody enterprise faced by the Spanish in the Americas. This war prompted extensive discussions among the most important religious authorities of New Spain on how to settle these peoples and achieve peace.

As demonstrated by Carrillo Cázares (2000b, p. 594), it was during the Third Mexican Provincial Council of 1585 that the need to improve the living conditions of the Chichimecas and provide them with sustenance to encourage a more receptive attitude toward Christianity was reinforced. Thus, rather than seeking an understanding with civil authorities or institutions—apparently nonexistent among the Chichimecas—it became necessary to create structures to facilitate evangelization. In these places, Spanish religious figures would teach the various Chichimeca groups the advantages of sedentary life, such as the use of clothing and agriculture. This approach was proposed as early as 1561 in a letter from Fray Jacinto de San Francisco to the Spanish king:

...especially in the beginning, since some parts of the land are desolate, and the natives live without settlements or towns, with no other sustenance than what grows wild in the land. It is therefore necessary to provide for the poor Spaniards who settle and establish themselves, supplying them with the essentials for their settlement, as well as for the natives who lack them, whether they be peaceful or at war. (Fray Jacinto de San Francisco in Carrillo Cázares 2000a, p. 550)

The actions of the Chichimecas were deemed seditious and labeled as acts of banditry, which justified the use of violent measures, including their enslavement, to settle and evangelize them.⁸ It was argued that their persistent resistance to any peaceful efforts, such as accepting Christian missionaries or engaging in trade. This resistance led to the conclusion that the use of force was justified and considered defensive, as they were accused of violating the law of nations by their murders and robberies, but also their supposed apostasy and to force them to accept Christianity peacefully.⁹ The process involved forced resettlement and the exploitation as prey of pacific Chichimecas by soldiers to supplement their meager wages, this produced many doubts and critiques although this was not the intention of the Spanish civil and religious authorities.¹⁰ It is important to highlight that violence in this missionary frontier was a complex phenomenon involving Indigenous peoples, colonizers, and religious men as active agents. However, chronicles often present a narrative in which missionaries were portrayed as passive victims of indigenous violence.¹¹

For New Spain clergy, it was insufficient to conquer their land solely or negotiate with a few powerful Chichimeca caciques, as in most cases these leaders lacked sufficient authority over other culturally similar groups and did not possess centers of power with political and religious institutions. Instead, it was imperative to create infrastructures for their settlement and even appoint political leaders where authority was ambiguous, while simultaneously providing them with the means for a “civilized life” by teaching useful trades.¹² This misunderstanding of the tribal lifestyle in the Mexican desert was partly due to the fact that Spanish missionaries were grounded in a Thomistic and Aristotelian conception of the state and social life, based on the principles of natural law (Tierney 1998, p. 397; Castilla Urbano 2014, p. 43; Villey 2003, p. 330).

Another challenge was the absence of cities or religious worship sites for these peoples, which had to be constructed *ex nihilo* to settle and monitor the population (Goicovich 2022, p. 138). In these spaces, it was expected that the Spanish would impose a discipline that ensured preparation for a Christian civic life. In practice, however, these posts were primarily used for defensive purposes, and due to the accumulation of supplies and wealth, they became attractive targets for Chichimeca Indigenous groups (Jackson 2012, p. 52).

Individuals who chose to settle would undergo re-education to supposedly become good subjects of the Spanish king and devout Christians. They would receive instruction to facilitate their transition to a sedentary life, beginning with baptism and the Hispanization of their names. Neophytes had to be subjected to the imposition of categories of time and leisure as distinct constructs, to teach them to work and prepare them for the demands of settled life (Velloso 2018, p. 45). This control was necessary to prevent the perceived inconstancy of the American Indigenous peoples, through both good works and constant surveillance (Lara Cisneros 2014, p. 14). The return to idolatry was particularly punished, since it was seen as a rejection of the true God, leading to a lack of consciousness of sin, which permeates human faculties and behavior.

In practice, the religious men had to locate a suitable site for a missionary post, establish a settlement with nomadic Indigenous groups willing to be reduced, and manage the supplies sent by their order and native populations (Torres 2006, pp. 109–10). The site had to have conditions suitable for life (water, abundant food, etc.)¹³ and for construction (using materials like adobe or wood) to carry out religious sacraments such as baptisms, funerals, and weddings. One way to convince nomadic populations, as Bletzer (2016, p. 18) notes, was to create *pueblos de indios ladinos* (Spanish-speaking) or friendly native populations in war zones, a practice used by the Augustinians on the Purépecha-Guamare frontier. However, the migration of populations from the south often led to interethnic conflicts over scarce water and food resources.

The congregated population was expected to undergo a process of reduction to a productive economic life, as they were used as laborers on ranches or in mines (Bletzer 2016, p. 19). As the settlement consolidated, it could become a town and perform other bureaucratic functions within the territory.

Missionaries on the Chichimeca frontier accorded paramount importance to the education of Indigenous children, establishing schools with the aim of inculcating Christian doctrine and teaching basic skills such as reading and writing, viewed as more adaptable to cultural change than adults. Through this education, they sought to promote acculturation, replacing Indigenous customs with Spanish ones and facilitating the transition to a sedentary and Christian lifestyle. As evidenced in the 1577 memorial of the Jesuit Provincial Congregation:

...that it would be most appropriate to establish schools for Indian boys, sons of the principal leaders, of good disposition and ability, and that they should live in our schools to be instructed in all proper governance and Christian customs, teaching them to read and write, along with Christian doctrine, so that, if Our Lord should make some of them capable of perfection, they might become worthy ministers for their nation. (Cfr. Acta Congregationes Provincialis Novae Hispaniae in Abascal Sherwell 2015, p. 148)¹⁴

These posts intended to congregate various nomadic bands, populating the area with both local people and sedentary groups from the Mexican highlands (Jackson 2012, p. 54). However, it was soon recognized that the linguistic and cultural differences among the groups within the Chichimecas and the importance of mastering their languages. The viceregal and ecclesiastical authorities in New Spain recognized that knowledge of local dialects was crucial for better understanding the customs and cultures of the visaged territory and for accelerating evangelization. According to Sánchez Muñoz (2021, p. 245) this strategy was believed to enable the more effective transmission of Christianity, using Nahuatl and Otomi as foundational languages.

Within this effort to bring the word of Christ to the pagans of the Chichimeca frontier, Viceroy Gaspar Zuñiga Acevedo, Count of Monterrey, highlighted the work of the Jesuits in the conversion of the various pagan partialities in the Chichimeca frontier, due to their ability to learn their apparently “difficult” languages and to place great emphasis on education.¹⁵ In this sense, a coherence with the principles used in other provinces can be noted, but this had to be accompanied by the construction of appropriate structures such as seminaries and monasteries, focusing on evangelization and suppressing idolatry:

On the Chichimeca frontiers, as it seems Viceroy Don Luis has noted. . . these fathers of the Society are most useful for the conversion of those barbarians. . . indicating that great attention is paid. . . to their efforts to adapt. . . they are more effective than other religious orders in their constant labor and the great care they take in learning the languages of those Indians, which are many and difficult. . . As for the doctrines. . . monasteries should be built for the friars. . . who, hindered by distance, are delayed in the catechization of the children and in addressing idolatry. (Letter from Viceroy Gaspar de Zuñiga Acevedo 1597, Count of Monterrey, Archivo General de Indias, Mexico, 23, N80)¹⁶

To conclude, it was expected that once the missionaries had acquired sufficient linguistic capacity, they would be able to confess and preach in the native languages (Sánchez Muñoz 2021, p. 347). This opinion is also shared by Gaona Corradi (2019, p. 386), who considers that this approach to pagans was in line with that followed in Asia. Moreover, this process of evangelization was accompanied by a “constant barrage of images, shrines, and icons”, which fostered cultural syncretism alongside the ethnic intermixing that ultimately influenced the beliefs of the local population (Rubial García 2022, p. 47). As Pagden states (Pagden 1999, p. 157), all this enabled the contextualization and conveyance of the meaning of Christian doctrines to Chichimecas neophytes.

4. The Development of Infrastructure for the Spread of Catholicism and Spanish Civilization in New Spain Northern Frontiers

The formation of missionary posts where it was previously thought none existed, was driven largely by necessity and the efforts of captains and religious men. In the Chichimeca frontier, the missionaries acted as intermediaries between local chieftains and the Spanish authorities, especially in the most conflictive areas. As Gaona Corradi (2019, p. 386) has pointed out, this involved the establishment of peace zones aimed at pacifying and evangelizing the region through the creation of missions, primarily led by Franciscans and Jesuits, and later, rectorates. This approach was implemented in various areas, including San Luis de la Paz in 1598, Sinaloa in 1591, Parras in 1598, the Acaxees and Xiximes regions in 1592, among the Tepehuanes in 1596, Tarahumara Baja in 1607, among the Yaquis, Mayos, Tepahues, and Conicarís in 1614, Sonora in 1614, among the Chinipas in 1621, Tarahumara Alta in 1673, Baja California in 1697, and Nayarit in 1719.¹⁷

Politically, the Spanish power could offer little in terms of resources and security to its settlers on the frontiers, aside from teaching the doctrine to the Indigenous people. The discourse of these missionaries frequently referred to the constant danger faced by the native populations, as well as the arduous life in Spanish American frontiers, where the lack of sustenance and work were recurring themes, compounded by the near subhuman conditions in which the local populations were described (Green 2014, p. 154).

In addition to their pastoral duties, the religious men in the remote and large northern border of New Spain organized civil activities. For this reason, the missionary posts were expected to become economic hubs, as they often participated in the commercial life of the communities through activities such as herding or even mining exploitation. For their strategic location, these places often evolved into villages even if the obedience of the native population remained tenuous.

Ideologically, the arduous goal of settling the nomadic pagan population, whether through persuasion or force, remained prevalent, and the missionaries relied on resources provided by colonial authorities.¹⁸ Additionally, it was expected that missionaries would mediate between rival groups, thus preventing conflict (Hausberger 2015, pp. 23–24). In these new spaces, norms of interaction between the Hispanic population and Chichimecas would be established. These sites, collectively, would rationalize the territory, enabling both defensive and offensive actions against hostile enemies. They would also organize civil activities, including urban projections, to gather and evangelize the still large pagan populations in the territory. In addition, as Zeron points out (Zeron 2015, pp. 308, 311), the crucial role of Indigenous labor in sustaining the missionary posts on the frontiers should not be forgotten, as they contributed to various tasks, including agriculture and defense.¹⁹

As previously mentioned, these missionary spaces served as an advancing force to facilitate the spread of Christianity in pagan regions where the population had resisted European settlers and religious missionaries. Say it differently, the missions were also representations of viceregal powers and culture, which explains the attacks and hatred they provoked among native populations (Powell 1982, p. 295). This was clearly explained by Dr. Juan Bautista de Orozco in his letter to the king of Spain of 1576:

The places where these marauders do the most destruction are in the most distant pueblos of Nueva Espana and on the haciendas, cattle ranches, and farms that line its borders. The same applies to the mines and the roads leading to them because they are the most recently founded settlements. (Orozco 1986, p. 44)

The mission among the Chichimeca was expected to communicate the gospel, along with certain civil practices and norms (Jackson 2013, pp. 170–71), while also considering economic interests and military logistics.²⁰ From a missionary perspective, the goal of forming neophytes among the Chichimeca was to transform their way of life, turning them from fierce pagans into a more faithful clergy, much like the early converts of the primitive church. However, the pacification had to be accompanied by strong religious propaganda efforts and military actions. For instance, in his letter to Francisco de Urdiñola, the Marquis of Villamanrique emphasized the need for religious figures among the Chichimeca groups, as only then could “these miserable people be settled”.

I have written to the father custodian asking him to send a religious there in order to settle those wretched people, and if it is necessary, I will go with him. I think he will agree to this because it is so fitting to the service of God our Lord and his majesty. If he does, I will leave at once; but if not, I will go there anyway to see those people and if needed I will supply them at his majesty’s expense with corn and settle them in a place where they can be taught our religion. At this time your grace should be there. This is more important now than at any time since I have been lieutenant captain-general because this is the beginning of the peace. (de Villamanrique 1986, pp. 62–63)

It was believed that once the various Chichimeca groups abandoned their nomadic way of life, through gifts of food and clothing, they would change their belief systems, facilitating their acceptance of Christianity, which would inevitably lead to their incorporation into the New Spain society and religiosity.²¹ It was anticipated that this approach would gradually facilitate the eventual integration of these territories and populations into the colonial economy.

Finally, the efforts to evangelize the still largely pagan population in New Spain’s northern frontier adhered after 1563 to the principles outlined by the Tridentine reforms,

including the regular administration of Communion, the instruction of a single catechism, and the establishment of institutions such as colleges, seminaries, and convents (Abascal Sherwell 2022, p. 72). It is important to note that securing the Chichimeca territories through the conversion of the pagan population was a crucial step in the spatial and jurisdictional organization of the dioceses, which would manifest in institutional forms of governance, justice, and administration of the social colonial space (Cervantes Bello 2014, pp. 169–70).

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the narratives surrounding the evangelization and establishment of missions in frontier regions during the mid-16th and early 17th centuries. These accounts often emphasize the challenges and risks faced by missionaries among pagan peoples, including the constant possibility of martyrdom. I argue that a significant element of propaganda is present in these stories, intended to justify the importance and self-sacrifice of this mission. Nevertheless, from a methodological perspective, the danger of professing the Catholic faith was equally, if not more, pronounced in European Protestant nations than in the remote frontiers of Christendom.

Another element that is often overlooked in this work, due to the focus on spreading Christianity and a notion of civilization, was the differences in the approaches of the religious orders in the northern frontiers of New Spain, particularly between the Franciscans and the Jesuits. Instead, my intention was to highlight the similarity in the conclusions reached by these orders and several military captains: that the Christian religion can only be fully understood if the nomadic Chichimecas were taught to live according to civil norms.

Given Christianity's status as the paradigmatic example of religion, this delineation also required defining what constituted religion within non-Christian societies. In Japan, this challenge was particularly pronounced, as some of the adaptations proposed by the Jesuits extended beyond cultural practices, influencing the mission's hierarchical structure and, more importantly, religious practices. For example, in Asia, the Jesuits were especially adept at understanding diverse beliefs and cultural differences since they accepted equality in civil terms (Bernabé Cabral 2019, p. 250). In opposition, in New Galicia, where there were no established populations or recognizable social hierarchies, it was first necessary to establish conditions for political organization, which would then enable the introduction of Christianity.

This required ethnographic research on the target populations for missionary work. In supposedly inhospitable frontiers like the *Gran Chichimeca*, evangelization often involved exercising authority over native populations, treating them, in practice, as if they were children by providing them with all the means to profess Catholicism (Abascal Sherwell 2022, p. 72). In contrast, in literate societies such as China or Muslim nations, it was expected that good results would be reached to be achieved through conviction and reason.

Finally, it is crucial, as Bernabé Cabral (2020) has shrewdly observed, not to ignore the frequent competition between various religious orders—particularly the Franciscans and Jesuits—and the differing approaches they adopted toward evangelization in America and in Asia. For the Franciscans, the true meaning of evangelization lay in the imitation of Christ and strictly following His teachings. In contrast, the Jesuits sought to adapt to the customs of pagan peoples so that Christianity would not seem entirely foreign to them, thus aiming to avoid cultural clashes that could lead to rejection (Bernabé Cabral 2018, pp. 9–11). Although both orders had prominent figures who played significant roles in converting Indigenous populations, their influence extended beyond religious instruction, leaving a lasting impact not only on native communities but also on the architectural works that became emblematic of their presence.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 In its etymology, the term has two literal translations: tied dog and separately *chichi*: to suckle and *mecatl*: rope. For the sedentary Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the Mexican highlands, *chichimecatl* was understood as hunter-gatherers, uneducated people of great rudeness (Santa María 2003, p. 205).
- 2 For the Dominican Fray Diego Durán (1537–1588), the Chichimecas were “gente que vivía de esta parte era muy poca, cuyo modo era muy brutal y salvajino, a quien esta nación llamó chichimeca, que quiere decir “cazadores o gente que vive de aquel oficio” agreste o campesina. Llamáronlos de esta manera a causa (de) que ellos vivían en los riscos y en los más ásperos lugares de monte, donde vivían una vida bestial, sin ninguna pulicía ni consideración humana, buscando la comida como las bestias del mismo monte, desnudos en cueros, sin ninguna cobertura de sus partes” (Cfr. Chichimeca in *Gran Diccionario Nahuatl Online*) (UNAM 2024).
- 3 As observed by Cook (2013, pp. 22–25), in describing the animosity of the Chichimecas toward the friars who sought to teach them the Catholic faith, they were often compared to various Muslim groups, such as the “Alarabes”.
- 4 “Aunque de Paz quieran Rescuiir y Resciban los predicadores y su doctrina Vayase a sus pueblos con mucha cautela recato y seguridad de manera que aunque se quieran descomedir no se puedan desacatar a los predicadores porque no les pierdan el respeto y desacatándose contra ellos obliguen a hazer castigo en los culpados. porque seria gran ympedimento para la pacificación y Conbersion y aunque se aya de yr” (*Ordenanzas de Felipe II sobre nuevos descubrimientos 1950*, p. 277).
- 5 Due to their perceived intransigence and nomadic lifestyle, the Chichimeca were often deemed incapable of comprehending natural law or living under civil governance (Zeron 2011, p. 149). Consequently, many clergy members categorized these indigenous peoples as “brutos” (brutish), lacking self-control and unable to grasp the abstract concepts of Christianity. This concept aligns with medieval Castilian legal concepts referring to rough, unintelligent individuals requiring constant supervision, and do not have a racial symbolism (Pérez Flores 2016, pp. 23–24).
- 6 “Pues tratando en general los ritos y costumbres de todos estos chichimecas, las cuales son bien de notar tienen en todo depravada la naturaleza humana, y tan apartados de las costumbres y bien vivir de los todos hombres. . .ellos son dados muy poco a la religión. . .porque ningún género de ídolo se le ha hallado ni cu, ni otro altar. . .Son en extremo crueles, que es la mayor señal de su brutalidad” (Santa María 2003, p. 208).
- 7 According to Zeron (2015, p. 313), in order to effectively subjugate the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, particularly those regarded as irreducible, it was necessary to impose a labor discipline, associated with punishments and a new regulation of time and work. These factors shaped how spaces would be organized within Indigenous *reducciones*.
- 8 This was stated by the influential New Spain archbishop and viceroy Pedro Moya de Contreras: “He entendido de personas de aquella tierra que con solo darlos a estos indios por esclavos. . .estando averiguado con gran número de muertes y robos que cada día hacen que no perdonan a nadie la vida así hombres como ganados. . .buena obra se les haría en sacarlos de [su] vida tan inhumana y traerlos al gremio de la Santa Madre Iglesia y a mejor tratamiento que ellos tienen en sus tierras” (Moya de Contreras 2000, p. 632).
- 9 This is pointed out by Santa María (2003, pp. 201–2): “. . .se les hace guerra es por obviar sus daños, muertes y robos, y cuanto a esto [es] defensiva, y las demás causas de guerra ofensiva es por castigarlos como apóstatas y rebeldes que se bautizaron y dieron la obediencia a la iglesia y al rey y sin causa la substrajeron y se rebelaron. . .Y cuanto a la intención recta para la guerra justa, ya se entiende. . .que es su fin por el bien de paz, seguridad de los caminos y conversión de los chichimecas”.
- 10 “Es duda si han de pasar todos por igual a fuego y a sangre, porque los mismos soldados hacen de ello escrúpulo, y dicen ser cargo de conciencia captivar a los chichimecas pacíficos y ni la intención de su Excelencia del señor Virrey fue tal, ni la de los señores de la audiencia real, ni de los maestros y teólogos que dieron su parecer” (Santa María 2003, p. 200).
- 11 For example, Guillermo de Santa María described the case of the French Franciscan friar, Bernardino Cozín, who, after attempting to disseminate the gospel, was slain in the church he constructed in Zacatecas by the Chichimecas: “. . .en el camino de Zacatecas a las minas de San Martín, que aún entonces no estaban descubiertas, donde halló mucha gente, y los empezó a dotrinar y hizo iglesia y estuvo entre ellos algunos días, y al cabo un día en el altar diciendo misa le mataron” (Santa María 2003, p. 220).
- 12 “. . .sería necesario poner entre ellos a quien les muestre a cultivar la tierra y a otros oficios mecánicos, como olleros, carpinteros, albañiles, y quien muestre a sus mujeres a hacer pan o tortillas y hilar y tejer, porque ni ellos ni ellas ninguna de estas cosas saben hacer. Compelerlos a que hagan casas y vivan en ellas. . .Enseñarles a mantener la justicia y castigar delitos. . .que dejen de robar y asienten en mejor modo de vivir, que es el que se les da” (Santa María 2003, p. 239).
- 13 In the *Ordenanzas* of Philip II of 1950 (*Ordenanzas de Felipe II sobre nuevos descubrimientos 1950*) is acknowledged this point (pp. 231–32): “los sytios y plantas de los pueblos se elijan, en parte adonde tengan el agua cerca. y que se pueda derribar para mejor se aprouechar della en el pueblo y heredades cerca del y que tenga· cerca todos los materiales que son menester para los edificios. y las tierras que han de labrar y cultivar y las que se an de pastar”.

- 14 “. . .que sería lo más conveniente hazer collegios de niños indios, hijos de los principales, de buena índole y habilidad, y que biviesen en nuestros collegios para los instruir en toda buena policía y cristianas costumbres, enseñándolos a leer y escribir y doctrina cristiana, para que si N. Señor hiciese dellos a algunos capaces de la perfección, fuesen estos dignos ministros de su nación” (Cfr. “Acta Congregationes Provincialis Novae Hispaniae” in [Abascal Sherwell 2015](#), p. 148).
- 15 For instance, numerous Jesuits often lamented the challenges of administering the sacraments to various Indigenous groups on the northern frontiers of New Spain, citing difficulties arising from the lack of understanding of the rites being performed and the inability to explain them in the languages of these groups ([Abascal Sherwell 2022](#), pp. 74–75).
- 16 “En las fronteras chichimecas, me parece como Virrey Don Luis ha advertido. . .estos padres de la Compañía son muy útiles para la conversión de aquellos bárbaros. . .dándose a entender que es mucha la atención que es mucha la atención con que. . .procuran acomodarse. . .que son más aprovechados que otros religiosos en continuo trabajo y mucho cuidado que ponen en aprender las lenguas de aquellos indios que son muchas y dificultosas. . .En lo que toca a las doctrinas. . .deben ser edificados monasterios de religiosos. . .impedidos por la distancia. . .en la catequización de los niños. . .y a atenderse idolatrías” (Carta del virrey Gaspar de Zuñiga Acevedo del 8 de abril de 1597, conde de Monterrey, Archivo General de Indias, México, 23, N80).
- 17 In an effort to impose a new social order, the architecture of missions, especially those located in frontier regions with hostile nomadic populations, followed specific design principles, based on their cumulative experience in other borderlands. As [Zeron \(2015, pp. 314–15\)](#) points out: “il y a un centre de référence marqué par la présence de l’église. . .la résidence des religieux se situerait à côté de l’église. . .ce système définit un territoire qui réduit les différentes populations indigènes à un seul espace politique, économique et religieux”.
- 18 As [Hausberger](#) notes, due to the isolation of these missions in this frontier, it was more common for them to interact with each other, exchanging goods that were irregularly received from Mexico City, such as medicines or other supplies ([Hausberger 2015](#), p. 27).
- 19 It is important to note that missions in the Chichimeca region, depending on their distance from the urban centers of New Spain and the resources available, were often simple structures made from materials capable of withstanding the arrows of the “savages” ([Valdés 2017](#), p. 153).
- 20 It is important not to forget, as [Torres \(2006, p. 112\)](#) aptly highlights, that there was a significant economic incentive in establishing missions, as many were located in areas with mining potential or arable land. This transformation turned them into commercial centers where various goods such as clothing, livestock, spices, wood, and even sweets from overseas were collected, making them attractive targets for raids by rebellious indigenous chieftains.
- 21 This was the advisement of the Marquês de Villamanrique to the Viceroy of New Spain in Luis de Velasco by 1590: “. . .atraer a los indios por buenos medios de paz, regalándolos y haciéndoles buenos tratamientos y dándoles de comer y vestir a costa de la hacienda de su majestad, con lo cual se han ido amansando y apaciguando. . .que administrándoles los sacramentos. . .aprendiesen la ley evangélica y doctrina cristiana” ([de Villamanrique 2000](#), p. 674).

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