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Revolution as a Sin: the Church and Spanish American Independence

The crisis of the colonial Church

The collapse of the Bourbon State and the onset of colonial rebellion were observed by the Church not simply as secular events but as a conflict of ideologies and a struggle for power which vitally affected its own interests. The long prehistory of Independence, during which colonial economies underwent growth, societies developed identity and Creoles became convinced that they were Americans not Spaniards, was part of the Church’s history. Controlled as it was by the colonial State, the Bourbon Church reacted to the vicissitudes of the State. The clergy too underwent a crisis of authority, they too were divided between peninsulares and Creoles, they too had economic interests to defend. And in the war of ideas the Church saw allegiance to Spain, obedience to monarchy and repudiation of revolution as moral imperatives and their denial as a sin. Yet the Church in America did not speak with a single voice.

Along the road to these developments a number of colonial rebellions had already tested the loyalty of the clergy. In Peru Creole protest against Bourbon fiscal and administrative policy was overtaken by a great Indian rebellion led by Túpac Amaru. The violent scenes in the southern highlands were the culmination of endemic grievances over tribute and reparto (forced sale of goods at exorbitant prices), and now aggravated by new alcabalas (sales taxes). The events of 1780–82 represented a basic defiance of the colonial State, whose officials closely scrutinised the reaction of the clergy. The credentials of the Church in Indian Peru were ambiguous. On the one hand it was a common Indian complaint that priests exacted labour services without paying a just wage, charged excessive fees for the sacraments, demanded taxes

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under pain of corporal punishment and appropriated communal land
and livestock without just title. In the second half of the eighteenth
century grievances erupted into protests and there were a number of
minor rebellions against the clergy.
On the other hand, no one denied that the Peruvian clergy, most of
them Creoles, had great power over the Indians, a power used by some
in support of royal officials but by many others in defence of Indian
rights. At the beginning of the great rebellion, while Túpac Amaru was
declaring his respect for the Church and ‘our sacred Catholic religion’,
many priests were openly sympathetic to the Indian cause. When the
conflict became more violent, and then turned against the rebels, the
clergy tended to step back. Meanwhile, the colonial authorities vented
their anger on José Manuel Moscoso, Creole bishop of Cuzco, who was
slow to report the initial outbreak and was suspected of collusion with
the rebels. The fact that Moscoso excommunicated Túpac Amaru and
his followers, helped to organise the defence of Cuzco, and subsidised
the war effort did not impress the colonial authorities; following the
defeat of the rebellion and the cruel execution of its leaders, he was
detained for two years in Lima and a further three in Spain before he
established his loyalty. Priests in the Peruvian highlands continued to be
suspect to a state which allowed not the slightest deviance by its clerical
arm, least of all in an area where they were regarded as vital agents of
social control. No one doubted that they had power over their Indian
parishioners and could make life difficult for officials seeking to impose
yet harsher royal exactions.¹
In New Granada the rebellion of the comuneros in 1781 was a Creole-
dominated protest against tax innovation and bias in appointments.
The rebellion also incorporated grievances of mestizos and Indians,
and these sectors were useful to the movement in adding to its numbers
and frightening the authorities. But they also frightened the Creoles,
who eventually lost their nerve and abandoned the struggle. A few
clergy excepted, the Church stood solid with the colonial power in
resisting the rebel claims, conscious perhaps that its own demands for
tithes often made it a target of criticism. In rebellions of this kind the
colonial clergy were expected to appear before the mob in liturgical
vestments, raise the monstrance bearing the blessed sacrament and
appeal for calm. In 1781 the rebels paid more attention to Archbishop
Antonio Caballero y Góngora, who led the negotiations on the king’s
side and secured an agreed settlement. The Crown capitalised on his
moral authority by appointing him viceroy of New Granada, in which
capacity he undertook to effect reconciliation of absolute monarchy and