

d. Summary

It is interesting how many of the early explorers marked their industry with a "faith in God." Columbus was primary among these and with this group there seems to have been a profound interest in the "faith" and its applications to the indigenous population. Certainly many of the early priests, monks, etc., were motivated by religious zeal more than any other single factor.

The efforts of this group were seriously hampered by the adventurers, fortune seekers, and enslavers. Working within tyrannical frameworks the church was often a servant of the governmental authorities and while it decried abuses was often not in a position to do anything positive about them. This explains much of the ecclesiastical conditions of central and south America in the past centuries. North America, as noted several times, was spared much of this due to the lack of immediate pursuable fortune. Hence the missionaries were largely free to do their work with less interference of the monetary worshippers. It meant that what work was done was better done and more solidly established.

Maybe one of the greater weaknesses in the Roman missions, however, was in the binding of the converts to a party...and a foreign party at that...rather than to the Gospel and the saving message. In some places syncretistic moves were made in the development of converts and this always results in a weakening of the Christian position with eventual deplorable results. The Roman emphasis on mystery was ideal for reaching Indian converts and easily assimilated some original beliefs. But in time this aspect shrouds a faith in the unknown and the unknowable.

The Roman Catholic parties were also hindered in North America by the continual change in foreign leadership. While much of the territory was always in one hands or another, shifts in influence from England to France and vice-versa, materially affected the native work. Since the nations were not reluctant to use everything from bribery to force in gaining the alliance of the Indians it is not surprising that they sought to take advantage of religious alliance as well.

But overall the largest Roman Catholic work was in the southwest with the Mississippi valley and the Great Lakes region being second. The great Catholic growth in America will come through immigration, not conversion of the natives.

3. The Religious Backgrounds of the Eastern Colonists.

Our intention in this section is to first look at the people and their aspirations and then the settlements and churches they founded. In our classification this period is the totality of the colonial period until the American Revolution. While ecclesiastical settlement is not absolutely rigid in the colonies it does tend to patterns that will allow this sort of treatment.