

*What was the relationship between church and state in Mexico and why was it so different from that of the United States?*

Unlike the United States, which was founded on the principle of religious freedom and the separation of church and state, Mexico's religious heritage was quite distinct. Beginning with the Spanish reconquest of Spain from the Moors between the 700s and the 1300s, the role of the Catholic Church as the sole representative of Christianity in Spain was essential. This experience influenced the Spanish Crown to assign the Catholic Church a fundamental role in the conquest of New Spain, a large part of which became Mexico in 1821. Beginning with the expeditions to the New World, the Crown assigned two priests to every land or sea expedition. Spanish authorities believed priests could be useful in facilitating the European conquest of the indigenous communities. Their belief proved to be accurate. Indeed, a case could be made that after the initial phase of the violent conquest by the soldiers, priests were essential to increasing the expansion of Spanish political authorities. Using their intellectual skills,

they learned numerous indigenous languages and provided a liaison among soldiers, conquistadores, and the indigenous leaders.

The Spanish authorities created an ambitious mission system, operated by members of religious orders such as the Franciscans or Jesuits and designed to produce agricultural goods and products to benefit the Spanish economy. These missions existed throughout New Spain and eventually became the basis for numerous influential cities in the United States, including Albuquerque, Tucson, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco. Once the initial colonies were established, the Church was assigned the responsibility for being a censor of radical ideas, including religious beliefs which were viewed as heretical to Catholicism, such as Judaism, Protestantism, and indigenous religions, as well as radical secular beliefs questioning the authority of the monarchical system on which the colonial structure relied. The Church generated an index of banned books that were not allowed to circulate in the colonies and controlled the publication of political and religious tracts. Their representatives served as customs inspectors, along with civil officials, searching for such banned works on incoming ships.

Assigned these and other responsibilities, the Church, in effect, was an essential ally of the state in the New World. It supported the Crown and became an integral part of the governing structure. This does not mean, however, that their relationship did not involve tensions and conflicts. Over the centuries, for example, religious orders tried to retain long-term control over numerous mission properties, bringing them in conflict both with diocesan authorities, that is, ordinary priests, as well as civil authorities. They were given the responsibility of protecting the indigenous populations from exploitation by the colonists, but more typically Church representatives colluded with the settlers to exploit the indigenous people.

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**Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know**