The study of the history of religion(s), as such, has never existed in Mexico as a distinct discipline. Aside from the fact that from early on there have been theological studies in confessional centers, the study of religion has remained a component of other disciplines like History, Art History, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, or Philosophy.

The history of the study of religions in Mexico coincides with the political history of the country. Therefore, it is important to recall that in 1521 the aboriginal peoples who had achieved a high level of civilization were conquered by the Spanish and converted by force to Roman Catholicism. Spain had very recently fought its last battle against the Muslims, the Jews had been expelled from their territory or forced to conversion, and the Reform Movement was in its climax in the rest of Europe. With the help of the Inquisition, which began in 1480, Spain had initiated a fight against all non-Catholics.

One of the excuses for the conquest of the Indians was their conversion to the “true faith”. The fight of the Catholic monarchs against idolatries and heresies was transplanted to Spanish America and it included anyone suspected of being Protestant or of having converted to Judaism or Islam. Consequently, Jews, Muslims and Protestants were not permitted to enter the colonies. Nevertheless some “Crypto-Jews” did manage to enter the New Spain and even played important roles provided they were not caught by the Inquisition, which had been introduced to the New Spain in 1567.

The evangelistic work was very active and a process of fusion between Catholicism and the various forms of regional pre-Hispanic religions started very soon, resulting in varying degrees of syncretism. But generally the Catholic church controlled the social life of the people. Only 26 years after the Conquest of the capital city of the Aztecs, the Catholic hierarchy was firmly established. Cathedrals and

---

1 This history includes only those studies that were done by Mexicans or by non-Mexicans who live in Mexico and who work for Mexican institutions.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2000  
Method & Theory in the Study of Religion  
12, 38-48
parish houses were built in all the dioceses and a stipend was allotted to each of them. The Church monopolized intellectual knowledge as well. Scholars, who were in charge of schools and education, were mostly either priests or had been trained under the Church. The University of Mexico, an ecclesiastical institution where Scholastic philosophy and theology were the main subjects taught, was founded in 1551. During the same century, priests living in the New Spain wrote important books on theology.

Although it exercised a monopoly on both social and intellectual life, the Church was not a unified system of ideas; different trends of thought were prevalent. For example, the friars of the Mendicant orders, who had come to evangelize the region, held utopic ideas. Many of them were staunch defenders of the Indians against their exploitation by the conquerors. They were also against the spread of the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose apparition, according to tradition, had taken place only ten years after the conquest. The members of the Church’s hierarchy, however, strongly supported the policy of the Conquerors, which included remaking the older, indigenous deities into Roman Catholic saints.

Later in the 17th and 18th centuries, there were disputes between secular and non-secular priests as well as between higher and lower clergy. It was among the latter that liberal ideas started to flourish for it was these priests who were the most educated and who had been influenced by the revolutionary writings of France. It is for this reason that the priests of the lower clergy played such an important role in the struggle for Independence from 1810 to 1821. Ninety priests actively participated and two of them, Hidalgo and Morelos, were the most important leaders of the Independence. Both were captured by the Spanish and excommunicated by the Inquisition before their execution.

In 1803 Alexander von Humboldt visited the New Spain and on his return to Europe he gave a vision of the New World that previously had eluded the attention of European scholars. His vision was one reason why many Europeans came to visit the country in the second half of the 19th century, after the Independence. A few years later, the Société des Americanists was founded in France by scholars from Germany, France and the United States, who then began writing about pre-Hispanic American culture and religions.

Even before Independence, the Church had started having problems with the Spanish Government, but the situation became disas-