The social atmosphere in Spain during the Fifteenth Century was one of passionate religious zeal brought about by centuries of Christian-Muslim conflict. The Spanish brought with them this fervor as they colonized the recently discovered “New World.” After the triumph of the Protestant Reformation in northern and central Europe, mission work was perceived as a way of restoring the Roman Catholic Church’s prominence in the world. The Americas provided an ideal venue as it housed millions of “pagan” natives, supposedly ready and waiting for Catholic salvation. The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico were one of the Spaniards’ targets for conversion. The Spanish began the conversion of the native immediately following conquest; they subdued the Indians with “a sword in one hand and a bible in the other.” They employed many methods to convert the natives, but a vast number of Indians converted not because of true piety or direct force exerted by the Spanish. Most converted to simply survive in the new environment that the Spanish had created. The Pueblos of New Mexico converted to Catholicism primarily out of necessity, not because of genuine religious devotion or from Spanish military might.

The Pueblo Indians were groups of natives in central New Mexico and northeast Arizona that resided in permanent stone or adobe dwellings. The term “Pueblo” refers to a cultural classification, which disregards language and tribal lines that separate the various Pueblo groups. The Pueblo were mainly agricultural, growing principally beans and corn along with pumpkins, cotton, and tobacco. Despite the arid weather, the Pueblos were assiduous farmers and thrived agriculturally. The natives did some limited hunting, mostly for jackrabbits. Crafts such as weaving, pottery, and basket production were fashioned with skill and artistry. Women crafted pots, made bread, and were the owners of the homes and gardens, as familial descent was usually traced through the mother’s line. Men and women shared in activities such as basket and cloth weaving, basket, building houses, and farming. Individual “pueblos” were independent identities that had connections to other pueblos through related customs and languages.

Pueblo religion consisted in a form of animism. The religion included various ceremonies that were believed to have powers over the weather, the harvest, war, and hunting. Religious myths for the Pueblos expressed ideals and values that they held in high esteem. These myths aided in organizing and giving their society purpose. The Western concept of linear time was foreign to the Indians. They believed that time was cyclic, or as “eternally returned.” Particular events were not seen as unique. For example, a seed that sprouts into a plant, produces fruit, and then dies is reborn into another seed and the cycle is repeated.

1 Cleve Hallenbeck, Spanish Missions of the Old Southwest. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1926) p. 5.
The history of the Spanish contact with the Pueblo Indians began in 1539. Rumors of “great cities in the North” enticed the Franciscan monk, Marcos, di Niza, to make an expedition to the region of the Zuni Indians. Initially, relations were friendly but the Spanish proved capricious. Immediately following Marcos di Niza, a substantial expeditionary force was organized by Francesco Vasquez de Coronado to conquer the area. In the summer of 1540 de Coronado’s forces reached and seized the principal Zuni village. The party also penetrated into the Tiguex province on the Rio Grande, which held twelve pueblos with a population of approximately eight thousand.

Native insubordination was overcome with Spanish brutality that included being burnt at the stake or shot. Genuine campaigns of conquest did not occur until both 1598 and 1599 by Juan de Onate of Zacatecas with a force that included four hundred men and ten Franciscans. They quickly organized forms of government in the region that included a priest in each district to control the Indians. The Spanish altered and virtually destroyed the Pueblo’s way of life. Abuses towards the Indians continued after Juan de Onate; on January twenty-fourth, 1599, the residents of the cliff village of Acoma were massacred after a Spanish detachment was slain in that locale.4

Converting the Indians through mission efforts became an integral goal and desire of Spanish colonization. Indian conversion not only fulfilled the religious fervor of the Spanish, but had other goals as well. With few colonists in New Mexico, there was a shortage of labor. The natives were the obvious choice of cheap labor for the Spanish missionaries. The Franciscan missionaries were to convert the Pueblos to Christianity, and also to instruct the Indians on Western methods of farming, building, and mechanics.5

Most missionaries did not know the native language, which resulted in miscommunication between the Spanish and the Indians. Due to the lack of communication, the Indians did not fully understand or accept the basic tenets of Christianity until the missionaries finally learned their language or, more likely, the natives learned Spanish. Baptism was considered enough to temporarily save a native’s soul, even if the “converted” Indian had little or no understanding of Christianity. The natives’ temporary salvation through baptism was conditional; the natives were to understand that the “padre” through the Sacrament of Penance ultimately decided whether the Indians would enter heaven or purgatory. This blackmail gave a considerable amount of influence to the padres over their neophytes.6 By 1617, there were eleven Franciscan churches in New Mexico and fourteen thousand Indians had been baptized. These figures expanded even further as the Spanish gained more influence through military force and with the efforts of the missionaries to forty-three churches and thirty-four thousand natives baptized in 1627.7

The arrival of Juan de Onate and the Spanish brought confusion and chaos into Pueblo society. The Spanish disturbed agricultural practices and trading networks among the Pueblos of New Mexico. They seized Pueblo food supplies, which in turn ruined trade between the Pueblos and the nomadic Apache and Navajo tribes.8 In addition, the Pueblos were required to pay “tributes” to their new Spanish governor in the forms of clothing and maize. In the arid environment in which the Pueblos lived, these necessities were not in abundance. Thus, the New

4 Mooney, pp. 3-4.
5 Hallenbeck, p. 11.
6 Hallenbeck, pp. 85-86.
7 Mooney, pp. 4-5.
Mexican natives found their culture dependent upon the Spanish for subsistence, even though the Spanish were the very ones that threatened their survival.⁹ The “tribute” payments began when Juan de Onate and his expedition first came to New Mexico. They lacked their own provisions, so they forced the natives to give them their own.¹⁰ The brutality that the Spanish displayed when collecting tribute from the Indians was especially callous and unfeeling, as mentioned by the Spaniard Fray Lope Izquierdo in 1601:

> Our men, with little consideration, took blankets away from the Indian women, leaving them naked and shivering with cold. Finding themselves naked and miserable, they embraced their children tightly in their arms to protect them, without making any resistance to the offenses done to them, for they are a humble people, and in virtue and morality the best behaved thus far discovered.¹¹

Worse than the clothing tributes were the food tributes exacted by the Spanish. Harvests could not be counted on every year to yield the same amount. Drought and natural disasters occurred frequently, which resulted in the Pueblos storing and preserving food each year in expectation of an unfruitful harvest. The Spaniards’ demands for the natives’ food supplies annihilated the balance that the Pueblos had maintained with their environment for countless generations.¹² By ruining the Pueblo’s harvesting techniques, the Spanish also devastated the trading networks between the Pueblos and other native groups. Trade had been a means of survival to groups who suffered poor harvest years. A group would trade their goods for another village’s foodstuffs, ensuring survival. When the Spanish seized and demanded provisions, these connections were destroyed.¹³ Relations between the Pueblos and the nomadic Navajo and Apache tribes suffered, not only from the disrupted trading patterns, but also because of a newly-introduced means of raiding the Pueblos: the horse. In the horse, the Apache and Navajo groups were not limited to travel by foot, and had an advantage of speed and a means of carrying away lager amounts of plunder. The Navajo and Apache bands now attacked the Pueblos with added frequency, more speed, and greater efficiency.¹⁴ The Pueblos became completely dependent on their Spanish invaders for the essentials of life, clothing, food, and protection.

The Indians were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism in order to survive under the conditions that the Spanish had created for them. Conversion to the Pueblos was simply a practical ploy for survival; they still practiced their traditional religion, though concealing their genuine religious beliefs and practices from the missionaries.¹⁵ In exchange for converting to Christianity, the Indians received food, clothing, and protection from the Spanish. The natives’ situation was so desperate that some even gave themselves as servants to the Spanish in hopes of obtaining maize or other foods.¹⁶ The friars realized that the Catholic faith had little appeal to the Indians. Fray Francisco de Zamora describes why:

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⁹ Knaut, p. 57.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 58.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 59.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid., p. 61.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.
¹⁵ Ibid., p. 53.
¹⁶ Knaut, p. 65.
[The Spaniards] took away from them by force all the food that they had
gathered for many years, without leaving them any for the support of
themselves and their children, robbed them of the scanty clothing they had
to protect themselves...causing the natives much harm and wounding their feelings. This
brought great discredit to our teaching, for they said that if we would are Christians
caused so much harm and violence, why should they become Christians?17

Loyalty among the natives towards the Spanish was scant due to this hypocrisy and cruelty.
Spanish military might drove more Indians to convert for the sake of protection against the
Apache and the Navajo. Evidence that conversion was not complete among the Pueblos also
emerged in forms of resistance. By maintaining their traditional religious practices in secret, the
Indians resisted full acceptance of Western religious thought and belief. Resistance also
culminated in violent resistance movements against the missionaries.

The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico faced the decision to either convert to Christianity, or
subject themselves to hunger, the elements, and the threat of other hostile native groups. Their
choice to convert to Roman Catholicism originated from despair and necessity, not from sincere
religious devotion or even directly due to Spanish military force. Evidence that the Pueblos were
not true Christian converts culminated in 1680 with the Pueblo War of Independence. The
Indians revolted against the oppressive missionaries that had stifled their religious practices,
seized their food, demanded their labor, and abused Indian women. The Pueblo population had
also plummeted drastically due to the diseases brought by the Spanish. The Pueblos placed the
blame on the Spanish for their hardships, who had ended the natives’ religious ceremonies that
the Pueblo believed kept the world in balance. The resulting revolt of 1680 returned New
Mexico to the Pueblos as well as liberated them from the Spanish for twelve years. With the
reconquest of the Pueblos by Diego de Vargas in 1692 came more tolerant relations towards the
Indians.18 Though smaller revolts continued to occur, the more lenient treatment made the
Indians more apt to accept Spanish religion and customs, and culminated in a culture that was a
mixture of the two societies, allowing the Pueblos more freedom to practice their traditional and
unique religion.

17 Ibid., pp. 65-66.
18 Colin G. Calloway, First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History. (Bedford/St. Martin’s:
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