

*Institute of European Studies*  
(University of California, Berkeley)

---

*Year 2008*

*Paper 080225*

---

Forging Catholic National Identities in  
the Transatlantic Spanish Monarchy,  
1808-1814

Scott Eastman  
Creighton University

# Forging Catholic National Identities in the Transatlantic Spanish Monarchy, 1808-1814

## **Abstract**

By 1810, with the convening of the Cortes of Cádiz, the opening of the public sphere and war threatening to tear apart the monarchy, Spaniards began to forge a new national identity and an inclusive transatlantic nation. The common cultural idiom of religion and the language of national sovereignty provided a unifying symbolic repertoire for Spanish national identities during the transition from the Old Regime to liberal ascendancy. Yet American independence severed the ties of a transatlantic Spanish monarchy and an inclusive national identity as prescribed in the Constitution of 1812. The Virgin of Guadalupe, which had been appropriated by royalists as well as insurgents during the War of Independence in New Spain, soon emerged as the symbolic image of the Mexican nation. Religious imagery that had served to unite Spaniards on both sides of the Atlantic fragmented into regional identifications in the Americas, and Spain itself emerged as a sovereign nation that had broken with the Old Regime.

This paper was presented at the conference on The End of the Old Regime in the Iberian World sponsored by the Spanish Studies Program and the Portuguese Studies Program of UC Berkeley on February 8-9, 2008.

## **Forging Catholic National Identities in the Transatlantic Spanish Monarchy, 1808-1814**

Scott Eastman  
Creighton University

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the political boundaries of colonial viceroyalties had yet to be demarcated into national borders, and no nations can be said to have existed in Spanish America. Patriots in Spain and New Spain drew upon a common template as they articulated identities grounded in both secular and spiritual discourses, Catholicism and the legitimating rhetoric of monarchical rule. By 1810, however, with the convening of the Cortes of Cádiz, the opening of the public sphere and war threatening to tear apart the monarchy, Spaniards began to forge a new national identity and an inclusive transatlantic nation. .

National histories, reified upon achieving independence, have often been studied apart from one another. Within an American context, Mexican nationalism has been analyzed as a natural outcome of the independence struggle that culminated in 1821, just as the other nationalist traditions borne out of colonial Spanish America have laid claims to a singular and unique past that justified independence and political sovereignty. Such teleological narratives, however, have served to obscure central features of the struggles against Spain. For example, Jaime Rodríguez has forcefully argued that early political leaders throughout the empire espoused autonomy within a composite Spanish monarchy rather than outright independence.<sup>1</sup> Thus, that the priest Hidalgo rebelled in the name of Fernando VII and under the banner of the Catholic church did not seem contradictory to his followers at the time. Yet few works have studied the concurrent development of Spanish nationalist discourses as well as those of American, Mexican and other emerging

---

<sup>1</sup> Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge, 1998).

identities. In looking to redefine and shape an ‘imagined’ national polity, ideologues of various political persuasions and localized affiliations utilized similar language and points of reference to ground national identification in the Catholic faith professed by all members of the Hispanic world.

An uprising against French occupation of peninsular Spain followed on the heels of royal abdications and the installation of a French monarch in 1808. By 1810, autonomist sentiment posed a serious challenge to the authority of the Spanish colonial system and the legitimacy of the Bourbon reforms in the Americas. With an external enemy to fight in peninsular Spain, national identity coalesced in part around an oppositional form of identification, whereas civil war disrupted a similar path from taking shape in the New World. In New Spain, nationalist discourses built upon earlier conceptions of Creole patriotism and contributed to notions of an essential and separate American identity that came to mark political declarations and calls for independence by the end of the war. In both Spain and Spanish America, nationalist clerics contributed to notions of separate political and cultural identities. Sermons and other public religious discourse delivered across the Spanish empire shed light on links between Spanish and Spanish American patriotism and particularist nationalisms.<sup>2</sup> One historian of New Spain has recently noted that the identity of *novohispanos* as members of the Spanish imperial state has not been adequately studied.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, historians studying European nationalisms have only recently foregrounded the imperial relationship with the

---

<sup>2</sup> François-Xavier Guerra argues that “sermons, in all their forms, constituted an essential vehicle for the construction and diffusion of values and identities.” François-Xavier Guerra, “Forms of Communication, Political Spaces, and Cultural Identities in the Creation of Spanish American Nations,” in Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen, eds., *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth Century Latin America* (Washington, D.C., 2003), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Herrejón Peredo, *Del sermón al discurso cívico: México, 1760-1834* (Zamora, Michoacán, 2003), 253.

metropole. In order to expand on this historiography, I have taken into account both ideas and practices that unified the territories of the Spanish monarchy as well as the fractures and disjunctures that displayed regional differences. Rather than presenting American and Spanish identities as mutually exclusive or oppositional, I argue that the common cultural idiom of religion and the language of national sovereignty provided a unifying symbolic repertoire for Spanish national identities during the transition from the Old Regime to liberal ascendancy.

### **Appropriating the Virgin Mary into Nationalist Discourses**

Prior to the tumult of the wars of independence and the Napoleonic invasion of peninsular Spain, few clerics on either side of the Atlantic glorified the “people” as the nation. The structures of the Old Regime state and the hierarchical social order remained firmly entrenched. Yet in the aftermath of the French Revolution, a small number of patriotic ecclesiastics began to use such language in New Spain. Preaching in 1802, one priest dedicated his sermon to “[the] nation beloved and chosen by God.”<sup>4</sup> In celebrating the day of *nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza*, the cleric insisted that salvation lay in the merciful guidance of the Virgin Mary: “Princes, Priests, the Spanish People! There is our security, there our liberty, there our protection.”<sup>5</sup> His appeal, in the name of the church and the Spanish nation, pointedly conjured the image of a unified transatlantic audience of parishioners that shared a single cultural landscape. Notably given on the day of festival for the patron saint of Zaragoza, the sermon does not differentiate between American and peninsular Spaniards and is addressed to “Spain, fortunate Spain,” rather

---

<sup>4</sup> Ramon Casaus Torres y las Plazas, *Sermon panegírico de nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza* (México, 1803), in *Colección Lafragua* (C.L.), Biblioteca Nacional, México, vol. 558, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

than just the local parishioners. Assuming reverence and devotion to a peninsular image of the Virgin, the sermon draws on Spanish national identity as a shared idiom. The sermon concluded: “This Virgin of Pilar strengthens me: this Image consoles me....Blessed, blessed you will be forever, oh Mother of the Spaniards, the sweetness of our life, the gateway of divine grace and of the sovereign fatherland!”<sup>6</sup> This suggests that constructions of identity drew upon a wide range of symbols, including peninsular iconography, and were not limited to images or figures of local historical significance.

Although the Virgin of Guadalupe provided a distinctly American symbol for Hidalgo’s uprising in 1810, sermons did not single out Guadalupe as a sacrosanct national icon prior to the outbreak of war. For example, sermons honored *nuestra Señora del Pilar* as well as *nuestra Señora de Covadonga* and linked the two together as divinely inspired protection for all “Spaniards, [sons of] the Marian Nation.” One ecclesiastic, glorifying the Virgin of Covadonga in 1806 in Mexico City, emphasized the spiritual debt Spaniards owed to Mary: “To you, in Zaragoza, they owed the reception of the divine faith, the true liberty of the sons of God, and to you they owe in Covadonga liberty from the yoke of the Saracen, the preservation of that religion you brought to them, so that you were...the tender Mother, you were the Defender, and you were also the Renowned Restorer.” He likened the Marian images to the heroic defenders of religion and the fatherland, leading the battle against the Muslim yoke of oppression and domination toward a national rebirth in the eighth century. Mary, the holy mother, inspired soldiers to fight against the enemies of religion in defense of their homeland as the “Liberator of

---

<sup>6</sup> Casaus Torres y las Plazas, *Sermon panegírico de nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza*, 1, 36.

the Spaniards.”<sup>7</sup> She also represented a devotional figure of maternal strength, allowing for her followers to imagine themselves delivered and reborn into a holy land. Royalists were able to utilize these signifiers in defending Spanish identity during the wars of independence across Spanish America.

### **Familial Metaphors of Hispanic Identity**

The language of kinship utilized by the clergy embraced the idea of peninsular Spain as the central maternal figure within a familial structure—the mother defined by her fertility as well as her wisdom. As a teacher, the mother had instilled religion in her offspring from birth as their defining trait. The enlightened cleric Manuel de la Bárcena explicitly maintained that “we are Christians before we are citizens.” Furthermore, he contended that “Catholicism is inseparable from the Spanish nation...he that is not Catholic is not a Spaniard.”<sup>8</sup> For both the descendants of Spaniards as well as the Indians, the *peninsulares* had fostered the love of God, King and Country throughout the diverse reaches of Spanish America. One priest exhorted in 1810: “break the wall that divides the child from the mother: [and] they will never hear the hated names of Creoles and *gachupines*; we are all Spaniards, some European and others American; but all true Spaniards.”<sup>9</sup> As the legitimate children of the motherland, Americans were bound to Spain and could not justifiably break the bonds that tied them together as a family. This

---

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Ignacio Heredia y Sarmiento, *Sermon panegírico de nuestra Señora de Covadonga* (México, 1807), in C.L., vol. 1342, 26, ii.

<sup>8</sup> Manuel de la Bárcena, *Exhortación que hizo al tiempo de jurarse la Constitución Política de la Monarquía Española* (Méjico, 1820), in C.L., vol. 149, 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Manuel Ignacio González del Campillo, *Pastoral que el ilustrísimo señor Dor. D. Manuel Ignacio González del Campillo dignísimo obispo de la Puebla de los Angeles dirige a sus diocesanos* (1810), in C.L., vol. 995, 12.

became a common theme of sermons and religious instruction during the first years after the Napoleonic invasion of Spain.

Hidalgo, the priest and leader of the initial uprising in New Spain, framed a discourse of national identity, what Lynch referred to as “incipient nationalism,” in terms strikingly similar to those articulated by royalist clerics and by the clergy in Spain.<sup>10</sup> A common language of Spanish nationalism, littered with religious metaphors and references, imbued sermons and calls to arms across the Spanish monarchy. Formal armies as well as guerrilla bands offered their services to the fatherland in the name of religion. Reports circulated of troops in Spain refusing to fight on Sundays and of palpable discontent in the absence of a priest to give mass.<sup>11</sup> The trinity of God, King and Country, with God often listed first among the three, provided ideological ammunition for those fighting the French in Spain as well as for the combatants in the civil wars in the Americas. For example, Hidalgo insisted that “the object of our constant concern is to maintain our Religion, the King, the Fatherland, and the purity of our customs.”<sup>12</sup> Opponents of the uprising led by Hidalgo and Morelos condemned the bloody civil war that had broken out as sacrilege, and Hidalgo was excommunicated prior to his execution. Yet they too justified their stance in the language of Catholic piety, upholding the pillars of church and state. The Bishop of Michoacán, remaining loyal to the crown, exhorted his parishioners to “understand the obligations that one has, as a true Christian, to God, King, and to the Fatherland, and to each one of your fellow citizens.

---

<sup>10</sup> José Antonio Serrano Ortega, “El discurso de la unión: El patriotismo novohispano en la propaganda realista durante el movimiento insurgente de Hidalgo,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 14 (1994), 157-77.

<sup>11</sup> Manuel Moreno Alonso, *Los Españoles durante la ocupación Napoleónica: la vida cotidiana en la vorágine* (Málaga, 1997), 195.

<sup>12</sup> Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, *Manifiesto del Sr. Hidalgo* (1811), in J.E. Hernández y Davalos, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de la guerra de independencia de México*, Vol. 1 (Liechtenstein, 1968), 119.



All of you can understand your true interests, and embrace the certain paths of obtaining them.”<sup>13</sup> Preaching against Hidalgo in Guanajuato in 1810, the site of some of the first campaigns led by insurgents, the friar Diego Miguel Bringas impugned the “traitors to America, to Spain, and to the Church,” because they “declare war against their fathers, their sons, their brothers, their monarch, their fatherland and against their sacred religion.”<sup>14</sup> Each side accused the other of crimes against religion, claiming exclusive rights of speaking in the name of the universal Catholic faith. Hidalgo railed against his enemies, the men that “are Catholic only to benefit themselves: their God is money.” He concluded that “under the veil of Religion and of friendship they want to make you victims of their insatiable greed.”<sup>15</sup>

In peninsular Spain, the French served as the primary targets of religious ire. Clerics unleashed a barrage of anti-French sentiment, imploring Spaniards to defend the nation against the enemies of religion and the bearers of atheism and revolution. Conservative clerics argued that the French symbolized all of the evils then poisoning European societies. In the aptly titled *Preservativo contra irreligion*, Rafael de Vélez inveighed against the French: “In all of Europe they are known by the names of *the enlightened, materialists, atheists, unbelievers, libertines, masons, the impious*. Their doctrines against kings, authorities and religion merit these titles: and their works expose them at least as fanatics, misanthropic enemies of all society.”<sup>16</sup> He rallied the faithful to

---

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Abad Queipo, *Edicto instructivo que el Ilustrísimo Señor Don Manuel Abad Queypo* (México, 1810), in C.L., vol. 995, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Diego Miguel Bringas, *Sermón que en la Reconquista de Guanajuato, predicó extemporáneamente en la Iglesia Parroquial de dicha ciudad, el Padre Fr. Diego Miguel Bringas* (1810), in *Colección Documental del Fraile* (C.D.F.), Servicio Histórico Militar, vol. 604, sig. 2200, 36.

<sup>15</sup> Hidalgo y Costilla, *Manifiesto del Sr. Hidalgo y Costilla*, in Hernández y Dávalos, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de la guerra de independencia de México*, Vol. 1, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Rafael de Vélez, *Preservativo contra la irreligión, o los planes de la Filosofía contra la Religión y el Estado, realizados por la Francia para subyugar la Europa, seguidos por Napoleón en la conquista de*

the national cause with cries of ““long live the Virgin Mary: long live Jesus Christ: long live their faith, their religion: long live Fernando VII: death to the French.”<sup>17</sup> Vélez boasted that “all Spaniards heard nothing but cries of *long live Spain, religion will triumph, death to France.*”<sup>18</sup> Just as insurgents called for “death to the *gachupines*” in New Spain—some demanded that all Europeans be killed—peninsular Spaniards attacked the French in nationalistic terms that had not been used in the previous war of 1793-95.<sup>19</sup> The entire French nation had become the enemy of Spain rather than a select few impious individuals representing seditious causes.

In order to demonize those who fought against the uprising in New Spain, insurgents accused royalists of secretly conspiring with the French.<sup>20</sup> As in Spain, anti-French epithets became synonymous with atheism and hostility toward the Catholic church. Bringas portrayed Hidalgo and his followers as counterparts to Napoleon and the French, “penetrated by the spirit of the failed politics of the impious Napoleon Bonaparte,” corrupting the Americas with rapacious French ideas of liberty and equality.<sup>21</sup> Conflating the enemy with the French proved to be a powerful ideological weapon, which in turn established the idea that Spaniards in general were tied to the illegitimate regime of Bonaparte that had to be defeated.

During the early stages of the conflict prior to 1814, America represented a regional variant within the context of Spanish identity. Rarely did clerics eulogize *el pueblo Mexicano* in nationalist terms. The term for the “Mexican people” simply

---

*España, y dados a luz por algunos de nuestros sabios en perjuicio de nuestra patria* (1813), in C.D.F., vol. 172, sig. 701, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>19</sup> José Álvarez Junco, *Mater Dolorosa: La idea de España en el siglo XIX* (Madrid, 2001), 339.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico's National State* (Stanford, 1996), 67.

<sup>21</sup> Bringas, *Sermón que en la Reconquista de Guanaxuato*, 4.

indicated the populace of the city of Mexico. The nation, on the other hand, composed of the people, was a contested amalgam of regional and religious sentiments that had not coalesced around a central defining feature. America remained the *patria chica* with Spain as the symbol of a broader inclusive cultural identification. For example, even Hidalgo, as the leader of the independence movement, articulated an American identity rather than a specifically Mexican nationalism. In a manifesto from 1811 written shortly before his execution, he extolled “America beloved fatherland of mine! Americans, my compatriots Europeans my progenitors and above all the Insurgents, my sympathetic partisans.”<sup>22</sup> Royalist clerics portrayed an attachment to America in similar terms: “in the present epoch in which America has declared itself an integral part of the Monarchy...and in which the Cortes has been convoked for the first time...the mother country as received the clearest testimonies of the fidelity of America.”<sup>23</sup> There was little to differentiate between the rhetoric of the two opposing camps.

The Constitution of 1812 offered the possibility of reconciliation between warring factions. By bringing together both sides of the transatlantic Spanish monarchy under the auspices of constitutional government, liberals argued that the nation could once again function as an integrated polity. Representation and electoral politics promised to give a voice to the American provinces. Supporters of the constitutional regime such as Bárcena heralded the recovery of their ancient freedoms, referencing the captivity of the Israelites as a metaphor for the Spanish nation: “Chosen nation, now you leave captivity, you have reclaimed your rights [and] you are free.” Bárcena implored parishioners to

---

<sup>22</sup> Miguel Hidalgo, *Manifiesto del Sr. Hidalgo* (1811), in Hernández y Dávalos, ed., *Colección de documentos para la historia de la guerra de independencia de México*, Vol. 1, 59.

<sup>23</sup> González del Campillo, *Pastoral que el ilustrísimo señor Dor. D. Manuel Ignacio González del Campillo*, 11.

bridge the Atlantic divide between peninsular and American Spain and come together as a nation united by constitutional law: “compatriots, this small volume that you have read contains the foundation upon which to raise the edifice of our prosperity and our glory: it is the admirable product of the wisdom of two worlds, the celestial tie that reunited Europe with America, it is the Spanish Constitution.” No stronger attachment existed than that of the constitution, upon which liberals pinned their hopes and ideals: “Brothers, the storm is terrible, we have no more of an anchor than the Constitution, all Spaniards hold steady in her; if you are not to drown without recourse.”<sup>24</sup> The language of family underlined the ties between American and European Spaniards as brothers in the greater struggle against the French. In the midst of civil war and internal strife, the constitution as a unifying symbol was proclaimed from pulpits across the Americas.

By 1824, American independence had severed the ties of a transatlantic Spanish monarchy and an inclusive national identity as prescribed in the Constitution of 1812. The Virgin of Guadalupe, which had been appropriated by royalists as well as insurgents during the War of Independence in New Spain, soon emerged as the symbolic image of the Mexican nation. A profound transformation occurred during the period from 1810—with the first cry of Hidalgo’s revolt—through 1821 when Agustín Iturbide proclaimed the Mexican empire. Religious imagery that had served to unite Spaniards on both sides of the Atlantic fragmented into regional identifications in the Americas, and Spain itself emerged as a sovereign nation that had broken with the Old Regime.

---

<sup>24</sup> Bárcena, *Exhortación que hizo al tiempo de jurarse la Constitución Española, en la catedral de Valladolid de Michoacán*, 2, 6.