Death
AND
Conversion
IN THE
Andes
Lima and Cuzco,
1532–1670

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This book studies how the conversion of the Andean populations to Catholicism was achieved from a particular perspective: changes in attitudes toward death. Specifically, it investigates how and why the members of a society modify their attitudes toward the sacred to the point of changing not only their ideas and beliefs about, for example, the origin and operation of the world but the way in which they relate to their peers or what arrangements they make for the remains of their dead. The people of the Andes in the sixteenth century had no choice in their conversion to Christianity. Through different routes, men and women of all classes were compelled to receive baptism and to fulfill a series of requirements implied therein, some of which are topics of this book. Several decades later, the spread of Catholicism in the Andes was wide and effective and, despite opinions to the contrary from some observers and scholars, it had deeply permeated the lives of the indigenous population and transformed them completely. Consequently, this is also an investigation into how the conditions were established that made possible a change of this scope: the terrain, the main actors, the methods and instruments employed by missionaries and colonizers, and the reactions and strategies of the men and women who were the target of this assault.

The problem of religious conversion in the context of colonialism forms the general frame within which this study is inscribed. The work of other scholars who have explored this vast field, placing different emphases on themes, space, chronology, and point of view, is thus expanded. The use of the term “conversion” has been and still is the object of disagreement among historians and anthropologists,
and it has generated an extensive secondary literature that I shall not summarize here.¹ I would, nonetheless, like to clarify several points. In speaking of conversion, I refer to a multiple, prolonged, and non-linear process that involves an effort to adopt and adapt ideas and practices centered on the sphere of the sacred. These multiple transformations are motivated and accompanied by changes in the living conditions of their agents. In the context of colonialism, the difference between religious traditions and customs that came into contact with one another and the unequal power relationships of those who took part in the process should not necessarily lead us to imagine a scenario divided into two clearly opposing camps, each neatly defined and homogeneous.

In comparison to other times and places, the distinguishing characteristic of religious conversion in the context of Spanish colonialism was its unavoidability. In most of the New World territories occupied by the Spaniards, cooperation between Church and state in the evangelizing mission was also a distinctive feature.² In the Andes in particular, the conquest and the establishment of political and social order had a specifically Catholic orientation. It could not have been otherwise, because the prevailing culture and legal order in Spain were informed by that same source.

Moreover, the missionary and colonization process in the Andes was affected by the political, religious, and cultural reforms of the mid-sixteenth-century Council of Trent.³ In Mexico in the years immediately following the conquest, the mendicant orders were able to put into practice missionary ideas and methods of the period prior to the Catholic reform, with a considerable degree of autonomy, utopianism, original evangelizing materials, and decentralized printing presses established early on. For a while, the religious orders operated to a large extent free from state oversight and a centralized ecclesiastical structure.⁴ The later date of the conquest in the Andes and, above all, the period of wars and enormous political instability that followed it resulted in evangelization headed by a Church eager to stake out a clearly institutional role. At the foundation of the Andean colonial project, the ecclesiastical and political authorities were for the most part bound by the dictates of Trent. This is clear not only in doctrinal issues or in the evangelizing role that fell to the secular clergy
and to the Society of Jesus but also in such crucial and lasting factors as linguistic policy, control of the printing presses, and the planning of urban centers, crucial spaces from which Christianity was spread. Cooperation and symbiosis between the evangelization and the colonial project were fundamental to the Andes. For these reasons, studying the process of religious conversion involves not only attending to its functions and consequences in the area of ideas, beliefs, and the transmission and expression of doctrinal knowledge articulated in a coherent discourse, but also to the construction of the colonial order. Its course was marked by a diversity of factors, some not doctrinal but very influential, which left their stamp on it and legitimized it.

Some of the most important studies on colonization and religious conversion in the Andes cover very wide geographical and cultural areas as well as very long periods and multiple topics. This study is an analysis of a single theme: death, and attitudes toward it in the context of the conquest and colonization. It is an extensive area that permits an approach to the process of Christianization and colonization in the Andes from different angles. Although indebted to them, this is not a full analysis of death in the vein of the classic studies on the topic, which sought to understand the course of a society or of a “civilization,” the development of symbols and traditions, or even changes in the experience of a given social class, city, or particular region.

In considering death, we are led to study the peculiar features that distinguish a society: ways in which the body is treated, specific rituals of mourning and commemoration, methods and sites for placing the remains of the dead, and explanations of what happens to people once they have crossed the threshold of death, among others. Additionally, the study of death brings us face to face with questions with which all human beings are concerned: where we come from, and where we are going; what our ancestors mean to us, and their role in our lives; what we can do in the face of the pain and emptiness brought about by others’ deaths and the fear and uncertainty provoked by the idea of our own; what happens to the body; what feelings arise in us from the decomposition of matter, the disintegration of what we are and what we possess; how much importance we ascribe to this dispersion; and how we imagine the living will remember
us. Besides its religious significance, death has political repercussions, acting as a unifying or disintegrating force upon groups of humans. It influences the way in which societies distribute the physical space they inhabit: space assigned to the dead will always be in reference to space occupied by the living. The way a society relates to its dead molds its vision of the past and affects the way ties are established between the living. In the Andes, death operated as a force that not only had a destructive momentum but was also fundamental in the formation of colonial society.

This book proposes that the Christianization of death was crucial in the conversion of the Andean peoples to Catholicism and investigates its history from the moment of the Spanish invasion in 1532 to well into the seventeenth century, when colonial control and evangelization were fairly well established and major and lasting changes had come about across the Andes. The Church by that point had developed clear guidelines, materials, and personnel to carry out the missionary project; ecclesiastical and political jurisdictions were outlined, and the territory was thus organized into cities, settlements, and parishes, the majority of whose residents buried the remains of their loved ones in churches. Policies and institutions that sought to extend their reach across the whole of the territory and its settlers show the desire for uniformity characteristic of both reformed Catholicism and the ideals of the Spanish crown in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But this does not mean that those policies and institutions were imposed uniformly or, even less, that the directions and consequences were the same everywhere.

In order to explain the nuances and contrasts that characterize this process, the book offers a comparative study of the two major cities of the Peruvian viceroyalty: Cuzco and Lima. There are two reasons for this choice. First, the cities arose as models of physical, political, and spiritual order and, as such, were the strategic sites from which both evangelization and colonization were spread across the rest of the territory. Second, Cuzco and Lima were urban centers of practically equal hierarchy and importance, but for very different reasons. Cuzco, which had been the region’s ancient political and sacred center, was home to the most representative and well-established indigenous elite in the Andes: the descendants of the Incas. Thus, its
political and symbolic significance continued to be very great during the colonial period. Because of their power, especially symbolically, the ties that the Incan descendants established with the Spanish population were multiple and long lasting. Both the city and the region it controlled made it through the process of conquest and colonization without suffering great population losses, either numerically or culturally. With the peak of silver mining operations in Upper Peru, Cuzco retained its major-city status, which efficiently connected the southern highlands with the rest of the Peruvian viceroyalty.

Lima, in contrast, was established as the seat of Spanish power. Its native population was seriously weakened by the effects of the Spanish invasion, and the majority of its original leadership was marginalized in terms of both physical location and political significance. Upon becoming a political, economic, and commercial center, Lima turned into a magnet for immigrants of all social strata from abroad and from all points of the viceroyalty. Its indigenous elite had little chance to develop a self-legitimizing discourse that would appeal to its ancient historical roots. In a dynamic socioeconomic setting, there was wide social mobility among the indigenous population. The city maintained a complex relationship with its surroundings, constantly exchanging people, goods, ideas, and customs. In this context, both the installation of the colonial order and the conversion of the native populations to Catholicism were achieved. In terms of ritual and funerary customs, the Christianization of death in both cities followed general patterns that prevailed at that point in the Catholic world, but these patterns nonetheless assumed specific forms as a result of regional differences and the adaptations and appropriations put in place by all parties involved.

Some of the most influential studies of religious life in the colonial Andes have been guided by the content of a historical record of unique interest and importance: the documentation of the religious repression carried out in portions of the Lima diocese in the seventeenth century. Denying the religious repression, destruction, and violence that characterized a significant portion of the colonization and evangelization of the region would be tantamount to silencing key chapters of the history that I am attempting to write here. Nevertheless, to reduce this history to a series of episodes of open, continuous,
and exclusive opposition also results in a loss. The men and women on whom this study focuses are those who contributed to the creation of Andean Catholicism: those who, in their attempts to incorporate, understand, and appropriate ideas and practices that would give meaning to their lives, became actors in a major cultural transformation. Consequently, this study is based mainly on a different type of source: wills, which document ordinary, routine aspects of people’s lives.

Based on a reading of the archaeological literature, chapter 1 offers an overview of the ideas and practices regarding death in the Andes from the period prior to the conquest, emphasizing the connections between these ideas and their diversity. Through a study of the configuration and location of burials, the link between ancestor worship and control of space is examined. Consideration of the ways that human remains were treated establishes the basis for analyzing perceptions of the body and the self as well as the way in which social hierarchies were constituted. Finally, I use the study of funerary rituals to deduce some of the central ideas on the fate of the dead and the way in which the living understood and conducted their relations with them.

Based on an analysis of different versions of contemporary chronicles, chapter 2 studies the meaning of death during the conquest. The argument is that, in the absence of a common idiom, religion, institutions, or laws, death served as a language among the parties involved and operated as a destructive force as well as one that ordered society in the initial and decisive contacts between Andeans and Europeans.

Policies intended by the Church and state to Christianize death in the Andes are the topic of chapter 3, while chapter 4 is devoted to the study of the methods and instruments created for their implementation. Consequently, these chapters examine the issue of the control and distribution of space for the dead; ideas about the body and self introduced with evangelization; and the establishment of institutions and associations that were fundamental in communicating Christian ideas and practices regarding death to the inhabitants of the Andes.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to studying how the ideas and methods previously analyzed came into play in the lives of indigenous in-
habitants in the cities of Lima and Cuzco. In chapter 5, through a close reading of almost five hundred wills, I examine how the use of these documents was introduced and what their impact was on the Andean peoples. I also study the meaning behind the choice of graves and instructions for funerary rituals, proposing that both are a manifestation of the appropriation and redefinition of the two cities' sacred spaces. The fact that ever greater numbers of men and women agreed to bury their relatives' remains in churches signals a definitive Christianization of death, as does the growing adoption of Christian funerary rituals. Also based on an analysis of wills, the final chapter deals with the concerns of many people over what would happen to them after death: who their successors and heirs would be; who would carry out their last requests; who would keep their memory alive, and how. The context in which I raise and attempt to resolve these questions is marked by the circumstances established by colonial power and its legal order; the teachings and dictates of the Church; and the concrete injunctions facing each individual, whether presiding over a cacicazgo (chiefdom), a large or small family, or having no relatives at all.

The differences between the ideas, languages, rituals, and social practices regarding death in the pre-Hispanic Andes and those unique to Spanish Catholicism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have appeared to observers to be of such magnitude that any adaptation would be simply impossible. For some, only an overwhelming act of violence could carry it out or explain it, with its counterpart in submission and in a silent—albeit false—acceptance, leading to a clandestine religious life. This book does not dismiss the weight of the violence that permeated the conquest and colonization process, but, claiming that violence was not the only force that gave shape to colonial Andean society, it proposes an interrogation of how existing socio-political and cultural patterns were redefined, of the assimilation of new ideas and customs, and of the way in which the people of the Andes resorted to their own creativity to deal with these changes. In short, all that which human beings avail themselves of when, finding themselves surrounded by death, they take on the challenge of surviving.