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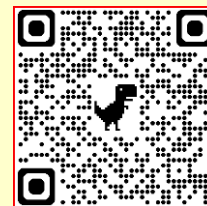
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Asceticism, Martyrdom, and Indigenous *Reducciones* in Friar Espino's Seventeenth-century Missionary Expeditions to La Taguzgalpa, Honduras

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the significance of Friar Fernando Espino's Relación verdadera de la reducción de los indios infieles de la Provincia de la Tagusgalpa, llamados Xicaques, a firsthand account of his missionary journeys to La Taguzgalpa, published in 1674. It contextualizes this narrative within a period of heightened scrutiny of Franciscan missionary effectiveness in seventeenth-century colonial America and employs Pierre Bourdieu's theories of "religious field" and "capital" as its analytical framework. It explains how and why Espino portrayed himself as a model missionary—committed to his evangelizing vocation—and how he used tropes of poverty, sacrifice, and obedience to acquire symbolic capital within the religious field through the performance of extreme suffering. Overall, this essay contends that Espino's seventeenth-century text of missionary vulnerability and sanctified violence functions as a work that moralizes and justifies colonial rule while concealing its coercive foundation and hiding the unequal power dynamics that shaped the reducción of the Indigenous populations of La Taguzgalpa.

KEY WORDS: Fernando Espino, franciscan missions, Honduras, La Taguzgalpa, religious field, symbolic capital.

Introduction

In 1674, Franciscan friar Fernando Espino composed, at the request of his superiors, one of the earliest extant missionary accounts of the conquest and colonization of the territory known as "La Taguzgalpa" or "Taguisgalpa." In his report on the expeditions to the Franciscan *reducciones* (forms of forced resettlements of indigenous peoples aimed at evangelizing and exploiting them as labor) of Santa María and San Buenaventura and their surrounding areas, Espino described a rugged, largely inaccessible landscape that required weeks to traverse, encompassing river crossings, the ascent of mountain ranges, and navigation through dense, only partially colonized jungle. He also underscored the limited success of both religious and secular authorities in preventing previously *reducido*

(resettled in *reducciones*) Indigenous peoples from abandoning mission settlements, while repeatedly emphasizing the physical dangers and spiritual challenges faced by Franciscan missionaries tasked with evangelizing dispersed populations.

This article examines the significance of Friar Fernando Espino's (1674/1977) *Relación verdadera de la reducción de los indios infieles de la Provincia de la Tagusgalpa, llamados Xicaques*, a firsthand account of his missionary journeys to La Taguzgalpa. It contextualizes this narrative within a period of heightened scrutiny of Franciscan missionary effectiveness in seventeenth-century colonial America and employs Pierre Bourdieu's theories of "religious field" and "capital" as its analytical framework. It explains how and why Espino portrayed himself as a model

missionary—committed to his evangelizing vocation—and how he used tropes of poverty, sacrifice, and obedience to acquire symbolic capital within the religious field through the performance of extreme suffering. Overall, this essay contends that Espino’s seventeenth-century text of missionary vulnerability and sanctified violence functions as a work that moralizes and justifies colonial rule while concealing its coercive foundation and hiding the unequal power dynamics that shaped the *reducción* of the Indigenous populations of La Taguzgalpa.

First Settlements and Initial Concerns

During the first century of the Spanish conquest and colonization of Honduras, imperial efforts were predominantly concentrated in the western and central regions, leaving the area of La Taguzgalpa largely outside effective control.¹ This territory extended approximately 400 leagues, encompassing Honduras’ northern coastline from the Agúan River in the west to the estuary of the River Segovia (or Coco) at the Cape of Gracias a Dios in the east. Its southern boundary reached the Olancho Valley. Currently, this region constitutes parts of the departments of Colón, Gracias a Dios, Olancho, and Yoro (Cuddy, 2007; García Añoveros, 1988). Despite its peripheral status, the Spanish established settlements motivated by extractive interests, notably founding Trujillo in 1525 and developing several mining communities in the Olancho Valley near the Guayape River, where the majority of silver and gold mines were discovered beginning in 1540 (Argueta, 2002b). These enterprises relied on unstable labor systems comprised of Indigenous men and enslaved Africans, who started arriving in substantial numbers by the mid-1530s in the Olancho region. Spanish miners attempted to subjugate the nearby Paya populations and incorporate them into tributary systems; however, these arrangements remained provisional and unstable. Rebellions, alongside numerous villages and mines, caused many of these sites to be abandoned as natives and Africans fled into remote mountains and uncharted areas throughout La Taguzgalpa, due to the Spanish authorities’ limited control. This instability was further compounded by a persistent shortage of clergy capable of instructing the indigenous populations in Christian doctrine, administering the sacraments, or maintaining social discipline (Argueta, 2002a).

The economic repercussions were considerable: mining declined, tribute remained minimal, and colonial officials faced an acute labor shortage. In response, beginning in the late sixteenth century, Spanish authorities turned to the spiritual conquest of La Taguzgalpa as a means of stabilizing populations, reasserting control over runaways, and securing new, more sustainable sources of labor (Alvarado García, 2002). This strategy faced challenges, as the region was inhabited by a complex and diverse mosaic of ethnographic and linguistic, often semi-nomadic, Indigenous groups—including the Lencas, Miskito-zambos, Payas (or Sumos), Tahuacas, Taupanes, Yaras, and Xicaques—whose social organization and mobility complicated their evangelization and *reducción* (García Añoveros 1988; Obando Andrade 2020). Nevertheless, members of the Mendicant Orders, most notably Franciscans, took it upon themselves to commence this missionary work.

¹ The etymological origins of the toponym La Taguzgalpa are thought to derive from the Nahuatl word *tagüütze*, meaning gold. From there, many of the early colonists in Honduras began referring to the region in the sixteenth century as “*pueblo de oro*” or “*casa del oro*” (Gómez Zúñiga, 2012, p.38). Consequently, it is not surprising that the area became of economic interest to the Spanish Crown.

Led by members of the Franciscan Order, a few attempts were made to enter this territory, but they often achieved little success. This was especially the case of the first two missions that commenced in 1608 and 1622 and quickly ended thereafter when the clerics who led them, Friars Esteban Verdelete and Juan de Monteagudo of the first one and Friars Cristóbal Martínez, Benito de San Francisco, and Juan de Baena of the second, would suffer deaths at the hands of the various indigenous groups they sought to subdue (Alvarado García, 2002; Argueta, 2002a; Flores Andino, 1992). According to soldiers who escaped the attack by the Taguagacas and Lencas in 1612, both Friar Verdelete and Monteagudo endured horrific deaths, with Verdelete sustaining multiple wounds throughout his body and eventually losing his head, all the while praying and beseeching God to forgive his aggressors (Alvarado García, 2002). Juan Ferrez, one of the soldiers who survived the 1622 encounter with the Mosquitosambos, indicated that the

bárbaros envistieron contra Fray Cristóbal, le tendieron al suelo, le envainaron por la vía superior una estaca a manera de lanza, como de cuatro varas de largo que le salió por el espinazo, cerca del cogote, la levantaron en alto y la clavaron en un hoyo, le dieron otros tormentos bárbaros, le quebraron las piernas; después continuaron en la misma forma con los demás misioneros (Alvarado García, 2002, p. 442).

[barbarians attacked Fray Cristóbal, knocked him to the ground, and drove a roughly four-yard-long stake through his upper body, exiting near the back of his neck. They lifted him high, placed the stake into a hole, subjected him to other brutal torments, and broke his legs. They then carried out similar acts of violence on the other missionaries.]²

These tragic deaths resulted in the immediate suspension of all missionary expeditions to La Taguzgalpa, a ban that lasted 43 years until Friar Espino arrived in the region.

Fray Fernando Espino and His Religious Capital³

Born in the 1590s in Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua, Friar Fernando Espino joined the Franciscan order and the Church of San Francisco in Guatemala in 1626. According to historians and fellow Franciscans, Espino was regarded as an exemplary priest who lived a life of poverty, obedience, and simplicity. He was penitent and known for mortifying his body and fasting regularly. He was also knowledgeable about some indigenous languages, including the Xicaque dialect. Since 1637, he dedicated himself to serving others, administering sacraments, and spreading the Christian Faith in Central America (Arellano, 1977, xiii-xxiv). Fundamentally, Espino’s life was guided by the vows and expectations of the Order of Saint Francis, including poverty, self-denial, service to the sick, and preaching the gospel (Alvarado García, 2002). In doing so, Espino gained “religious capital,” a form of capital that encompasses both material resources and symbolic authority or power, from which he derived legitimacy and recognition (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 6-

² All translations in this essay are the author’s translations.

³ Bourdieu (1986) defined capital as “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (p. 241).

10). As an ordained member of the Catholic Church—an institution historically known for its influence, resources, and moral authority (which are all forms of capital)—Espino can be considered a specialist who was invested with religious capital or “consecrated” through the knowledge and training he obtained and the process of ordination, which enabled him to legitimately administer or “market the goods of salvation to the laity... to consecrate the Eucharist, preside over other sacramental rites, exorcise demons, excommunicate heretics, and so on” (Rey, 2018, p. 306).

As Terry Rey (2004; 2018) notes, few academics and scholars have applied Bourdieu’s key concepts from his “theory of practice” in their study of religion or analysis of religious practices, structures, and domination. Partly, this limited engagement is attributable to the fact that Bourdieu’s writings on religion can be difficult to understand and were not frequent or extensive, particularly when compared to the entirety of his scholarly output (Rey, 2018, pp. 299-300).⁴ Nevertheless, in 1971, Bourdieu published the essay “*Genese et structure du champ religieux*” [Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field], his seminal work on religion, in which he applied his conceptualization of field (a structured social arena of competition) to religion to argue that beliefs, practices, and the legitimacy claimed and/or sought by religious specialists over laymen are social constructions tied to structures of power and exclusion rather than simply products of transcendental forces. Although some scholars have found Bourdieu’s explanation of the religious field imperfect or not entirely useful “to the study of certain dimensions of religion” (Rey, 2018, p. 304), it does provide a useful framework for understanding and “theorizing the role of religion in colonial conquest” (Rey, 2007, p. 83). In particular, and most relevant to this essay, Bourdieu’s (1991) “religious field” model allows us to understand the underlying and, at times “misrecognized,” structures at play in the spiritual conquest of La Taguzgalpa and explain Espino’s written work of sanctified “competence,” apostolic asceticism, suffering, and proto-martyrial self-fashioning as discursive strategies for obtaining legitimacy and recognition or “symbolic capital” for his proselytizing work in the area.⁵

According to Friar Espino’s (1674/1977) *Relación verdadera*, his role in evangelizing the indigenous people of La Taguzgalpa started when he met a livestock farmer from Olancho, Bartolomé de Escoto, who visited the Guatemala convent where Espino was staying in early 1667. Escoto, along with two recently converted indigenous men, was in Guatemala to request assistance from the Crown in controlling the Xicaque peoples. These groups had abandoned the *reducciones* set up by missionaries and had allied with unconquered tribes to attack the few settlements in La Taguzgalpa. Since the Franciscans had been in contact with the Xicaques since the early

seventeenth century, they were called upon to help. Although Espino was initially hesitant because of his poor health, he changed his mind after speaking with two of the indigenous men, Juan Antonio and Andrés Cabezas. From them, he learned that not only were they poorly catechized, but many other natives also needed him to administer the sacraments for their salvation (Espino, 1674/1977, pp. 15-17).⁶ Espino indicated in his narrative that he had

catequizado e informado lo más bien en nuestra Fe Católica, y como lo manda el Ceremonial Romano, sub conditione, los baptizé, porque los hallé muy bozales en todos los artículos de la Fé, por saber yo el idioma de ellos: estos dos que vinieron a esta ciudad, viendo y entendiendo que yo sabía su idioma y lengua, y no había otro que la supiese, con muchas ansias e importunaciones me pidieron y rogaron fuese yo a sus montañas a catequizar y baptizar a sus deudos y parientes, y les enseñase el camino del cielo (1674/1977, p. 16).

[catechized and instructed [them] in our Catholic Faith, and as required by the Roman Ceremonial, I baptized them under condition, because I found them to be very ignorant in all matters of Faith, since I knew their language. These two who came to this city, seeing and understanding that I knew their language and tongue, and that there was no one else who knew it, eagerly and insistently asked and begged me to go to their mountains to catechize and baptize their relatives and kinsmen, and to teach them the way to heaven.]

By catechizing Juan Antonio and Andrés Cabezas and agreeing to accompany them, Espino clearly showed his dedication to his calling as a Franciscan friar. Additionally, Espino’s words highlighted his role as a specialist with exclusive “religious competence” in matters of salvation and doctrine (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 9). Espino differentiated himself not only from lay believers but also from other missionaries, who, although well-intentioned, lacked the competence he possessed in religious and linguistic knowledge, thereby claiming religious capital. His linguistic fluency enhanced his authority by reinforcing his exclusive competence in facilitating salvation. In other words, Espino demonstrated credibility through his expertise and trustworthiness by communicating with the two indigenous men in their own language. However, it is important to note that Espino’s mastery of the indigenous Xicaque language is not free of interest or disconnected from the colonial project of the area (though Espino would probably say he was), because the learning, translation, and use of an indigenous language, in this context, was the result of adapting that native language to his own logic with the aim of controlling and “implied ‘colonizing’ them, fitting them into (Latin) grammatical models which were foreign to them, often configuring ‘general languages’ and, in some cases, also giving them a written form” (Palomo, 2016, Imperial Connections).

After receiving approval from his superiors, Friar Espino, accompanied by his colleague Friar Pedro de Ovalle, embarked on his first of two challenging journeys through the many valleys of Taguzgalpa, Honduras. They traveled on horseback, by canoe, and on foot, following the apostolic example, until reaching their destination at the *reducción* of Santa María in the Olancho Valley. It was there that Espino’s religious skills were fully on display and where he earned recognition for his efforts. For instance, Espino

⁴ See Rey’s (2018) discussion and analysis of some of the works that utilize Bourdieu’s theories in the study of religion (pp. 307-317).

⁵ According to Bourdieu (1998), “Symbolic capital is any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value” (p. 47). Furthermore, “every kind of capital (economic, cultural, social) tends (to different degrees) to function as symbolic capital (so that it might be better to speak, in rigorous terms, of the symbolic effects of capital) when it obtains an explicit or practical recognition” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242)

⁶ Every reference and citation of Espino’s *Relación verdadera* is from Jorge Eduardo Arellano’s 1977 edition of this work.

noted that he baptized and converted many locals, including the parents of one of the young men he met in Guatemala who had since passed away. Espino also relocated around 20 natives who feared for their lives if they stayed in Santa María to a new *reducción* he established, called San Buenaventura. Additionally, he married many couples, celebrated Holy Week, and performed the necessary Catholic rituals and sacraments for about 40 people living in and around San Buenaventura (Espino, 1674/1977, pp. 18-21). Espino's achievements were further validated by the recognition and prestige (forms of "symbolic capital") he received from one of the local laypersons, a man named D. Luis de Servellón—likely Spanish—who admired how the recently converted indigenous people demonstrated knowledge and respect for the Catholic Faith and recited the Hail Mary prayer to petition for his health when he was sick (Espino, 1674/1977, pp. 21-22). The acknowledgment Espino received from Servellón for his evangelizing work is essential to the acquisition of symbolic capital because it depends on and exists only if it is recognized (Bourdieu, 2000, P. 242).

Friar Espino's initial expedition lasted only a few months due to illness, after which he convalesced in Nueva Segovia, Nicaragua. However, he demonstrated resilience by returning to San Buenaventura the following February with Friar Pedro de Ovalle and a Spaniard named Joan García de Miranda to continue his missionary efforts and help resettle the indigenous populations that had left the *reducción* during his absence (Espino, 1674/1977, p. 23). During his time there, Espino successfully converted more indigenous people to Catholicism, defined which beliefs and rituals were considered orthodox and which were not, and produced religious music and a catechism book (la *Doctrina Christiana*) in the Xicague language (Espino, 1674/1977, pp. 24-33). Nevertheless, Espino also faced physical hardships and opposition from native leaders such as Captain Apuis, a Xicague cacique, who questioned his teachings and authority. After witnessing Espino conduct mass and administer the Eucharist, Apuis asked whether God truly was embodied in the Host and if God knew what happened to the missing villagers. Espino confirmed the Eucharist's presence and confidently predicted that the missing indigenous people would return that day (1674/1977, pp. 24-25). By affirming a core Catholic belief and predicting the villagers' return, Espino delivered a "consecrating" speech act (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242), thereby legitimizing his authority and presence in the area. Despite this, Apuis remained defiant, accusing Espino's followers of bewitching his infirm sister. Apuis also threatened numerous women in his tribe with death if they did not obey his commands and reject the sacraments. Additionally, Apuis engaged in what Espino called "superstitious" and "demonic" ceremonies designed to instill fear in Espino, his companions, Friar Pedro de Ovalle, and Joan García de Miranda, as well as the villagers. These rituals included animal callings, "*bailes de culebra*" [snake dances], and the consumption of a potion that Apuis claimed was the blood of their enemies. Espino noted that despite being threatened with spears and pushed to the ground by members of Apuis's tribe, he remained undeterred and faced the dangers head-on. That is why Espino protected the women who were nearly hanged and delivered a sermon condemning those who had erred against him and had committed violent and heterodox acts. Ultimately, Espino's perseverance led to the pacification of the indigenous men and to Apuis's retraction, repentance, and acknowledgment of Espino's authority (Espino 1674/1977, pp. 28-31).

Similar to his first journey to La Taguzgalpa, Espino's second also resulted in the acquisition of more symbolic capital through verbal and written recognition. Besides the respect he eventually earned

from Captain Apuis, as mentioned earlier, Espino received written letters from both Fray Hernando de la Rúa (Commissioner General for the Franciscan Order in New Spain) and Fray Francisco Calderón (General Secretary for Nicaragua), in which they expressed their joy and gratitude for his work in La Taguzgalpa. The secular authorities of the Royal Audiencia of Guatemala also offered him 300 pesos for his missionary efforts (Espino, 1674/1977, pp. 32-33). Although Espino expressed appreciation to his superiors and did not shy away from describing hunger, physical exhaustion, and even danger, he emphasized that he never asked for or sought "*premio, ni galardón, ni agradecimiento, porque...lo hizo por el servicio de Dios...y bien de aquellas pobres almas, y porque la obediencia [se] lo mandó*" [reward, nor honor, nor gratitude, because...he did it for the service of God... and for the good of those poor souls, and because obedience required him to do so] (1674/1977, p. 33). By renouncing royal funds, rewards, and material goods—including basic necessities—Espino aligned himself with the Franciscan ideals of apostolic poverty and transformed material deprivation into disinterested, virtuous suffering. His dedication and role in the religious conquest of the Xicaques are further justified by the claim that his actions or "acts are ends in themselves and that...[he] is rewarded by the very fact of carrying them out, that they are on the order of finality without end" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 116).

Religious competence and asceticism were two ways in which Fray Espino built symbolic capital in his narrative. However, Espino also achieved this through his careful proto-martyr self-fashioning as a missionary constantly exposed to suffering and mortal danger, yet disciplined and willing to die for a higher cause. First of all, Espino repeatedly stated in both his first and second journeys to La Taguzgalpa that his body was subjected to hunger, illness, and hostility. In his first voyage, Espino described how a nobleman, angry over losing his source of labor after Espino transferred the recently converted indigenous people from Santa María to San Buenaventura, exploited Espino's illness that left him nearly immobile and close to death by having his men subject him to starvation, abuses, and dangerous environments with the goal of getting rid of him. Espino managed to escape a situation that left him "*casi muerto*" [almost dead] with the help of natives and a Franciscan colleague named George de Sossa, who helped nurse him back. Despite the undeniable suffering, Espino emphasized that his experiences were blessings, providential trials, and signs of election rather than signs of vulnerability (1674/1977, pp. 20-23). It is safe to say that Espino recognized the fact that religious work required "a considerable energy aimed at converting activity... into a sacred task" and that although there are "losses" (in terms of effort, suffering, and even lives), they are "recovered in another position," within a divine realm (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 119).

A second instance of proto-martyrdom rhetoric occurred during Espino's second voyage when his life was threatened by Captain Apuis and his tribe. As alluded to above, Espino and his colleagues were forced to observe rituals intended to instill fear in them and were in direct opposition to Catholic orthodoxy. He, along with his colleague Friar de Ovalle, was placed at the center of these rituals, surrounded by Apuis tribespeople armed with weapons. Espino and the others did not know whether they would be staked, burned, or even hanged, but he encouraged Pedro de Ovalle to have "*ánimo varonil para dar la vida por Jesu Christo Señor nuestro, o assado, o alanzaeados... que lo que es el deseo y la voluntad no falto a la muerte, ni al sacrificio*" [manly courage to give our lives for Jesus Christ, our Lord, whether by fire or by the sword, so that our desire and will may not fail in the face of death or sacrifice] (1674/1977, p.28). In other words, Espino did not fear death and voluntarily

subjected himself to a possible martyrdom. The emphasis he made is not on death itself but on disciplined availability to face death. Although Espino never made an explicit claim to outright martyrdom, he did align his situation with that of an early Christian martyr when he uttered “*Vinam fruar bestiis*” [I wish to be fed to the beasts], words attributed to Saint Ignatius of Antioch and reflective of his desire to fulfill his mission of death for his faith (1674/1977, p. 30). In doing so, Espino sacralized his experiences without directly challenging the Church’s authority on martyrdom.

Espino’s most explicit discussion of martyrdom appeared in his recounting of Franciscan missionaries who were martyred during earlier efforts to evangelize the indigenous people of La Taguzgalpa. Espino detailed the deaths of Friars Esteban Verdelete, Juan de Monteagudo, Cristóbal Martínez, Benito de San Francisco, and Juan de Baena because, for him, their sacrifices stemmed from their faith (1674/1977, pp. 35-36). They served as models of “virtue, selflessness, and total dedication to the salvation of the souls of peoples” (Lavrin, 2014, p. 139). As Espino described, in 1612, Verdelete and Monteagudo faced violence and torture; they were killed with shovels, and “*al Padre Verdelete cortáronle la cabeza, y como eran caribes, se los comieron*” [Father Verdelete had his head cut off, and since they were Caribs, they ate them both] (1674/1977, p. 38). Similarly, Cristóbal Martínez, Benito de San Francisco, and Juan de Baena were also “*martirizados*” (martyred) or suffered gruesome deaths in 1623, with their bodies buried in pits excavated by those who killed them (Espino, 1674/1977, p. 36). Evidently, all of the Franciscan friars who lost their lives in La Taguzgalpa fulfilled the requirements for martyrdom as described in antiquity and the medieval period. They were tortured, their deaths were the result of their defense of Christianity, and they voluntarily gave up their lives (Lavrin, 2014, p. 132). Espino (1674/1977) used the words “*mártir*,” “*santo*,” and “*bendito*” [martyr, saint, and blessed] numerous times to describe these men and their acts, but he made it a point to indicate, that in his use of his terms, “*es [su] intención y dictamen ajustar[se] a lo que la Santidad de Urbano VII dispone, y no es [su] intento se dé más crédito que el que se funda en fe humana*” [it is his intention and judgment to comply with what His Holiness Urban VII [the then Pope] decrees, and it is not his intention to give more credence than that which is based on human faith] (p. 41). In other words, Espino was careful not to make unauthorized claims to martyrdom, thereby reaffirming his submission and respect for the Pope, who has the authority to recognize an individual as a martyr.

References to the sacrificial experiences of earlier Franciscan missionaries are more than mere memories. They served as strategic words and recollections that built symbolic capital and elevated Espino’s own missionary work in La Taguzgalpa. The deaths of Friars Verdelete, Monteagudo, Martínez, de San Francisco, and de Baena transformed La Taguzgalpa both physically and symbolically into a repository of Franciscan blood and sacred memories, making Espino’s subsequent presence and claims (as well as those of other Franciscan missionaries) both legitimate and a continuation of a morally approved mission. By entering such a territory, Espino became part of a lineage of sacrifice and inherited the symbolic capital accrued by the martyred friars. Moreover, their deaths sanctified the ideas of danger and violence itself. By indicating that La Taguzgalpa is a place where Franciscans died for their faith, Espino elevated risk to a theological duty and obscured, if not completely effaced, the power imbalances—and harm caused by the coercive resettlement of Indigenous people in *reducciones*—that shaped this and every missionary endeavor during the colonization of the region.

The employment of proto-martyrial rhetoric and references to martyrdom incidents is not surprising. Since the fourteenth century, there has been a resurgence of martyrdom narratives and episodes within the Franciscan Order, with their interpretation being regarded as “the very essence of the Franciscan vocation” and as a key aspect of “Franciscan identity” (Heullant-Durant, 2012, p. 433).⁷ The Franciscan Order emphasized that its identity was rooted not only in asceticism but also in martyrdom, thereby strengthening its position within the Church (Heullant-Durant, 2012, p. 452). Also, stories of martyrdom in the New World linked missionaries in locations like La Taguzgalpa with their European counterparts and traditions. These narratives were “more than welcomed in the peninsula itself [Spain], as [they] strengthened the spiritual cause of Counter-Reformation Catholicism as well as fired up the imagination of common folk” (Lavrin, 2014, p. 137). The production and circulation of texts such as Espino’s *Relación verdadera* (1674/1977) also provided the Franciscan Order in the seventeenth century with crucial recognition and prestige, especially since they had lost much influence and power when the Crown began favoring the secular clergy over Mendicant Orders (Phelan, 1970, pp. 54-58). Their decline was further exacerbated after Friar Gerónimo de Mendieta openly criticized King Philip II’s policies and the rapid rise of the Jesuits in the Church—since they were not only highly “effective missionaries” but also had a stronger and more practical approach than the Franciscans in addressing the “political and social realities” mentioned earlier—leading to “a noticeable decline in the Franciscans’ morale, discipline, and effectiveness in the New World” (Phelan, 1970, p. 109).

Conclusion

In his 1674 letter to the president of the Real Audiencia of Santiago de Guatemala, Don Fernando Francisco de Escobedo, Friar Fernando Espino explained that the purpose of his written account of his evangelizing efforts was to motivate future missionaries to continue the work he and other Franciscans had begun in reducing the Xicaque populations of La Taguzgalpa.⁸ Espino’s *Relación verdadera de la reducción de los indios infieles de la Provincia de la Taguzgalpa, llamados Xicaques* (1674/1977) is indeed material proof of his efforts and was read as a manual for those assigned to serve in the area. However, it is also a text produced to legitimize both his and the Franciscan Order’s continued presence in La Taguzgalpa, Honduras, within a framework that uses ascetic and martyrdom rhetoric to justify religious conquest and colonial expansion. As argued in this essay, if we apply Bourdieu’s concepts of the “religious field” and “capital,” Espino’s narrative is a work in which he fashioned himself as an exemplary agent and utilized both proto-martyrdom and apostolic ascetic language to accrue individual and religious institutional symbolic capital. Together, these textual and rhetorical strategies helped to portray Franciscan evangelizing efforts as both moral and divinely sanctioned rather than as economically and politically dependent.

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⁷ For studies of Franciscan martyrdom in the Americas and Asia, see Borucoff (2014), Green (2021), Oré (2017), and Palomo (2016).

⁸ For a complete transcription of Espino’s letter to Don Fernando de Escobedo, see Arellano’s (1977) edition of Espino’s *Relación verdadera* (pp. 11-13).

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