

“The arrival, 500 years ago, of Spaniards to what is today Mexican territory cannot be judged in the light of contemporary considerations,” the Spanish rebuttal read.

(Source: “Mexico asks Vatican, Spain to apologize for centuries-old conquest...”
<https://www.foxnews.com/world/mexico-asks-vatican-spain-to-apologize-for-centuries-old-conquest-says-it-was-carried-out-with-sword-and-cross>)

Do you agree with this view? Is it fair to judge past historical events in the light of the present? Why/why not? Does this view contribute to an understanding of past events and between peoples or does it blur the past and create unnecessary tension? Use the ideas in the source texts and your own experience to support your views.

Using the Past to Improve Our Present

Earlier this year, the president of Mexico requested that the Vatican and Spain apologise to his country for the “misdeeds”, as he called it, which took place during the conquest of the Americas as from 1492. His request, however, was rejected by the Spanish government as it engages in historical presentism. This situation raised the question of whether it is fair to judge past historical events from a contemporary perspective. The answer is not hard to attain. Even if centuries ago people had a completely different mindset, what affected a large proportion of people then has had important negative consequences for numerous people now, and should therefore be judged through a modern perspective in order to better our societies.

In the first place, we need to consider whether presentism, the interpretation of the past with present-day ideas, should be taken into account when analysing history. Some historians believe it to distort what actually occurred. However, this way of considering past historical events does not in any way blur our view of the past; rather, it helps us to understand why history developed as it did and to comprehend our present issues as a society. If we take Argentina, for example, it should not surprise us that native people claim the lands where they live to be their own, as their ancestors were deprived of their lands during the Spanish conquest. Still, there are people who believe that their request is completely unreasonable and that they should be punished severely. Analysing history with our current ideas could help us to achieve a better understanding of these situations.

Furthermore, contrary to what some people believe, modern moral principles derive largely from our interpretations of significant historical events. It is common knowledge that the Spanish conquest was successful mainly due to its many killings, which, of course, greatly affected the native peoples. In this sense, if murdering thousands of people at that time was considered atrocious by those who suffered it, judging this event as immoral and wrong can hardly be considered a “contemporary consideration”, as read the Spanish denial for the apology.

Lastly, those appalling events that occurred centuries ago are still present in our modern societies through the existence of racial discrimination, in this case, towards natives. The Spanish conquest of the Americas was validated by the Spaniards as being for the benefit of the natives. Abraham Lincoln, former president of the USA, said that it was the government’s duty to move Indians towards the “arts of civilization” in order to achieve prosperity as the “pale-faced people” had. However, in this imposing of civilising principles, natives’ traditions were eradicated and their characteristics came to be defined as uncivilised and were thus

regarded as improper. This led to centuries of discrimination towards the natives in the USA, which still largely persists. Presentism, in this sense, could help us reach a better understanding of the causes of this negative view towards a particular part of society and it could help us improve in this regard, by making use of our current ideologies.

In conclusion, even though we all agree that past historical events occurred in contexts which are completely different from our present context, and that the people involved had different mindsets from our own, it is important to realise that those situations were wrong from every perspective. This means that, even if we accept that the Spanish conquest in Latin America took place when a different moral view was predominant, we can and we should judge this event in terms of our current views, given that its consequences are still present.