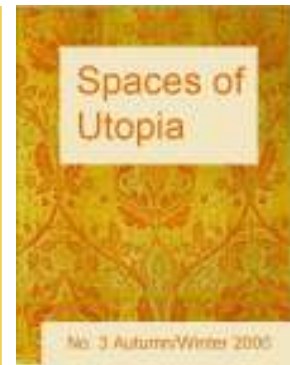


The Biography of Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), Bishop of Utopia, by Benjamín Jarnés (1888-1949)

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Introduction

In those years of the European Early Modernity an Old Castilian Spanish young man of sixty years of age, Vasco de Quiroga, born in Castilian lands of Ávila in 1470, left the Iberian Peninsula and sailed towards the New World. He arrived in the new colonial Vice-Royalty of New Spain and Mexico City in 1530. His Lord and Emperor, Charles I, wanted him there in the new territories. Vasco de Quiroga was a former student at Salamanca University, a proved humanist and a devoted son of the Renaissance. He probably travelled light but determined to make his favourite reading, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a dream come true. He not only promoted, protected against the many abuses, and improved the Indian's life conditions from the very beginning, but started building his ideal plans. Between 1531 and 1535 Quiroga founded two utopian communities, both named *Hospital-Pueblo de Santa Fe* (Hospital-Village of the Holy Faith), in the outskirts of Mexico City and Michoacán. A few years after, he became Bishop of Michoacán and from this high position continued struggling for the abused and applying his utopian agenda firmly. Vasco de Quiroga died in 1565 at the venerable age of 95.

Centuries later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new Spaniard, Benjamín Jarnés, born in Codo (Aragón) in 1888, left the Peninsula and exiled in Mexico in 1939, after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Jarnés was a brilliant intellectual, avant-garde artist, and prolific writer. His many novels, short stories, translations, articles, essays and biographies prove the wide

scope of his talents. There in Mexico he could not avoid feeling the appeal of Bishop Quiroga. This attraction resulted in a biography: *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Obispo de Quiroga*, published in 1942. Benjamín Jarnés died in 1949.

The present article will comment on this biography by Benjamín Jarnés and his (mis)understanding and (mis)reading of a sixteenth-century utopian from the point of view of a twentieth-century intellectual also very fond of utopian constructions and ideal causes. For those of my readers interested in completing their knowledge of Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Utopia, according to Benjamín Jarnés, I highly recommend the study of the selection of sources listed in the final bibliographical section of this article. This article itself is highly indebted to these sources.

The Encounter of Quiroga and Jarnés's

The existing bibliography on Don Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), also known as the *Obispo de Utopía* [Bishop of Utopia], is huge. It is quite difficult to add something new. However, this article intends to produce a small contribution to this impressive wealth of research and scholarship from a different approach. I am not going to study this outstanding historical character directly, but through the specific vision of a twentieth-century Spaniard who wrote a biography of him. Namely, Benjamín Jarnés, a leading cultural, intellectual and literary figure of pre-Civil War Spain. In other words, a man from those infamous and paradoxical decades of the last century for Spain, the 20's and 30's, historically disastrous but culturally brilliant.¹ A new Golden Age of Spanish literature and culture that was only second to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century first Golden Age.²

Jarnés was once the intelligent and talented son of a big rural family from Aragón, Spain, who could finally make his way to Madrid, where he finally settled down, and start a brilliant career within the most brilliant intellectual circles flourishing there. He also succeeded in becoming a disciple and collaborator of the reputed philosopher and pre-war leading intellectual José Ortega y Gasset.

As a member of this modernist avant-garde generation, Benjamín Jarnés was a great reader, a devoted and prolific writer, and a mind open to all current

European cultural and artistic movements, vogues and fashions: a fact that made him very fond of formal and subject matter experiments. For example, formally, he devoted much of his time to promote the hybrid sub-genre of the so-called *lyrical novel*. Or, as far as content is involved, he elaborated a fully revolutionary theory of womanhood, which makes him an almost feminist writer, and played extensively with the deconstruction of myths.

Besides, he was a very prolific talent who published nearly a hundred volumes during his short lifetime of only 61 years: novels, short novels, anthologies of short stories, plays, legends, biographies, literary criticism and research, etc., apart from innumerable articles and essays for different periodicals, journals, and newspapers, prologues and reviews. And all of them were very profound, polemical, advanced and committed renderings of his creative powers and of a modern humanist's soul.³

Finally, after the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Jarnés had to follow the very path that many of his contemporaries opened before him. First he had to exile in France temporarily, from where he moved to Mexico, or the former Vice-Royalty of New Spain. Once in the New World, he never threw his return ticket away and finally came back to Spain to die in 1949, after a very short while.

As many exiles had done before him, while in Mexico, he typically struggled to identify with his new country and cultural environment. He was especially interested in the legacy of Spain, which made him develop a strong need to read about and to assess the conquest and the colonial periods. While in Spain, Jarnés had written some biographies⁴ and now he turned to his old genre again most enthusiastically, as the following Mexican titles prove:

- *Escuela de Libertad* [School for Freedom] (1942), consisting of seven different biographies: two dealing with American *libertadores* [liberators] – Washington and Lincoln; and five glossing the life wanderings of some of their Latin American counterparts: Hidalgo, Morelos, Bolívar, Martí, San Martín and Sucre;
- *Manuel Acuña: Poeta de su Siglo* [Manuel Acuña: Poet of his Century] (1942), a mixture of biography and literary criticism on this Mexican poet;

- *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Obispo de Utopía* (1942), the work of his that better exemplifies his almost painful efforts to identify with his new world by means of this biographical method of self-expression and knowledge gaining.

The third of these biographies marks the point of encounter between our two men: Benjamín Jarnés and, back in time, Vasco de Quiroga.

Utopian Quiroga and Jarnés

What did Benjamín Jarnés see in Vasco de Quiroga that made him write his biography? First of all, both of them were Spanish citizens who, after having spent almost their whole busy lives in their home country, had to leave many things behind and travel to Mexico, an unknown territory. But they had many more things in common.

As a vocational biographer, Jarnés was bent on dealing with exceptional lives – those lives that really made a difference. For him, *biography* was superior to *history*. The latter usually focuses only on the so-called “big history”, *i.e.* in the feats of kings and other outstanding leaders – not the real protagonists of history, according to Jarnés. The former, however, is more likely to focus on everyday life or “small history”. In other words, it provides access to the lives of those who were the real protagonists of history.

In addition, Benjamín Jarnés goes much further by listing the following dichotomies between history and biography:

- history is a cold patterning of human events, while biography is a live and authentic recounting of a real, unique human being;
- history is frequently a school for hatred and manipulation, while biography always sets high standards and good examples to imitate;
- regarding Spain, the general History of Spain has always been especially prone to failures and shortcomings and has never managed to provide very good examples, while it has always enjoyed the benefit of very fruitful lives of merit.⁵

All these ideas and beliefs led Jarnés to elaborate a theory of his own that he named *Theory of Sympathy*. He claimed that the times of proud and great figures were over. The new times were not for *idols to worship*. They demanded a new virtue: “sympathy”. In other words, people will only accept models that are sympathetic to them or to whom they can feel a kind of sympathy, identification, proximity, love. And Vasco de Quiroga can be termed one of the most outstanding examples of human sympathy in history. Probably this was the reason why Jarnés chose him.

Don Vasco de Quiroga was a disciple of one of those utopian thinkers who devoted their lives to disclose the real nature of men and women and make them lead a happier life pilgrimage on earth. He was also a disciple of those who showed us the way of the Gospel toward the City of God. He followed a double interest in an Earthly Christian Utopia and in a Heavenly New Jerusalem. The Mexican Indian people of Michoacán – the Tarascos – used to call him *Tata Vasco* (Daddy Vasco). No world power could give him a better title. His memory lives on in the hearts of his people, especially in the lake city of Pátzcuato, Michoacán.

Don Vasco was born in 1470 in the Old Castilian town of Madrigal de las Altas Torres [Madrigal of the High Towers],⁶ in Ávila province, where Queen Isabella of Castile was also born. He belonged to a very noble family who was always in the service of Spain. It was also a very proud family, one of the Grandees of the Kingdom.

Eventually Vasco de Quiroga became both an outstanding judge and a brilliant humanist and man of letters, but, most unexpectedly, life granted him a second opportunity, *i.e.* the possibility to turn a rewarding and honourable life of service into a unique life of heroism and legend. From “lawyer”, “judge”, “Christian humanist”, “reader of the *Utopia* of Thomas More”, and “lay man”, into “adventurer”, “pioneer”, “forger of nations”, “founder”, “popular leader”, “hero”, “legend”, “mythical figure”, and “man of God” (Bishop of Michoacán). And this happened in the year 1530, when Vasco was *only* sixty years old – an age for a well-deserved retirement.

The Emperor Charles I needed desperately a fully reliable man to be sent to the new colony of New Spain, future Mexico, which was in a state of absolute

turmoil. And that man was to be Vasco de Quiroga, the old judge, the wise humanist.

The *Primera Audiencia* or first Government of the Crown in New Spain, led by the infamous Nuño de Guzmán and his tyrannical rule, turned soon into a reign of terror, full of corruption, greed, murder, abuse, exploitation of the Indians. The *Segunda Audiencia* or Second Government, appointed by the Emperor and led by Vasco de Quiroga, had the demanding and high utopian mission of healing the wounds, amending the wrongs, and repairing the damage. And the strong man of prestige, adorned with a very determined character, finally arrived in Mexico on January 1531. Against his many enemies, he was protected by two leading principles: the new brilliant European culture of the Renaissance and the teachings of the Gospel. And he soon proved to be a perfect man of action and a successful peacemaker.

From the very beginning he sought a cultural and racial fusion of conquerors and those conquered. He not only wanted to spread the European best values, but to promote respect for those of the Indians. He grouped his measures around a double mission, enterprise, agenda or programme – a social as well as a spiritual level. On the one hand, Vasco built a real, sensible and possible utopia, in firm contact with worldly realities, in order to empower his people. On the other, he went around the land performing good deeds as Christ did, as the Good Shepherd saving his creatures. Regarding the Indians, this evangelical utopian leader attempted a middle way or double liberation. He wanted to liberate them from the abuses of slavery and the system of the *encomiendas*,⁷ imposed by the colonizers; and from their own subhuman ways of life and ignorance. Consequently, he strove both to free the natives and to make them Christians. How did he do it? What method was he to adopt? How to succeed? The answer was: “sympathy”, “love”, “patience”, “good examples”, “promotion of the new values”, “generosity”, “sharing”. And he was very successful.

His *mixta policía* (mixed policy), consisting of worldly tactics combined with spiritual ends, included the founding of ecclesiastical courts, where Indian grievances were heard; the promotion of education by means of a popular

school system; and a health and social programme in order to take care of the hungry, the sick and the homeless.

But his biggest plan was undoubtedly to be the promotion of communities of Indians from August 1531, only six months after the date of his arrival at the New World. The temptation to apply the new humanist ideas of European civilization in the New World was unconquerable. He based his projects on the lives of the first Christians, but, above all, on the works of Saint Augustine, Campanella, and his admired Thomas More.

The Indians, seen as a simple and naïve race very close to the first Christians of the *Acts of the Apostles*, were a kind of “perfect commodity” to build a new and more perfect Christian people.

His *Ordenanzas* or rules for his *Pueblos-Hospitales de la Santa Fe* (Hospital-Towns of the Holy Faith) included all the typical elements of a utopian construction. His first Hospital-Town was founded in Mexico City in 1531, and the second in the Michoacán region in 1534, but they were only the prelude to many more. It is very well-known that around 1580, fifteen years after his death, there were more than two hundred hospital-towns in the colony. And his pioneer interest in the Pacific Ocean region of Michoacán was one of the arguments in favour of promoting Don Vasco to the high position of power – a great push for his plans – of first Bishop of Michoacán. In a single day he stopped being a lay man, received all the Holy Orders together and became bishop, which constitutes one of the quickest ecclesiastical careers in the history of the Catholic Church.⁸

The *Pueblos-Hospitales* were hospital, asylum, church, school, and charity house at the same time. No private property of land was allowed. Everybody had to devote time to farming, on a rotating communal work basis, and to learning a trade or craft. Extended families were the rule. All had to work, but only six hours a day. Women had the right to work. Physical health was very important. A Christian life-style was promoted. No luxuries were allowed. These communities were kept isolated on purpose in order to protect them from the corrupting influences of the colonizers, and out of their own pagan traditional way of life. Education was universal and consisted of four main skills: “reading”, “writing”, “singing” and “playing music”. There was a very utopian hierarchical

social organization: every thirty families chose a *jurado*, every four *jurados* chose one *regidor*. There were also two *alcaldes ordinarios* (ordinary mayors) and one *alcalde mayor* (major mayor). Consequently, there was some kind of democratic practices because the lower magistrates were chosen by the people.

In general, it can be claimed that they were very successful.⁹ The Mexico City Hospital-Town reached the peak number of 30,000 Indians living together under this system. But they were also very polemical and had to confront many attacks.

Jarnés's View of Quiroga

Jarnés depicts his character, Don Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Utopia, and his "mission" in Mexico in very positive terms: "Un hombre, el inmortal Don Vasco de Quiroga, hizo por sí solo, en Michoacán, la obra de una legión de civilizadores" [A man, the immortal Don Vasco de Quiroga, did alone, in Michoacán, the work of a legion of civilizers] (Jarnés 1942: 80).

From my point of view, there is a contradiction between this devoted admiration and some of the claims made throughout the whole biography, especially concerning the Indians and their beneficial entry into Western civilization. The following examples are quite self-explanatory:

No acepta la crueldad en el trato del indígena, menos la humillación, el envilecimiento... Pero tampoco admite que se les abandone a sus modos de vivir: quiere hacerlos libres, cristianizarlos, porque no es precisamente libertad humana – a capricho o por ignorancia – poderse hundir en los mundos inferiores, subhumanos. [He could not stand cruelty toward the natives, even less humiliation, or vile treatment... But he did not accept either to let them continue with their old habits –willingly or due to ignorance –, to let them fall deeper in their subhuman, inferior worlds] (*idem*, 89)

Y él quiere convertirlos en ciudadanos que no sientan su miseria, que se vean incluidos entre los hombres, admitidos en la sociedad de los hombres. Porque, para Don Vasco de Quiroga, todos los hombres forman ante Cristo una sola clase. [And he wanted to turn them into regular citizens, not feeling their misery any more, regarded as men, accepted in human society. For Don Vasco de Quiroga, all men belong to a single class in the face of Christ] (*idem*, 95)

Quiere ser el gigantesco artesano que infunda en los indios la conciencia de la humana dignidad. [He wanted to be a giant craftsman infusing the conscience of human dignity into the Indians] (*idem*, 102)

Se acerca a ellos y los va convirtiendo trabajosamente en hombres.

[He approaches them and painfully turns them into men] (*idem*, 111)

Arrancar a estos hombres de la ignorancia.
[He saves these men from ignorance] (*idem*, 124)

Cristianizar, humanizar, civilizar son para él una y la misma cosa.
[To help them become Christians, to make them humans, to civilize them are the same thing for him] (*ibidem*)

Elevar de nivel humano a aquellos indígenas.
[To raise those natives to human level] (*ibidem*)

Para que inviten al jefe de aquel país a abandonar la idolatría y a reconocer los providenciales favores del monarca español que con tal solicitud se preocupa de aquella tierra de promisión.
[To invite the chief of that land to abandon idolatry and to acknowledge the providential favours of the Spanish monarch who worries so much about that promised land] (*idem*, 127)

Y destruyó los templos de los ídolos dejando extinguidos sus ritos y diabólicas ceremonias.
[And he destroyed the temples of the idols, uprooting their rites and devilish ceremonies] (*idem*, 138)

Y en todas ellas habla Don Vasco paternalmente de las incomodidades y desdichas que resultan de la vida errante por las montañas y en los bosques, y de las ventajas que ofrece la "civilización". También les habla de los altos consuelos de la vida religiosa, subordinada a leyes evangélicas.
[In all of them Don Vasco speaks as a good father about the inconveniences and misfortunes resulting from living in the wild mountains and woods, and about the advantages of civilization. He also talks to them about the high comforts of religious life according to the laws of the Gospel] (*idem*, 149)

Y tras esta intervención, fueron los frailes buscando a los indios para convencerlos y reducirlos a buena policía.
[And after this speech, the friars went in search of the Indians to try to convince them and make them accept the good ways] (*idem*, 152)

Fructuosa humanización, por completo desinteresada.
[Fruitful humanization, absolutely generous] (*idem*, 153)

Alzar a los indios de nivel, situarlos entre los hombres.
[To level the Indians, to find them a place among men] (*idem*, 156)

Conclusions

I consider that there is something wrong in this twentieth-century biography of Don Vasco de Quiroga by Benjamín Jarnés, an intelligent intellectual, a committed writer and a very critical individual. He neither questions Bishop Vasco de Quiroga at all nor any of his deeds. His admired man is always depicted as a very positive historical figure. And all possible critical interpretations of his life and actions are missing. Indeed, Vasco de Quiroga

was a very controversial leader in his times and he still is in our days. He is frequently accused of being too rigid and of stereotyping the Indians.

It is impossible to deny that he was a very intelligent and very results-driven perpetrator of the strategies of the powers of his time to which he was a faithful executor. He also implemented a very effective policy of acculturation, imposing foreign models such as the utopian construction and foreign values such as the ethics of work to an alien people. As a true believer of the superiority of his culture and religion, he did not show much interest in the other culture either. This cunning politician, no matter how well-intentioned he may be, could not avoid the limits of his mental framework, time and ideology. It can be understandable for a sixteenth-century humanist, Vasco de Quiroga, but it is not enough for a twentieth-century modernist, Benjamín Jarnés.

The latter just trod along a too well-known safe discourse: that making of the Bishop of Michoacán a stereotyped myth. He neither studied his character deeper nor tried to find and disclose the real man behind the legend. As a result, this biography can be described as superficial, outdated and not satisfactory for today's readers. It is more a flattering hagiography than a balanced biography.

Many questions are left open: What happened to his hospital-towns? Did they last? For how long? What problems were faced by his real utopians at work? There is nothing about these intriguing points.

It was a failure and a pity for such a brilliant writer, that can only be explained in the context and purposes of a beaten exiled Spaniard who wanted to identify with his new country of adoption and vindicate what the Spanish conquerors did in the area so many years before. He had the talent to have produced something much better, but, probably, the circumstances did not let him do it.

However, the biography can be praised for many other aspects, especially all those paragraphs devoted to gloss a Don Vasco, bishop of a utopia made real in the New World:

He aquí de nuevo al buen forjador de utopías, al inquieto fabricante de ciudades maravillosas, empeñado en la faena de adaptar las ideas más fascinadoras a la pobre vida real, a la humilde vida cotidiana, mucho menos fascinadora.

[And here you have a good forger of utopias, the active maker of marvellous cities, the man devoted to the task of adapting the most fascinating ideas to real life, to everyday humble life, much less fascinating] (Jarnés 1942: 219)

Poco tiempo después Don Vasco de Quiroga expone por extenso el programa humanista, basado en la Utopía de Moro, que debe constituir, a su entender, “la carta magna de la civilización europea en el Nuevo Mundo”.

[Soon after Don Vasco de Quiroga made a detailed account of the humanist programme, based in More’s Utopia, which constitutes the “Main Charter of European civilization in the New World”] (*idem*, 98)

Notes

¹ Benjamín Jarnés can also be regarded as a member of the so-called *Generación del 27* [Generation of the 27], nowadays an almost mythical one thanks to big names such as Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) or Vicente Aleixandre (1898-1984), Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977, among many others.

² Indeed, this second Golden Age has been termed *La Edad de Plata de las Letras Españolas* [The Silver Age of Spanish Letters], to avoid any misunderstanding.

³ Most of his fictional works deal with *human life* at all levels, from all points of view. As a devoted friend of philosophy, his theoretical views of literature, his aesthetic views and his views on literary criticism are founded on philosophical *vitalism*.

⁴ *Mosen Pedro* (1924); *Sor Patrocinio: La Monja de las Llagas* (1930); *Zumalacárregui: El Caudillo Romántico* (1931); *San Alejo* (1934); *Castelar, Hombre del Sinaí* (1935); *Doble Agonía de Bécquer* (1936).

⁵ Spain has always been known for being a country of saints and heroes, a land of ideals and bravery. This can especially be claimed of the times of Don Vasco de Quiroga and his Spanish contemporaries or of those foreigners at the service of Spain: that brilliant sixteenth century that witnessed the great deeds of unique navigators such as Columbus and Magallanes, humanists such as Luis Vives, or scientists such as Miguel Servet.

⁶ In 2005 the town of Madrigal organized a public homage to Don Vasco de Quiroga, in which the Governor of Michoacán was declared “Honorable Citizen”.

⁷ The *Encomiendas* was a system of land-tenure by which Spanish settlers were granted the right to own the land and to benefit from Indian free work, in a regime of semi-slavery.

⁸ However, Don Vasco de Quiroga has never completed the long way to become a saint of the Catholic Church.

⁹ Another very successful foundation of Don Vasco was the *Colegio de San Nicolás* in Michoacán in 1540. Originally, it was a seminary for Indians and Spaniards together. Later on it became a university that still exists and is one of the oldest educational institutions in America. Don Vasco himself donated his personal library of 266 volumes to this institution, which was an extraordinary number of books for that time and that place – the new wild colony of New Spain.

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