

The Solar Christ in Nahuatl Doctrinal Texts of Early Colonial Mexico

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Abstract. The friars who ministered to the Nahua (Aztec) Indians incorporated into their Nahuatl teachings Old World symbolism which used the sun as a metaphor or type for Christ. The solar Christ had different connotations in Nahuatl because of differences between Christian and Nahua views of cosmology, morality, history, and the symbolism of sun and light. Indians today view Christ as a solar deity; Christian teaching may be one source of this identification.

The Mendicant friars who converted the Indians of Mexico to Christianity after the Spanish Conquest left behind a large corpus of Christian doctrinal literature in Nahuatl and other Mesoamerican languages. These texts include sermons, catechisms, biblical excerpts, dialogues, hagiography, meditations, hymns, and confession manuals. They were written by friars conversant in the native languages, in collaboration with indigenous students who were educated in Spanish and Latin and who had considerable influence on the native-language texts. Because of their dominantly European content, these texts have received relatively little attention from ethnohistorians more interested in the indigenous side of Indian-Spanish contact. Thus these texts constitute a largely unexploited ethnohistorical resource of great value for interpreting colonial culture, particularly in regard to religion but also to language, political and social relations, and other aspects of Indian life. They provide a useful guide to the acculturative pressures operating upon native ideology. They may also help to establish more continuity between the indigenous beliefs and practices recorded in sixteenth-century ethnographic descriptions and those observed by ethnographers in the present.

The doctrinal corpus is dominated by texts in the Nahuatl (Aztec) language. This extensive body of Nahua-Christian literature reveals precisely how Christianity was presented to the Nahuas, how Christian con-

cepts were translated and explained, and what elements of indigenous belief were carried over by the friars into what was, in effect, a Nahuatl interpretation of Christianity. Christian concepts picked up new meanings and symbolic associations as they were translated into Nahuatl; at the same time, the new contexts and modes of expression characteristic of Christian preaching began to influence the meanings of Nahuatl terms. Analysis of this hybrid literature helps to illuminate the true character of the so-called spiritual conquest. Christian doctrine was "Nahuatlized" in the process of its accommodation to native categories of language and thought just as Christian personages and Christian rites took the place of the indigenous ones that most closely resembled them.

This paper examines the treatment of one motif, Christ as the sun, in the colonial Mexican literature, and analyzes this motif in light of its Old World origins and its New World cultural setting. The use of this motif in the Nahuatl doctrinal writings of three prominent friars, the Franciscans fray Bernardino de Sahagún and fray Juan Bautista and the Augustinian fray Juan de la Anunciación, is discussed.

The Solar Christ in the Old World and the New

The Christ-sun is by no means a common theme in the colonial literature, but it illustrates some interesting aspects of the translation process, including the very sensitive issue of idolatry. It is the sort of identification that one might expect the friars to avoid in the interest of preventing idolatry. Alternatively, the fact that they did use it might be seen as an attempt at planned "syncretism," the fostering of identifications between indigenous and Christian figures as an easy way to bring the Indians into the church. In reality, though, the friars were neither so conscientious nor so crafty. They were simply employing an Old World motif, translating its terminology into Nahuatl and using it in traditional contexts. Formal Christian teaching did not necessarily contradict the Nahuas' own interpretations of Christianity; the difference between Old World and Nahua Christianity lay in the articulation of their respective worldviews and the way that metaphors operated within them.

It is widely known that present-day Mesoamerican Indians view Christ as a solar deity (see, for example, Gossen 1974; Hunt 1977; Taggart 1983; Vogt 1969). This identification may look like a "survival" of indigenous solar worship, but in fact the identification was not inconsistent with sixteenth-century Christianity. For Christ to become identified with the sun was a logical response given the structure and character of the indigenous worldview; the argument here is not that the friars were responsible for this identification but only that theirs was one voice active in the intercultural dialogue within which this identification originated.

The late-medieval Christ had obvious solar characteristics, some of which derived directly from Old World solar cults. Early Christians differentiated their Christmas festival from the pagan winter solstice feast of *Natalis Solis Invicti*—while at the same time borrowing its symbolism—by characterizing Christ as the “true” sun of righteousness, who “enlightens” humanity with truth (Lukken 1973: 333–34). Thus, a metaphorical relationship was set up between Christ and the sun, with Christ playing a role in regard to spiritual concerns which paralleled the sun’s role in regard to earthly concerns. Spiritual “enlightenment” was analogous to the light of the sun. This relationship was expressed in some very direct ways: Christ’s birth was placed at midnight near the winter solstice; Christ moved between the earth, the heavens, and the underworld; his body was splendid at birth, during his transfiguration, and after resurrection.

Symbolism of darkness and light is deeply entrenched in the Catholic liturgy. Even in the Old Testament light symbolizes wisdom; the person who does not know God is in darkness. In the New Testament the Devil is the prince of darkness; God through Christ gives humanity the light of knowledge and salvation. The first nine verses of the Gospel of John refer to Christ four times as *lux*. Christ’s self-characterization as the “light of the world” (*lux mundi*, John 8:12) became a common epithet for him, along with the “sun of righteousness” (*sol justitiae*).¹ The latter epithet was derived from the Old Testament prophecy “And unto you who fear my name will arise the sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2).² Christ served in place of the sun in the New Jerusalem, as described by John in Revelation 21:23: “And the city does not need the sun, nor the moon, to shine in it, for the clarity of God illuminated it, and its lamp is the Lamb.”³

The “Canticle of Brother Sun” composed by St. Francis includes the following passage (Armstrong 1973: 228, from translation by F. C. Burkitt):

Be praised, my Lord, with all Thy works whate’er they be,
Our noble Brother Sun especially,
Whose brightness makes the light by which we see,
And he is fair and radiant, splendid and free,
A likeness and a type, Most High of Thee.

The Franciscan St. Bonaventure, whose *Mistica theologia* was published twice in sixteenth-century Mexico (in 1549 and 1575), uses a solar analogy to describe the mystic’s achievement of union with God. The sinful soul is like a rusty mirror which cannot reflect the light of the sun; the purified soul is cleansed of this rust and the rays of divine enlightenment (*alumbamiento divino*) can shine in it. If the soul has achieved an advanced state of purification, this divine sunlight can shine on it directly; the less advanced soul is enlightened by divine rays reflected in God’s creations and in Scripture (Bonaventure 1549).

The strength of the Christ-sun metaphor in the thinking of the sixteenth-century friars is amply demonstrated by an interesting passage in the writings of Motolinia. This friar was a member of the first official party of Franciscans, who arrived in 1524 (he took this Nahuatl name, "the afflicted one," in affirmation of his Franciscan poverty). He compares the friars' efforts to eradicate indigenous religious festivals with the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites under Joshua. Joshua called upon the sun and moon to pause in their courses to grant him time to vanquish the Amorites (Joshua 10:12). Likewise, the friars called upon "the splendor and grace of that sun of righteousness [*sol de justicia*], Christ our redeemer," along with Mary, who is "more beautiful than the moon," for assistance in their campaign against idolatry (Motolinia 1971: 39).

Motolinia digresses into a brief summary of Christ's solar character. As God turned the sun back ten degrees on the sundial in affirmation of a promise made to Isaiah (Isaiah 38:8), so did Christ lower himself by ten degrees in taking on human flesh (the number derives from the ninefold celestial hierarchy of powers, dominations, archangels, etc., intermediate between the states of humanity and deity). Christ among the souls in limbo is described as the sun that "gleamed on golden shields" in 1 Maccabees 6:39. On Easter morning this sun went back out; it appeared to the women in the morning and to the disciples in the afternoon, *et vespere et mane* (and evening and morning), this last phrase drawn from the creation of night and day in Genesis 1:5 (Motolinia 1971: 39-40).

Motolinia's use of Old Testament references is an example of typology, a popular medieval hermeneutical device by which Old Testament events, places, or personages were seen as "types," or predictive models, which prefigured things that would happen in the New Testament or in the church. The Old Testament was considered historically accurate, but its true significance for Christians lay in this predictive relationship to Christianity. Literal, historical phenomena had spiritual meanings in regard to the church; these spiritual referents fulfilled the types and superseded them in importance. The symbolism of the sun thus operated on two levels: the actual, "historical" sun, mentioned in the Scriptures, could be interpreted as a type for Christ; the actual, "physical" sun was a metaphor for Christ in respect to physical/spiritual dualism. As in St. Francis's canticle, the sun is a "likeness and a type" of the deity.

Transferred to New Spain, this symbolism took on certain new implications. The Nahua view of the world was monist; while it encompassed various spiritual or immaterial forces and beings, it did not set them off onto a separate plane of reality, a realm of "spirit" existing in opposition to the material realm. This contrasted with Christian transcendental dualism. The existence of an immaterial or spiritual level of existence, which is at once more "real" than the physical world and morally superior to it, is implicit in Christian doctrine as the friars presented it. Metaphors drawn

between spiritual and material things keyed into this dualist worldview: the spiritual element was rendered morally superior by its very nature; the material element could only be an insignificant shadow of it. While Nahua thought had dualistic aspects, most notably a dialectical interplay between principles of order and chaos, there was nothing to parallel Christianity's strict moral division of the cosmos (Burkhart 1986).

A second implication for the Christ-sun analogy lay in the connotations which sun and light bore for the Nahuas. In Christianity the principal connotation is of "enlightenment" as wisdom or spiritual insight, which enables the Christian to live a moral life and draw near to God, and to be "saved" from the "darkness" of sin and hell. Because Christ introduced this enlightenment and salvation, he could be seen as playing a sunlike role. In Nahua ideology the ethical significance of light was based on a metaphor of "lighting the way," of setting a moral example for others to follow. It was human beings, not celestial bodies or deities, who acted as moral models, holding up their virtuous lifestyles like a torch so that others might follow the same path. The terms used in this context refer to types of light produced by human agency. Typically, the metaphor uses the term *ocotl*, referring to a resinous pine tree and, by extension, to torches made from its wood, and the term *tlahuilli*, which referred to reddish light, including the light of dawn but in the dictionaries principally identified with torchlight, firelight, and (after the Conquest) candles or lamps (Karttunen 1983: 269–70; examples of the use of this metaphor may be found in Olmos 1875: 14 and Sahagún 1950–82: vol. 6). León-Portilla (1986: 115) describes the "light, torch" figure as "a *difrasismo*⁴ which denotes the idea that something is an example, which should be taken as a guide and model." For Christ to act as a light in this sense implies that one should follow his mode of life. While Christianity certainly urged its faithful to do this, symbolism of light and darkness was directed toward other ends.

For the Nahuas, the sun was not a moral model in the sense of a being whose behavior one should emulate. The sun had crucial roles in the creation and maintenance of earthly life, the ordering of time and space, and as the lord of a celestial realm to which the souls of dead warriors were consigned. All of these roles had morally positive connotations, but with no sense of "salvation" or of spiritual "enlightenment."

The Nahuatl name for the sun, for the deity as well as the celestial body, is *tonatiuh*, from the verb *tona* (to be warm, for the sun to shine) (Karttunen 1983: 245) plus the auxiliary verb *-yauh* (to go), joined by the ligature *-ti-* (*-yauh* is reduced to *-uh* in the present tense). The name may be translated as "he goes shining and shedding warmth." The reference to warmth is significant, for this was irrelevant to Christ's role in illuminating benighted humanity but was important in Nahua thought.

The sun's heat and light regulated the growth of food crops, which were called by the abstract noun form of *tona*, *tonacayotl*. The same applied to humans through the *tonalli*, an animate force or soul which lodged in the crown of the head; it regulated growth and body temperature as well as various other aspects of physical and moral well-being (López Austin 1980, 1: 224–25, 236–37). The days of the 260-day ritual calendar or *tonalpohualli* (tonalli-count) were equated with this tonalli soul. The infant bathing ritual, which had the effect of placing the tonalli into the child, was conducted outdoors in the first strong rays of the morning sun (Sahagún 1950–82, 6: 201).⁵ In Nahua ideology, the human self was a microcosm of the cosmos, subject to the same disruptions and regulated by the same principles. The sun's role in creating and maintaining cosmic order was expressed in the calendrical system; its role in human existence was expressed in beliefs about the tonalli soul and food crops. Without the sun, chaos ruled and life was impossible.

The Nahua sun presided over a celestial paradise where the souls⁶ of dead warriors dwelt, accompanying the sun on its morning rise. These souls took the form of brightly colored birds, which would fly about sucking nectar (Sahagún 1950–82, 3: 47). This was a joyous and highly valued place; death in battle or as a sacrificed war captive was glorified. On its descent from the zenith, as it dimmed and cooled and eventually vanished, the sun was accompanied by the souls of women who had died in their first childbirth—anomalous, dangerous beings suited to this place of decline. The western sky was associated with the moon and the feminine principle, with diminishing heat and failing strength. Hence, Christ as the rising sun forms an image of masculine strength and glory not incompatible with aspects of Christian theology; Christ as the setting sun would have had other connotations.

The Christ-sun image took on a new resonance in its Mexican setting not only because of the different connotations of sun and light but also because the friars created an analogy between the Jews of the Old Testament and the Indians before their conversion. To many, this was a literal identification: the Indians were seen as descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel; their conversion was interpreted eschatologically as a sign of the approaching Apocalypse (the conversion of the Jews was to be one of the precursors of the Apocalypse). But even without this explanation of Indian origins, the analogy functioned well. The Indians' paganism was a sort of Babylonian captivity; alternately, it paralleled the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt, with Cortés playing the role of Moses. The song for the festival of St. Hippolytus (August 13) in Sahagún's *Psalmodia christiana* encourages the Indians to be joyous on this day in commemoration of their liberation from the Devil (Tenochtitlan fell to Cortés's army on August 13, 1521), just as the children of Israel celebrated the anniver-

sary of their liberation from Egypt (Sahagún 1583: 148r–149r). The friars saw themselves as Apostles, their church as a re-creation of the Apostolic church; the symbolic landscape in which they set themselves resembled the Judea of the first century A.D. as much as it resembled the Spain of the Renaissance.

Typological thinking implies a temporal, historical continuity between signifier and signified which other kinds of tropes lack. The signifier precedes the signified in time; it relates the past to the present as well as relating one symbolic domain (earthly history) to another (Christian spirituality).

If the Old Testament is a type for the New Testament, and the pre-conversion Indians are placed symbolically in an Old Testament world (which was, after all, a world of temples, sacrifices, prophets, wars of conquest, kings, and priests), then preconversion culture can act as a type for Indian Christianity. While Christianity must supersede what came before it, typological identifications establish links between present and past; the same mode of thinking that made the Old Testament relevant to Christianity could permit certain Nahua beliefs to slip across into Christianity in accordance with an accepted hermeneutical principle. For the Indians, the significance of history lay in the cyclical repetition of ancient patterns, by which the present was brought into line with the past. The temporal direction of typological thinking could easily be reversed: rather than their sun being a mere type for Christ, Christ could be assimilated to their sun as a new embodiment of a primordial being.

If to this typological gateway is added the moral problem, the potential for continuity increases. For the Nahuas, the “metaphorical” Christ-sun is not morally superior to the “physical” sun, or the “historical” sun-deity, merely by virtue of his identification with Christian spirituality; he does not necessarily overshadow or replace it on his moral merits alone. Hence, from the Nahuas’ point of view there is a rationale for continuity between their sun and their Christ, without Christianity’s diminution of the historical or earthly version as less important, less good, less true, and less real than its Christian correlate.

To describe Christ in solar terms would not have appeared to the friars to be contradictory to their goal of obliterating idolatry. They assumed that their tropes were understood by the Nahuas the same way they would have been understood by a European audience; all that was required was to translate the words accurately into Nahuatl. To the Nahua audience, however, these tropes could have suggested a closer identification. Christ could be interpreted as a deity who has taken the place of the sun, thus becoming a new sun presiding over a new segment of history. The solar aspects of his character could be interpreted as having a direct

bearing on the conditions of earthly life, rather than being removed onto a spiritual, metaphysical level of reality.

The Christ-Sun in the Writings of Sahagún

References to Christ in general terms of light and illumination are common throughout the catechistic literature; the following discussion will be confined to the usage of explicitly solar terminology.

Sahagún and his fellow friars equated sun worship with all other forms of idolatry and spoke out against it. In the refutation of idolatry which he appended to his book on the Nahua gods, Sahagún rejects sun worship while at the same time using light as a metaphor for Christian truth, saying that the idolaters took the sun and other creations of God as deities because these are precious and comforting to people (Sahagún 1950-82, 1: 56). They honored God's creations as if they shed light, but only from God comes all that gives light and shines on and comforts people (*ibid.*). Sahagún describes the sacred words (of Christianity) as "yn tlanextli, yn ocutl in teutlatolli, ca teutlanestli" (light, a torch, the sacred words, indeed, they are sacred light) (*ibid.*: 63). He uses an Old Testament passage in which the sun stands for righteousness and intelligence, interpreting this figurative sun as a type for Christ:

Jzcatquj yn inchoquiz, yn imixaio in tlateutocanjme. Erraujmus in via veritatis, etc. Sapientie, 5 capitulo. qujtoznequj. O totlaeliltic ca otitiscuepque, yn oc tlalticpac tinenca: auh in melaoac iecnemilizvtli, amo tiqujttaque, in iecnemiliztonatiuh, amo techtlanextili. (*Ibid.*: 65)

(Here is the weeping, the tears of the idolaters. "We strayed from the road of truth, etc." Of Wisdom, chapter 5. It means: "Oh how wretched we are. Indeed, we lost our way, when we still lived on earth. And we did not see the straight road of proper living, the sun of proper living did not illuminate us.")

The passage in the Book of Wisdom from which this is translated (5:6) refers to the fate of the impious: "We strayed from the road of truth, the light of righteousness did not illuminate us, the sun of intelligence did not rise upon us."⁷ The "light of righteousness" and "sun of intelligence" are combined in the Nahuatl into the "sun of proper living"; this was the usual gloss for *sol justitiae*.

From a Christian point of view, the Indians' error—like that of the Jews—lay in their failure to transcend earthly reality in order to comprehend the transcendental significance of the things of their world. As the Jews focused on the literal and historical meanings of their Scriptures,

the Indians worshipped the sun and other natural phenomena instead of seeing in them symbols of a higher reality which alone merited worship. Once the Indians were converted to Christianity, all of these subtleties should, in the friars' view, have become clear to them. That they did not was, of course, interpreted as evidence of the Indians' inferiority.

In Sahagún's Christian doctrinal literature, a highly developed example of solar imagery may be found in his three sermons for Christmas. Sahagún's collection of sermons was written in 1540 and revised in 1563. A later, unrevised copy of the Christmas sermons has been published by Baudot (1982).

Beginning in the introductory section of the sermon for the midnight mass, the text creates an elaborate night-day image. It describes how important the sun is to people and other living things, how it is the source of all light. Sahagún includes a refutation of idolatry, describing how some people worshipped the sun because it is wonderful and strong. This is not true, he says, because it is just a creation of God. He tells parents to educate their children about this so that they do not worship the sun; the parents should say:

Notlaçopiltzine ma vel ximozcali, ma ytech timotlapololti ÿ tonatiuh, aic ticmoteotiz aic tictlatlauhtiz: ca çã tlanextli amo yoli amo tla-caqui, amo tlachia amotle quimati: ca çã tocoub totlavil, in titlaca otechmomaquili in totecuiyo dios, inic techtlanextiliz techtlauliliz.⁸ (Sahagún 1563: 8v)

(Oh my precious child, teach yourself well, do not be confused about the sun. You will never take it as a deity, you will never pray to it, for it is just illumination, it is not alive, it does not hear, it does not see, it does not know anything. For it is just our torch, our light, which our lord God gave to us people so that it would illuminate us, it would light us.)

Having thus dispensed with the earthly sun, Sahagún then feels free to use the sun as a metaphor for Christ, referring to Christ as "tonatiuh yn itech povi tãã" (the sun to which our souls pertain) (*ibid.*). He expects that the reference to souls, using the Spanish or Latin term *ánima* to distinguish this from the multiple Nahua soul concepts, will remove the image to a spiritual level of reality, that the audience will understand that he is no longer talking about the actual sun. Christ will be seen as playing the role of the sun in a spiritual realm compared to which the earthly sun and human bodies are insignificant. An obvious problem is that this simple opposition between the soul and the body did not correspond to Nahua categories of thought. However, even if the Christian concept of a single soul was accepted and the parallel dichotomy between spiritual

and physical domains came across, the symbolic associations of the sun were different—it might be seen as nourishing and gladdening these souls rather than saving them from sin and hell.

In the next section of this sermon Sahagún states that before the savior came, the people of the earth lived in darkness. When the savior was born, “omomanaco in tonatiuh in quitlanextilia teāā” (the sun which illuminates people’s souls came to spread itself) (*ibid.*). The verb *momana* (to spread or extend oneself) is used to refer to the rising of celestial bodies (as in the *Florentine Codex* book on astronomy, Sahagún 1950–82: vol. 7). Here again, the reference to the soul, using the Spanish term, was to place the image onto a spiritual plane.

It is also worth noting that the term used for darkness, *tlayohuayan*, is not an abstract notion but a spatial or temporal locative, referring to a time or place that is dark; in indigenous usage this could refer to the disordered time (or time out of time) before cosmic order was established with the creation of the sun. To be in a dark place or a dark time is not quite the same thing as being in a metaphorical, abstract “darkness” of the soul. However, the image of Christianity as a solar order contrasting with the chaotic darkness that preceded it fit Nahua conceptions quite well.

Sahagún cites Isaiah 9:2, interpreting it as a reference to Christ. The biblical verse reads: “The people who were walking in darkness saw a great light; light has dawned upon those who dwelt in the region of the shadow of death.”⁹ Sahagún translates and explains this passage as follows:

In maceoalti tlayoan nēca quittaqz vei tlanextli: oalmomā ŷtlavil ymocouh ŷ miquiztecomac eoaticadca. In iquac omotlacatili temaquixtiani: yuhquī tlanextli inpā omomanaco in tlayoayā nenca. (Sahagún 1563: 8v)

(“The vassals who dwelt in the darkness saw a great illumination; the light, the torch of those who were sitting in the jar of death¹⁰ came spreading itself.” When the savior was born, like illumination he came to spread himself upon those that dwelt in the darkness.)

Christ’s birth in Bethlehem is then described. This section closes by stating that Christ is “ytlanex ytlavil yuhquī ma ytonatiuh in tāā” (our souls’ illumination, their light, as if he were their sun) (9r). The term *tlahuilli*, which connoted wisdom and moral authority (as “lighting the way”), is here employed in the same utterance as the sun and *tlanextli*, illumination in a general sense of “visibility.” It is assumed that these terms would all connote spiritual enlightenment or salvation.

The night-day image is continued with a description of the sadness of night and of how happy all creatures are when the sun comes out

and spreads itself. Before Christ was born all the people of earth lived in darkness and were sad and miserable. When Christ was born the darkness disappeared and it became light everywhere in the world (9r). He is again compared with the sun (9v): "In iuhqui tonatiuh quitlanextilia tonacayo: no yuhqui in yevatzin totemaquixticatzi ihu x quitlanextilia in tãã" (as the sun illuminates our bodies, likewise our savior Jesus Christ illuminates our souls). The text goes on to describe some of Christ's teachings, here equated with illumination.

In the sermon for the second Christmas mass, the audience is told to follow the example of the shepherds who were keeping watch when Christ was born and then went to worship him. They should get up and go to the temple to see their deity in the morning when the sun rises; there is an implicit identification of the sun with the deity (10v).

Finally, in his sermon for the third Christmas mass, Sahagún again observes how the sun illuminates and warms the body, while Christ is "ytlanex yuhqui ma ytonatiuh in tãã" (our souls' illumination, as if he were their sun) (11v). He illuminates, warms, comforts, and strengthens people's souls. The sun illuminates people on earth so that they can do what they need to do; Christ illuminates people so that they know what is good and bad (11v).

Sahagún's *Psalmodia christiana*, a book of songs and chants for use in church festivals which was published in 1583 but written around 1560, permits some even more direct identifications of Christ with the sun. In the text for the Purification of Mary, a Latin responsory used on this occasion in missals of the period (e.g., *Missale secūdum . . . Gerunden* 1557: 188v) is the source for a prayer to Mary. Three phrases from the responsory are quoted in the margin, including the statement "Ex te ortus est sol justitiae" (from you arose [or was born] the sun of righteousness). The Nahuatl version of this reads, "Motechtzinco oquiz, otlacat, iecnemiliztonatiuh, in quintlanestilia in tlaioaian nemi" (from you emerged, was born, the sun of proper living, who illuminates those who dwell in the darkness) (Sahagún 1583: 27r).

The *Psalmodia*'s text on the Annunciation addresses Christ as follows (55v):

In tehoatzi in tidios tipiltzi, tijtonameiotzi in motlaçotatzi, ca titlanextli, ma xitechmotlauililiqui, in tlaioaian tonoque.

(You, you God, you child,¹¹ you are the sunbeam of your precious father, you are illumination; come to shed light for us, we who lie in the darkness.)

The marginal entry "O oriens, splendor lucis aeternae," as well as the surrounding text, identifies this passage as one of a series of antiphons used during Advent, called the "O" antiphons because they all begin with this

interjection. Here these chants are taken from their standard liturgical context and applied to the Annunciation.¹² The complete antiphon reads, "Oh rising sun, splendor of the eternal light and sun of righteousness, come and illuminate those who are seated in the darkness and the shadow of death"¹³ (Breviarium Augustanum 1495: 110r). In the *Psalmodia* the solar imagery has been reduced. "You God, you child" and "your precious father" have been substituted for the antiphon's "rising sun" and "eternal light"; "sun of righteousness" has been omitted. However, a solar sense is retained with the translation of *splendor* as "sunbeam." The Latin *splendor* refers to "sheen, brightness, brilliance" and the like, with no particularly solar connotation (Lewis and Short 1907: 1744). The Nahuatl term for sunbeam, *tonameyotl*, is an abstract noun constructed from the verb *tona* and the verb *meya* (to flow or gush). The term may be translated as "a flowing of warmth and light"; it is equated with "sunbeam" by Molina (1970: 149v). The verb *tona* also links this directly with the sun. If the translator had intended to purge the passage of solar connotations, *splendor* could have been glossed with a Nahuatl term having a more general reference to light or brilliance, such as *tlanextli*.

For the festival of the Transfiguration, the *Psalmodia* states, "Ylhuicaicocorona, cenca pepetlaca, cenca tlanestia, iuhquin ma tonatiuh inic tlanestia" ([Christ]'s celestial crown shimmers greatly, shines greatly, it is like the sun, the way it shines) (130r-130v). Here Christ is, figuratively, crowned with the sun; in the biblical account of the Transfiguration which comes closest to this, it is his face which shines like the sun (Matthew 17:2).¹⁴ A description of the Transfiguration in Sahagún's sermons follows the text in Matthew, stating, "Ca in ixayacatzī ynic cēca tlanexti yuhquin tonatiuh" (Indeed, his face, the way it greatly shone, was like the sun) (Sahagún 1563: 34v). The *Psalmodia* is interpreting this text rather freely; it may be influenced by Revelation 14:14, where Christ wears a golden crown, by Revelation 19:12, in which he wears many crowns (*diademata multa*), or other images of a crowned Christ. The woodcut which accompanies the *Psalmodia* text is shown in Figure 1. Lines radiating outward form an aureole around Christ's head and around his entire body, indicating his luminosity.

In the song for the Nativity of Mary, a responsory containing the epithet *sol justitiae* is translated into Nahuatl. The phrase "for from you has risen the sun of righteousness"¹⁵ is translated "Vel nelli motechtzinco omotlacatilizino in iecnemilize teutonatiuh" (very truly, from you was born the possessor of proper living, the divine sun) (Sahagún 1583: 172r). The addition of the term *teotl* (deity) to *tonatiuh* has the effect of making Christ into a sun god or, more literally, god-sun. The construction was intended to stress the spiritual significance of Christ's solar identity; the ambiguity is, however, evident.



Figure 1. The Transfiguration of Christ. Woodcut in Sahagún's *Psalmodia christiana* (1583: 129r). (Photo courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.)

For the festival of Saint Michael, the *Psalmodia* translates the Latin hymn *Tibi Christe splendor patris*, traditionally sung on this occasion and included in breviaries and collections of hymns from the period (e.g., Nebrija 1549; Breuiarium Romanū 1553). The phrase *splendor patris* becomes *titonameiotzi in tetatzi* (you are the sunbeam of the father) (Sahagún 1583: 180r). That the translator chose to gloss *splendor* as “sun-

beam," even in the absence of the strong solar symbolism of the antiphon quoted earlier, suggests that he tended to view Christ's luminous character in solar terms.

The song for the festival of Saint Thomas presents a striking usage of solar imagery (ibid.: 226v–227v). First it describes how all illumination, including that of the moon and the stars, derives from the sun. This illumination pertains to our bodies. Good and bad alike, believer and idolater alike, can see it; it is "our torch, our light" (*tocouh, totlauil*)—here these terms are meant literally, not metaphorically.

The audience is then told to marvel at the illumination which illuminates our souls, which is Jesus Christ, *toteutonatiuh* (our divine sun). This statement again relies on "soul" and "divine" to suggest a spiritual interpretation. When "our divine sun" Jesus died, *oonac, ocalac* (he went in, he entered); these verbs are those used to refer to the setting of the sun. He disappeared from the presence of the people of the world. When he revived, they were again able to see him with their eyes. Thomas's doubt is explained by the statement "Our lord's illumination was not yet within him." The text distinguishes between the internal illumination, or spiritual enlightenment, shared by all Christians and the external illumination of the physical sun. It is assumed that solar terminology may be appropriately applied to both.

In the *Psalmodia's* Christmas text, the infant is addressed with the statement "ca titlanesio, titonamecio ī tetatzi isquich iueli" (you are the illumination, you are the sunbeam of the all-powerful father) (ibid.: 232v). Marginal notes indicate that this passage translates the line "Tu lumen, tu splendor patris," which opens the second stanza of the Christmas hymn *Christe redemptor omnium*, found in the breviaries and hymnbooks (e.g., Nebrija 1549; Breuiarium Romanū 1553). Here again, "sunbeam" is the preferred interpretation of *splendor*.

Some of the miracles associated with the birth of Christ are briefly narrated. One of these passages declares that when the sun, Jesus (directly identified as *tonatiuh in Iesus*), came spreading himself, three suns came to spread themselves, were marveled at, and then became one again (Sahagún 1583: 233v). This refers to a legend that three suns were indeed seen in the east at the birth of Christ. According to the *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century compendium of religious lore, "there appeared in the orient three suns, which little and little assembled together, and were all on one. As it is signified to us that these three things are the Godhead, the soul, and the body, which been in three natures assembled in one person" (Voragine 1900, I: 26–27).

The next passage in the *Psalmodia* relates that Jesus was born at midnight (*ioalnepātla*), and it miraculously became light everywhere in the world ("auh nouiā cemañoac tlamauicōltica otlaneztimoman"). These

two miracles are paired with marginal notes taken from an antiphon from the Christmas liturgy: "When the sun has risen in the heavens, you shall see the King of kings coming forth from the Father, like a groom from his bridal chamber"¹⁶ (English translation quoted from *Hours of the Divine Office* 1963, 1: 1153). The text is following a source other than that cited in the margin, but the two suggest each other through this solar image of Christ coming forth as if he were the sun.

Another of these Christmas miracles is recounted as follows:

in vel iquac omotlacatili in Iesus, in Emperador, ilhuicatli itech, tonatiuh oquittac ichpuchtlī quinapalotica icunetzi, auh motlanquaquetz, oquimoteuti, inezca ca oualmouicac in talticpac, in vei Emperador. (Sahagún 1583: 234r)

(Right when Jesus was born, the Emperor saw the sun in the sky, a maiden carrying her child in her arms, and he knelt, he took him as a god. It is a sign that the great Emperor came to earth.)

As the *Golden Legend* tells this story, the Emperor Octavian¹⁷ desired to be worshipped as a god. He consulted the prophetess Sibyl to find out if there would ever be another ruler as great as he. The seeress had a vision in which she

saw a circle of gold about the sun, and in the middle of the circle a maid holding a child in her arms. Then she called the Emperor and shewed it him. When Octavian saw that he marvelled over much, whereof Sibyl said to him: *Hic puer major te est, ipsum adora.*

Octavian obeyed her instructions and worshipped this child, abandoning his pretensions to divinity (Voragine 1900, 1: 27).

The accounts of these legends in the *Psalmodia* are so condensed as to be nearly unintelligible; the author or authors may have been working from memory rather than directly from a text. The inclusion of these truncated accounts indicates that solar imagery was considered appropriate to the occasion, and whatever examples were available could be included.

Sahagún's *Exercicio* of 1574, a book of prayers and meditations arranged for the days of the week, contains one reference to the solar Christ. It tells how prophets had foreseen the coming of Christ and how Christ, at age twelve, showed that their predictions had come true when he spoke to the priests and sages in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:46-50). The fulfillment of the prophecy is described as

ca onac otlathuic otlaymmantic ohualquiz ohuالمoman in yancuic tonatiuh in yancuic tlanextli. Auh in yehuatzin in motlacopiltzin in dios yhuan oquichtli Jesu xp̄o. (Sahagún 1574: 20r)

(Indeed, it became sunny, it dawned, it was time, the new sun, the new illumination came out, came to spread itself. And it is your [God's] precious child, who is God and man, Jesus Christ.)

“New sun” suggests the beginning of a new age, the Christian era with its spiritual Christ-sun, or a new solar age with its new sun deity. The two interpretations are not necessarily contradictory; the very ambivalence of such a text may foster the merging of these ideas.

The Augustinian Christ-Sun

Fray Juan de la Anunciación was a highly respected and influential Augustinian friar whose large compendium of sermons, hagiography, and catechism was published in 1577. Like Sahagún, Anunciación applies imagery of night and day to Christmas. At night thieves, murderers, and wild animals go about; at dawn they flee and hide. Christ's birth had the same effect upon the devils: before Christ was born they used to dwell among us and afflict us, “auh in axcā teoyotica otopā tlathuic” (but today [Christmas] in a divine way it became day upon us) (Anunciación 1577: 12v). The friars often employed this term *teoyotica* (in a sacred or divine way, or divinely, from *teoyotl*, an abstract form of the noun *teotl* [deity], plus the instrumental suffix *-tica*) as a way of expressing metaphorical relationships between earthly and spiritual referents. The sense intended by the friars was, in effect, “spiritually speaking” or “in regard to the spiritual domain”; in Nahuatl it means simply that something is being done in a sacred way or through the agency of divinity. For it to become day “in a divine way” may refer to the actual dawn, merely implying that a divine power has had something to do with it. The term's constant usage in church-related contexts may have given it a Christian sense as relating to God or the church, which is appropriate but nevertheless does not convey a sense of material/spiritual dualism.

In his sermons for the Sunday after Christmas, Anunciación compares people who are blind or have eye diseases, who cannot see when the sun rises, with sinners who cannot see the coming of Christ (ibid.: 13v–14r). Citing John 3:20, “For everyone who does evil hates the light,”¹⁸ Anunciación describes how sinners hate the sun, that is, the words of our lord God, which illuminate people “in a divine way” (*teoyotica*). Here it is divine words which are equated with the sun, reflecting the sense that it is knowledge or spiritual wisdom that is represented by the sun figure.

The text for the birth of John the Baptist compares John to Venus, in Nahuatl the “great star” (*vey citlalin*), which goes before the sun, informing people that the great illumination, the sun, is about to rise. John the Baptist came to earth before Christ; “ca çatepan valmohuicac in vey

tlanextli in tonatiuh, yehuatzin in totēcuiyo IESV CHRISTO" (afterwards came the great illumination, the sun, which is our lord Jesus Christ) (ibid.: 160r). This association of John the Baptist with Venus was used in sixteenth-century Spain as well: it appears in fray Alfonso de Villegas Selvago's book of saints' lives (1615: 261). It derives from biblical passages that describe John as a light that came before Christ, though not specifically as Venus (e.g., John 1:6-9; John 5:35; Villegas Selvago's exegesis of Psalm 131:17).

For the festival of the Transfiguration, Anunciación translates into Nahuatl Matthew 17:2, referring to how Christ's face shone like the sun:

Ca in ixayacatzin totēcuiyo IESV CHRISTO, ynic cenca tlanexti ynic cenca pepetlacac, yuhquin tonatiuh. (Anunciación 1577: 174v)

(Indeed, the face of our lord Jesus Christ, the way it greatly shone, the way it greatly shimmered, it was like the sun.)

The passage in Matthew is literal and descriptive; it does not rely on physical/spiritual dualism: in some ways Christ's actual body acts in a solar manner.

The concept of the trinity was extremely difficult for the friars to explain in Nahuatl. In two contexts, the festival of the Holy Trinity (83r-83v) and his explanation of the second article of faith (233v), Anunciación creates an analogy with the sun. God the father is like the sun, Christ is like the sun's illumination, and the Holy Spirit is like the sun's warmth. The purpose of the figure is of course to illustrate how three things can be one and the same—there is only one sun. In support of monotheism, Anunciación marshalls imagery which could easily be interpreted as a promotion of "idolatrous" sun worship.

Fray Juan Bautista

The Franciscan fray Juan Bautista was a prolific writer and meticulous scholar of Nahuatl. His *Sermonario*, published in 1606, is a complex theological treatise devoting its more than seven hundred pages to only one month of the church calendar. In a sermon for the first Sunday in Advent, Bautista applies a night-day metaphor to the coming of Christ. He tells his audience to awaken, for day has broken. At night people sleep; he explains that the night he is talking about is not that which happens every day, but that which happened when Adam sinned. Now it is time to arise from this sleep of sin, because

ca o amopan moquetzaco in tlahuilli in ocotl, in teotlanextli: ohualquiz omomanaco in Tonatiuh, in ineltococatzin to Tecuiyo Iesu Christo. (Bautista 1606: 7)

(Indeed, upon you has arisen the light, the torch, the divine illumination. The sun has come out, has come to spread itself, belief in our lord Jesus Christ.)

Here it is the Christian faith, belief in Christ (literally, “his being considered true”) rather than Christ himself, which drives away the darkness of sin and hell.

In an exegesis of the biblical passage “light came into the world, and men loved the darkness more than the light, for their deeds were bad”¹⁹ (John 3:19), Bautista again expresses the contrast between darkness and light in various ways. The basic analogy is of Christ as a source of light and sin as darkness. The sun is mentioned once: it is told how people with various eye problems (representing sinners) cannot look at the sun (Bautista 1606: 225).

In a sermon on the Final Judgment, Bautista explains that the judgment of all the resurrected dead will take place all at once. To convey how this simultaneous action can occur, he describes how it becomes light everywhere at once when the sun rises. Likewise will Christ appear forth from the clouds when people have come back to life, and in his light everyone’s words, thoughts, and deeds will all be visible (ibid.: 214).

Later in the same sermon, Bautista translates the passage in the Book of Revelation (19:12) which mentions Christ’s many crowns²⁰ as “In icpactzinco mantihuitz, teuhitonac, miec in tlahtocatonameyotl, in tlah-tocaCorona” (on his head came spreading, shone in abundance,²¹ many royal sunbeams, a royal crown) (Bautista 1606: 223). The contemporary conception of the crowned Christ clearly involved this image of solar radiance.

In Bautista’s sermons on the Conception of Mary, the woman clothed in the sun and standing on the moon (Revelation 12:1) is (as was usual) interpreted as a representation of Mary. Her being dressed in the sun Bautista explains in two ways: she was dressed in God’s illumination so that sin never reached her, and she gave birth to “in nemilizTonatiuh toTecuio IESV CRHISTO [sic]” (the sun of life, our Lord Jesus Christ) (Bautista 1606: 481). This statement relies on a contrast between a “dead” earthly sun and a “living” spiritual sun. The verb *nemi* means “to live” in the sense of living at a certain place or of moving about and being active; the verb *yoli* would actually have been more appropriate to the intended meaning.

Bautista’s sermons for the fourth Sunday in Advent discuss John the Baptist’s humility when the Jews asked him if he was the Messiah. In John 5:35–36, Christ describes John the Baptist as a burning and shining light, in which the Jews delighted for a time, but Christ has greater testimony, which comes from the Father. Explaining what Christ meant by

this statement, Bautista (1606: 564) writes, “in sanct Ioan ahmo yehuatl in Tonatiuh: ca çan Candela, ca çan ocotl, ca çan tlahuilli” (Saint John is not the sun; he is just a candle, just a torch, just a light). This implies that it is Christ who is the sun.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown that the Christ-sun figure was active in the thinking of some of the most influential friars of early colonial Mexico. They applied this figure to a variety of contexts, most of them having firm roots in the Bible and the Roman liturgy. They assumed that the careful translations prepared by them and their indigenous assistants would convey the same message to indigenous audiences that Old World teachings conveyed to Old World audiences.

How did Nahuas outside of the immediate church context interpret this symbolism? One reference to the solar Christ coming from outside the friars' writings may be found in the *Cantares mexicanos*, a collection of Nahuatl songs by native authors. Some of these songs deal explicitly with Christian subjects. A song written in 1564 by don Francisco Plácido, the Indian governor of Xiquipilco, describes the resurrection of Christ as follows: “dawn came to arise and just then the true sun came out. It was Jesus Christ. He came to spread his illumination all over us” (Bierhorst 1985: 270; my trans.). The verbs used are those appropriate to the rising sun (*hualquiza*, *mana*). Is this “true sun” or “very true sun” (*huel nelli tonatiuh*) the sun in the sky or the metaphorical sun of the spiritual world? The text is ambiguous; it is open to either a literal or a metaphorical interpretation.

Christ as the friars presented him was a deity like the sun, or indeed was the sun in some sacred sense, playing the role of the sun in respect to holy and spiritual things. From here it is a short step to a direct identification. It is possible that some Indians took the church's teaching to mean that Christ and the sun were the same being. But even without such an identification the solar Christ has different connotations: his light may represent not spiritual enlightenment but cosmic order, his beneficence may apply not to immaterial souls but to living people and their crops. The relationship between these colonial connections and present-day belief cannot be ascertained at present, but the colonial literature does provide one historical precedent for the Christ-sun of today's Mesoamerican peoples.

Christian doctrine as the friars presented it contained many elements which the Indians could easily interpret in their own terms and use to reinforce their own beliefs. An Indian who diligently attended sermons,

catechism classes, and festivals could in all sincerity accept Christ and continue to revere the sun, for they were spoken of in similar terms. The moral dualism which placed Christ's significance far beyond that of any earthly phenomenon was alien to Nahua thought; the Nahuas did not view their conversion as ushering in a new spiritual order of reality that superseded all preceding history.

This paper has explored only one motif; many others could have served as well to illustrate the basic contrasts between Nahua and Christian thought and the implications these had for Christian teaching. By allowing Christian doctrine to be shaped by Nahuatl terminology, and by assuming that Nahua concepts of time, morality, and cosmology were comparable to theirs, the friars inadvertently fostered the retention of much indigenous belief within the context of colonial Nahua Christianity. It is only through close study of their native-language doctrinal writings that the dialogue between Indians and priests, between indigenous culture and Christianity, can be reconstructed, and that simplistic models of "syncretism" and "survival" can be replaced by a deeper understanding of the processes of culture contact.

Notes

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- 1 *Justitia*, though a cognate of "justice," in this context is better translated as "justness" or "righteousness"; "justice" suggests a legalistic aspect that is not appropriate. Lewis and Short (1907: 1020) include "righteousness" and "conduct in accordance with the divine law" among their glosses for *justitia*.
- 2 "Et orietur vobis timentibus nomen meum Sol iustitiae." Biblical quotations are taken from *Biblia Sacra* 1982. All translations from Latin, Nahuatl, and Spanish sources are by the author unless otherwise noted.
- 3 "Et civitas non eget sole, neque luna ut luceant in ea, nam claritas Dei illuminavit eam, et lucerna eius est Agnus."
- 4 A pair of terms denoting a single concept, common in Nahuatl metaphorical constructions.
- 5 Present-day Nahuatl speakers of northern Veracruz conceive of the tonalli soul as heat from the sun, which returns to the sun when an individual dies (Sandstrom, pers. com., 1987).
- 6 The *teyolia*, an animate force seated in the heart.
- 7 "Ergo erravimus a via veritatis, Et iustitiae lumen non luxit nobis, Et sol intelligentiae non est ortus nobis."
- 8 Where passages from manuscripts or colonial publications are quoted, their orthography has been preserved, but words are divided according to modern

- grammatical classifications. Elsewhere, standard modern orthography is used for Nahuatl terms. This accounts for apparent inconsistencies in spelling.
- 9 "Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris, Vidit lucem magnam; Habitantibus in regione umbrae mortis, Lux orta est eis."
 - 10 *Miquiztecomatl*, from *miquiztli* (death) and *tecomatl* (jar), is not in the dictionaries. It appears to be an extension of the usage seen in *mixtecomatl* (literally, cloud-jar), which referred to gloom or darkness—as if one were inside a jar of clouds. Here one is in darkness as if inside a jar of death. This is a clever translation of "region of the shadow of death."
 - 11 Literally, "you are God, you are a revered child"; this manner of expressing the idea of "God the son" makes an apt difrasismo for Christ, a phrase that elegantly expresses his dual nature by naming two of his attributes.
 - 12 The Spanish church celebrated the "Feast of the Expectation of the Delivery of Our Lady" on December 18. As Pedro de Ribadeneyra explains, it was felt that the Annunciation (March 25), since it occurred during the period of Lenten penances and the lamentation of the Passion, could not be celebrated with appropriate joyfulness. In the tenth century the new festival was instituted by the archbishopric of Toledo in order that Mary's pregnancy could be adequately observed. The "O" antiphons were sung during the rites of December 18; the festival was also called the "Feast of Our Lady's of the O" (Ribadeneyra 1669: 987). The association of these antiphons with this Spanish supplement to the Annunciation establishes a logical basis for their use with the Annunciation in the *Psalmodia*.
 - 13 "O oriens et splendor lucis aeternae et sol justitiae veni et illumina sedentes in tenebris et umbra mortis."
 - 14 "Et resplenduit facies eius sicut sol."
 - 15 "Ex te enim ortus est sol iustitiae."
 - 16 "Dum ortus fuerit sol de caelo, videbitis Regem regum procedentem a Patre, tamquam sponsum de thalamo suo." The *Psalmodia*'s notes vary slightly from this, stating, ". . . Tanq; sp̄sus dominus, procedēs de thalamo suo" (like the groom, the lord, coming forth from his bridal chamber).
 - 17 Augustus Caesar, Roman emperor at the time of Christ.
 - 18 "Omnis enim qui male agit, odit lucem."
 - 19 "Quia lux venit in mundum, et dilexerunt homines magis tenebras quam lucem: erant enim eorum mala opera."
 - 20 *Diademata multa*; Lewis and Short (1907: 568) gloss *diadema* as "a royal head-dress, a diadem."
 - 21 From *teuhti* (much in quantity) (Molina 1970: IIIv) and *tona*, referring to the sun's shining.

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