The Slippery Earth

Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico

Louise M. Burkhart

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CHAPTER 1

Evangelization, Dialogue, Rhetoric

Central Mexico in the sixteenth century was the scene of a social experiment which, though hopelessly quixotic, bequeathed to modern scholarship an excellent and extensive record of intercultural contact, including the largest body of native-language texts from anywhere in the New World. Europeans here did not simply pass through and describe what they saw: they sat down with the natives and, over a period of decades, listened to them speak in their own voices while they themselves learned to answer in kind. This dialogue owes its existence to an odd mix of medieval theology, which insisted that all human souls were equal, Renaissance humanism, which suggested that something of worth might be found in another way of life, and Catholic intolerance, which justified—or excused—the study of pagan things on the grounds of facilitating their eradication. The Indians of Mexico were contacted at a time when educated, religious men of Europe could deem them worthy of the effort required to communicate with them.

On August 13, 1521, Cuauhtemoc, the last ruler of the Mexica Indians, surrendered to Hernán Cortés the island capital of Tenochtitlan. Cortés's three years of schemes and shrewd alliances had paid off, and to the possessions of Spain's young king, Charles V, newly crowned Holy Roman Emperor, was added the vast territory known in history as the Aztec Empire. The colony of New Spain was established; its capital, now Mexico City, was built upon the ruins of Tenochtitlan.

Central Mexico, the mountain-ringed Basin of Mexico and its surrounding territory (now the states of Puebla, Tlaxcala, Morelos, México, and Hidalgo), had been the seat of urban civilization since before the time of Christ. Through time, shifting political alliances periodically united the area or fragmented it among rival city-states. In periods of political upheaval, such as the fall of the ancient city of Teotihuacan, seminomadic tribes would migrate into the area from the north. These tribes brought with them the Nahuatl language, a Uto-Aztecan tongue related to languages of the western and southwestern United States, and an origin myth about a place called Aztlan, source of the term Aztec (from *aztecatl* 'person from Aztlan') which is often used to describe these peoples. From the local inhabitants the settlers learned the arts of agriculture and civilization, and acculturated their tribal rites and deities to ancient Mesoamerican patterns.

The Mexica were the last of these immigrant groups, entering the Basin of Mexico in the twelfth century and founding their island city in about 1325. A warlike group, they synthesized their tribal cult with the Mesoamerican solar cult and the ancient practice of human sacrifice, inventing a militaristic ideology which eventually helped them to win hegemony over most of Mesoamerica. As their soldiers went forth to bring back captives for sacrifice, demands for tribute were imposed on the vanquished polities and wealth poured into the capital. But aside from their state cult and their politically dominant position, the Mexica were culturally very similar to the other Nahuatl-speaking peoples who surrounded them.

After the Spanish Conquest, aside from some temporary privileges granted to Cortés's closest allies, all of these peoples shared similar experiences. It is here more fitting to speak of Nahua culture, the culture of peoples speaking the Nahuatl language, than to distinguish the Mexica from their neighbors or to speak of "Aztecs"—a vague term that is better applied to the pre-Conquest Mexica empire than to the particular ethnic groups that composed, and outlived, that organization.

Located at the center of the new colony as well as the old empire, the Nahuas came into closer and more immediate contact with the Spanish colonial administration than did peoples in more isolated regions. This area was also the center of the colonial Church. It was the missionaries who entered into closest contact with the Nahuas, learning their language and attempting to understand how their culture operated. These missionaries were friars of the Mendicant orders—Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians. They came to New Spain in the hope of establishing among

the Indians a new and exemplary Christian community. They believed that this could be achieved only by residing in the native communities and paying close attention to their customs, however alien or repugnant these might have seemed. Hence, they entered into a dialogue with these people, of which a fragmentary transcript survives in the missionaries' many writings.

The purpose of the dialogue—to transform the Indians into a model Christian society—was thwarted by various factors. The Nahuas resisted, actively and passively. The indigenous population was decimated by disease, overwork, and dislocation. A powerful colonial order based on an economy of exploitation was institutionalized. Religious authority was transferred from the Mendicant monastic orders to the secular Church hierarchy, while at the same time the heavy hand of the Counter-Reformation pulled the priests away from their immersion in native language and culture. What remains are the records—and the challenge they pose for turning an attempt at religious conversion into the basis for anthropological analysis.

Information on indigenous culture has permitted ethnographic studies to be written on pre-Conquest culture, with a degree of detail impressive for a culture never visited by a modern anthropologist. A very few examples are Berdan (1982), León-Portilla (1963), López Austin (1980) and Soustelle (1961). Such cultural reconstructions strive to block out European influence, to show the Indians as they "really were." The results are fascinating and are probably valid for the most part, but they tend to overlook the realities of the contact situation and their influence on the sources. Also, this emphasis on the pre-Conquest period, this quest for the authentic Indian, ignores what these sources are best suited for: the study of culture contact.

The use of colonial sources to reconstruct pre-Conquest culture is symptomatic of a general tendency within anthropology to place other cultures into an "ethnographic present" in which they are described as static, self-perpetuating systems. Fabian (1983) attributes this disposition to anthropology's need to justify itself as a science, to make of culture a passive object of inquiry on the same order as those of the natural sciences. Living societies, with whom an investigator has had extensive personal contact, are made to seem removed in time and space, objectified; the investigator's dialogue with individual people becomes his or her monologue about the "culture," now presented as a homogeneous unit.

Sahlins (1985) also criticizes the tendency to remove cultures from their

own history. He emphasizes that a culture exists in time and reveals itself through time, as its conceptual categories come into contact with an ever-changing reality and it is forced to interpret and organize that reality using whatever symbolic equipment its own past has bequeathed to it. His analysis of British-Polynesian contact shows how Polynesian culture shaped the course of that contact and was at the same time changed by it.

Nahua culture is rooted deeply in a past known only through archaeology and continues today among several hundred thousand Nahuatl-speakers. To single out the pre-Conquest "Aztec" as its quintessential representative is to perpetuate the ahistorical bias plaguing traditional anthropology. Colonial sources are best suited to the study of colonial Nahuas, and in some ways colonial Nahuas are more interesting than their predecessors. It is they who faced the greatest challenge ever presented to Nahua culture—how to make sense of an invasion by alien beings intent not only on seizing their wealth and territory but on altering their most deeply held religious beliefs. That they survived with a large part of their cultural identity intact is perhaps a more impressive achievement than the feats of the poet-kings, warriors, and scribes so beloved of pre-Conquest enthusiasts.

Even if one's goal is to discover the pre-Conquest Indian, European "influence" in the colonial texts is not simply a screen or a veneer that can be easily peeled away. It is the colonial Indians who speak through these records, Indians who are in the process of adapting to the colonial environment, not by simply adding European traits to their own cultural repertoire but by reinterpreting those traits to make them consistent with preexisting cultural models. At the same time, Nahua culture is undergoing what Sahlins (1985:ix, 31) calls a "functional revaluation of categories," the ongoing process of change that all cultures undergo through time in response to changing experiences but which becomes accelerated, and perhaps more easily observable, in a situation of contact. The Nahuas reinterpreted their own culture and their own past in the light of their new experiences and pressures; their own image of the "ancient Aztec" was in part a colonial artifact.

In discussing their culture, the colonial Nahuas did not speak freely, for Europeans created the context within which information was set down. They sought answers to particular questions, determining not only what matters would be recorded but the form the records would take. Investigators, especially those who were priests, tended to respond to what they learned about indigenous religion with shock or zeal, depending on their

own values. Even if the Indians were encouraged to be honest, they soon understood what their interlocutors thought about some of their most cherished traditions.

The records were not made immediately upon the arrival of Cortés in 1519 nor upon the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 but mainly during the 1530s to 1580s, while the Indians were adapting to colonization and learning at least as much about Europeans as the Europeans were learning about them. The very language of the interaction, what is now called Classical Nahuatl, was adopted from native upper-class usage and preserved by the friars; thus, its survival was a result of Nahua-European dialogue (Karttunen 1982:396–97).[1] Without taking into account the context of the dialogue, the expressions of either side cannot be interpreted accurately.

Studies of the continuities in native culture have tended to focus on the "survival" of native elements despite the appearance of Christianity, or on "syncretism" (for example, Madsen 1957, Uchmany 1980). Modern Indian religion is seen as a mixture of pre-Hispanic and European elements, a middle ground between the two cultures. While this approach has been useful in identifying the often surprising extent to which ancient beliefs survive, it does not account adequately for which kinds of elements from each culture are present, and how they came to be integrated through historical processes into a cultural system that is more than a simple sum of parts. Nor does Ingham (1986), who chooses to emphasize the Catholic character of a formerly Nahuatl-speaking community, adequately explain how the many clearly indigenous cultural elements are integrated into this Catholic structure as anything other than the shreds and patches of a vanished identity.

Gossen (1986a), in an excellent collection of essays on Mesoamerican thought, stresses the persistence of a pan-Mesoamerican ideological structure characteristic of the entire region from pre-Columbian times to the present. Culture change has been structured in terms of the system's own inner logic and without violating important symbolic precepts, such as concepts of space, time, and duality. However, the volume's five essays on Central Mexico include four on pre-Conquest thought and one based on modern ethnography; there is nothing to bridge the gap.

From the European side, Church and academic historians have long studied the conversion of the Nahuas and their neighbors. In these studies the Indians are presented as the objects of great humanistic experiments, of innovative missionary methodologies, of apocalyptic or millenarian musings, of inflexible dogmas. What the missionaries say they did or said

is accepted. Native culture is treated as a given, the inert clay that the friars tried to mold as they pleased. The missionaries' ingenious methods of introducing Christianity are described with little or no attention to the process of translation, or to the Indians as active partners in a dialogue.

In recent years a new interest in the Nahuatl language and colonial Indian society has yielded excellent work based on long-overlooked nonreligious texts in Nahuatl. Legal records, municipal proceedings, land documents, and wills provide insight into the realities of Indian life in the colony not recoverable from Spanish records. They also document linguistic acculturation, filling in the "middle years" between Classical Nahuatl and its modern descendants. This category includes such works as Anderson, Berdan and Lockhart (1976); Karttunen and Lockhart (1976); Lockhart (1982); Lockhart, Berdan, and Anderson (1986); Cline and León-Portilla (1984); and articles edited by Harvey and Prem (1984).

Along with this new emphasis on colonial society has come a new interest in colonial religion, involving a critical synthesis of Church history and studies of indigenous culture. Some of the best Nahua scholars are studying Christianization. León-Portilla (1974) has looked at indigenous reactions to Christianity. Klor de Alva (1979, 1980b, 1982b, 1987b) has debunked the "spiritual conquest" legend, the claim promulgated by Ricard (1966) and others that the Indians of Mexico were quickly and easily Christianized, and has focused upon dialogical aspects of Nahua-Christian interaction from the perspective of indigenous philosophy. The *Colloquios* of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the most overtly dialogical text, has been translated and analyzed by Klor de Alva (1980a; 1982a); León-Portilla has brought out a facsimile edition with a Spanish translation (Sahagún 1986). Bierhorst (1985) has analyzed the *Cantares mexicanos,* the Nahuatl poems long ascribed to pre-Conquest authors, in the context of the mid–sixteenth-century cultural milieu in which they were recorded and at least partially composed and reworked. Baudot (1972, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1983) approaches Franciscan ethnography from the perspective of missionary goals and interests, applying his proficiency in Nahuatl to the study of Fray Andrés de Olmos's and Sahagún's catechistic writings. Anderson and Dibble, translators of the *Florentine Codex,* Sahagún's ethnographic encyclopedia, have shown interest in this friar's doctrinal writings as well (Anderson 1983; Dibble 1974, 1988). Todorov (1985), from outside the field, treats the conquest of Mexico from the standpoint of Indians' and Europeans' perceptions of one another, that is, the extent to which they were able to enter into a dialogue with one another. He treats the texts as expressions of particular voices rather than as passive collections of information. For the colonial Maya also, Farriss (1984) and D. Tedlock (1985) have moved beyond the syncretic model to view religious change in terms of dialogue and creative synthesis.

The study of Nahua culture is opening up to include the missionaries—those men who, though they misunderstood so much, were more familiar with it than the modern investigator can ever be. It was they, their teachings, and the culture they represented that were posing the greatest challenge to indigenous cultural categories at the very time those categories were being described.

In order to apply an anthropological perspective to the missionaries' dialogue with the sixteenth-century Nahuas, the traditional enmity between the anthropologist and the missionary must be set aside. This is not, after all, so outrageous a proposition. Both anthropologists and missionaries engage in intercultural dialogue, in contexts where the contacted cultures tend to be in a materially and politically weak position relative to the culture represented by their visitors. Malinowski (1935:II, xxi, cited by D. Tedlock 1983:334) saw anthropologists and missionaries as "inverted twins," the missionary's role being to translate the European's point of view for the native while the anthropologist's is to translate the native point of view for Europeans. The missionaries to the Nahuas were sent to do the former but also did quite a bit of the latter, for themselves as well as for a broader European audience. Distance in time enriches their records by providing a historical perspective usually lacking in modern field studies. Their ultimate goal was to silence indigenous voices, to resolve dialogue into monologue, to replace cultural diversity with conformity. But since they themselves were silenced with the task incomplete, and since they also championed Indian rights (albeit within the colonial context), the anthropologist cannot judge them with severity.

D. Tedlock (1983:333–34) succinctly points out the flaws of the traditional approach to the ethnohistorical documents. He criticizes the rejection of whatever seems "contaminated by the presence of Spanish missionaries," as well as the general neglect of the catechistic literature written in native languages by men familiar with native customs. Such texts are significant because they "show, from both sides and with moments of thunderbolt clarity, the dialogical frontier between European and Mesoamerican cultures during the colonial period." Tedlock's work with the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh* (1985) reveals how one can use the presence of "Christian influence" to illuminate the processes of indigenous culture.

Approaching the friars' records with attention fixed on both sides of the dialogue, one can come to understand native culture—and the friars' impact on it—better than they did themselves. Something more than a static reconstruction begins to emerge. Nahua culture becomes not simply a thing to be described but a process to be analyzed, a method for coping with experience, a dialectic by which the old accommodates new content while maintaining important aspects of its form.

It is into this context of inquiry and interpretation that the present study falls. It explores one aspect of Nahua-Christian interaction: the attempt to introduce into Nahua ideology Christian moral precepts, particularly the Christian concept of sin. It is based on the ethnographic records and the friars' doctrinal writings in Nahuatl.[2] This topic was chosen partly because of the texts' own emphases: the friars put a great deal of effort into making the Indians behave like moral Christians. It was considered more important that the Indians lead a simple, Christian life than that they understand Christian doctrine on a metaphysical and philosophical level. In addition, the topic was selected in reaction to the tendency for studies of Nahua culture to emphasize the world-view aspects of ideology. To borrow Geertz's phrasing (1973:93), "models of" reality (the structure of the cosmos, the organization of the calendar, descriptions of rituals) are analyzed at the expense of "models for" behavior. This position contributes to the view of indigenous culture as a static given rather than something to be adapted and manipulated by people as they faced the challenges of existence.

Moral precepts both reflect a particular world view and provide models by which one may live in accordance with that view. They are involved in the dialectic between culture and behavior. But they are not to be identified by an observation of behavior; they are, like other kinds of beliefs, part of an ideology. According to Ladd, a philosopher who studied Navajo ethics, a moral code should be investigated only through the explicit statements of informants and the logical presuppositions—conscious or otherwise—upon which those statements depend (1957:12–17). Moral concepts are an apt subject for ethnohistorical investigation, because the ethnohistorical record is in essence a collection of statements, many of them dealing explicitly or implicitly with values. The inability to observe behavior directly—and the fact that contemporary reports of behavior vary widely and are clearly biased—does not affect the validity of the study. Statements about behavior can be treated as part of the discourse rather than as an accurate reflection of reality.

Fundamental to the dialogue of evangelization was rhetoric, or the ability to use language effectively. Friars and Indians had not only to understand one another and exchange information; the former had to persuade the latter to accept new ideas and attitudes that would lead them to think and act in ways compatible with Christian doctrine. Missionaries are known to have resorted to whipping recalcitrant Indians, and even burned a few at the stake, but on the whole the friars were, for their time, a peaceable lot who preferred to do their persuading with words, with pictures explained in words, and with the example set by their own lifestyle.

From Christianity's earliest days its preachers relied upon their powers of persuasion. Saint Paul believed that "faith comes from hearing": if he could persuade his listeners to accept his doctrine, they would believe—and behave—differently from the way they had under paganism (Burke 1966:5). The same applied to the sixteenth-century missionaries. This explains why Fray Diego Valadés, a Mexican-born Franciscan who journeyed to Europe as spokesman for his order, chose to incorporate his apologia on the Franciscans' work with the Indians into a Latin treatise on the rhetorical art, his *Rhetorica christiana* of 1579.

Christian rhetoric is what they used, but they cast it in Nahuatl terms. Evangelization had to be carried out in Nahuatl and the other native tongues: the soul-saving mission was too urgent to await the massive acculturation program that would have been necessary to impose the Spanish language on a huge native population. Learning native languages enabled the friars to gain the Indians' acceptance, but it was also a factor in the friars' downfall: having bound themselves so closely to the Indians, they raised the suspicions of colonial authorities and the leaders of the secular Church hierarchy. In an effort to avoid such suspicion a century later during missionary efforts among the Pueblo peoples, the Franciscans neither learned the native languages nor won their subjects' acceptance (see Spicer 1962).

The friars were not modern linguists; they lacked sensitivity to the relationship between language and thought, between words and mental categories. They looked for synonyms and used whatever they could find; some Spanish terms were introduced but almost always as the equivalent of something Nahuatl. The meanings of Nahuatl terms were, of course, not immutable, and they did shift somewhat under the friars' manipulation, but there was no escaping the fact that Nahuatl selected, organized, and named a different set of ideas and objects than did Spanish or Latin—and did so in harmony with a particular ideology. In addition, translation

from Spanish or Latin into Nahuatl was something quite different than translation from Latin to Spanish, or between other European tongues sharing both a common origin and a long experience in the expression of Christian doctrine.

Nahuatl not only named but persuaded in a different way from Spanish or Latin. In order to use Nahuatl effectively, to persuade as well as to explain, the friars had to adopt the rhetorical forms of expression appropriate to Nahuatl. Christian precepts had to be expressed in a way that was not only grammatically correct but that would convince Nahua listeners to accept them. To this end, friars elicited and recorded native oratory, listed the figures of speech and adages contained therein, and strove to master the elegant speaking style of the native orators. Both Olmos and Sahagún, who compiled the principal sixteenth-century collections of rhetoric, focused upon this activity quite early in their respective careers. Their interest in this material was not without precedent. St. Augustine, a teacher of rhetoric before his conversion to Christianity, expressed in his *De doctrina christiana* an interest in adapting the verbal skills of the pagans to Christian uses (Burke 1970:49).

For the Nahuas, as for Mesoamerica in general, words had tremendous symbolic force. A key aspect of pan-Mesoamerican thought is, in Gossen's words (1986a:7) this "extraordinary power of spoken and written language as a symbolic entity in itself, beyond its neutral role as medium for routine communication." Rhetorical speech was sacred and was also an important method of social control: the words of elders and ancestors set forth the proper behavior of their descendants, which was to replicate the established pattern inherited from the past (Sullivan 1986). If the friars could usurp the power of those words, replacing the authority of the Indian past with that of Christianity, they would gain a significant degree of control over Indian thought and behavior, with all the social and political consequences that such control implies. The words, though, were Nahuatl words, and their symbolic power was accorded them by Nahua minds. The friars could successfully manipulate the system only by adapting to it; violation of its basic precepts would strip it of the authority the friars sought to borrow.

Based on Burke's idea of language as "entitlement," by which "the things of the world become material exemplars of the values which the tribal idiom has placed upon them" (1966:361)—that is, the words are not simply tools for naming things but ascribe culture-specific meanings and values to the things named—Crocker develops a scheme for the ethnographic analysis of rhetoric (1977). It is equally applicable to ethnohistory. "Rhetorical entitlement" is the process by which someone says something about a social situation "which summarizes its moral essence in such ways as to define possible actions" (Crocker 1977:37). The situation, simply by the terms in which it is described, entails a certain moral interpretation, which, in turn, suggests appropriate behavior. Behaviors pick up morally positive or negative valuations by association with terms that carry those values.

Rhetorical statements can be interpersonal, with the speaker aiming to persuade the listener to do something, or they can refer to a social situation wider than the relationship of speaker to listener, narrating events pertaining to a third party, or even events from history or myth, and using them as a general prescription for behavior. Rhetorical devices exist also as a verbal codification of the culture's ideas and values, and can be analyzed as such even apart from their applications to particular contexts (Crocker 1977:37–38).

To be effective, a rhetorical device must be "felt" as well as "thought." That is, it must function cognitively in giving a name to a complex situation, classifying it in accordance with some ordering principle, but it must also evoke an emotional response. This depends on an interplay between external metaphors (analogies) and internal metaphors, or between metaphor and metonymy (Crocker 1977:53–58).

The terms used in this study for the various types of tropes are consistent with the classification of Sapir (1977). The term "metaphor," though often applied by rhetoricians to a broad range of tropes including synecdoche (substitution of part for whole or whole for part within a semantic domain) and metonymy (substitution of part for part within a semantic domain), is here restricted to tropes which relate elements from separate semantic domains. To illustrate these relationships with an example from Nahua-Christian discourse, the external metaphor or analogy "sin is to virtue as dirt is to cleanliness" provides a way of thinking about immoral acts by relating the domain of morality to the domain of sanitation. Within this analogy, sin is related to dirt by internal metaphor. It is this internal metaphor which is "felt," because it evokes toward sin the emotional responses evoked by dirt. This internal metaphor may in turn slip into metonymy, sin and dirt being treated as contiguous, as two elements in a single domain of dirty, contaminating phenomena. This particular analogy is explored extensively in Chapter Four.

This study focuses on how the friars attempted to convert the Nahuas

by converting indigenous rhetoric to the expression of Christian moral concerns, and how Christian rhetoric was made indigenous by its adoption of Nahua form. It is organized according to principal metaphors used in indigenous moral argument which were adopted into Christianity. The following chapter summarizes mission methodology and examines how the friars handled the major problems posed by the differences between Nahua and Christian morality.

CHAPTER 2
The Missionary Missionized

A paradoxical figure in Mexican history is the ***Conquistador conquistado***, the Spaniard's child "conquered" by the new land, who rejects Spain for New Spain and ultimately demands independence (Keen 1971:92). One might speak in similar fashion of the missionary missionized, of the friar whose sympathies come to lie with the Indians against the colonists and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, against an Old World perceived as corrupt, and who adopts Indian ways in order to fulfill his mission. A very brief account of this man and his mission follows.

MISSION AND METHOD

Evangelization was for Spain inseparable from conquest and colonization: the Crown must have its gold but God must in return have His souls. Thus, in the early decades—until almost all the Indians had at least been baptized—the friars were ceded considerable powers. They were permitted to act as parish priests, tending congregations and administering sacraments, in addition to their usual role as teachers and healers. They held positions of bishop and archbishop and acted as Inquisitors in the absence of the Holy Office. Until after mid-century, when the ***repartimiento*** system of labor assignment increased Indian contact with colonists[1] and secular