

Christianity Conquered

The encounter between Nahua morality and sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism brought into contact two very different ways of looking at the world and at humanity's place within it. The friars were confronted with an impossible challenge—the remaking of an entire culture in their own image. They responded by, to some extent, remaking themselves: the encounter could not help but expand their own sensitivity to human diversity; the molding of their Christianity to fit the Nahua context demanded a doctrinal flexibility which, though they rarely admitted it to non-Indian audiences, is clearly evident in their Nahuatl writings. On the whole, the friars managed to content themselves with an Indian Christianity that was hardly orthodox; the Nahuas, on the whole, were able to become just Christian enough to get by in the colonial social and political setting without compromising their basic ideological and moral orientation. Perhaps the close emotional bond between friars and Indians was in part a reflection of this complicity: they were partners in the creation of their own society, different from European society and from that of the colonists and mestizos around them.

THE DIALOGICAL FRONTIER

The catechistic literature in Nahuatl is not simply a body of Christian writings; it is the residue of a dynamic interaction between European and Nahua culture. The attempt to synthesize Nahua thought categories with Christian ideology throws into high relief the contrasts between the two cultural systems by demonstrating which concepts passed easily across the cultural barrier, which were transformed in the process of their translation, and at which points Christianity was or was not willing to compromise its orthodoxy in order to adapt itself to indigenous expression. This is the “dialogical frontier” identified by D. Tedlock (1983:334).

A fundamental difference between Nahua and Christian thought was the contrast between Nahua monism and a Christian world view that distinguished between spiritual and material worlds or levels of reality. The preceding chapters have shown the various implications this contrast had for moral indoctrination. The Nahuas did not conceive of a life of the soul utterly distinct from that of the body; metaphors the friars drew between spiritual and material domains translated as metonyms linking elements within a single domain of reality. This is not to suggest that the Nahuas were incapable of adopting a Christian world view—some of them did become fully acculturated—but for the population as a whole the friars were too few; themselves too immersed in native culture, and the level of indoctrination too rudimentary for such a fundamental shift in world view to be effected.

The friars perceived the relationship between their own and Nahua morality principally in terms of parallelism and diabolism, and, beyond their respect for the Nahuas' general religiosity, with attention mainly to content. Things that meshed well with Christianity were elements of truth which the Nahuas, even in their paganism, had discovered; for anything unacceptable the Devil, or the Indians' weak nature, could be held responsible. Indigenous morality as a coherent system having its own internal logic and differing from Christianity in its very underpinnings—regardless of its content—was a perspective difficult for the sixteenth-century observer to achieve. Even for those few who may have achieved it, to devise a method for systematically altering that morality into a Christian form was an impossible feat of cultural engineering.

In general terms, Nahua and Christian (sixteenth-century Catholic) religion correspond, respectively, to the “archaic” and “historic” stages or

types of religion as defined by Bellah (1964). Archaic religions, in Bellah's scheme, are typified by cults involving gods, priests and sacrifice, with sacrifice acting as a means of communication with the sacred. The world view is monist, though the universe tends to be hierarchical and complexly structured. On the social level, as Bellah describes it (1964:365):

The individual and his society are seen as merged in a natural-divine cosmos. Traditional social structures and social practices are considered to be grounded in the divinely instituted cosmic order and there is little tension between religious demand and social conformity.

Historic religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, and Catholic Christianity, differ from archaic religions mainly in the introduction of a dualist orientation. A transcendentalism setting the supernatural world apart from the material world characterizes the world view; ritual centers on salvation rather than sacrifice. An ethic of world rejection is typical of these religions. In regard to concepts of human nature, Bellah states (1964:367):

Devaluation of the empirical world and the empirical self highlights the conception of a responsible self, a core self or true self, deeper than the flux of everyday experience, facing a reality over against itself, a reality which has a consistency belied by the fluctuations of mere sensory impressions. Primitive man can only accept the world in its manifold givenness. Archaic man can through sacrifice fulfill his obligations and attain peace with the gods. But the historic religions promise man for the first time that he can understand the fundamental structure of reality and through salvation participate actively in it.

The transition from an archaic to a historic type of religion is associated, in Bellah's scheme, with widespread literacy, a differentiation between urban and rural lower classes, and between political and religious leadership. Archaic elements may persist, particularly among the peasantry (Bellah 1964:367-68).

This characterization of Nahua and Christian religion according to Bellah's outline is not included in order to place the two religions within an evolutionary framework, but in order to stress that these are not just different religions but different kinds of religion. The frontier between them is of a different order than that between Christianity and Islam, or between Nahua (or Mesoamerican) religion and that of Peru or, for that matter, ancient Mesopotamia or ancient China. The problem of translation was complicated by more than the fact that the two peoples spoke unrelated languages.

For the Nahuas to have shifted to a historic religious orientation would

have required a degree of acculturation available only to urban elites. The bulk of the population remained a largely rural peasantry among whom literacy was the province of a few specialists (see Karttunen 1982) and whose varieties of contact with Europeans were limited. They became the "archaic" peasantry within a "historic" society.

Christianity as presented at the dialogical frontier did not constitute a coherent, internally consistent system but, rather, a hodgepodge of concepts—shreds of Christian orthodoxy and patches of Nahuatl meaning. Not only was the whole religion confused, but its presentation varied from friar to friar and even from one sermon to the next. The concept of *tlatlacalli* simply did not fit with the concept of individual moral responsibility. The friars' talk of filth, penance, and peripheral dangers resembled indigenous discourse while their talk of love and salvation did not, and since the former concepts were interpreted in ways consistent with indigenous thought, the latter concepts could make little sense in relation to them. Christian purification rites reiterated too neatly their Nahua cognates to be perceived as linked to a whole different kind of reality. The differences between the two world views were not consistently stated and stressed in terms that would have made them clear to the Nahuas.

It is widely understood that part of Christianity's appeal was that it somehow filled a vacuum created by the abolition of the traditional ritual round. Had it been possible to present Christianity as a coherent, fully logical, and meaningful system, perhaps it would have been possible for the converts, their world view menaced by the upheavals of the Conquest, to have been seduced into a sincere acceptance of Christianity. But Christianity did not offer such a complete alternative, and the continuities between traditional thought and the dialogical frontier were such that Christianity did not simply fulfill the Nahuas' need for a religion but allowed for the perpetuation of their kind of religion.

The hybrid Nahua-Christian religion represented at the dialogical frontier tended to blend the two cultures in such a way that Nahua structures and functions imposed themselves upon Christian content. The basic organization of the cosmos, of time and space, of order and disorder were maintained. The upper world became peopled with saints rather than *teteo*, with the saints filling the same cult roles; the underworld with *tlatlacatecolo* rather than the similarly peripheral underworld deities. Penitential rites were connected with the Christian calendar but continued to serve the purpose of achieving merit. Christian purification rites functioned to remove *tlazolli* and restore order. Salvation failed to displace the basically

custodial focus of Nahuatl ritual and the this-worldly concerns of its participants.

In this subjugation of content to form, an important mechanism was the transformation of metaphor to metonym as Christian transcendentalism crossed the dialogical frontier into Nahuatl monism. Things which, in Christianity, were ultimate truths became logical impossibilities in the absence of a dualist premise. It was much easier for the Nahuas to reject these impossibilities, or to rephrase them in Nahuatl terms, than to accept them and all they implied. The logical structure of the universe remained Nahuatl; Christian elements transformed to fit this logic—to express symbolic relationships that made sense in a Nahuatl context—could be accepted because they no longer challenged the very nature of reality.

The dialogical frontier, then, is not the locus of syncretism, for syncretism implies a resolution of contradictions, a half-way meeting between complementary elements. A religion combining equal parts of Christianity and Nahuatl belief could not function as a cultural system: there is no neutral middle ground between a sacrifice-oriented monism and a soteriologically-oriented matter/spirit dualism. To be caught between is to be in the anomalous, disorienting position which León-Portilla (1974:24) and Klor de Alva (1982b:33-54), inspired by a passage in Durán (1967:I, 237), label "nepantlism," after the Nahuatl *nepantla* 'in the middle.' From this confused standpoint, the premises of Christianity were not understood and therefore only superficial aspects of Christian rites could be incorporated into one's own religion (Klor de Alva 1982b:354). Nepantlism was resolved by combining a Christian surface with a Nahuatl structure. The result was "syncretic" in the sense that it combined elements of both cultures, but not in the sense of a simple sum of parts, nor of attaining a true synthesis. The frontier was a liminal zone full of contradictions and inconsistencies. The friars were unable to weave of it a whole cloth; the Nahuas could take from it only threads with which to mend the fabric, torn by the Conquest, of their own belief system.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERMONS

The persuasiveness of the friars' rhetoric depended upon their ability to borrow tropes from indigenous moral philosophy and apply them to Christian ends. Certain limitations inhered in such a procedure. If Nahuatl ideology was too drastically altered by Christian influence or other hazards

of colonialism, those tropes would become disconnected from any coherent belief system and would lose the very authority the friars sought to usurp. Within a slightly Christianized but still basically indigenous ideology, the friars could make at least some impression on their audience. Had Nahuatl ideology disintegrated, the friars could not have rebuilt it from the ground up in a Christian image, whatever their millennial illusions to the contrary. Small changes were really in the best interest of both sides. The friars' capability to undermine indigenous ideology was, in any case, restricted by the limited ability of most of them—those who were not great scholars, humanists, and ethnographers—to understand it. The destruction of the Aztec state cult, the one realm in which the "spiritual conquest" was truly successful, did not threaten the Nahuas' basic moral orientation.

The Aztec state cult itself had constituted a religious change, an innovation emphasizing the solar cult and large-scale human sacrifice. This change in cult practice was closely associated with the Mexicas' rise to political supremacy. Conrad and Demarest's analysis of the role of religious change in Aztec (and Inca) politics (1984) discusses the kinds of change which were successfully implemented. Their study, though dealing with pre-Conquest history, has interesting implications for the colonial situation as well.

The Mexica elite were successful in instituting religious changes only when those changes were compatible with existing religious institutions and traditional mythology (Conrad and Demarest 1984:47). The innovators had to work within the existing system; changes that had no ties with tradition could not be implemented. Successful ideological adaptations fell into two main categories: "manipulations of the upper pantheons and workings of ancient, basic institutions" (Conrad and Demarest 1984:180). The upper pantheon was reworked to give the sun a degree of prominence it had not previously enjoyed, while the Mexicas' tutelary deity, Huitzilopochtli, was identified with both the sun and the ancient and powerful Tezcatlipoca. These manipulations did not constitute the introduction of a wholly new and unfamiliar sort of deity. The ancient institution of sacrifice was reworked to grant the Mexica cult of heart-sacrifice a special role in maintaining cosmic order, thus validating—and necessitating—Mexican imperialism. But sacrifice had always served a custodial function; human sacrifice as practiced by the Aztecs was simply an old institution adapted to new political ends.

If these conclusions hold for the introduction of Christianity, one would predict that the friars' success might be limited to contexts where

their attempted innovations fell into these categories, or at least could be so construed by the Nahuas. And indeed, such seems to have been the case. Christian teaching was effective only to the extent that it was compatible (or appeared in translation to be compatible) with preexisting belief and practice. Changes in the pantheon involved much more reworking than replacement: Christ, Mary, and other saints gave new identities to Nahua sacred beings just as Huitzilopochtli had taken on part of Tezcatlipoca's identity, though the new personages tended to have morally positive (or negative) rather than amoral or ambivalent characters. The ancient institutions of sacrifice, penitence and purification were reworked while remaining the basic forms of religious action. The idea that Christian confession "cures" the heart or soul was easy to accept; that it worked on some immaterial, spiritual level was incompatible with traditional thought and was not accepted. The idea that one should do penance on Christian holy days was compatible with traditional thought; that such penance functioned to prevent suffering after death was not compatible.

Another conclusion of Conrad and Demarest's analysis (1984:177-78) is that the changes, to be successful, had to be adaptive in social, economic and political terms. The religious changes introduced by the Mexica helped them to gain hegemony over most of Mesoamerica. Likewise, the modified Christianity practiced by the colonial Nahuas had advantages outside the religious context. It granted them an identity within the Christian sociopolitical milieu of the colony. It also enabled them to maintain a community identity, focused on the local saint, that promoted social cohesion in the face of Spanish racism and exploitation. That preserving the community took precedence over individual salvation represents a continuity with traditional thought which was also adaptive under changed social conditions.

The friars' rhetoric, while it adopted various tropes from indigenous moral discourse, differed from it in significant ways. There was an overall reduction and simplification: many of the available figures of speech were rarely or never used. The friars' teachings must therefore have seemed monotonous, repetitive, and uninventive relative to the discourse of the Nahua elders.

Crocker's (1977) typology of rhetorical situations (see Chapter One) provides a second way of examining the difference between the two rhetorical styles. Indigenous rhetoric emphasized interpersonal persuasion, with a tendency to relate the prescribed or proscribed behaviors to fundamental facts about reality, often expressed in the form of proverbs, and

calling upon the wisdom of the ancestors. The friars also engaged in much interpersonal discourse ("you should do this, you should not do that") but tended to validate their statements by referring to third-person events: Christ's parables, the lives of the saints, the experiences of biblical personages. God, not the ancestors, was invoked as the infallible moral authority. The events of Nahua mythology were rarely invoked in moral discourse because deities simply were not morally responsible actors: morality was a human adaptation rather than a divine pronouncement.¹ Assuming that Nahua rhetoricians had developed the style of argument most effective within their cultural context, the friars' divergence from this pattern may have weakened the effectiveness of their teaching.

Even where the friars attached effective, emotive tropes to their moral arguments, the ability of those tropes to accomplish their intended purpose had inherent limitations. The good/evil dichotomy basic to the friars' moral orientation approached the dualist, transcendental structure of their world view: the material world was largely equated with the principle of evil; the spiritual world was closely associated with the principle of good.

The order/chaos dichotomy which the friars used to express these positions simply did not "entitle" the universe in the same way as their own good/evil model. Given good/evil dualism, the obvious moral prescription is to avoid evil as much as possible: such action is the logical way to behave and moral discourse has only to define what is evil. But without that dualism as a basic premise, the rest does not logically follow. The universe, as entitled by an order/chaos model, does not preclude the possibility of benefits accruing from the chaotic side. Chaos is not all bad. Behaviors disapproved of by the friars, such as sexual activity and ritual drunkenness, served positive purposes according to the indigenous world view. The friars could link such behaviors to the chaotic side of nature as often and as convincingly as they were able without ever persuading the Nahuas that the behaviors should be totally avoided.

Viewing the friars' "success" objectively, one might praise them for their ability to establish continuities between Nahua thought and Christianity, however intended or unintended those continuities may have been. In this way the friars mollified the impact of the new religion, limiting the cultural breakdown that the Nahuas might otherwise have suffered. "Pure" Christianity would have had little meaning for the Nahuas. By allowing their teachings to be shaped by indigenous culture, the friars assured that Christianity in some form would be adopted; at the same time they inadvertently aided their subjects' struggle for cultural survival.

CULTURAL SURVIVAL ON THE SLIPPERY EARTH

Even where a relatively high degree of exposure to Christian teaching existed, it would have been fairly easy for the Nahuas to accept what appeared to be compatible with their own conceptions, and to ignore or reinterpret the rest. Despite the incorporation of many Christian elements, the belief system of the majority of Nahuas remained essentially untouched. The Nahuas remained culturally distinct from the Spanish and mestizo population; their separate (and unequal) status was enforced by colonial policies, but their identity within that status derived from pre-Conquest culture and the particular dynamics of its interaction with Christianity. Reports on continuing "pagan" practices, from the *procesos* of the Primitive Inquisition (*Procesos de indios* 1912), through colonial treatises on idolatry such as those of Ruiz de Alarcón (1982) and Villavicencio (1692), into modern ethnography (e.g. Montoya Briones 1964; Taggart 1983), reveal the persistence of sacrificial and penitential complexes, pollution beliefs, and the traditional spatiotemporal orientation. Farriss (1984:8), in an analysis of Maya cultural survival, proposes the existence of a stable, central core of beliefs which

provide not only the principles according to which change will take place but also the measure of its extent; they indicate whether we are dealing merely with variations on a theme or an altogether new theme.

Thought somewhat less successful than the Mayas, among whom the missionaries simply did not have the numbers and influence that they enjoyed in Central Mexico, the Nahuas managed to make of Christianity a variation rather than a new composition.

Klor de Alva (1979, 1982b) observes that the "little tradition," as opposed to the elite state cult, survived the missionization process fairly well. The most common response to Christianity was an incomplete conversion complex in which Christian elements were only superficially incorporated into the culture (Klor de Alva 1982b:356). This sort of culture change, in which native form and function are retained, is a testament to the adaptability and resilience of a religious system under conditions which would seem to pose a serious threat to its survival. A distinction between this sort of religious change and that occurring at a deeper, structural level clearly must be made in studies of culture change. An analogy to the process of linguistic acculturation, in which incorporation of loanwords occurs much more readily than shifts in grammatical structure, may be appropriate (in

the case of Nahuatl, Karttunen and Lockhart 1976 describe the sequence of linguistic changes).

Nahua experiences under colonial rule did not pose an impossible challenge to the explanatory powers of traditional belief. Sin, the Christians' explanation for all misfortune, was not needed as an explanatory device. The fifth age was a time of relative chaos: the Mexica could not have expected their political order to persist indefinitely. The earth was a slippery place where misfortunes easily befell one regardless of one's precautions: the fact of the Conquest did not demand the premise of Indian sinfulness.

Increased participation in behaviors considered immoral under both moral systems—most notably drunkenness—was not necessarily indicative of cultural breakdown. With the gradual decline of the elite class, with its claims to moral purity and its authoritative position relative to commoners, it was logical and predictable that such behavior would increase. The colonial Nahuas were all *motolinia*, poor and afflicted—a position recognized by Spanish authorities in the latter sixteenth century as all Indians came to be granted the special legal protection accorded to *miserabiles*, the wretched of the earth (Borah 1983:80–82). Such a status was associated in indigenous thought with a morally wretched condition: as wealth and rank were commensurate with moral purity, poverty and baseness were commensurate with contamination. High rates of alcoholism, disease, and death were only to be expected among people in this condition.

The friars' usurpation of the elders' moral authority further validated moral and physical decline. With the breakdown of the ascetic lifestyle condoned by tradition, it was only natural that living conditions in this slippery world would begin to deteriorate.

For those Nahuas who managed to survive physically in spite of epidemics, hard labor, poverty, and other colonial dangers the Nahua interpretation of Christianity provided a means of adapting to their social situation while continuing to make sense of the world in Nahua terms. In a colonial social order structured upon Indian servitude, even complete acculturation would not have brought social equality—there was more to be lost than to be gained in relinquishing one's cultural identity. The friars' acceptance of Nahuatized Christianity constituted an implicit patronage of Nahua cultural continuity. The earth was perhaps more slippery than ever, but for those who could retain their balance it remained a Nahua earth.