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REVIEW ARTICLE

A Cosmic Approach Falls Short: A Review of Jacques Lafaye's *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness, 1531-1813*

PEGGY LISS*

The dual principle appears here in double dose, for this essay is not only a historiography of two beliefs but also two books in one. The first is a scholarly and at times inspired analysis of the history of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century growth, and of some of the uses, of the myths of Quetzalcóatl and the Virgin of Guadalupe. This analysis has been summed up in a review by John Phelan of the book's original, French edition (*HAHR*, February 1975). The second is intermeshed with the first and is an unsuccessful attempt to present, by focusing on eschatology, Quetzalcóatl, and Guadalupe, the history of "the formation of Mexican national consciousness." While religious components and religion itself are important aspects of this history, too much is claimed for them here. More precise was the subtitle of the dissertation from which this volume emerged, *Eschatologie et histoire au Mexique*. What was at first a limited claim to causation has become a too-encompassing one, and rewriting to suit it is perhaps a reason for frequent and abrupt interpolations of unwarranted assertions of near-cosmic character. An example: adjudging Miguel Sánchez, whose writings of 1648 are important only to the history of the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, "the true founder of the Mexican patria" (p. 250). Related is a tendency to puff up limited attitudes into "the pervasive spirit" of eras and groups. Examples include "the Portuguese, through the mouth of the Jesuit Antonio Vieira, professed to be the new chosen people by virtue of a new covenant" (p. 184); and that Lorenzo Boturini's "pious designs" were resented "by the creoles" (pp. 263-264). The recurrent lumping of all creoles as like-minded especially weakens the argument.

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Moreover, the juxtaposition throughout of intelligent to invalid observations becomes for the reader a maddening one, much like taking one of those showers which alternately delight and scald and cannot be adjusted.

The author is proficient at the kind of history of ideas that the book's translator, Benjamin Keen, also did well in his *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*. Jacques Lafaye, however, goes beyond recounting the evolution of his major themes and seeks to present the significance of each step in their development for its own time. This approach could be a superb one, but those times themselves are then delineated by relying too greatly on documents concerning Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe. There is too much earlier emphasis on what were mainly late eighteenth-century interests; and in offering this excursion into the sociology of knowledge as the sum and substance of a "quest for the national soul" (p. 300), entirely too vast and heavy a superstructure is erected on the histories of Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe.

Although purportedly sketching the general sixteenth-century background, the opening section does not mention the web of interrelationships among the crown, the clergy, and the conquistadors. Instead, it deals nearly exclusively with utopian and millenarian Spanish religious thought relating to Mexico. The establishment of New Spain is attributed to missionaries alone. These, it is stated "were certainly 'creoles' in the measure that they wanted to create a new world, which implied a rupture with the old" (p. 32). Now, only some of the first missionaries wanted to create a new world, and most of the first missionaries were far from most creoles in outlook. Moreover, most creoles before the late eighteenth century considered the New World an important extension of the Old. Theirs was a *patria* within the monarchy and they thought themselves its aristocrats. The Franciscan evangelical current did not emerge "after the liquidation of Erasmianism (p. 53) but before it, as is later demonstrated (pp. 55-56). Pedro Moya de Contreras did not arrive after the first Jesuits (p. 51) but had in fact written from Mexico requesting they be sent. (Nor is he listed in the index, which also omits Charles V, Juan José de Eguiara and Eguren, and others.)

The situation under Philip II became more complex, yet this account, still avowedly exploring the origins of national consciousness, still notices largely "the wait for the last days," although it was even less prevalent in this period, and speaks of it in connection with the

idea of a creole utopia, although the two were not inherently compatible. In addition, it claims firsts for Bernardo de Balbuena's poem, *Grandeza Mexicana* (1604)—among them “the renaissance of classic culture” and the first mention since Las Casas of the notion of a “Mexican paradise”—which properly belong to earlier Spaniards in Mexico, notably Francisco Cervantes de Salazar. Omitting or slighting the sixteenth-century formulations of these themes and others throws the discussion off course by the 1600s. By then, insufficient information concerning the previous history of New Spain makes it hard to understand the implications of references to Mexico as “Imperial City” (p. 93), and, more seriously, the nature of Habsburg imperial arrangements in general and how Americans perceived them. Thus, what was a creole claim to importance within the Spanish monarchy and of competition with other regions of it is presented as one of competition with the Spanish empire itself. This may be in part because we are not told that creoles who were hostile to peninsular Spaniards were at the same time loyal to the monarchy.

The attempt to pursue select themes and to outline the history of Mexican consciousness at the same time reaches a nadir in the discussion of the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767. Instead of mentioning as contributory factors increased regalism, new intellectual currents, and the state reforms, including an attack on old powerful corporations, it is implied that the expulsion took place within an otherwise static situation. The sole motive of the popular risings of the period is viewed as to “die for the Jesuits,” when, instead, a confluence of internal conditions and new governmental policies, attitudes, and measures, including the expulsion, provoked local riots. These risings did not occur “from one end to the other . . . of the immense Spanish empire in America,” nor were they “a national movement in New Spain,” nor was the enemy then thought by Mexicans to be the King (p. 100). Fortunately better is the relating of the spiritual disarray and the disorganization of the educational process after the expulsion. Other flaws: Jesuits in exile not only gave Europeans information about Mexico, but the author omits that their writings also heightened the Mexican self-consciousness of some of their compatriots. Oddly, the changing concept of *nación* in this period is not explored. The background to independence cannot be explained, as it is here, in purely religious terms. Hidalgo was not educated in the Jesuit colegio at Valladolid (now Morelia); he was there at most six months. The large number of mixed peoples

rising in 1810 are ignored. It was scarcely, as implied here, an Indian revolt. And why does the book nowhere go into the very important linkage of religious syncretism to racial and ethnic mixture?

The later sections, those concentrating on the expansion of the myths of Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe, are the best; yet, despite some excellent analysis, the old weaknesses persist. For example, the writings of Diego Durán (in the later sixteenth century) are said to have had broad influence almost immediately on "efforts to assimilate Quetzalcóatl to a figure of Biblical tradition" (p. 168). We are not told that Durán's manuscript was not published until 1867. Something more specific must be said here and throughout about the nature and extent of the dissemination of the beliefs and ideas discussed.

The discussion of the literature concerning the cult of Guadalupe is valuable, and the history of that cult in Spain fascinating. Yet germane questions are not raised concerning some of the important ramifications of its transplant in Mexico. Did the crown and Spanish clergy promote the cult because of its Spanish origin? Did they promote it as a source of revenue? There is evidence that both were so (pp. 95, 270, 278, 282). Yet the thesis here is that Guadalupe in Mexico symbolized creole against Spaniard and thus undifferentiated again are creole attitudes toward peninsulars from those toward the monarchy, and again evidence is neglected. In this case, for example, cited elsewhere is a devotee of Guadalupe, the Jesuit Ita y Parra (also missing from the book's index) who preached to a popular belief in Mary as mediator between the King and the Americans (p. 288).

This essay is conjectural, speculative, and imaginative, but on all these levels it often falls short. It offers some brilliant interpretations—for example of the syncretic elements in the depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe—but its assertions generally go too far, so that instead of taking us along they press a caution button in our heads. The author was not sufficiently self-monitored and so the book yields some good research and insights interspersed with some intellectually and emotionally invalid and too-broad conclusions, the whole leaving a confusing and distorting impression, ultimately untrustworthy. Phelan's kindred *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* and his article, "Neo-Aztecism in the Eighteenth Century and the Genesis of Mexican Nationalism" [in Stanley Diamond, ed., *Culture in History. Essays in Honor of Paul Radin* (New York, 1960) pp. 760–771] are much sounder. *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe* seeks and fails to attain the reaches inhabited by the works of Johan

Huizinga, Marc Bloch, Eric Erikson, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Octavio Paz. It is a shame, for we badly need explorations of the non-rational in Mexican history.

A word on the preface by Paz, which does three things. It synthesizes Dr. Lafaye's argument and unobtrusively adds important points which should have been made in the text. It serves as a disclaimer for the book's assumption of a continuous evolution of past into present, New Spain into Mexico (neither text nor preface, however, takes into account the changes *within* the colonial period, in late eighteenth-century society, politics, the economy, and the dominant ideology). And it makes some telling points about contemporary Mexico. In a comment on Lafaye's equating Quetzalcóatl with the principle of legitimacy, Paz remarks: "the interregnum opened by the flight of Quetzalcóatl in 987 has not yet been ended" (p. xxi). And, he sums up, "the Mexican people, after more than two centuries of experiments and defeats, have faith only in the Virgin of Guadalupe and the national lottery" (p. xi).