Communications

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ARTICLES

To the Editor:

While not a specialist in colonial Mexico, I have long had an interest in how the Spanish were able to conquer the powerful Aztec empire in the early 1500s. As one who teaches World History to college freshmen and who works with social studies education majors, I very much appreciated Camilla Townsend's close attention, in "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico" [*AHR* 108 (June 2003): 659–87], to what she calls the myth of the Aztec belief that the invading Spaniards were gods. Townsend correctly notes that this version of the conquest narrative, in which the Aztec religion was a major factor in preventing full military resistance to the invaders, is pervasive in the secondary schools, and deserves to be investigated more critically in college classrooms. Townsend's observations that Hernando Cortés himself never claimed that the Aztecs considered him to be a god, and that the first documented accounts of such claims came decades after the conquest, constitute powerful evidence for her thesis.

I suggested in graduate school a decade ago that the retrospective Aztec account of the conquest, as published in the popular book, *The Broken Spears*, edited by Miguel Léon-Portilla, might reinforce student perceptions of Aztec cultural backwardness because of its passages describing the Spanish as gods. I wrote then that such passages might lead students to believe that the Aztecs, and by extension other Amerindians, "deserved" their fate at the hands of European invaders. Townsend articulates these same fears, as she notes that this text, which on one level celebrates Aztec resistance, also "traps [the Aztecs] in stereotype" (p. 663), and presents "memory" as historical reality.

Nevertheless, I use *The Broken Spears* in my classes; and a close reading of the text, even in English, can help students raise some of the same questions that Townsend addresses. Passages in Bernal Díaz's *The Conquest of New Spain*, mentioned in passing by Townsend, can also provide clues to an alternate explanation of the myth of the Aztec reception of the Spaniards as gods.

In *The Broken Spears*, when Moctezuma, before the Spanish arrival, related to his magicians the omens he had "seen," the latter averred (p. 14) that they had not noticed such omens, and they provided the king with what can only be called deliberately vague and evasive answers. Thus the religious authorities were not providing these prophecies to the king. Later, the text presented Moctezuma's feelings upon the arrival of "our prince Quetzalcoatl" in the following terms: "This is what he [Moctezuma] felt in his heart: He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed! . . . It is said that our lord has returned to this land" (p. 23). With coaxing, my students can soon identify this phrasing, and a similar passage on page 64, as quintessentially Christian, indicating that the narratives produced in the decades after the conquest had assimilated ideas of the Spanish priests about the prospective second coming of Jesus. The double meaning in English of "lord" as both earthly master and god helps point up for my students in a basic way the difficult issues of meaning and translation that Townsend discusses with regard to Nahuatl and Spanish.

Another important passage in *The Broken Spears* that sustains Townsend's thesis, and to which she alludes only indirectly, is the account of the debate among Moctezuma's advisers about whether to welcome the Spaniards to Tenochtitlan or to resist. In the English version, the Spaniards are referred to as "Christians," as "ambassadors of another great prince," and as "visitors," but never as "gods." Indeed, Moctezuma's brother, Cuitlahuac, explicitly rejected the idea that they could be gods when he presciently warned: "I pray to our gods that you will not let the

strangers into your house. They will cast you out of it and overthrow your rule" (p. 61). While most advisers, we are told, agreed with Cuitlahuac, Moctezuma fatefully decided otherwise. The point for students here is that the supposed religious preconceptions played no role in the debate over strategy, which is also a point that Townsend makes in her article.

The Spanish soldier Bernal Díaz, meanwhile, provided some evidence to explain the emergence of premonitions among various Nahuatl groups that changes might come from the east. In his account of the Spanish expedition along the coast of Mexico in 1519 (the relevant portions of which are reprinted in Stuart Schwartz's 2000 collection of documents, *Victors and Vanquished*), Díaz described the encounter with a Spanish priest, Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the area a decade before, and who had been living among the Amerindians. One may speculate (though Díaz himself does not) that the priest had spoken to his hosts of Spanish ships, guns, horses, beards, and God, thus planting the seeds of what later would be regarded as "prophecy." Perhaps Townsend takes up this thread in her forthcoming book on Malintzin, or "La Malinche," who with Aguilar served as Cortzés's translators.

It is worth noting that at least one recent anthology of North American Indian accounts of interaction with whites both reproduces and questions supposed prophecies of the coming of the new group. Peter Nabokov writes in *Native American Testimony* (expanded edn., 1991): "It is possible that some tribes received advance word of early Indian-white meetings, then turned these rumors into predictions" (p. 6). Thus "pre-contact" prophecies in North America, like the "prophecies" Townsend analyzes, may not really have been from the pre-contact period at all.

Townsend and the *AHR* deserve praise for revisiting this important historical issue, which should be of interest not only to specialists but to all teachers of world history, and even of U.S. history. This attention, I hope, will spur changes in how we teach the Spanish conquest of Mexico not only at the college level but in elementary and secondary schools as well.

Robert Shaffer
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Camilla Townsend replies:

As a comparativist, it is gratifying to find myself in conversation about the conquest of Mexico with a scholar of U.S. foreign relations. A journal of the scope and caliber of the *American Historical Review* makes meaningful interchange between historical fields, so often isolated from each other, a genuine possibility.

It seems to me that Robert Shaffer is certainly correct that the apocryphal first half of Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex is replete with discrepancies, obvious overlays of Christian imagery, and sticky translation problems that together undermine a careful reader's confidence in the text as an actual record of events. It is not even necessary to wait for the second part (concerning the military conflict that ensued), the strikingly different tone of which can only be called business-like, before allowing oneself to begin to doubt. In a separate vein, a careful study of varying omens later reported not only by the Nahuas but also by numerous other indigenous groups, most of whom had been exposed to rumors about exploring Europeans, and all of whom held their own complex narratives of political history, might well prove illuminating: I hope to see such studies in future.

I appreciate Shaffer's reading for other reasons as well. He immediately zeroes in on the two major themes of my article that surround the central question of the white gods. First, he shares with me a belief that this issue is important to historians in our relations with both our subjects and our students. It is not merely a yes/no question of fact (i.e., the Indians did think the Spanish were gods, or they did not). It is, rather, a question of human dignity—of allowing it to our subjects and teaching it to our nation's young. In this case, as in most instances of objectification, the objectifiers (those who imagine a less powerful Other) have by no means hated or despised those whom they have rendered less real by denying them complicated views and agendas of their own. On the contrary, they have often been fascinated by the indigenous, even loved them. But in the long run, we do any people an injustice not to allow them to be ordinary or angry or calculating or rational—in short, real. In a worst-case scenario, as Shaffer points out, teaching anything less might allow some of our students to convince themselves that certain peoples "deserve" to be conquered. It seems to me that in light of recent international events—not just sixteenth-century ones—we would do well to give this thought serious consideration.

Secondly, Shaffer recognizes in his first sentence that "how the Spanish were able to conquer the powerful Aztec empire" is ultimately at issue here. Our lack of a completely satisfactory answer to that question has held many of us tongue-tied in the past. The theories of causality that we have advanced have been too full of holes to make it possible thoroughly to discount Aztec religious fatalism as a major factor. We can't, for example, have it that disease was the deciding factor, even as we argue that the Aztecs were effectively defeated not by Spaniards but by their Indian allies, for Indian allies were hit as hard by the microbes as Indian enemies. Traditionally, even those who have brought up technology (one corollary of which is, of course, a greater previous exposure to a range of diseases) have had perforce to beg the question of *why* the Europeans had superior technology in the first place. Plant biologists studying the remains of ancient seeds may be able to liberate us from this conundrum if we will let them. That thought, I know, is anathema to some of my colleagues who understandably fear a return to ridiculous environ-

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