

David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short History*

The
The scientific rediscovery of the Aztec world

Almost immediately following the collapse of Tenochtitlan, an aggressive conversion effort was launched to wipe out Aztec religion and replace it with a brand of Roman Catholicism that would herald in the millennium prophesied at the end of the New Testament. A clear example of this impassioned campaign to overwhelm and transform the misguided and dangerous life ways of the Aztecs is seen in this passage from the Franciscan friar Martín de Valencia's *obediencia* (exhortation and instructions) given to the "apostolic twelve" missionaries who were sent to Mexico City in 1524 to officially begin the evangelization of the natives. Using a series of martial metaphors, which defined their purposes as a kind of holy war, their *superior* implored them to attack and utterly defeat the evil madness of Aztec thought and culture: "Go... armed with the shield of faith and with the breastplate of justice, with the blade of the spirit of salvation, with the helmet and lance of

perseverance... and to the perfidious infidels a road may be opened for them and pointed out, and the madness of heretical evil may fall apart and come to nothing." In fact, when those twelve Franciscans arrived in Mexico, Cortés arranged a ceremonial escort from Veracruz all the way to the destroyed capital of Tenochtitlan so that their arrival and purpose could be witnessed everywhere they triumphantly walked.

But the process of converting the "perfidious infidels" ran into problems when European priests and laypeople began to interact with native peoples who spoke the indigenous languages, knew native philosophical teachings, and could communicate the myths, songs, histories, and cultural practices of pre-Hispanic times. A significant number of texts began to emerge that described indigenous cultural practices, settlements, calendars, and mythologies of many city-states and rural communities. A Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún, produced a twelve-book chronicle of the Aztec world known today as the *Florentine Codex*. His interviews with elders between the 1530s and 1570s reveal a sophisticated social, linguistic, and ceremonial world in which merchants and kings, slaves and warriors, women and men, farmers and shamans, and priests and artists interacted to produce a highly stratified, intensely ritualized, wealthy urban society. But even as Sahagún, his students, and other friars collected and recorded this kind of knowledge, there were intense cultural and religious forces in colonial society working against their dissemination. Without necessarily intending to do so, Sahagún had produced a huge amount of writing that some Spaniards believed was *preserving* Aztec knowledge, mythology, and cultural practices.

Unlike the Aztecs who appropriated the gods of peoples they dominated, Christian priests and laypeople did all they could to root out and destroy the rites, beliefs, and religious iconography of Mesoamerica. But the insistent friars themselves were forced to make adaptations and compromises when instructing natives on Christian beliefs in the Nahuatl language, which often resulted in new meanings given to notions of sin, crucifixion,

sacrifice, salvation, saints, and God. Mesoamericans were resistant to entering the new churches, so architects created open chapels to allow growing numbers of Indians to attend outside masses and sermons. Native peoples did not merely acculturate to Spanish Catholicism, they combined elements of indigenous and Spanish culture and religion, picking and choosing from various traditions in order to meet their spiritual and physical needs in the changing society. Consider the various early colonial sculptures that combined Christian and Aztec imagery such as the baptismal font in Zinacantepec where images of Christ and Mary combine with symbols of the rain god Tlaloc. This kind of inventiveness took place in myriad forms of cultural mixing during the colonial period in Mesoamerica. One example vividly portrayed during the Mexican wars of independence from Spain at the beginning of the nineteenth century is that of Father José María Morelos. He was one of the spiritual and military leaders of the independence movements who invoked a line of Aztec heroes and the Spanish massacre in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan before the Noche Triste as models and justification for the rebellion against Spaniards, saying, "Spirits of Motecuhzoma, of Cacamatzin, of Cuauhtimotzin, of Xicotencatl and Catzonzi, celebrate, as you celebrated the *mitote* dance in which you were overcome by the treachery of Alvarado, this happy instant in which your children have come together to avenge the injustices and outrages."

Another example of the persistence of indigenous symbolic meanings into the colonial and modern eras is found in a few *cristos de caña*, papier-mâché figures of the crucified Christ made out of maize, the most sacred indigenous plant, inside of which were hidden colonial period manuscripts tallying onerous tribute payments. When native artists made these images of the crucified Jesus out of their revered corn plants, they were linking the profound knowledge they had of the divine seeds in plants with the new knowledge they had of the divine life inside of Christ.

The most powerful and pervasive example of mixing Aztec and Spanish religious elements is found in the apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe at a hill, associated with an Aztec goddess, outside the capital of New Spain in the early colonial period. Native, Mestizo, and Creole peoples adopted her as their own patron divinity, noting that she spoke Nahuatl during her apparitions, was dark-skinned like themselves, and offered them compassion while making ritual demands on the Spaniards. Everywhere one goes today in Mexican communities throughout the world you will find statues, images, and devotional practices in honor of this most sacred Mother of Mexico.