

5

Faith and Morals in Colonial Mexico

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Mesoamerican civilization prior to contact with Europeans was composed of stratified chiefdoms, city-states, and imperial governments, all linked by an overarching worldview, cultural traits, and a religious belief system. More specifically, religion ordered the cosmos, the movement of historical time, and the daily lives of ancient Native Americans. Their daily life revolved around an annual cycle of ceremonies that was of principal concern to the entire society. Native Americans believed that the relationship between human beings and the divine was a filial one. Deities, because they had sacrificed themselves to create humanity, were to be honored, appeased, propitiated, and pleased in order to maintain order or balance in the heavens and ward off cataclysm and natural disaster. All of this was understandably important to an agricultural society at the mercy of the vicissitudes of nature. Consequently, a majority of ceremonies to the gods dealt with agricultural and fertility issues.

The ruling elite, the priestly and aristocratic class, positioned itself as the intermediary between the general population and the supernatural. They acquired astronomical and mathematical expertise and monopolized the art of writing and record keeping. In short, they came to control the knowledge that was deemed sacred, that was instrumental to maintaining the precarious balance of cosmic forces.

In addition, the order of the cosmos was replicated at the societal level. Native societies were defined by strict behavioral codes that delineated their members' duties and responsibilities toward the gods, the elite, and commoners. And one's identity was linked to a lineage that was further attached to the gods, the elite, and sacred history.

Upon encountering the Mesoamerican peoples, the early European missionaries were astonished by the complexity of their political structures and the virtuous nature of their lifestyle, yet horrified by their idolatry and practice of human

sacrifice. The regular clergy (members of religious orders), charged with evangelizing the natives for most of the 16th century, viewed these aboriginal peoples and their religion through the filter of European history and experience. This was particularly true of the Franciscans who headed up the Christianization of the natives in the population center of Mexico's central valley.

The Franciscans, especially the first generation of missionaries, were highly educated, endowed with a strong millenarian vision, and possessed of an apocalyptic view of history that posited a leading role for their own order. The vast majority of these early friars came from the provincial house of San Gabriel (Extremadura) founded by Father Juan de Guadalupe in 1496. He emphasized a "living Gospel" of extreme poverty in emulation of both Christ and Saint Francis of Assisi, the founder of the order. Both Saint Francis and Father Guadalupe had been influenced by the writings of Joachim de Fiore, who through dreams and a numerological approach to the Bible discovered three different states of mankind, leading to the second coming of Christ. The first state was the epoch of God the father at the time of the secular church, dating from Adam to Christ; this was followed by the era of God the son and the church of priests, from the birth of Christ to A.D. 1260; and the third age, that of the Holy Spirit, was the period of the rule of the monastic orders and the destruction of the earthly church.

The new Christ described by de Fiore would be a founder of a monastic order. Some Franciscans believed Saint Francis to be this messiah who, once the earthly church was destroyed, would reign for a thousand years. The millennium would be characterized by a world of perfect egalitarian charity inhabited by the poorest and most humble. Although many churchmen thought this interpretation extreme, it nevertheless helps explain the existence of the observant Franciscans and the reform movement under Spain's Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, who closed opulent monasteries and emphasized a life of poverty for regular clergy.

The "discovery" in 1492 of the last gentiles, the Native Americans, was seen as a clear sign of the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the coming millennium. By evangelizing the natives, the first Franciscans believed that they were playing a decisive role in the creation of the millennial kingdom or the Christian paradise on earth. Reports of the devotion, humility, and obedience of the aboriginal peoples caused many friars to suppose initially that the natives were the prophesied Christians of the third age. This explains why the Franciscan missionaries chose the term "indoctrination" when discussing the Christianization of the natives rather than the term "evangelization." They believed that the natives were already prepared to live as Christians and merely needed to be introduced to or indoctrinated in the passion of Christ.

Therefore, the Franciscans sought to teach an evangelically pure Christianity to the natives and to create a Christian Indian state. Thus, they set for themselves the arduous, and impossible, task of eradicating native religion without eliminating native culture. This objective partially accounts for their insistence on teaching in native languages rather than in Spanish, in direct opposition to Crown

directives. The friars also opposed the first attempts to institute and collect church tithes from the natives. Both these phenomena would have hispanicized the native populations and secured the rule of the earthly church that was destined to fall.

Even clergymen who did not share the apocalyptic vision of the early Franciscans were profoundly influenced by the writings of another scholar, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose humanist philosophical and satirical essays calling for church reform claimed that the institution had become too sumptuous, too worldly, too distanced from the original Christian church. This attitude led to a harsh view of ordinary Europeans, especially those who emigrated to the American colonies. Some clergy felt that the Catholicism of the average colonist was decadent and tainted, not suitable for the impending third era. These Spanish emigrants brought with them the beliefs and practices of Iberian popular Catholicism, namely the devotion to the saints and Mary, as well as to holy relics.

Apparitions and miracles punctuated the daily existence of contemporary Catholics, and formal religious practice was dedicated to public displays of worship such as processions and pilgrimages, especially to celebrated shrines. Attendance at mass and confession was small, and general religious education was severely lacking. Furthermore, folk Catholicism, particularly in rural areas, was spontaneous and independent of the official church. Mendicants such as the Franciscans were teaching orders, which formed part of a larger movement to educate the population and reassert church control over religious belief and activity. This movement would culminate, in the late 16th century, in the introduction of reforms called for at the Council of Trent in 1545 and Spanish Inquisition efforts to institute an orthodox church-controlled piety.

Disdain for the Spanish colonists on the part of some churchmen was not solely grounded in these religious and philosophical precepts but was coupled with charges of mistreatment of the natives under the *encomienda* system. Until 1542, the Crown granted *encomienda*, the right to collect tribute and extract labor service, to early colonists as a reward for their service during the Conquest in exchange for Christianizing the indigenous population. The *encomenderos* invited friars into their jurisdictions to evangelize, but even so, many clergymen sought to maintain a clear separation between their Indian charges and decadent Spaniards eager to exploit native labor. Some friars, among them the famous Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas, became vociferous opponents of *encomienda*, especially the personal labor service clause, which they equated (and rightly so) with native slavery. At the same time other clergy believed that the *encomienda* system, purged of its outstanding abuses, was a suitable one from which to convert the Native Americans. Furthermore, many priests exploited native labor just as much as the *encomenderos* did, forcing the construction of monasteries and churches and living off what the natives produced.

In the midst of these

The first three Franciscans arrived in Mexico in 1523 and the following year 12 more, known as the 12 Apostles, arrived, walking barefoot for 200 miles from Veracruz to the capital. Other religious orders such as the Dominicans, who arrived in 1525, the Augustinians (1533), and the Jesuits (1571) also played major roles in the evangelization of the Indians. However, it should be noted that the regular clergy were always limited in number compared to the task at hand. By 1559, approximately 800 friars were working among a native population of 2.65 million. Only 6,000 ordained priests were available to minister to the natives and colonists a century later.

A number of factors, in addition to the small number of Catholic priests, conditioned and limited the evangelization or spiritual conquest of the natives. These considerations included the language barrier, cultural ignorance, disputes among the Spaniards such as the aforementioned rivalry between regular clergy and colonists, and even battles with the Crown and within the church itself, such as doctrinal disputes between the orders.

The initial task of the friars was to learn the native languages. As a consequence, they produced a substantial number of dictionaries and grammar manuals to further the missionary work in the field. The Christianized sons of the conquered nobility, who attended centers of learning founded by the missionaries, made this production possible. Two such schools in Mexico City included San José, under the direction of the Franciscan Pedro de Gante, and the famous Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, founded by Mexico's first viceroy and first bishop, Antonio de Mendoza and Bishop Juan de Zumárraga respectively. Young native scholars, fluent in Spanish, Latin, and their own Nahuatl, translated and wrote prayer and confessional manuals, sermons, histories, and other religious treatises that became indispensable to the Christianization program.

Successful conversion of the native population was predicated not merely upon learning the rudiments of native languages but upon understanding native society. This quest to learn about native cultures in order to eradicate a substantial portion of them led to the great pioneering works of such religious chroniclers as Diego Durán, Bernardino de Sahagún, Andrés de Olmos, Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía), and Diego de Landa. These men, although accomplished linguists in their own right, worked closely with native aids, informants, and translators. The Crown welcomed these investigations, because it too was interested in learning about pre-Columbian political, economic, and tribute practices.

While they were learning the local languages, the friars resorted to alternative teaching tools in an effort to educate and convert the natives to Christianity. They developed visual aids such as murals and religious paintings to depict the passion of Christ and the lives of the saints, and to explain religious allegories to native neophytes. This visual approach turned out to be unexpectedly problematic, because its success depended upon how the natives interpreted the images, which could be different from how they were intended to be by the friars.

For example, the missionaries almost immediately held up the cross and paintings of the Crucifixion to the Maya. To the Maya, however, the symbol of the

cross evoked their sacred "first tree." This Tree of Life displayed the conjunction of the heavens, earth, and the underworld. At its axis lay the axis of the universe. In addition, it metaphorically showed the manner by which rulers became deified, and members of the heavens. It celebrated creation, sacrifice, and rebirth and, especially when a corn tree was depicted, made direct reference to the agricultural cycle. It also marked a sacred space at which spiritual beings would arrive to accept offerings. Thus, from the Maya perspective, Christ could be viewed as one ruler of many who had followed the divine path in the cycle of life, not necessarily as the one and only savior from sinfulness.

Public ritual had always been essential to both pre-Columbian religion and Spanish Catholicism. Consequently, priests quickly introduced their aboriginal parishioners to religious plays, music and festivals, especially at Easter and Corpus Christi, both of which celebrated the Holy Eucharist. Additionally, the regular clergy also hoped to inspire religious devotion through their own examples of living devout, humble lives informed by Christian zeal. This approach eventually appeared to make an impression on the native commoners, who had initially been perplexed by the European vow of poverty, because their own precontact priests had dressed luxuriously, befitting their noble status.

The early priests were itinerant, worked in pairs, and entered villages, towns, or urban neighborhoods with the express goal of converting the local leadership. Once the cacique (village chief) or *tlatoani* (ruler) was baptized, the rest of the community quickly followed. The amount of religious instruction provided before baptism was brief and made the baptism of 10,000 natives at one time possible, albeit questionable in that their understanding of Christian doctrine was superficial at best. Then, with the initial conversion completed, the missionaries proceeded to discredit and dislodge the traditional native high priesthood, forcing their activities underground. However, it was more difficult for the missionaries to eliminate the role played by lesser religious representatives such as midwives, healers, diviners, and weather conjurers, because these positions correlated with existing positions in Mediterranean Catholicism. As a result, many of these traditions continue well into the present day.

The friars ordered the destruction of any idols or statues in evidence, but the natives successfully hid some from European view. The priests attacked concubinage (cohabitation without marriage) and polygamy, practiced especially among the nobility. Because the number of clergy was limited and they were itinerant, the newly Christian native elite were responsible for the daily operations of the new native Christian church. The indigenous elite clearly mediated between the Spanish and native worlds, governing, collecting tribute, and providing laborers for work projects. In this respect they continued performing the same functions as they had during the pre-Conquest period.

The missionaries taught Christianity in terms of what was already familiar to the indigenous people. In other words, the friars not only allowed but purposely encouraged the correlating of native deities, symbols, and rituals with their European counterparts. This methodological approach, known as guided syncretism (combining of beliefs and practices), made for some complicated, fascinating problems, especially when missionaries sought to align concepts of the native deities with those of the Christian god and Satan. At issue was the fact that the native gods were multifaceted and appeared in various manifestations, possessing both positive and negative attributes.

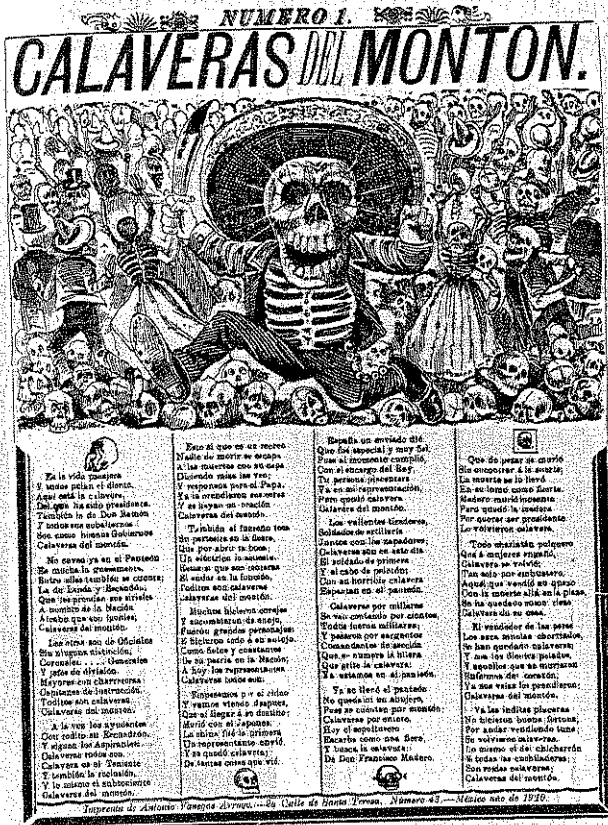
For example, priests generally selected Tezcatlipoca (accompanied by Quetzalcóatl) as the supreme being, because one of his manifestations was that of Lord Possessor of the Near, Possessor of the Surrounding, Possessor of Heaven and Earth. Although this was a suitable correlation, Tezcatlipoca had no particular moral authority, being considered neither good nor evil. In addition, Tezcatlipoca was also known as the trickster and ruler over chaos. The Franciscans sometimes used this manifestation to express satanic evil. Thus, the friars were continually forced to clarify which Tezcatlipoca they were referring to.

A more common correlation to the devil was the Nahuatl *tecolotl* or human owl, an apparitional spirit associated with sickness, death, the night, and the underworld. However, the *tecolotl* was a type of *nahualli*, or spirit, not a *teotl*, or high deity. In effect, representing the devil as *tecolotl* weakened the concept of evil in the eyes of natives. Thus evil was either chaos, which according to the natives was a positive concept, or was not on a par with other deities that were to be feared.

Continuing with this example from central Mexico, the Nahuatl did not perceive the universe as a struggle between good and evil (God and Lucifer) but rather as a balance between the forces of chaos and order. In the native world, aligning oneself with good to avoid evil was not the basic problem of human existence. What was at issue for them was the discovery and maintenance (through offerings and rituals) of the proper balance between the two in order to survive. Maintaining this balance was seen as a creative struggle in which chaos, rather than being inherently evil, was actually the source of life.

In summation, the friars were forced to accept the creation of a flexible belief system defined by a native interpretation of rituals and doctrine. As time progressed, many missionaries came to realize that evangelization would be a lengthy process requiring constant supervision. Most friars would not understand that although Christianity was exclusive, the native religions had a long tradition of being inclusive, incorporating new deities and accompanying rituals into their already existing pantheon.

Because of the natives' ability to assimilate external religious concepts, a parallel religious system developed in many native communities. They worshiped their old gods as well as the new Christian deity and the saints. Some friars were furious with this and felt betrayed when it became clear to them that the traditional native religions were continuing. These priests demanded immediate action against such ongoing idolatry and utilized their inquisitorial powers to punish natives found to be practicing their traditional religion clandestinely.



Todos Santos (The Day of the Dead) on November 1 allows for widespread popular celebration of the complementary nature of life and death. As with most Mexican fiestas, the occasion allowed for satire of society. In the last two decades of the 19th century, José Guadalupe Posada drew caricatures of these popular traditions. His skeletons, or *calaveras*, humorously represented social stereotypes. Like most of Posada's work, the broadsheet shown here includes comic doggerel about members of society.

popular religion of the average colonist. For example, it was generally believed that native medicinal and herbal knowledge was more effective in treating New World ailments than conventional European medicine, because it was indigenous to the New World setting. There are numerous examples of Spaniards, mestizos and Africans pressuring Indians to reveal "secret recipes" for curing any type of ailment as well as for procuring physical prowess, the ability to seduce many women, or the ability to change stones into gold bars. There are even cases in which Spaniards and Africans turned to native religion to seek aid or redress for an injustice. Of all the native traditions, the healing arts had the greatest impact on colonial society. Even the Inquisition recognized the validity of indigenous medicine during a time of few European doctors. However, with native healing also came a native worldview, indigenous rituals, and a nativizing of Christian concepts.

This process of cross-cultural assimilation also extended to Africans forcefully brought to Mexico. African slaves resided in the Spanish parts of the New World, with the largest percentage living in urban areas. Others could be found on sugar plantations on the Gulf Coast, in textile factories, and in the mining and ranching industries. Africans, mostly from west and central Africa, and mulattoes made up

a substantial portion of the population, perhaps as high as 20 percent, especially in Mexico City.

It was generally the obligation of the Spanish master to see to the religious education of Africans who had been baptized before their Atlantic passage. They would have received only minimal instruction in the Catholic faith, because the church did not organize a massive spiritual conquest of Africans as it did with Native Americans. African servants were encouraged to attend religious services, and African and mulatto confraternities hosted festivities for their patron saints and participated in large city festivals such as Corpus Christi. However, during the early 17th century such African groups located at the Church of Santo Domingo in Mexico City were prohibited, because the Crown suspected them of harboring anti-Spanish rebel conspiracies. Even when they were not suspected of subversion, the African religious associations were singled out, because their processions, which included African music and dance, were deemed too scandalous. They did patronize specific parish churches, as the mulattoes did at the Church of San Roque in Mexico City.

Although the slaves brought to Mexico spoke many different languages, hailed from diverse regions of western Africa, and were members of differing nations, they did share important religious concepts, which they brought to Mexico. Traditional African religion entailed a belief in a supreme force, divinities, and ancestors, as well as the practice of magic and healing, each with its attendant devotional practices and rituals. All together, they formed the interrelated fabric of one belief system, a system that allowed many to survive slavery. Africans believed that supernatural forces were omnipresent and consulted and manipulated them in order to ameliorate the slave's life. For example, Afro-Mexicans wore charms and amulets that served as talismans or assisted them in an effort to achieve some desired effect, such as softening the punishments of a cruel master. Africans and mulattoes also carried special earth, usually from cemeteries or human bones, that was probably connected to ancestor worship. Other items, such as ointments and potions rubbed on the body, were designed to calm anxieties and may have formed part of rituals of purification, combined with abstinence from certain foods, to bring about change. Slaves were also preoccupied with using various medicinal herbs to cure illnesses and especially to induce sleep. Slaves surely intended the latter for slave owners, because a sleeping master translated into a measure of freedom of movement for slaves. Other items such as cowrie beads were utilized to foretell future events and predict the behavior of friends, relatives, and, above all, slave owners.

Africans, like the Native Americans, extracted from their new environment the cultural ingredients that were of value to them or were similar to their familiar African traditions. Scholars have long assumed a high degree of cultural interaction between African slaves and the Native Americans. For example, in 1647, a native woman named Petrona hosted a prohibited private ritual to Saint Anthony in her employer's home and invited African and mulatto friends and *comadres*

(women who served as godmothers to someone's children) who danced and ate sweets after the ceremony.

The combination of African and native traditions led to interesting religious forms. For instance, in early-18th-century Jalapa an African slave led a series of rituals, again centering around Saint Anthony, in which natives participated by performing traditional dances. The slave, considered the shaman of the group, entered into a trance, consulted with the spirits, and, upon recovering, transmitted the advice received from the supernatural world. Such an interweaving of religious practices eventually led to the creation of completely new belief systems. Although not as widespread in Mexico due to the decline in the slave trade to the colony and the increase in the native population, Afro-Mexican religion shared many of the traits of such religions as *candomblé* in Brazil or *Santería* in Cuba in which African divinities became linked to Catholic saints and the Trinity and some Indian concepts regarding nature.

As these examples demonstrate, popular religious rituals and beliefs were flexible, spontaneous, and open to other religious traditions present in the colony. These innovations, however, all appeared to take place under a cloak of European Catholic symbols and ritual forms, especially large-scale public worship linked to the widespread devotion of the saints. Every neighborhood, parish, confraternity, guild, institution, village, town, city, and ethnic group maintained its own devotion to a particular saint or manifestation of Mary or Christ. Feast days were celebrated with all the pomp and religious zeal the devout possessed. Such spectacles affirmed identity, were sources of personal and group pride, and could become reasons for great rivalry among different confraternities, as happened in 17th-century Mexico City. In addition to these annual feasts, large processions to specific saints punctuated colonial life, which was constantly threatened by epidemics, drought, famine, and other natural disasters. A prime example for the central valley was the native, Spanish, and *casta* (individuals of mixed racial ancestry) devotion to the Virgin of Remedies, concerning drought and illness, and Saint Gregory, the wonder worker, for floods. Eventually one form of Marian devotion came to dominate in Mexico, that of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The Virgin of Guadalupe was said to have appeared on December 9, 1531, before a humble native named Juan Diego, asking him to instruct Bishop Juan de Zumárraga to construct a church on the very spot of the apparition on Tepeyac Hill, four miles north of downtown Mexico City. The bishop could not be convinced. Three days later, the Virgin again appeared before Juan and told him to pick some roses and place them in his cloak. Juan carried these flowers to Zumárraga with a second request regarding the construction of a church on the hill. Standing before the bishop, Juan Diego opened his cloak to reveal an image of the Virgin where the roses had been. This sacred image became the focus of veneration. A small church was constructed on the apparition site in 1533. Years later, in 1556, a larger, more ornate structure was built through the efforts of

Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar. By 1622, the shrine was relocated to the bottom of the hill. In 1695, new construction took place at the new location.

Devotion to Guadalupe increased through time until, by the late 17th and early 18th centuries criollo clergy and civil leaders began to see Guadalupe as a uniquely Mexican, as opposed to European, image. Native devotion to the image increased rapidly during the 18th century because of the active promotion of the cult by diocesan, Franciscan, and Jesuit priests. Until that time, natives generally emphasized their various local patron saints or Marian images, including the Virgin of Remedies, who later became associated with royalist forces opposing the Mexican independence movement (1810-1821). On December 12, 1756, the city celebrated a huge festival to Guadalupe in honor of her designation as patroness of the viceroyalty.

Veneration of the saints and Mary dominated private devotional practices. Wealthy criollos maintained private chapels with accompanying libraries filled with prayer books and biographies of the saints, which served to inspire religious contemplation. More modest households erected temporary altars for special occasions such as Todos Santos or private devotional ceremonies. Generally, most houses contained at least one or two statues usually set aside in a *retablo*, a small, brightly colored and decorated wooden cabinet with doors. Retablos were portable and could therefore be carried to mass for blessings or in processions.

Vows made to saints in an effort to secure their divine intercession regarding illness, injury, abandonment, or a spouse were quite common. In return for the desired miracle, the devout would embark on a pilgrimage to a local shrine, donate funds to charity, build a chapel to honor the saint, volunteer to sweep the church, or nurse the sick. In addition, those who had had family members miraculously healed commissioned local artists to paint the main details of the miracle. These paintings, or *ex-votos*, hung on the walls of chapels and were dedicated to the saints as a testament to their intercessory powers and as a small measure of thanks to God.

By 1600, popular Catholicism in Mexico was a fascinating combination of African, native, and Spanish traditions. The average citizen believed in miracles and expected to witness divine intervention on a regular basis. Overall, the inhabitants sought to marshal or influence supernatural forces for personal, ethnic, and community gain, whether through the saints, talismans, potions, or rituals. The three overlapping cosmologies—European Catholic, African, and Native American—afforded individuals the opportunity to remedy life's stresses and illnesses. Admittedly, a goodly portion of popular piety relied upon the magical. The Catholic Church itself attested to the miraculous powers of the host, the saints, and Mary, but other popular beliefs smacked of unorthodoxy.



From the colonial period onward, the Virgin of Guadalupe has been the single most pervasive symbol of Mexico. As the patron of the colony of New Spain, she was called on in times of community and personal crisis. This 1743 engraving of Our Lady of Guadalupe shows her coming to the aid of the faithful in Mexico City during 1737.