

Religion in Colonial México
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The writing of colonial Mexican religious history starts with early 20th-century French historian Robert Ricard and his focus on missionary preaching and teaching endeavors. Ricard, whose historical writing reflects a pre-WWII Eurocentrism and Catholic victory mindset, relied heavily on Spanish and religious sources. In his work, he concludes that the missionary conversion process was successful spiritual conquest. Louise Burkhart's 1989 *The Slippery Earth* sets a new tone for colonial religious research, claiming that conversion was not one-directional. Burkhart argues that the Nahua of central Mexico had more significance in the development of colonial Mexican Catholicism than Ricard imagined. Burkhart becomes the foundation of modern colonial religion research. Her work is rudimental with the incorporation of native-language sources, opening an avenue for future scholars who will later add, expand on, and support her work. In her monograph *The Slippery Earth*, Burkhart heavily utilizes the sixteenth-century *Florentine Codex*, the twelve-book encyclopedic style manuscript written by Nahua elites under the supervision of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún telling of the culture and the people of Central México. Through her findings, she argues that the Mexican colonial religion reflects a cross-cultural interaction, which ultimately gave birth to what she coins 'Nahuatized Christianity.'¹

Burkhart dedicates the chapter “Four priests sacrifice a prisoner of war to “the gods” of *The Slippery Earth* to highlight the cross-cultural connection of Nahua and Christian beliefs about purity and pollution. According to the author, Mesoamerican belief considers adulterers, thieves, slaves, and physically unkempt people as *tlazolli*, filthy, dusty, and pollutant immoral beings. The ideas of dirt and filth the Nahuas closely associate with entities that can pollute anything that surrounds immoral individuals, especially the earth and their community. Because the Nahuas have strong traditions of a communal society, the polluted member is a dangerous threat to the

other members and offensive to the deities.² Burkhart utilizes Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*, illustrating that the Nahua's preoccupation with filth is a cultural belief connecting deities to ideas of dirt and purity. The codex mentions Tezcatlipoca, a dirty descender to earth to create chaos and Tlazolteotl, a woman deity of dust, filth, and adultery. Together, the two deities are a recipe for immortality, looking to take away peoples' cleanliness. In stark contrast, the Nahuas idea of *chipahua* (clean and perfect) connects to a person of morale with a clean outer appearance that is absent of filth and dust. Burkhart again refers to the *Codex*, this time Book I, Figure 10, which portrays the other side of Tlazolteotl with an unspun cotton headdress carrying a broom. The painted image of Tlazolteotl is said to represent purity as well as softness with the cotton untouched. The broom represents the Nahua belief that the object can sweep away *tlazolli*, which is an act of removing dirt and symbolically the staining from immoral acts.³

Burkhart suggests that the Christian beliefs on purity and filth run parallel to the Nahua discourse. Christians correlated pollution and dirt to evilness and purity to sacredness.⁴ The correlation between Nahua and Christian in this instance is essential as the friars sought to make Christianity appealing to the Nahua mind.⁵ Burkhart adds that the Christian concept of dirt was the most similar, appealing, and useful aspect of Christianity to the Nahuas. It was often that the friars applied the Nahua's perception of the symbols, appropriating them to their Christian teachings.⁶ Though the Nahua perception about dirt, filth, and cleanliness was not easy for the Christian friars to accept, it was accepted because it fits into their dichotomy of evil/good. This instance signals the cross-culture interaction that Burkhart refers to as Nahuatized Christianity. Burkhart concludes that although the friars' perceptions were convincing to the Nahuas, Christianity in colonial México operated within a Nahua frame of reference.⁷

Oswaldo F. Pardo's 2004 monograph *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahuatl Rituals and Christian Sacraments in the Sixteenth-century*, published two decades after Burkhardt's work, refutes Ricard's idea of religion being an uncontested spiritual conquest. He continues an alignment with Burkhardt, adding his research of Nahuatl-Christian Friar interaction during the administering of sacraments to the colonial religion field. Using Indigenous-language driven sources and Spanish friar accounts, like Burkhardt, Pardo argues that the Nahuatl-Friar interaction is cross-cultural and influential in shaping Mexican Catholicism.

Pardo's chapter "The Uses of a Sacrament: Confirmation and Spiritual Maturity" serves as a breakdown of the sacrament of confession, highlighting the cross-cultural influence that shapes colonial religion. Pardo explains that there were significant concerns that the Nahuas would revert to their cultural beliefs amongst Friars.⁸ Because the friars' primary goal was to convert as many Nahuas as possible the big questions at hand, how would they prevent the Nahuas from digressing back to their old ways? Furthermore, once converted, how were they going to get them to continue on a path of spiritual growth? The friars' solution, turn the Indigenous into perfect Christians by allowing them to enter the priesthood to restrict their Indigenous converts to the church's laws, preventing them from exercising their authority.⁹ According to Catholic rituals, it is through the sacrament of confirmation that converts could find their perfection as Christians and grow in their spiritual maturity.

The church doubted the approach explaining that they could not imagine the Indigenous reaching spiritual maturity.¹⁰ Pardo utilizes the accounts of Missionary Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, a famous colonial friar, to argue otherwise. He suggests that embracing European concepts almost came naturally for the Nahuas, and by looking at the number of conversion efforts,

he could gauge a success that equates to an increase in the Nahuas' spirituality. In support of Motolinía's plan, the friars agreed to administer religious instruction of a structured and uniform catechism. However, realizing that Indigenous language and culture would perhaps pose as an obstacle and would be a considerable task requiring a new theology if they wanted to appeal to the Nahuas. Intellectually, the priests did not prepare. Pardo then uses Franciscan Fray Alonso de Molina's *Vocabulario*, a sixteenth-century confirmation translated to Nahuatl that portrays the friars' effort to urge the Nahuas to receive the sacrament.¹¹ Like Burkhart, Pardo highlights the pairing of Christian concepts of confession to Nahuatl equivalences as instances of cross-culture influence.

Molina highlights the bi-cultural influence in the term *teoyotica techicaualiztli*, marking the forehead with the sign of the cross by the confirmand and Christian reference to the cross on the forehead, confirming a soldiers' entry into the army of Christ. Attempting to illustrate the importance of confirmation to the Nahuas, Molina uses an image of a prestigious and courageous Christian soldier. He hoped the figure would appeal and spark a traditional connection to soldiers and warriors, a figure of prestige that not just anyone could in the old Nahua society. In essence, becoming a warrior in Christ's army was an opportunity for the common Nahua to hold a status of honorable privilege. Molina's *Vocabulario* also features other Nahua war culture terms like *yaotlatquiltl* (clothing of war), and *tlahuiztli* (Aztec warrior clothing) to help with Molina's approach to appeal.¹² To the Nahuas, *tlahuiztli* meant much more than wartime clothing and hierarchical social marker and recognition for one's courage on the battlefield. Pardo mentions that Molina uses the *tlahuiztli* for God's Christian soldiers, indicating a clear mesh of Nahuatl cultural terms to coin Christian religious ideas.

An additional monograph that overlaps and adds to Burkhart's research in *The Slippery Earth* is the 2017 collection of essays, *Painted Words: Nahua Catholicism, Politics, and Memory in the Atzaqualco Pictorial Catechism*. Through this work, co-authors Elizabeth Hill Boone and David Eduardo Tavárez examine the seventeenth-century pictorial and alphabetic *Atzaqualco* that consists of prayers in Nahuatl, pre-conquest stories and dynastic records. Louise Burkhart joins the two authors to provide a multi-disciplinary approach to analyze the *catechism*. We observe her original argument of defining colonial religion as a cross-cultural maintains. Perhaps more interesting is that 30 years later, she is still contributing to the research field.

Boone's contribution is her focus on the transformation of pre-Hispanic pictography to the pictographic writing system found in the catechism. Her knowledge becomes essential to aiding Burkhart's contribution in deciphering the pictographic images so that she can then reconstruct them into Nahuatl text. Tavárez focuses on the entries later added to the front and the back of the *Atzaqualco*, offering an in-depth analysis of the Romanized Nahuatl text and name glosses. Through his study, he uncovers Nahua memories of pre-as well as and post-conquest lineages. *Painted Words* also extends from Pardo's mention of continuities of Indigenous culture and symbolism that appear Christian. These essays rely heavily on codices, taking Pardo's claim of continuities and changes in colonial religion and applying it to *Atzaqualco*. Like both of the preceding monographs, the authors assert that the *catechism* is a conflation of European and Indigenous cultures and that the continuities and changes between pre-colonial and colonial religions are apparent.

Burkhart's essay "Deciphering the Catechism" is one of the best examples of continuity and change found in the imagery of the *Atzaqualco*, breaking down the pictorial portion and providing a Nahuatl translation. Burkhart's work is unquestionably one of a kind. Her scholarship is the only one to give an image-by-image and a word-for-word translation for pictographic texts. For the translations, she references an extensive array of alphabetic Nahuatl catechisms and other completely glossed and unglossed catechisms in Nahuatl, one being Dominican Martín de León's seventeenth-century *Camino del cielo*, for occasional for wording.¹³ Additionally, she incorporates Fray Alonso de Molina's *Doctrina*, whose content shows a more considerable influence of a Nahuatl writing system on the painted wording in the *Atzaqualco*.¹⁴ Through her essay, Burkhart presents the translation for ten different catechisms, among which are the more popular The Our Father, The Apostles' Creed, The Hail Mary, and traditional Catechetic dialogues. She explains that the creation of Nahuatl language catechisms was a necessary task for the friars. They knew it would be instrumental in expressing the Word of God and bringing their Indigenous listeners to salvation. With that in mind, translating the basic catechisms was as Burkhart states their main priority and inclusive of the Indigenous language and Christian perceptions.¹⁵ The catechisms illustrate the continuity of the Indigenous writing system in pictorial images and the continuity of Catholic prayers, reconstructed to be accessible to the Indigenous community.

Because Burkhart uses her essay to focus on the breakdown of her work, Boone becomes the go-to for explaining the continuities, changes, and cross-cultural influence in the Burkhart's translations. In the essay "A Merger of Preconquest and New Spanish Systems," Boone notes that both cultures have the tradition of recording and preserving knowledge. However, images, symbols, and vibrant colors are seen more in Indigenous records. Similarly, European record-

keeping utilizes symbols. Instead of having intricate meanings in the pictures to explain what the image means, attached is linguistic text. Boone comments that the continuity of the Indigenous writing system is apparent in the catechism because of imagery and colors, but also because the *Atzaqualco*'s images retain much of their original meanings. Such examples she points out are the speech scrolls which Indigenous scroll writers apply to signify speech or dialogue — also, footprints to indicate movement.¹⁶ The changes are also apparent as the *catechism* symbols reflect, as Boone calls it, “the letter world.”¹⁷ The *Atzaqualco* images also echo Catholic iconography because the images intended to depict Catholic religious concepts. However, one cannot overlook that the adoption of the pictographic text by European catechists, and apply characteristics of Indigenous writing, distinguishing the *Atzaqualco* as a cross-cultural product. In the same manner, the authors explain that the continuities of Indigenous pictography were only possible if the adjustments were allowed. Hence, they conduciveness to Catholic practice.

Johnathan G. Truitt's 2018 *Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan: Nahuas and Catholicism, 1523-1700* follows the direction of Boone, Burkhart, and Tavárez's research in exploring colonial history, specifically in continuities and changes. However, Truitt's approach makes a slight shift from his peers, making his focus strictly on the continuities and changes of the Indigenous population's experiences with the colonial divine through time. Like the prior monographs, Truitt incorporates the use of Indigenous-language and Spanish texts. He argues that if the Indigenous did not embrace parts of Catholicism, the church would not have been as eminent as it appears.¹⁸ The author appropriates his chapter entitled “European Pedagogies and the Nahua Populace” to depict the Nahua experience in conjunction with education administered by the friars. This area contributes to a better understanding of how colonial religion was so wide-spread, not

only within the New Spain colonial capital but also into rural altepetls. Truitt reinforces the concept in *Painted Words* showing the continuity of Mesoamerican pictorial recording that Catechists adopt. Truitt then notes that there is a heavy reliance by friars on these images when they administer education. However, nearly 20 years into the colonial period, in the mid-sixteenth century, Catechists suggested a more European literacy, systemizing Nahuatl into Roman linguistic text, signaling continuity in Indigenous language. However, also a change in the European mannerism in the outward expression. Their first students were the Nahua elites, who were the only ones out of the Nahua population to have any formal education.¹⁹

In this context, Truitt uses Lockhart's three-stage temporal breakdown of language adaptation and change and applies it to the Nahuas experience with ministry instruction. Stage one starting from the Spanish arrival in México in 1519 to the years 1540-1550. During this time, the only Nahuas to have direct contact with the Spaniards are personal servants, aides, and students of the friars. The friars began religious training of the Nahua elites at friaries, which is the point of cross-cultural exchange. According to Truitt, this temporal phase is essential because although few, they are the start of the production of Nahuatl-language documents in the Roman alphabet, an example of bi-cultural continuities of traditions. By the end of stage one, the Nahuas saw an increase in European literacy as they are now producing household censuses for various altepetl, like the Tula and Cuernavaca regions. The author suggests that since the censuses are in areas outside of the colonial center, the spread of Romanizing Nahuatl was spreading to more distant altepetl.²⁰

Stage 2 corresponds to the years 1540-1550 and 1640-1650. This period portrays that both the Nahuas and missionaries have developing skills in alphabetic Nahuatl, bi-culturally influenced.

Truitt notes a well-known colonial friar Alonso de Molina and his *Confesionario breve*, a Nahuatl-Spanish manual used to assist non-Nahuatl speaking priests in administering confessions. Molina's manual is significant because it is written in both Nahuatl and Spanish, and is beneficial for non-Nahuatl speaking friars. The latter can refer to the Spanish while vocalizing the Nahuatl to appeal to their Nahua crowds. Another importance of the bi-lingual manuals Truitt explains allowed Nahuas to administer confession when a friar was unavailable. This allowance signals that Nahuas are an essential part of the spread of colonialism religion. Their participation in the spread is also apparent as the Nahuas utilize the manual to train other *teopannenque* (church people) in rural communities.²¹ Stage 2 undoubtedly symbolizes the continuity of the Nahuatl language in the documents of religious pedagogies. At the same time, the continuity existed within the change that colonial religion brought, using the Nahuatl for their motivation for Nahuas to convert other Nahuas.

Stage 3 covers the years 1640 or 1650 and any years after that. It is an era that shows the continuity of Nahuas increasing growth in religious education and efficiency in Romanizing Nahuatl. The Nahuas' literacy expands and is apparent with the multitudes of legal petitions, religious texts, histories, and other documents written in Nahuatl from this time. Because their literacy and ability to speak Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin is impressive, the friars permitted them to teach at the friaries facing a decline. To try to make the most out of their institutions' current state, the friars placed their Nahua students in a position of power, hoping that the Indigenous students would entice more converts before the system met its collapse.

Simultaneously, this period signifies a change in religious education as literacy training opportunities extending to Indigenous women, making it not exclusive to just men. Truitt explains

that by the eighteenth-century most of the Nahua noblewomen were literate in Spanish and probably in Nahuatl and Latin, the languages of colonial religion. Their knowledge of religious linguistics exemplifies a readiness to participate in spiritual practices like reciting the divine in Latin and reading the catechisms in Spanish. The skills of Nahua women are imperative as convents began to pop up in the colonial capital. Viceroy don Baltazar de Zúñiga Guzmán Sotomayor y Mendoza, responsible for the first convent, was already requiring that the women trained before entering.²² Although religious education was extremely institutionalized, the Nahuas made an effort to engage with colonial divinity. In some cases, there was even incorporation of the religious tools of evangelization into their society.²³ Truitt argues that the Nahuas manipulated the tools given to them by their teachers and fought to control aspects of their past. They fought for the power to influence their future, illustrating a mechanism to maintain traditional continuity.

Aside from his contribution to a new approach to colonial research, Truitt's coverage of the Indigenous women's experience with the divine is nothing short of phenomenal. Truitt extends his investigation on Indigenous women from his chapter "European Pedagogies and the Nahua Populace" into the next, dedicating it the focus solely to women. In "Cornerstones of Catholicism: Nahua Women and Religion in Mexico Tenochtitlan," suggesting that Indigenous women may have given their lives to Christianity, a definite shift. However, the acceptance of Christianity did not allude to relinquishing their traditional Mesoamerican ties to their families and communities. The Indigenous women's first contact with religion was with nuns and schools set up for Indian girls. However, the schools did not survive, as there was a lack of interest in teaching Indigenous women and Indigenous resistance.

Nonetheless, Indigenous women appeared in religious spaces again, facing limitations from the Catholic Church. Despite the Church's attitude, change is evident as women took positions of *cihuatepixque* (women in charge of people) in *cofradías*, religious groups for the marginalized, and a way to enhance social positions. Women's positions in *cofradías* were significant because it proves that someone without *limpieza de sangre* (pure Spanish blood) could be good Christians.²⁴ Spanish notions did not stop Indigenous women from being religiously active. The persistence of the Indigenous women paid off as Nahua women received credit from friars to convince their communities to accept and entrance into *cofradías*. Later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the friars viewed Nahua women as having exceptional spirituality and famous colonial chroniclers like Chimalpahin's recorded women's religious accomplishments.²⁵ The acknowledgment of Indigenous women as exceptional spiritual beings is an immense change as their presence in religious education was once non-existent. However, the Church still did not allow them to become nuns; in fact, the only positions they could hold in nunneries were servants to nuns. In essence, the Church thought higher of Indigenous for the faith but still kept limits on their religious statuses in the Church. It is important to note that because the Indigenous women were not fully allowed to commit to nunneries, they could not stay at the convents. Instead, as servants, travel to and from their homes to the convent where they work is typical. For Indigenous women, this meant they were still able to fulfill their traditional roles in the household. Also, to maintain the continuity of Indigenous traditions of selling in the marketplace while being able to participate in religion, Truitt explains.²⁶ The women's communities thought of it to be a social and economic benefit to have religious women in their communities.²⁷ The Indigenous women's experience with the divine, for the most part, remains restricted by the church. However, by

accepting the colonial divine, women created some agency for themselves and their community. Perhaps more importantly, they could make opportunities to work for themselves while maintaining Indigenous tradition and accepting the colonial church.²⁸

The explored monographs illustrate a growing contemporary field of colonial religion research. Burkhart deserves a distinction as her research became the starting point of colonial research through the lens of the Indigenous perspective. It is essential to note that all the monographs still use Burkhart's thesis presented in *The Slippery Earth*, showing that her work and the original argument is still relevant nearly 30 years later. However, it is not to take away that all of the authors' build off of each other contributing something valuable and unique to Burkhart's findings and the findings of the peers before them. Pardo, contributing research focuses on the dynamics between the Nahua and Friars. He also is the source that inspires the research of continuities and changes in colonial religion that Boone and Tavárez pick up. These two explore deeper into the topic and contribute an extremely detailed breakdown of all the imagery and texts of one specific catechism. Of course, in the same collection, we see Burkhart, again, offering modern colonial research ten in-depth translations of catechisms that she compliments with detailed explanations. Then there is Truitt, who brings in a new approach to continuities and changes that cover over 200 years of Indigenous, colonial experience. Of course, his addition of research on Indigenous women is impressive. It opens doors for future scholars to expand on the topic. Overall, the authors of these monographs and the essay collection are responsible for providing evidence to prove that colonial religion is not a one-sided history. Each author's scholarships are extraordinary, lending a hand to the re-write history to include the other side, the Indigenous voices that historians like Ricard so much ignored. Additionally, across the board, they

prove that Indigenous influence is just as significant as European influence in shaping religion in colonial México.

¹ Burkhart, Louise M. *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸ Pardo, Osvaldo F. *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-century Mexico*. History, Languages, and Cultures of the Spanish and Portuguese Worlds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³ Boone, Elizabeth Hill, Louise M. Burkhart, and David Eduardo Tavárez. *Painted Words: Nahua Catholicism, Politics, and Memory in the Atzaqualco Pictorial Catechism*. First [edition]. ed. Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology; No. 39. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid., 161.

¹⁵ Ibid., 73.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁸ Truitt, Jonathan G. *Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan: Nahuas and Catholicism, 1523-1700*. Norman, Oklahoma: Mission San Luis Rey, Oceanside, CA: University of Oklahoma Press; The Academy of American Franciscan History, 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

²¹ Ibid., 85.

²² Ibid., 90.

²³ Ibid., 110.

²⁴ Ibid., 122.

²⁵ Ibid., 131.

²⁶ Ibid., 143.

²⁷ Ibid., 135.

²⁸ Ibid., 142.

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