Millennial Missionaries and the Nahua Neophyte: an essay on the evangelical methods of the Franciscans in New Spain

It was a warm day in 1533, in the patio-like theater of Tlatelolco, New Spain.¹ Over eight hundred Nahua were acting out a religious drama, entitled The Final Judgment, under the direction of Franciscan friars.² The climatic moment occurred when Christ Himself condemned sinful Nahua for their transgressions, and the wrongdoers were physically punished by vengeful devils.³ The Final Judgment was a play intended to teach the Catholic catechism to the Nahua, specifically, the dually opposed forces of good and evil that defined the human moral struggle, the Euro-Christian view of a linear progression of the universe, and salvation or damnation as possible ends within this worldview. The characterization of devils as physical manifestations of evil, opposite the characters of Christ, the Archangel Michael, and other angels established a tangible struggle of good versus evil. Time itself was another character that warned the audience that the apocalypse was near, so that it was tremendously important that they quickly repent their sins.⁴ The Franciscans emphasized the imminence of the Nahua fate by linking punishment for sins with the coming of Christ.⁵ Franciscans were concerned with rapid conversion, to yield many Nahua as eager converts; however, the limited catechistic knowledge available through methods such as plays meant that these converts lacked complete comprehension of Christianity, and were therefore only superficially converted.

³ Burkhart 2011, 77.
⁴ Ibid, 63, 68-69.
⁵ Ibid, 76.
Franciscans and their millennial beliefs were central to the motivation for conversion of the indigenous of New Spain; yet, ironically, such beliefs actually hindered the process of conversion. In short, Franciscan millennialism held that the Order of Friars Minor were spiritual agents that could work to create a Spiritual Age of the Church, hasten the Second Coming of Christ, and eventually bring about the Apocalypse. Upon European contact with the Nahua, the Franciscans appointed an apocalyptic role to the Nahua, as the Nahua appeared to satisfy prerequisite positions for the fulfillment of Franciscan apocalyptic prophecy. The missionaries’ application of millennialism altered their perception of time, in that they could actively hasten it, while the evangelical project and conquest simultaneously dismantled the Nahua cosmic order and attempted to put an ill-translated Christian model in its place. It is important to note, however, the agency of indigenous catechumenates and varying degrees of efficacy of conversion, ranging from rejection to embracement of Christianity. In this way, this study acknowledges scholarly positions that support successful conversion, as well those that argue the conversion process was a mixture of acceptance and rejection. Despite the mutual and collaborative process of conversion, Christianity ultimately meant different things to different groups, which points to distinct Nahua and Franciscan perspectives, and the paradoxical nature of the missionary project.

Historiography has evolved in its appraisal of the conversion process, from Robert Ricard’s 1933 position that European missionaries carried out a spiritual conquest that was nearly as successful as the material conquest of the conquistadors. More recently, however, scholars such as Louise Burkhart and Jorge Klor de Alva have asserted that conversion was

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received in a complex mixture of acceptance, rejection, and varying positions in between. Klor de Alva has formulated a typology of indigenous response to conversion, with two positive and negative responses, accommodation and conflict, which are further differentiated by degrees of intensity. The accommodation response ranges from complete conversion, in which Christianity is believed and understood, to incomplete conversion, in which Christianity is believed yet misunderstood, and overt conversion, in which Christianity is superficially practiced yet not internally accepted. The conflict response ranges from complete resistance, overt conversion with belief in native religion and forced participation in Christian rites, and apostasy, in which Christianity could be abandoned in addition to native religion. By acknowledging a variety of responses to conversion, which account for multiple degrees of acceptance or rejection, we can begin to approach the question of the particular influence of Franciscan missionary zeal and millennial urges upon the evangelical project.

Franciscan eschatology, or beliefs about the nature and timing of the end of the world, is rooted in medieval conceptions of the nature of time and the Christian Apocalypse. Joachim de Fiore, a Calabrian monk from the twelfth century, made a colossal contribution to Christian eschatological thought that may have been officially unorthodox, yet was still influential. Fiore used biblical typology to formulate his apocalyptic thought, as he viewed parallels between the Old and New Testament as revelations of divine truth. Biblical typology is a method of scriptural interpretation in which multiple layers of truth are present in the Bible, which range from “truth to be believed (allegorical), or a boon to be hoped for (anagogical), or again a virtue

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7 Klor de Alva, 351-353.
8 Ibid, 351.
9 Ibid, 351-352.
to be practiced (tropological).”

Taking these interpretations even further, Fiore reasoned that he could predict the future through close readings of scriptural allegory. Fiore essentially conceived of history as unfolding into three stages that were each associated with a facet of the divine Trinity. The creation of man through Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ was the Age of the Father, the Age of the Son began in the book of Kings and lasted until the time of Fiore himself, while the third and final stage, that of the Holy Spirit, was imminent. In the Age of the Holy Spirit, two new religious groups would work to convert the peoples of the world and create a more perfect model of the Church in order to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. The founding of the religious orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans not long after Fiore seemed to fulfill this prophecy. Fiore’s interpretations established a precedent that historical events could acquire providential significance, as well as the inverse that providential significance could be attributed to historical events.

The parable of Luke 14: 16-24 is an important instance of biblical typology that enables Franciscan millenarian thinking. This alternative reading of the Bible presents a vision of the conversion of the world to Christianity as a prerequisite for the Apocalypse. In this parable, Christ invites many people to come to his table and dine with him. This is to be read as coming to his “spiritual table,” to be in Holy Communion with him. These unique interpretations hold that these invited dinner guests represent the non-Christians of the world, specifically Jews, Muslims, and pagans. Upon the discovery of the New World, the Europeans conceive of the millions of indigenous as an untouched pocket of primordial humanity that aches to hear the

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11 Ibid, 7.
12 Lara, 53.
13 Ibid, 53-54.
14 Ibid, 54.
16 Phelan, 7-8.
word of God. Apocalyptically inclined Franciscans understood Mesoamerican people to be a previously unreachable population of pagans. Fiore started the idea that a religious order would emerge and begin the work of creating a Spiritual Age of the Church, which would precede the Apocalypse, and the Franciscans traveled to New Spain in order to do exactly that. In sum, thinkers like Fiore and apocalyptic imperatives, such as interpretations of Luke 14, enabled a mental framework that proposed the end was near, and could be hastened by the actions of the pious.

European contact with the Americas provided a field for millenial theory to be practiced, and in the world historical context of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Spain was an ideal entity for such an undertaking. Catholicism was a fundamental cornerstone of Iberian culture and was emphasized and exaggerated due to Spain’s recent victory in the Reconquista. The mobilization of Spain’s Catholicism was evident through religious warfare and the heresy hunting institution of the Inquisition that sought to maintain religious orthodoxy in the face of Protestantism and questionable Jewish and Muslim converts. The consolidation of Charles V as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, as well as the King of Spain, identified him as a defender of Catholicism, against the newly emerging adversary of Protestantism and the age-old enemy of Ottoman and African Muslims. Charles V also inherited the legacy of Ferdinand and Isabella as the “Catholic Monarchs.” Indeed, the Franciscan Friar Mendieta conceived of Hernán Cortés as the antithesis of the devilish Martin Luther, as he believed (incorrectly) that they were born in the same year. Even more importantly, Mendieta viewed the millions of converts available in the Americas as a replacement for the loss of Catholic souls to

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Protestantism. In this way, Cortés was a holy deliverer of fresh pagan souls while Luther fiendishly stole Catholic souls with his heresy. For the Spaniards, a confluence of factors formed a substantial deluge of religious zeal and assuredness that it was their duty, by circumstance, to maintain and extend the influence of Catholicism, with the hope of initiating the Second Coming of Christ.

The main indigenous ethnic group of Central Mesoamerica and the Aztec Empire, collectively known as the Nahua, had a mixture of similarity and difference with Iberian Catholicism that would cause complex and paradoxical interactions between the indigenous and European. Indigenous religion was a “powerful and uniting force that penetrated every aspect of life and shaped their world in innumerable ways.” On the other hand, the Franciscan missionaries were thoroughly convinced of the urgency and importance of their evangelical project. In 1524, twelve Franciscan missionaries were given the task of beginning the evangelization of the Nahua. Within Fiore’s eschatology, the number twelve was symbolically chosen as a parallel with the original twelve apostles of Christ and their mission. The militaristic language of the “Orders Given to the Twelve” illustrates the firm resolve of these Franciscan missionaries: “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, struggle with the ancient serpent which seeks and hastens to lord himself over, and gain victory over, the souls redeemed with the most precious blood of Christ.” Despite Franciscan determination and zeal, the Nahua had deeply held religious beliefs of their own. Franciscan missionaries would face a

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18 Brading, 116.
19 Schwartz, 8.
20 Kenneth Mills, William Taylor, Sandra Graham, eds. Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History (SR Books, 2002), 64. [Reader 71]
difficult task in manipulating a clean switch of religions due to the entrenchment of religious belief.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, Aztec religious expression legitimized imperial expansion, as a steady flow of sacrificial captives would placate their sun deity, Huitzilopochtli. The Spaniards also fulfilled a religious objective through imperial expansion: conversion of souls for the advancement of millenarian prophecy. While the Aztecs believed that they were responsible for maintaining the cosmic order by providing a steady stream of blood for Huitzilopochtli, Christians believed that they had been saved because their God had shed his blood for humanity. Thus, Aztec blood sacrifice may be interpreted as an inverse to the Christian doctrine of the death and resurrection of Christ as a means for the salvation of mankind. Such similarities and differences were not conducive to a substitution of religion; rather, they allowed for an amalgamation of Christianity within indigenous religion, or vice versa. This process highlights the importance of clearly identifying similarities and differences between ideologies, in order to make sense of their relation or compatibility with one another.

Europeans and the Nahua had different conceptions of time and the nature of the cosmos, and these distinctions would come to a head in the colonial context. The Nahua considered the cosmic balance to be hinged upon the dually opposed forces of chaos and order, and they possessed a degree of agency in this cosmic order through blood sacrifice, which would forestall chaos and promote order. Even so, the Nahua conceived of themselves as fighting a losing battle, as the sun was in its fifth and final stage, which would be followed by the end of time, and replacement of the universe with chaos. The scholar Louise Burkhart calls this sense of doom

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21 Schwartz, 13.
23 Ibid, 74 and Burkhart 2011, 62.
fatalism. This reflects a cyclical and political use of time and history by the Nahua to established unified goals for their society: keep the sun alive through ritual sacrifice. The arrival of the Spanish changed the Nahua process of conceiving and even recording history and the cosmos. Instead of the Nahua cosmology that hinged upon chaos and order, the Christian universe assumed the opposing forces of good and evil. It would be an immense challenge for Franciscan missionaries to reconcile the Nahua fatalistic and cyclical cosmology with their own, which was hinged upon salvation and linear progression.

Due to the fundamental difference between Nahua cosmology and Christian morality, the Franciscans struggled in teaching their view of a moral order to Nahua converts. Louise Burkhart explains that the Nahua worldview had no analogue to the fundamental Christian concept of sin. Without a cultural reference point, sin was presented to the Nahua as all native religious practice and the failure to follow Christian doctrine. Even though it was not synonymous or equivalent, but rather a rough approximation, the Nahuatl word tlatlacolli served as a substitute for the Christian concept of sin. In Friar Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain, he claims that the friars “opened the Indians’ eyes and showed them that it was the devil whom they served… and with this each friar told the Indians what he considered sufficient and most suitable for their salvation.” It would be one thing to truly inform Nahua converts of Christian morality, and another thing entirely to merely say that native traditions are of the devil, and the Christian way was morally correct. Perspective is fundamentally important in this instance, in that missionaries considered Christianity to be exclusive and synonymous with eradication of native

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24 Ibid, 75.
25 Schwartz, 20.
26 Ibid, 22-23.
28 Burkhart 1989, 28.
29 Ibid, 28-30
religious practice, while the Nahua did not always understand this. In other words, a missionary would assume a Nahua to be converted if they showed no outward signs of subscription to native religion. Actual substantive belief in Christianity, however, was absent from these evaluations. Fundamentally different Nahua and Christian cosmologies could not be cleanly substituted for one another, rather, were haphazardly set atop one other.

Franciscan attempts to teach Christian belief would not always be successful due to cultural gaps and inconsistencies. The Nahua conceived of at least three, if not four or more entities that could apply to a Christian idea of the soul. The Nahua could accept the Christian concept of the soul one moment, but would then turn around and attribute souls to animals or inanimate objects. The Nahua concept of the underworld, mictlan, was another point of questionable translation of ideas. Mictlan was not an inherently evil place for the punishment of sins, although it was in opposition to the native creator deities, and in this way was an embodiment of chaos. A contemporary from this period sardonically notes that mictlan was a poor analogue for the Christian hell, because the Nahua did not believe that morality could prevent everyone’s fate in mictlan after death. For the Nahua, the order of creation and the chaos of destruction were necessary dynamics of existence, and not necessarily good nor evil. Nahua beliefs of morality and eternal fate were fundamentally different from those of the Franciscans, which would be an obstacle in the Nahua education of Christian morality. It is ironic that the Franciscans would consider such conversions successful for the sake of millennial

33 Gibson 1964, 101.
34 Burkhart 1989, 51-52.
prophecy, because the “converts” themselves had a faulty understanding of the full implications of their new faith.

Indigenous sources should be considered relative to the context in which they were created, and it is important to acknowledge that the Nahua were stratified and heterogeneous, and their sources are not emblematic of the colonial experience as a whole. An inherent European influence underlies all Nahua documents, as Nahuatl only became a written language following the introduction of the Roman alphabet by Franciscan missionaries. European and Spanish influence can be further assumed from Romanized Nahuatl, as the Nahua learned to write their own language under the instruction of friars. While indigenous people author the sources, it is important to understand that they were created at the behest of Spanish authority, which reflects their subordinate position in the post-conquest and colonial context. The Spanish had a political objective in influencing native histories: to control the past in order to dictate the present. Furthermore, Nahua authors were literate elites, which does not include the perspective of macehualtin, or commoners. While it is certainly true that indigenous sources present different experiences than European ones, it is also important to note the European hand guiding the indigenous pen.

Translation would be an immense challenge for Franciscan missionaries. Missionaries decided early that they would proselytize in the native language of Nahuatl, as it would take too long to teach Spanish to millions of Nahua and then begin important millennial work. The decision of the friars to adapt their Christianity within the limits of Nahua culture and language would result in a fair amount of inconsistencies, as the use of language can promote

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35 Schwartz, 2-3.
36 Ibid, 25 and Burkhart 1989, 6, 11-12.
37 Clendinnen, 106.
38 Schwartz, 27.
39 Burkhart 1989, 11.
understanding or severely inhibit it. This is shown as missionaries made translations without a concern for connotative meanings of words. When dealing with something as refined and critical such as the beliefs of salvation, “close enough” could not adequately convey the full implications of the Catholic catechism.

Region is another important consideration when examining the context of colonial Nahua sources. The Franciscans established a college for elite Nahua youth at Tlatelolco, whose students assisted Friar Sahagún in the composition of his General history of the things of New Spain. This was a massive undertaking that sought to understand indigenous tradition so that the Nahua could be more successfully converted. This is significant as Tlatelolco and its scholars would be a point of transfer of religious doctrine from the European to the Nahua. Even so, it is important to recognize the stratified intensity of evangelization, as the students of Tlatelolco would undoubtedly be better versed in Christianity than a Tlatelolca that converted after witnessing the apocalyptic play The Final Judgment. Similarly, due to the urban concentration of Franciscans, urban dwelling Nahua were much more likely to be more carefully instructed than rural Nahua. Another area of initial Franciscan activity, Tlaxcala, lay between the Gulf port of Veracruz and Mexico City, the capital of New Spain. Tlaxcala’s alliance with Cortés in the conquest of the Aztecs allowed for them to be granted some exception from Hispanization as well as an initial focus for missionary work. Attention to the diversity of experience is essential

40 Ibid, 11-12.
41 Ibid, 22-23.
in an analysis of the conversion process, and a focus on hotspots of conversion will show the most exaggerated instances of Franciscan efforts.

The Franciscan process of conversion was paradoxical in nature, because factors that could facilitate conversion could also impede conversion. As an example, pre-conquest Mesoamerican religious tradition encouraged the acceptance of a triumphant faith. This line of thinking would facilitate conversions, and is pithily expressed with the axiom, “the proof of a god is best found in his protection.” This motive for conversion, however, is fundamentally at odds with Christian theology, as it reveals a lingering belief in the native pantheon in relation to their “defeat” by the Christian God. Converts that used this line of thinking to make sense of their religious conversion reveal an inability to grasp basic Christian monotheism, and therefore represent nominal conversions, which lacked substantive comprehension of the implications of conversion. Even though the missionaries in this instance would boast of their work of saving these indigenous souls, in reality, those Nahua would still be damned according to Christian doctrine, as they acknowledged deities alongside the one true God. Thus, conversion was dependent on perspective, as missionaries equated conversion with the eradication of native “devil worship,” while the Nahua could conceivably add the Christian God to their existing pantheon. This highlights the Franciscan urgency to save masses of souls, with minimal concern over their converts’ comprehension of Christianity. Therefore, conversion is an extremely slippery term, as its meaning can vary with perspective, in that one person may have considered themself Christian, while another did not.

48 Clendinnen, 105.
Conversion efforts were initially wildly successful, or so the Friars thought. Rapid baptisms were favored by the Franciscans as a way of ensuring the salvation of as many pagan souls as possible. The Friars Mendieta and Motolinía sacrificed comprehensive instruction of the Catechism prior to baptism, in order to expedite the process of creating new Christians.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, Motolinía boasted that he baptized five million Nahua during the years 1524-1532.\textsuperscript{50} The Franciscans favored an active approach to evangelization, and measured their success by the number of souls saved, which served their ultimate goal of creating a Spiritual Age of the Church, and the fulfillment of millennial prophecy. Not all Europeans agreed with mass conversion, and in the years 1537-1539, there were two efforts to tighten the baptismal procedure, much to the dismay of the Franciscans.\textsuperscript{51} The religious authority and other mendicant institutions did not agree with Franciscan mass “quantitative” conversion, and instead favored conversions that focused on quality, and producing truly observant Nahua.

Parallels between religions allowed for a degree of mutual understanding. In order to present digestible Christian images, the friars manipulated Christian content into an existing native framework.\textsuperscript{52} Spanish Catholic regional saint identities and regional Nahua deity associations are an example of this method in action.\textsuperscript{53} In the Tlaxcala-Puebla valley region, a Nahua man named Juan Diego Bernardino claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to him. Coincidentally, the local goddess Xochiquetzalli was characteristically similar to the Virgin Mary, and the head Franciscan Friar Martín de Valencia was excited about the commonalities between the two female holy figures, as it could be a point for easy transition of religious

\textsuperscript{49} Ricard, 84.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 91.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 93-94.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 306.
Amalgamation of Christianity within a native context has been argued as a point of strong conversion, but it is important to realize that it is not definitively clear whether or not the Nahua truly subscribed to Christian beliefs, when it was merely placed on top of native religion.

While the Franciscans were driven because of eschatological objectives to be fulfilled, there were also eschatological attractions in the New World that fueled millennialism. In other words, European contact with Mesoamerican peoples forced the Franciscans to revaluate their millennial mental framework and integrate the Nahua within it. Some friars saw the Mesoamerican indigenous to be the Lost Tribes of Israel, who according to medieval legend, would return at the end of the world and liberate Jerusalem. The innocent and primeval nature of the Nahua aligned with the alleged character of the Lost Tribes as a “singularly virtuous community, a genus angelicus, which knows nothing of the ways of the Antichrist.”

The Franciscan association of the Lost Tribes and the Nahua identified them as militant participants alongside Europe’s Christians in a final crusade on Jerusalem to restore the Holy Land and prepare for Christ’s Second Coming. In Tlaxcala in 1539, the feast of Corpus Christi, which had apocalyptic overtones in Spanish Catholicism, would provide an opportunity for the Franciscans to present this revelation to the Nahua.

The Friars shared their vision of the Nahua millennial role in 1539, through the dramatic plays *The Conquest of Rhodes* and *The Conquest of Jerusalem*, which sought to teach Christian apocalyptic beliefs to an indigenous cast and audience. Even though the Mediterranean island of Rhodes and the Holy Land of Jerusalem would be completely alien places to the Nahua, the Franciscans spared no expense in creating a dramatic spectacle that would further their goal of

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55 Lara, 8, 44.
57 Lara, 179.
promoting baptisms. Friar Motolinía, one of the original twelve Franciscan missionaries, describes the play as a preparation for the final crusade, as Tlaxcala’s plaza was specially prepared to resemble the Holy Land. Dramatic effects such as destructible stages and cannonballs made of clay and red mud created a gory spectacle to excite the participants.58 These plays were “rehearsals for an ultimate crusade to the holy land… this time by the joint forces of Christian Europeans and the new militant faithful of the Americas.”59 Upon the theatrical victory of the allied Christian armies of Europe and the Americas, Nahua actors playing the defeated Muslim armies humbled themselves before their conquerors and asked for baptism.

In a dramatic public spectacle, the Nahua actors were actually baptized at that moment in the play, and the procession of Corpus Christi went on.60 The efficient Franciscans deftly orchestrated baptisms to occur at the most exciting moment of Christian victory, granting the ritualistic spectacle a heroic and redemptive air. Undoubtedly, the Franciscans hoped that the audience would be compelled to ask for baptism after viewing the actors’ valiant salvation. Through these plays, the Franciscans sought to proselytize Christianity while acting out the prophesized Christian conquest of Jerusalem, in the hopes that their collective action and consciousness would help to facilitate the fulfillment of that prophecy. Franciscan contact with the Nahua accelerated their understanding of a linear progression of the universe, and the Franciscans believed that their concerted efforts could bring the Apocalypse. Even though evangelical plays were accessible to the Nahua because of native actors and language, the eschatological motivation and content were completely foreign to the Nahua, and the Franciscans made little effort to relate it to something native.

59 Lara, 180.
60 Motolinía, 116-118.
While the Franciscans were indifferent in providing an accessible religious vision for the Nahua, the Dominican order was concerned with fully educating their converts. The Franciscan friar Alonso de Molina translated the most widely used catechism to Nahuatl, which was merely an adaptation or transcription of similar Iberian catechisms. The Franciscans emphasized repentance and moral living amongst the Nahua, rather than actual understanding of Christian doctrine on metaphysical and philosophical level. This fact alone highlights an ideological divide between rival mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Unlike the Franciscans, the Dominicans were generally more thorough in their approach to conversion and favored gradual methods, which emphasized doctrinal comprehension. This fits with the image of a typical Dominican theologian that took care to maintain orthodoxy and adherence to doctrine. The Dominicans occupy yet another perspective that evaluated the conversion process, and their conclusion was that conversion without comprehension and proper observance was not really conversion at all. The Dominican Diego Durán complained: “they believed in God and at the same time practiced the old ways and rituals of the devil.” Competing opinions on the most appropriate methods for conversion would result in a kaleidoscopic process that would reflect in many divergent ways, rather than a singular and focused effort.

Aside from ideological divides between the different mendicant orders, missionaries and European settlers came into conflict due to competing interests, which caused contradictions for the process of conversion. Historical scholarship has identified two mutually exclusive goals of Spanish colonialism in the creation of an idealized pure Indian Church and the material goal of

61 Ricard, 101-102.
62 Burkhart 1989, 10.
63 Brading, 63-64.
64 Phelan, 10.
65 Knight, 44 and Gruzinski, 178.
colonial labor and wealth extraction. Despite being named New Spain, the Spaniards were not concerned with creating new Spaniards through the Nahua. In point of fact, Franciscans considered Hispanization and Christian conversion of the Nahua to be incompatible ends. The parallels in the poverty and purity of the Nahua, the original Apostles of Christ, and his own Franciscan order overwhelmed Friar Mendieta. He conceived of the colony to be divided in two distinct spheres: a City of Man, defined by the Spanish settlers’ lust for gold and exploitative relationship with the Nahua; and a City of God, which was composed of the humble Nahua and their meek embracement of Christianity. With this clear line drawn between the corrupt influence of Spanish settlers and the Nahua, Mendieta and other friars felt that Hispanic influence other than Christianity would actually harm the missionary project. The mendicant orders saw a solution through an idealized separation of colonial society into a república de los indios and a república de los españoles.

The separate república de los indios was conceived as a way to maintain the Primitive Indian Church, develop an angelic Christian Indian realm, and eventually precipitate the Apocalypse. Mendieta and the Franciscans felt that the Nahua were “the innocent, simple, and the pure who would inherit the kingdom of Heaven.” Following this, Mendieta saw the Spanish colonial efforts as misguided, because the Spaniards should be focused on the spiritual wealth that was present in the souls of the Indians, rather than the material wealth that Spanish obsessed over. In the end, the regular clergy’s evangelical efforts were diluted because of the trajectory of the colonial project, and a shift in power from the regular clergy to the secular clergy.

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67 Phelan, 53 and Motolinía, 98 and Burkhart 1989, 18.
68 Phelan, 86-90.
69 Republic of the Indians and republic of the Spanish
70 Phelan, 66.
71 Ibid, 83.
72 Ibid, 84-85 and Knight, 37.
Material objectives often intruded and competed with mendicant spiritual goals. The Friars had
the utopian objective of revolutionizing indigenous life, yet at the same time they found it
convenient to conserve aspects of society that would facilitate cooperation and understanding
with the Nahua.\textsuperscript{73} In the end, these incompatible aims would result in a lack of clarity and focus
for the evangelical project.

The continual and complicated nature of the Franciscan mission is evident within Nahua
wills and testaments. The preambles of these documents contain many basic Christian tenets,
such as the commission of the soul to God upon the death of the testator. In Tlaxcala in 1566,
don Julián de la Rosa expressed his desire for his soul to be returned to God upon his death in his
testament.\textsuperscript{74} While this is doctrinally correct, it is uncertain to what extent don Julián was
responsible for this portion of the testament and from there, whether he understood what it
meant. The formulaic nature and yet high frequency of errors in these documents suggests that
the content of these preambles followed a Spanish model, and that neither the authors nor the
testators had a firm grasp on the complete meaning of the worldview of Christian belief inherent
within the wills.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, wills and testaments, such as that of don Julián, indicate that the Nahua
did not necessarily embrace the superposition of a Spanish practice with the purpose intended by
the Spaniards.

Following evangelization, the presence or lack of idolatry could be an indicator of
superficial belief, and could be used to measure the initial efficacy or staying power of
conversion. Evaluation of the success of evangelization differs depending on perspective, as
Friars would consider any idolatry a regression to pre-conquest devil worship, while the Nahua

\textsuperscript{73} Knight, 44.
\textsuperscript{74} Arthur Anderson, Frances Berdan, and James Lockhart, \textit{Beyond the Codices: The Nahua View of Colonial Mexico}
\textsuperscript{75} Lockhart 1992, 251.
may have considered idolatry as a way of integrating new gods within their existing tradition. In this way, the scholar Serge Gruzinski stresses idolatry’s importance in illuminating material practices and expressions, which can help outline the more elusive ideological framework of the indigenous. The historian Alan Knight asserts, “Rapid, mass conversion” was the source of “a legacy of ingrained Indian idolatry, backsliding and indifference to Catholic doctrine.” The actions and practices of the Nahua did not align with their nominal belief. Indeed, Friar Motolinía hardly takes a breath between paragraphs that express his pride for the new faith of the Nahua, to more mournful passages that lament the regression of some to idolatry. The indigenous managed to conceal idols within or behind altars, so that apparent Christian worship could actually be dedicated to a native deity. From the perspective of the mendicant orders, idolatry hinted that conversions were not wholly successful in converting the Nahua to Christianity.

An incident of a Catholic religious revival in Puebla in 1684 shows that initial conversions lacked staying power, and furthermore, it is indicative of another instance of Franciscan theatrical missionary tactics. The indigenous annals of Puebla for 1684 provide insight for this event:

“In this same year came seven friars, Franciscans who came from the great altepetl of Rome…What they came to do took people greatly aback and troubled them. They brought out a procession; all the Franciscan friars that there were came out, and all wore ropes around their necks, and they performed a great many acts of penance as they went to the cathedral. And they preached sermons everywhere in the all the churches, and at night at house corners everywhere. Trumpets and hand bells went ahead of them…At night no one wanted to go to sleep yet…one friar, as he was delivering the sermon, would give himself blows in the face; he was really beating himself up. Then he fainted in the pulpit. After a full hour he revived, and when he had come to he said, ‘I have gone before our lord God in heaven. He told me that He would pardon you your sins.’ Then everyone wept and was troubled; a great many were converted. And he

77 Knight, 44.
78 Motolinia, 52-53.
79 Gruzinski, 153.
grasped a Santo Cristo in his hands, and a dead person’s skull. (n) Hence everyone thought (n) that these friars were saints.”

This occurred more than one hundred years after the missionary project began in 1524. The Spanish city of Puebla de los Angeles, simply referred to as Puebla, was founded in 1531 near Tlaxcala. The region certainly did not lack a missionary presence, as Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans occupied the various barrios of Puebla, as well as maintained churches and convents. Despite this, it was deemed necessary to have a strong religious revival, as the annals author stresses dramatic and spectacle-oriented preaching, which resulted in many conversions.

This 1684 religious revival shows that the Nahua community in Puebla was not entirely nor convincingly Christian, even after a century and a half of Christian presence. The preaching methods of the Franciscans in the revival were especially engaging, as they preached in the middle of the night and used trumpets and hand bells to ensure that they would have an audience. The passage mentions that “no one wanted to go to sleep yet,” yet one is inclined to wonder if anyone would have been able to with such a significant disturbance. The climax of the show occurs when a friar beats himself senseless, faints for an hour, only to revive and claim that he had a vision of God’s mercy. The exaggerated actions of the evangelizers could convey to the Nahua what no mistranslated words could: these men are extremely serious about their faith, and they risk their own health to inform us of their God’s goodness. The motive for conversion in this instance is largely based in fear, as “everyone wept and was troubled” upon hearing of their wrongdoing. Even so, this shocking method of preaching was successful from the Franciscans’ perspective, as “a great many were converted.”

80 Townsend, 129-131.
81 Ibid, 8.
82 Ibid, 8-9.
The Franciscans played an important role in the early evangelization of the Nahua in New Spain. The friars were driven by intense millennial beliefs, which enabled a mental framework that the end of the world could be hastened through the conversion of many souls to Catholicism. This ideology defined the nature of the Franciscan conversions, in that they were dramatic, swift, and overly concerned with quantity, instead of quality. The friars acknowledged cultural and linguistic barriers; however, they were not always appropriately addressed. In turn, the Nahua response was complex and varied, and there was a wide range of accommodation and rejection of the Catholic faith. Even though the process of conversion implies cooperation and mutual understanding between the converters and the converted, the Nahua, Franciscans, and Dominicans each had differing views on what it meant to be Christian, which complicated the missionary project. A focus on regions that were evangelized heavily or from the very beginning of the missionary project reveals that even in the most ideal missionary situations, conversions were not always successful. The millennialism of the Franciscan missionaries would frustrate their attempts to fully educate the Nahua neophyte of the nature of Christianity.
Bibliography


