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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

New Work on Nahua Spiritual Journeys

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This essay reviews the following works:

The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies. By Molly H. Bassett. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. Pp. 283. $27.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780292760882.

Islands in the Lake: Environment and Ethnohistory in Xochimilco, New Spain. By Richard M. Conway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 386. $99.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781316518892.

El maíz se sienta para platicar: Códices y formas de conocimiento nahua, más allá del mundo de los libros. By Ana Díaz Álvarez. Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2016. Pp. 96. Paperback. ISBN: 9786074173840.

Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico. By BenLeeming. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2022. Pp. xxxi + 314. $100.00 hardcover, $35.95 paperback, $29.95 eBook. ISBN: 9781646422999.

Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion. By James Maffie. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015. Pp xiv + 592. $36.95 paperback. ISBN 9781607322221.

Indigenous Science and Technology: Nahuas and the World Around Them. By Kelly McDonough. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2024. Pp. 328. $102.00 hardcover, $37.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780816550388.

Sacred Consumption: Food and Ritual in Aztec Art and Culture. By ElizabethMorán. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. Pp. 156. $24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477310694.

Rethinking the Aztec Economy. Edited by Deborah L.NicholsFrances F.Berdan, and Michael E.Smith. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017. Pp. 310. $65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780816535514.

In tlahtolli, in amoxtli/La palabra, el libro: Conferencias y estudios inéditos sobre fuentes e historia nahuas. By Luis Reyes García. Edited by Guillermo Goñi and Guilhem Olivier. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2018. ISBN: 9786073012522.

Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahua Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana. By Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2023. $34.95 paperback, $97.00 hardcover, $28.95 eBook. ISBN: 9781646423507.

The late James Lockhart trained a generation of ethnohistorians to be wary of studies of pre-Conquest and early post-Conquest religious beliefs among the Nahuas. In his classic work, he first reminds us that it is difficult enough to study Mesoamerican politics before the arrival of the Europeans, and then he adds the following caution: "The darkness is in fact greater in the case of religion, for whereas we have every reason to believe that the tlatoani [or ruler] and lesser officials of the altepetl [or city state] continued to act virtually as before the conquest, and in the earliest Nahuatl documents we actually see them still doing so, the Spaniards could not allow indigenous priests and temples to continue to function in the preconquest manner for any extended period."[1] When Lockhart wrote those words in the 1990s, he understandably wanted to hit Pause on the field's continuing acceptance of certain aging paradigms. Older—and more popularized—work simply accepted the colonizing Spaniards' view that the Nahuas (and especially the Mexica or, as we often call them, the Aztecs) gloried in death and brutality and were universally convinced of the need to kill thousands of people every year to placate their ferocious gods and ensure that the sun would continue to rise. In response to seminal studies by Alfredo López Austin, late twentieth-century scholarly work took a more respectful tone and explored the cosmovision of the Nahuas, arguing that it was their profound faith in traditional gods and in the concept of reciprocity that encouraged them to display gratitude to divinity by offering the gift of human life, that it was their great desire for an orderly universe that required them to do their best to keep dual oppositional forces in balance.[2] The Nahuas, too, they said, believed in a human soul and in some ways were monotheists. But such work, though respectful, was not deeply based in Indigenous-language sources. In the absence of independent and explicit writings by colonized Indigenous people about their previous spiritual beliefs, scholars of Nahua religion who wished to base their work on Native statements most often studied material remains of the Templo Mayor (where human sacrifice had been carried out) and drawings made by Indigenous people after the Conquest. Unfortunately, the meaning of such visual sources is often difficult to ascertain without recourse to written commentaries, and so the Spaniards continued to dominate the discourse, albeit indirectly. Even the extraordinary Florentine Codex, a project carried out by Nahuas, was orchestrated by Spaniards. The section on the religious rites and ceremonies consisted of answers by Nahuas to questions posed by Europeans. Out of necessity, members of the field often proceeded by quoting one another, taking sides in various long-standing debates, and making substantive declarations that their own instincts told them were correct. These were dangerous practices in the sense that they created a wealth of what was understood to be accumulated wisdom, much of which was, in fact, projection.

Recently, for instance, Justyna Olko and Julia Madajczak published an article demonstrating clearly that the field's long acceptance of the idea that the Nahuas believed in a soul, which they purportedly called *teyolia*, was almost certainly a mistake, as there are no early attestations of the word in any sources other than those created by friars or by Indigenous working hand in hand with friars.[3] It was a post-Conquest invention (a neologism) that took on a life of its own in the hands of modern scholars. Comparably, in my own recent book on Aztec religious stories, in which only Nahuatl sources appear and Spanish colonists are not allowed to speak or interpret, the famous story of the god

[1] James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 204.

[2] His most valuable work is perhaps *Hombre-Dios: Religión y política en el mundo náhuatl* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1973), which appeared in English as *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl: Religion, Rulership and History in the Nahua World*, trans. Russ Davidson and Guilhem Olivier (University Press of Colorado, 2015).

[3] Justyna Olko and Julia Madajczak, "An Animating Principle in Confrontation with Christianity? De(re) constructing the Nahua 'Soul,'" *Ancient Mesoamerica* 30 (2019): 1–14.

Huitzilopochtli violently throwing his sister Coyolxauhqui down to earth reads much differently: in full context, even the birds are shocked by what Huitzilopochtli has done. Far from being a glorification of misogynistic violence, as is generally assumed, it seems to have been a multifaceted story about the dangers of selfishness and insecurity.[4]

Reading ten recent books on the nature of the Nahua world in response to this journal's invitation, I was at first startled to find that the majority of them concerned religion; even those whose titles did not indicate that the authors would engage with spiritual matters in fact did so.[5] After weeks of reading, I was delighted to be able to say that, although there has been little public reckoning with the problematic nature of some of our past assumptions in this arena, the field does in fact seem to have turned a corner. Scholars are engaging with Indigenous belief systems, and they are finding ways to do so largely without recurrence to the older methods of relying either on Spanish frameworks or on prior scholarly assertions. This has primarily been made possible by a far deeper engagement with the Nahuatl language on the part of scholars and, secondarily, by more creative use of existing sources.

One of Mexico's greatest *nahuatlatos*, Luis Reyes García, died relatively young, in 2004, and in the years that followed, Guillermo Goñi and Guilhem Olivier considered how best to honor him. In the end, they published not a collection of work by others, but a number of unpublished pieces by Reyes García himself that they found in his study. The result is a posthumous work by one of the field's finest scholars: *In tlahtolli, in amoxtli/La palabra, el libro: Conferencias y estudios inéditos sobre fuentes e historia nahuas*. Reyes García, born in 1935, was raised by Nahuatl-speaking elders (he called them his many grandmothers) in the small town of Amatlán de los Reyes, near Veracruz. Probably due to his fluent Nahuatl, he developed a passionate interest in documenting precolonial and early colonial Nahua thought processes. The pieces in this book, written mostly in Spanish but including two in Nahuatl, delve into the local archives he knew so well, underscoring the uses to which they may yet be put. Perhaps most importantly, the archival materials he discovered in the Indigenous-maintained *fiscalías* (church-hosted offices for Indigenous staff) have remained largely unstudied. Reyes explained: "The political-religious vision of the Tlaxcalan towns, which we might say is maintained clandestinely, has meant that the documents generated within these institutions called fiscalías, may have been kept with a certain degree of secrecy and suspicion of outsiders' observation" (203). In the book, Reyes describes almost a thousand documents in Nahuatl in the four Tlaxcalan *fiscalía* archives alone. Detail by detail, without any self-important theorizing, Reyes García lays out what he means when he refers to a "political-religious vision." It is a way of thinking about or understanding the world that is at once political and spiritual. In the case of the Tlaxcalan Nahuas, it touches on the possession and use of land and on the relationships between neighboring groups of people, all of whom are understood to have the right to fight for their own interests and their descendants' well-being during their time on the earth.

Reyes García shied away from making any grand synthesis, being unwilling to have his work used in what, in the 1990s, he called efforts to "establish artificial thinking that is

[4] Camilla Townsend, *The Aztec Myths* (Thames & Hudson, 2024), 60–66. This work is based almost exclusively on the opening pages of each of the dozens of existing *xiuhpohualli,* or year-count texts often referred to as "annals." Although these texts were largely political in their content, most of them begin with what we might call myth-histories, the substance of which is profoundly spiritual.

[5] I am writing of the monographs. There was also a cluster of anthologies appearing to mark the five hundredth anniversary of the Spanish-Aztec War (or the Conquest of Mexico), which will undoubtedly be reviewed widely. These include Peter Villella and Pablo García Loaeza, eds., *The Conquest of Mexico: 500 Years of Reinventions* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2022) and Galen Brokaw and Pablo García Loaeza, eds., *The Nahua: Language and Culture from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (University Press of Colorado, 2024). Two excellent recent textbooks are Frances Berdan and Michael Smith, *Everyday Life in the Aztec World* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and Susan Kellogg, *A Concise History of the Aztecs* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

invented as if it were authentic Indian ideology" (77). But it seems that other scholars have since proceeded to try, very gently and very carefully, to reconstruct what they can of Nahua ancestral vision.

James Maffie, in his monumental work *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, carefully bases his assertions in Nahuatl-language evidence and separates out Western-influenced twists on the latter that stem from all-too-common wishful translations. He advances the idea that the Nahuas were monists and pantheists, as opposed to true polytheists. "At the heart of Aztec metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists at bottom just one thing: dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy. The Aztecs referred to this power as *teotl*" (12). And later: "The Aztecs singled out and emphasized certain facets, aspects, or qualities of teotl for ritual, practical, pedagogical, and artistic purposes (these being often indistinct). The different deities of the Aztec 'pantheon' represent different clusters of these aspects or qualities" (86). Crucially, the divine universe is perpetually in motion, always changing, not with intentionality, but simply ceaselessly, as that is its self-regenerating nature. Humans have very little power in all of this, but if they are spiritually wise, they learn to do their best with it.

In developing these views, Maffie studied historical texts, but over the years, he also learned from the anthropologists Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, whose most recent book is *Pilgrimage to Broken Mountain: Nahua Sacred Journeys in Mexico's Huasteca Veracruzana*. Since the 1970s, the Sandstroms have often spent many months at a time in a small Nahuatl-speaking town in the Huasteca region (not far from where Luis Reyes grew up). Between 1998 and 2007, they were invited to participate in five different pilgrimages. The photographs they took, the stories they recorded, and the analysis they completed now form the heart of a book that strikes me as one of the most valuable works on Nahua religion in existence. Two ritual specialists, the late Encarnación (or Cirilo) Téllez Hernández and his then apprentice Teófilo Jiménez Hernández, invited the Sandstroms to participate in the pilgrimages specifically because they were concerned that young people were moving away from the old religion (largely as a result of pressures from evangelical Protestants and the internationalized economy). The two wanted their people's beliefs and practices to be recorded for posterity. Not only were the two specialists the leaders of the holy pilgrimages through the forest to the mountain peaks; they were also extraordinarily talented creators of cut-paper images of spiritual entities. Some form of paper-constructed entities has been part of Nahua religion since long before the Spanish Conquest. Importantly, the paper images are understood to possess holiness themselves. Cirilo said: "These rituals are not a game; they are our life. I am giving you my sons and daughters, my devotion. I spend my life dedicating offerings to them [the spiritual entities], and they provide us with maize. God watches over us when we dig and plant maize, and we have to give something back . . . . Set up an altar. Follow the correct path" (3).

What is striking in reading Maffie's work and the Sandstroms' together is that there is no question of the dangers of upstreaming or conceivably even downstreaming, because neither work attempts either project. One focuses on written sources from the classical era of the sixteenth century and even before, and the other on participant observation among living people. If their conclusions are very similar, it is because the Nahuas seem to have maintained some consistent core beliefs for generations. It is little wonder that their work has already become a visible influence on the work of others.

Mollie Bassett, for instance, cites it in her book *The Fate of Earthly Things: Aztec Gods and God-Bodies*. She, too, studied Nahuatl and lived for a while in a village in La Huasteca.[6] There

[6] It is not a coincidence that modern scholars often end up studying in La Huasteca. Nahuatl was the dominant language of central Mexico, the heartland of the Spanish colonial state, but it has survived best where it was the primary language in more distant and especially mountainous regions.

she learned what, quite bluntly, many scholars have sometimes failed to appreciate: that universal beliefs are rare among any group, not just Westerners. Nahuas themselves may disagree, for instance, on how animate a certain entity—say, a cloud formation—is or is not, and their internalized conceptions of religion likewise exist on a continuum. With this in mind, Bassett carefully compares classical-era attestations of the words *teotl* (traditionally and simplistically understood as "god"), *teixiptla* (image, or localized embodiment of divinity), and *tlaquimilolli* (sacred bundle), hoping to better comprehend the range of qualities that once were understood to adhere to each. She does not revolutionize our understanding of any of these words but rather shows how subtle and subtly shifting their meanings were. No one can read this book without coming away with a deeper understanding of Nahua religion and its partially subjective nature.

Elizabeth Morán has produced a related work in *Sacred Consumption: Food and Ritual in Aztec Art and Culture*. The purpose of the study, she tells us succinctly, "is to analyze how . . . basic foods were transformed into sacred elements within particular Aztec rituals and how food in turn gave meaning to the rituals performed" (4). Morán does not claim to read Nahuatl and thus does not have access to new sources or insight into hitherto unread Nahuatl-language texts. Rather, she combs through all the familiar sources—the descriptions by Spaniards, the sixteenth-century Indigenous pictorials, and the archaeological remains—looking for food playing a role as a catalyst for change in Aztec ceremonies. She finds it everywhere. She thus demonstrates that even without a knowledge of Nahuatl, a new idea may help a researcher draw meaningful conclusions even from the old, hitherto occasionally abused sources.

If I have any critique of recent works like these it would be only that in our newfound enthusiasm to think more carefully about the nature of Nahua religious thought, we may end up excluding other forms of their thought (on grounds that they supposedly knew no such distinction, all the world being an emanation of divinity). My own knowledge of the classical-era Nahuatl sources teaches me that people of that time could most certainly think on many levels at once. They could believe in the divine universe and still have a grasp of the way realpolitik works among humans. When Bassett, for instance, relying on the Spanish Dominican Fray Diego Durán, argues that in the lead-up to the Tepanec Wars, the Mexica leader Itzcoatl and the ruler of Azcapotzalco exchanged spiritually symbolic gifts to ascertain whether war was necessary, I might point to Nahuatl-language annals that show that Itzcoatl was cleverly arranging such supposedly spiritually significant moments so as to ensure that he could fight for Tenochtitlan's sovereignty. It is of the utmost importance that we not return to the days of thinking that Indigenous people had (or have) only one way of understanding their lives.

A determination to bring to the fore Nahua ways of conceiving the world, and especially what we might call the spiritual world, likewise animates a recent book coming to us from Mexico: Ana Díaz Álvarez's *El maíz se sienta para platicar: Códices y formas de conocimiento nahua, más allá del mundo de los libros* (Corn Sits Down to Chat: Codices and Nahua Forms of Knowledge Beyond the World of Books). Having been exposed all her scholarly life to Miguel León Portilla's image of the *tlamatini*, whom he understood to be a "wise man," a philosopher much like those of ancient Athens, whose shelves were supposedly full of paper *amoxtli*, translated as "books," Díaz was somewhat startled by what she actually found when she looked into the matter. She concluded tartly, "No todo lo que parece un libro es un libro" (Not everything that looks like a book is a book). She sought evidence as to the nature of the *amoxtli* in the descriptions of their uses in the Nahuatl-language annals. She found them being sprinkled with blood and eliciting prayers and formal speeches. She did a deep dive into the surviving pre-Contact codices of the Borgia Group (the Codex Borgia, the Codex Laud, the Codex Fejérváry Mayer, the Codex Cospi, and the Vaticanus B), which are thought to have come from a region close to Tenochtitlan. She found them to be calendrically based texts clearly of use to active priests carrying out

ceremonies: "Thus, the codices are not the pre-condition for the possibility of knowledge [as Western books are], but rather, material objects that complement human actions taken by those who possess them and know how to apply their knowledge. The wisdom that permits the interpretation of key signs is contained in the memories of the specialists, not in the texts" (18). When Díaz visited a Nahuatl-speaking town where traditional religion was still practiced, she experienced ceremonies involving blood spattering akin to those observed by the Sandstroms, in which what mattered was indeed the ritual specialists' making use of the paper objects, far more so than any wisdom-bearing signs painted on the paper.

In a sense, the fact that there was still a need to write such a book is a result of a kind of historical tragedy. Díaz's argument is flawless and true, and it should have been obvious for many years, given all the Nahuatl sources that have been available to us in translation. But the point that the Aztecs did not have (or want or need) our kind of books hasn't been at all clear, because the racism of earlier generations was such that in the 1950s, Miguel León Portilla felt compelled to defend the dignity of Indigenous peoples by comparing them to the ancient Greeks. "Among the Nahuas, as among the Greeks, it was the lyric poets who first became aware of and enunciated the great problems of human existence," he wrote.[7] From there, it was but a small step to move from discussing philosophy to discussing philosophers. León Portilla took a word that functioned as if it were an adjective (to be *tlamatini* was to be a habitually wise person of any kind) and made it a self-contained noun, then pluralized it and created a group of philosophers, who of course—it seemed—must have possessed books in the Western sense. The idea was repeated and bandied about for decades to come. It certainly still dominates the popular discourse on the Aztecs.

Mexica priests of long ago had in their temples baskets of rolled-up *amoxtli*, which all significant evidence indicates were what Díaz says they were—tools used by priests to interface with the divine and deduce what was to be done regarding life's predicaments. As Díaz undoubtedly knows by now, Moctezuma and the other Mexica kings also had baskets full of rolled-up writings, which we might call books but were not our kind of books. They were papers marking land boundaries and recording tribute, either to be paid or already paid. And the history tellers also had their baskets of writings, called *xiuhpohualli,* or yearly accounts, which consisted of strings of images that were in effect mnemonic devices designed to elicit from performers complex political tales intended to strengthen their community as well as to entertain. These latter sources themselves directly reveal the nature of the three kinds of written texts, if one reads them carefully. But it has first been necessary to unlearn what past generations have taught us.

Kelly McDonough, in her book *Indigenous Science and Technology: Nahuas and the World Around Them*, argues that there are other lessons that we must unlearn as well. She says she finds that there are few scholars today who do not give the Indigenous their due in recognizing that they had rich and complex spiritual beliefs of their own—even if we are only now making substantial progress in understanding what they were—but that almost no one acknowledges that the Indigenous of the classical era also had their own science and technology. As she has done in prior work, McDonough interweaves the contributions of modern Nahuas in between her chapters on the colonial era. Those intermezzi are excellent reminders of all that modern Indigenous academics and activists are doing to bring their traditional cultures to such fields as digital humanities, pharmacology, agriculture, and so on. But it is in the main chapters that the book provides truly new perspectives. In each, McDonough analyzes texts produced by Indigenous people under Spanish rule—indeed, often in conjunction with Spaniards—and thoughtfully uses them

[7] Miguel León Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1963). The Spanish original was published earlier as *La filosofía náhuatl* (Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1956). The book was published in multiple languages and its influence extended throughout the world.

to demonstrate Indigenous scientific thinking at the time of contact. First, she evaluates book 11 of the famous Florentine Codex, a volume on the natural world produced under the auspices of the workshop of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, demonstrating how differently it reads than any of the European bestiaries or encyclopedias on which the friar had originally imagined it would be modeled. In the volume's thousands of explanatory comparisons, fewer than forty refer to objects from Europe or use any Spanish terms. Using the *Relaciones Geográficas*, descriptive texts produced in response to a Spanish questionnaire in the second half of the sixteenth century, McDonough shows that the Indigenous informants' answers constitute proof of a wide network of healers who understood the properties of local plants and used them regularly. Relying largely on the work of Fray Diego Durán, McDonough likewise illuminates the complex world of hydraulic engineering that existed in the central valley of Mexico before the Spanish invasion—the dikes, causeways, and freshwater aqueducts—knowledge of engineering that she places firmly within the people's framework of respect for the divine world that the Nahuas saw all around them. In these and other ways, even though it is a book on Nahua science, McDonough ties together the knowledge bases that we might call practical and spiritual and shows that among her subjects, they were often understood to be one. If I as a reader was sometimes not fully convinced that they always saw the systems of knowledge to be one, I was fully convinced that they were intertwined.[8]

Perhaps the pervasive interest in finding new and creative ways to explore early Nahua religion is best exemplified (counterintuitively) by its appearance even in a new book on economics: *Rethinking the Aztec Economy*, an anthology edited by the archaeologists Deborah Nichols, Frances Berdan, and Michael Smith. The latter two scholars in particular have for decades been key to keeping alive an understanding of the Aztecs as pragmatic people whose political and economic realities were at the center of the decisions they made. They do not abandon that notion in this latest book, but they temper it, wishing to twist various threads in the field together (to use a traditional Nahua metaphor) rather than continue old arguments. In her fine opening chapter, Nichols makes it clear that the former debate as to whether Aztec patterns of village settlement were more determined by commercialism and trade routes or by political-administrative factors has now been laid to rest, as it is evident that both elements were crucial. After two additional chapters laying out the mechanics of commerce and the functioning of merchant communities (including an excellent study of sixteenth-century merchants by Kenneth Hirth, Sarah Imfeld, and Colin Hirth), the volume turns to a much longer second part, titled "The Economics of Ritual and Social Objects," and through the ensuing contributions of four chapters by six authors, it proceeds to show that the Aztecs' extensive ritual life was arguably the largest driver of demand for consumer goods in their economy, and certainly a major one. Emily Umberger explores the ways Aztec nobility justified their exclusive possession of objects understood to be of value; Laura Nadal and María Olvido Moreno study the trade in and use of precious feathers; Frances Berdan outlines the economic value of the sum total of goods required for the monthly ceremonies; and Alan and Pamela Sandstrom implicitly illuminate the past through a study of "behavioral economics" in modern Nahua ritual.[9]

[8] Who can forget the fascinating tales told about Ahuitzotl's decision to ignore warnings that rerouting the River Acuecuexatl would be dangerous? Nahua storytellers were well aware that understandings of the natural world and understandings of political realities were separate, but they did not necessarily approve of their separateness. For more on this, see Townsend, *Aztec Myths*, 144–146.

[9] This volume was perhaps influenced by an earlier work on comparable themes: E. Christian Wells and Karla Davis-Salazar, eds., *Mesoamerican Ritual Economy: Archaeological and Ethnological Perspectives* (University Press of Colorado, 2007).

From the book's opening paragraphs, we as readers can see this "religious turn" in the study of Aztec economics. Here are the initial sentences: "The year is 1486 CE, Chicome Tochtli (Seven Rabbit) in the Aztec calendar. The city of Tenochtitlan has been bustling for days in preparation for the flamboyant coronation ceremony of its newly chosen ruler, Ahuitzotl" (3). It becomes clear that this is going to be a spiritually significant ritual as well as a costly one tightly tied to the city's economy. Yet the next paragraph tells us that there is "a political agenda to accompany [the ruler's] religious investment." In his expensive ceremonial theatrical celebration, Ahuitzotl was doing more than honoring his own and his people's debt to the divine universe. He was also making a clear statement to his enemies as to the extent of his wealth and power. These authors are not turning their backs on older ways of thinking, even as they are determined to investigate the role of spiritually necessary goods in the overall economy. Their wisdom in this regard, it seems to me, is exemplary. It is essential that the new insights not move us to such an extreme position (regarding Nahua religiosity) that their usefulness becomes limited.

Studying religious belief and expression in the decades immediately after the arrival of the Spaniards is at least as difficult as studying the pre-Conquest period, as Lockhart noted. It is of course relatively easy to track what the Spanish friars said they were doing, but it is nearly impossible to document genuine Indigenous reception. For many years, it was assumed that if the Franciscans told us that they had converted thousands of Indigenous, then so it was. Robert Ricard published his famous work *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico* in 1930s France, but it was not translated into English until 1966, and at that point, it was widely hailed in the American academy as offering penetrating truth. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Louise Burkhart began to revolutionize our understanding of early Nahua interpretations of Christianity. Studying the sermonaries, devotional works, confessionals, and religious plays written by the friars working hand in hand with Indigenous aides, she demonstrated the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the Nahuas put their own stamp on the material with which they were engaging.[10] They were hardly blank slates, passively accepting whatever the Christians told them. Now, one of Burkhart's students, Ben Leeming, has taken such studies to another level in his book *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico.* In 2014, on the shelves of the Hispanic Society in New York City, Leeming found a notebook containing religious plays written by an Indigenous nobleman, Fabián de Aquino.[11] Given that it measures four by five and a half inches, he playfully—or perhaps ultimately seriously—likens it to an Aztec bundle, one of the *tlaquimilolli* studied by Molly Bassett. After careful study of the volume, Leeming emerged able to draw a clear conclusion: Aquino had not done his writing in the usual way by working in careful partnership with a friar; rather, he had worked quite on his own, without any effective European supervision, yielding doctrinal "errors" and other interesting results. One of the plays in particular, *The Antichrist and the Hermit*, thus offers valuable insight into Nahua thinking about what they were being told.

Stories of the Antichrist were common in late-medieval Europe, and some unidentified friar or priest clearly had shared one with Fabián, a Christian acolyte. Even if the European mentor knew that the young man was going to use it to write a play of his own, he could not have guessed how far it would move away from European expectations. Not only does the Antichrist appear as a vibrant and in some ways even appealing character, but he is

[10] Louise Burkhart's groundbreaking original work was *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (University of Arizona Press, 1989). She has continued to publish immensely valuable work in the ensuing decades.

[11] It has been impossible to connect this don Fabián de Aquino to anyone appearing in legal documents. The baptismal name Tomás de Aquino was taken by numerous Indigenous converts in several different communities (including Mexico City and others). Some of these had sons or younger brothers who took different Christian names but retained Aquino as a surname. The preponderance of the evidence indicates that this Fabián lived and worked in the second half of the sixteenth century.

accompanied by other characters with such names as Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, and Tlaloc (after some of the old gods), and Year Bearers, Cihuacoatl, and Ticitl ("healer") (after social roles in the old social order). Startlingly, the lines uttered by these characters indicate that the author really knew something about the disappearing world they came from. All told, dozens of such beings caper about the stage, sometimes singing and certainly speaking Nahuatl forcefully. It isn't that the Nahua author, Aquino, favored such entities, Leeming explains. On the contrary, Aquino was using the Antichrist to pillory resistant nobles and priests from the old order who still existed in his world: "The Aztec Antichrist preserved in the ... Hispanic Society ... is a pulque-swigging, *difrasismo*-uttering tlahtoani [ruler] who sits on a reed throne and presides over the execution of those he calls *nomacehualhuan*, 'my subjects.' A malevolent miracle-worker, he stood as a bulwark against the turning tide of his day. His impassioned pleas to his people to return to the traditions of their elders and reject the strange new morality of the friars established him as the nemesis of the Christians" (89–90).[12] Despite the overt message of the playwright, however, that figures like his Antichrist were dangerous, other possible interpretations on the part of at least some audience members are easy to imagine (111). At the very least, we are here confronting direct proof that in central Mexico, a Christian sensibility was born in struggle. Leeming manages to bring that struggle to life in a work that is both erudite and accessible.

Perhaps the greatest test of our ability as a field to engage with Nahua thinking about divinity will in some ways ultimately lie in works that are *not* explicitly about religion. If, in taking other approaches, scholars nonetheless stumble across examples of Nahuas thinking about politics and spiritual matters at one and the same time, then we will have proven the existence of the phenomenon more honestly than if we were seeking to make the case. Richard Conway's powerful new book, *Islands in the Lake: Environment and Ethnohistory in Xochimilco, New Spain*, is an example. Conway sets out to marry the study of a region's social history with its environmental history. Using dozens of existing Nahuatl records (including but not limited to some rich last wills and testaments) and hundreds of archival files generated by the Spanish state, he pieces together the history of Xochimilco, the beautiful *altepetl* once located on the southern shores of the great lake at the center of the Basin of Mexico, famous for its brilliantly designed floating gardens (or *chinampas*) since long before the Spanish Conquest. The Aztecs drew on the expertise of the people of Xochimilco to maintain their empire, and later, so did the Spaniards. At every step, Conway shows, the people were able to protect some aspects of their political sovereignty precisely because of their deep knowledge of and intricate relationship with their lacustrine environment. In the 1570s, the book's subjects kept an early Spanish would-be landowner out of their lands on grounds that he was planning to use a chinampa to graze goats, an activity for which, the Indigenous community members successfully argued, it would be ill-suited. By the early seventeenth century, examples of such moments become both graver and more impressive. When the viceroy announces that the dwindling population is to be congregated inland, the Nahuas protest, to no avail. So they themselves propose a compromise, indicating that they would be willing to be resettled, if it could be to Santiago, a village that lay on the shores of the lake. And the viceroy agrees to the plan, recognizing the importance of the food supply they know how to draw from the waters.

Like Reyes García before him, Conway studiously avoids making any grandiloquent claims about the innermost beliefs of the people of Xochimilco. But example by example, he demonstrates with perfect clarity their bond with the earth and the living beings that grew from it, and their sense that they had a right—even a duty—to defend that way of

[12] Formal Nahuatl speech often contained "diphrases," pairings of terms that together yielded a third meaning. The author knew how a ruler of old should speak, and he assumed that his audience was still familiar with such a style, too.

life. Only in the second half of the eighteenth century was the colonial Spanish state working in tandem with wealthy Spanish individuals able to break the Nahuas' hold. Conway does not idealize or romanticize his subjects: Some of them have to fight actively against other members of their own community who prove themselves only too willing to abuse others. But the people of Xochimilco are vigilant, and they succeed in maintaining their communities (and presumably their belief systems) much as they were until close to the end of the colonial era.

Their cultural persistence had long-term effects. Indeed, the last surviving fully fluent native speaker of Nahuatl from Tláhuac (or Cuitlahuac), one of the communities in the chinampa region at the heart of Conway's book, is a professional historian himself, Baruc Martínez Díaz. Like Luis Reyes García, he has published scholarly work in Nahuatl, and he has a book in Spanish exploring the life and contributions of the nineteenth-century Indigenous scholar Faustino Chimalpopoca, also from Tláhuac, who played a significant role in preserving and publicizing the existence of Nahuatl-language sources.[13] Martínez's work may stand as a beacon, pointing toward a future when there will be many Nahuatl-speaking PhDs, some of whom will undoubtedly write about their religious history.[14]

Thirty years ago, one of the field's leading scholars had reason to doubt that we would ever really be able to come to grips with what the Nahuas' religious beliefs were in the years before or shortly after conquest, or the extent to which those beliefs did or did not determine the actions they might choose to take. Yet in pointing the way toward the use of Nahuatl-language sources beyond those produced in concert with Spaniards, and the importance of reading them without prior assumptions, he helped to give us the tools we seem to have needed to make a dent in the task. Perhaps, like the Nahuas, we do not have to believe in an ever-improving world to acknowledge that sometimes, at least for some period, in a world of constant change, situations do improve.

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[13] Baruc Martínez Díaz, *Faustino Chimalpopoca Galicia: Un intelectual indígena en el México decimonónico* (Ediciones Era, 2024). Martínez has work appearing in Nahuatl in another volume: Camilla Townsend and Josh Anthony, eds., *After the Broken Spears: The Aztecs in the Wake of Conquest* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

[14] Nahua anthropologists are already writing about religious practices in more recent times. See, e.g., Abelardo de la Cruz, "Language, Nahua Life-Cycle Rituals, and Indigenous Identity," in *Oxford Handbook of Ritual Language*, ed. David Tavárez (Oxford University Press, 2025).

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