

Jaime Lara. *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008. ix + 372 pp. index. append. illus. map. bibl. \$75. ISBN: 978-0-268-03379-8.

In this much-anticipated second volume of explorations into the mindset of the mendicant missions to New Spain, Jaime Lara again applies his formidable command of patristic and medieval sources to the subtle dynamics of the integration of Christianity with Nahua religion (teoyoism). In volume 1, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (2004), he focused on missionary architecture, looking at the impact of liturgical practices and indoctrination on the built environment and missionary ceremonial, with particular emphasis on Near Eastern eschatology and messianism. The book's strength was its use of an extraordinarily wide range of early Christian texts, the sort of deep knowledge of the Christian side to the story that is too often absent from recent studies of Nahua-mendicant relations where the friars can seem like cardboard characters. But as in this new book Lara does not neglect Nahua beliefs, bringing an equally impressive understanding of their faith and worldview to the table. Once again he demonstrates the uncanny ease with which missionary Catholicism merged with Nahua spirituality and the active role the Nahua played in facilitating this integration. But rather than treating this acculturation as a clean mixture — or, as many like George Kubler have done, as a thin veneer of Christianity over covert Nahua beliefs — Lara characterizes it as a fluid interaction, a constantly changing successions of parries and thrusts: “much more than a bricolage, or Gruzinski's *mélange*” (262). This more nuanced, dialectical understanding of interreligious dialogue reflects cutting-edge work on colonial Andean religion by Kenneth Mills and Pierre Duviols.

Lara's evidence for this interfaith partnership comprises not only theological texts but also imagery, or “visual metaphor” (4), and its role in proselytization and the exterior (performative) life of Christianity. Some, like the “testerian catechisms,” a rebus method of depicting catechetical texts with pictures, are well known, although Lara explains them more clearly than I have seen before. Others, such as the striking corn-pith and orchid-glue crucifixions (215) made by the Purépecha of sixteenth-century Michoacán, are less familiar to lay readers. By using a medium associated with agricultural deities and human sacrifice for the

quintessential symbol of Christian sacrifice, new converts could more easily come to terms with the new faith. Lara stresses that these visual stimuli operated as links between worlds and made possible an — albeit unorthodox — insertion of Christian tenets into the Nahua world. Other profoundly significant Nahua sacred materials, notably feathers and blood — Lara refers at one point to the “rehabilitation of human sacrifice” (229) — operated within the liturgy, festivals, theater, and popular devotions of missionary Christianity. Feathers, a fundamental adornment of Aztec royal and liturgical ritual, were worn as ecclesiastical costume and became associated metaphorically with sacraments such as Baptism and Communion, the latter by using quetzal feathers as sunbursts to adorn depictions of the Host. A theatrical performance of the *Sacrifice of Isaac* performed during the celebrations of Corpus Christi in 1538 used blood covertly to draw parallels between Christ’s sacrifice and Nahua human sacrifice (232). Some substitutions seem very bold indeed, such as the Dominican use of *cuaubxicalli* (Aztec basins for sacrificial blood) for Baptismal fonts. In collaboration with the traditional dance and music incorporated into the Christian liturgical year, these elements of the Nahua sacred world transmuted Catholic beliefs into something new — what I have characterized elsewhere as “converting Christianity.”

I am not convinced by Lara’s claim — and he is not alone in making it — that the first sunburst monstrances came from the Americas (197) and were conceived in the context of adapting to indigenous sun veneration (an association equally pertinent in the Andes). His assertion may well be true — I, for one, would like it to be — but we need to wait for a comprehensive study of monstrance design in medieval and Renaissance Europe before we can claim that an iconography that was so commonplace in Europe did not originate there. On another note, as a structural conceit I especially like the way Lara uses the different sections of Diego de Valadés’s image of an idealized New Spanish mission to walk us through the seven sacraments in their Euro-Nahua context (in chapters four and five).

The book is lavishly illustrated in an age of budget cuts. With over 280 color plates Lara is able to back up his arguments about the crucial role imagery and the senses played in the Christian-Nahua dialectic. He also appends eleven translations of texts from Nahua and Latin that will be valuable resources to student and scholar alike. I have learned much from this book and its interpretation of an episode that is all-too-often understood as a simplistic encounter of binary opposites fuelled by that old canard, mendicant “utopianism.”

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