

that purported to document basic details of Andean history, just as it has misguided modern historiography on the subject. As a historian of colonial Latin America, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ramírez's Andean chapter is the strongest both analytically and in its depth of archival research. In a shift from the other chapters, the Andes case study relies not only on colonial ethnographies, but also on an impressive consultation of legal records that trace Indigenous naming conventions among more isolated peoples like the Jayancas.

As in any comparative study among groups with few to no intrinsic historical connections, though, the analysis engenders—indeed necessitates—a degree of abstraction to make these diverse customs intelligible to each other. Although Ramírez encourages her readers to think of these cases as sharing “the same practice” despite being “thousands of miles away and across the ocean,” the search for similitude occasionally hinders the productive exploration of differences among these groups (19, 83). The result allows the analysis to project broader generalizations about the nature of “preliterate societies,” in contrast to its treatment of the development of alphabetic writing and its alleged structural effects on cultural and historical memory (17). And yet, it is precisely this presumptive distinction between “preliterate” and “literate” that heightens the problem of the comparative structure. The text's theoretical grounding in Cunnison, Claude Lévi-Strauss (“hot” and “cold” societies), and other anthropologists of the mid-century relies on classificatory systems about literacy and consequent modes of “linear” and “circular” thinking that a generation of anthropological debate has challenged and decentered (28, 137).

As Ramírez marshals evidence, she makes clear her attentiveness to the historical contingencies and colonial dynamics that localize the three case studies. In this view, the book's most valuable contribution is to the study of ethnographic documentation of oral practices, rather than to the study of orality itself. Ramírez's chief concern is “the generation and use of knowledge as fundamental to understanding and evaluating the knowledge itself” (26). Thus, it is through the refracted gaze from Western ethnographies to Indigenous and African oral cultures that Ramírez's three cases prove most effective for the fields of colonial onomastics and the epistemology of language.

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RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN EARLY COLONIAL MEXICO

The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas. By Jennifer Scheper Hughes. New York: New York University, 2021. Pp. 244. \$35.00 cloth.
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Jennifer Scheper Hughes offers us a new study on an old and well-studied topic: the beginnings of the Christianization of Hispanic America. The novelty of this new

contribution is in the cultural-anthropological approach of the book, which takes the epidemic of *salmonella enterica*, known by native people as *cocoliztli*, that devastated Mexico between 1576 and 1581 as the starting point of the Christian transformation in the Americas. Indeed, the *mortandad* affected deeply all aspects of Mexican society, most notably—according to the author—the organization of the Church (19). The specific contribution of this study is the author’s mission to show how, half a century after the appearance of Christians and Christianity in Mexico, the foundations of religious transformation were established thanks to two developments: the Catholic Church’s need to overcome the difficulties generated by the loss of some two million people, mostly indigenous (roughly half of the Mexican population); and the opportunity that the surviving indigenous elites (*caciques principales*) saw to stop the advance of local owners on their lands and other assets, as well as to influence the reorganization of the Catholic Church. In this history, both the religious orders and the Spanish imperial project (that is, control of the Church) intervened.

Indeed, what the author calls “Spanish missionaries” (secular and regular clergymen) and surviving communities of Indigenous Mexican Christians “offered distinct, often competing or rival visions for the future of a church that now seemed to be gravely at risk” (14). Thus, based on decolonial postulates that give the indigenous population an “agency, sovereignty, and survival,” (25) and to a singular approach of cultural anthropology regarding theology, the author understands the case as the need to restore and reformulate the mystical body of Christ in Mexico, after its near destruction by the epidemic, based on different and divergent visions of this task exposed by the main actors (Church, religious orders, and, above all, indigenous communities). The main hypothesis is that New World Christianity was the creation of Indigenous Christians in the aftermath of the *mortandad*, with a design that persists today (6).

Hughes explains her method as different from that of historians. She asserts that instead of a “rhetorical approach” (supposedly characteristic of historical work), she analyzes the manuscript sources in a theological register, searching for “symbolic religious values discovered only through close theological study.” She warns her readers that what “I am writing about here are . . . rather vernacular, lived, or feet-on-the-ground theologies,” instead of “official” canonical ones (27-28). Insisting on her special theological approach, she explains that “[t]he mysticism of the *mortandad* produced a territorial theology of space and landscape in which the Valley of Mexico was a mystical body, with Mexico City its heart;” “sacralized by the *corpus mysticum*, colonial jurisdictions were superimposed upon preexisting Indigenous territories—particular Native-ethnic corporations or states” (96-97, 100).

This, in her view, is the contribution of the indigenous population to the creation of the American colonial Church: the Church of the Dead, in competition with the version of the official Church, because the visit made by Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras “was not just an act of thinking or speaking, but a pedestrian theology, the embodied articulation of

his vision for the future of the church cast in territorial terms” (121). The archbishop designed a map of Christian Mexico—the diocese that swallowed all Indigenous territorialities but maintained them intact, even as it subsumed them (121).

The book’s argument begins with the effect of the terrible *cocoliztli* epidemic, the concern it generated in the diocesan Church and the religious orders who saw the Christian project in Mexico jeopardized, as well as in the Spanish colonists who saw how the population was rapidly declining. In addition to helping by curing the sick, the clergymen sought the support of the Spanish Catholic monarch to obtain favors and privileges for the Church and religious orders, based on the royal patronage that the monarch exercised over the Church. This Patronato Real is a very important element for understanding the letters that served as primary sources in this study, but the Patronato Real is not mentioned in the book. This royal power to control was also an obligation to sustain the Church, and this explains the emotional tone of aggrievement expressed in the letters.

The petitions proposing possible solutions to the problem employ a language of ruin or cataclysm, which hints at the emotions of anguish and despair on seeing the mystical body of Christ (the Church) almost destroyed. The second aspect discussed is the pastoral visit that Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras made during and after the epidemic that with the endorsement of the Catholic monarchy helped design the new Church, connecting “the universal church and the structures of Mexican colonial society in a collective process of Christianization of native peoples in post-Tridentine Catholicism, claiming for the church ravaged Mexican territories” (64–72, 108). In this process, the diocesan Church prevailed over the religious orders, ending a chapter of long-standing conflict between the secular Church and the religious orders for power—the control of parishes, missions, monasteries, and schools (107). The inclusion of written and visual materials here is a special contribution of the book because it allows readers to follow more closely the development of the argument.

The other part of the argument refers to the role played by indigenous people in this history. By establishing that indigenous people mapped the same endangered lands as their own, the author points out that it was the indigenous people who prevailed, by ensuring that the chosen Christianization units were based on the pre-Hispanic city states (*altepemeh*, or *altépetl*, in singular) that they maintained; this is manifested in the administration of hospitals and palaces by their own political hierarchies that survived the epidemic. In this way, the Church of the Dead (“*ecclesia ex mortuis*”) arises: the new structure of the church is based on the indigenous lordships, which the author considers to have changed little; and they continued to count the deceased to maintain the cohesion of the group and preserve its properties.

In this way, the proposal appears very suggestive. To demonstrate the emotions of the diocesan and regular priests, the author uses 135 rich and challenging letters they sent to the Spanish king to report the situation and propose solutions. Some 44 letters came from the bishops of Mexico and Michoacán, and another 56 from Franciscan,

Dominican, and Augustinian friars, apparently in their personal names and not representing their respective orders (28). Another historical source the author uses is maps, including some from the colonial project known as *Descripciones geográficas de Indias*, released in part in the nineteenth century, and other “loose” maps found in Spanish, Mexican, and US repositories that the author has analyzed. About 70 of the maps were made by indigenous draftsmen and, according to Hughes, autonomously, without the intervention of the Spanish authorities.

In addition, the author has made a very special and useful effort to trace in medieval Europe and in biblical texts the use of the concepts brought forth in the book: the mystical body of Christ (the Church of Christ) as a body equal in Christ, but unequal on earth, and the Church of the Dead, or *ecclesia ex mortuis*. These two concepts are fundamental in the exposition because one provides the support of the social body (colonial), in which unlike the Puritans in North America, the Catholics did include the indigenous, although they considered them as miserable, that is, as people who needed to be protected in their souls and bodies (58).

The other concept refers to the intention of the indigenous people to continue considering their ancestors among them. “Surviving communities of Indigenous Christians resisted dispossession and mapped ancestral lands as their own, ensuring in this way their collective survivance (resilience and strength)” (108, 136). Their alternative cartography replaced previous jurisdictions (*altepemeh*) with “new Indigenous Catholic sovereign states that rivaled the jurisdiction of the diocese and the power of bishops, priests, and friars” (136). The author presents this situation as “a rival vision for Mexican Catholicism” and “a version of Christianity [that] is geographically bounded and defined in relation to Indigenous Mexican structures of authority” (139).

On this point, Scheper Hughes’s conclusion is that “by the middle of the sixteenth century, and perhaps even earlier, for many *pueblos de Indios* the material structure of the church came to signify sovereignty rather than conquest” (153). In this regard, the author states that “[e]very map from the Mixteca that was drawn for the *Relaciones geográficas* depicts a preconquest temple or palace next to the church” (155, 159). Moreover, the maps included local ancestral genealogies as supervisors of the churches of the *pueblos*, and this is seen as an “Indigenous counterclaim to authority over church structures and ecclesial spaces, one that amounted to an alternative model of church governance and territoriality” (149, 160-65).

The bases that support the text are equally interesting and suggestive. However, I question the links that the author makes. I am concerned to know if it is true that “Indigenous people throughout New Spain actively appropriated the new religion as their own,” because following that assertion, the author states that the term “Christian” should not be read to signify European or colonialist, nor to indicate (as shorthand) acceptance of or submission to European rule” (27). Thus, we might wish to know more about the

author's conception of Indigenous Christianity around the year 1580, because she mentions only once the concept of syncretism (in reference to another of her studies).

Another questionable premise of the book's general argument is the author's assertion that the *altepetemb* not only survived the European conquest and colonization, but that they were also strengthened. Even the maps "shored up the *altepetel* by recasting it as a sovereign Christian jurisdiction" (148). In my opinion, the author does not manage to demonstrate the ways in which Catholic bishoprics and parishes were established after the epidemic under conditions imposed by local indigenous elites. In fact, it was a much larger project that included the congregation or *reducción* of the surviving indigenous population for religious indoctrination and political order in the so-called pueblos de indios in most of Hispanic America. In regard to evangelization, they were put under jurisdiction of the secular church and the regular clergymen. In fact, when speaking about the Third Mexican council (1585) and its consequences, Scheper Hughes recognizes the opposite position (131).

Finally, it is striking that a statement in the book declares that it covers the Americas, when in fact it focuses on Mexico, with only a few references to the reality of the Puritans in North America and none to other Hispanic American realities, which are very different from each other. This would not be a major problem, but the author presents the results of her research as "a usable retrieval of the past," a counter-history of Christianity in the Americas, intended "to dislodge some of the most entrenched myths of American religious history: that Europeans were the primary agents of Christianization in the Americas; that conversion necessarily signaled conquest, subjugation, and defeat; and that Christianity was the inevitable outcome of European colonial rule" (7, 32). Scheper Hughes presents the book as a study that should rectify what has been indicated so far for other areas of the Americas, making the point that Christian proliferation and persistence may be largely the work of Indigenous Christians and their descendants (173). Certainly, in the conclusions of the book she relativizes this last assertion (179).

Perhaps we have here a common problem related to sources. Clergymen and indigenous peoples used the "cataclysm discourses" of ruin in letters and maps to present the epidemic in catastrophic and even apocalyptic terms so as to obtain special prerogatives from the crown and ecclesial authorities (19, 21, 118, 152).

All the mentioned objections notwithstanding, the book is provocative in its intention to become a model for studying American conversion. As such, it is very useful for discussing the multiple and complex processes of territorial and spiritual conquests of the Americas.

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