

## TOWARDS A PLURITOPICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SAHAGÚN'S WORK

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The assessment and interpretation of Sahagún's monumental life work has inspired a variety of often conflicting assessments and interpretations. He is seen as either a modern ethnographer or a medieval scholastic, a defender of indigenous rights or a vehement extirpator. Rather than seeing Sahagún as fitting neatly into one category, I argue that Sahagún's work reflected a complex set of agendas that, while seemingly conflicting, interplayed with and reinforced each other. Fr. Bernardino played a number of different roles, each one expressing differences that ranged from slight to fully divergent. Modern Mexican scholar Jesús Bustamante García criticized Sahagún's perspective, labeling it "nefarious". Bustamante goes on to say, "Sahagún is an extremely fine observer, an excellent authority on traditional indigenous culture, but here, with more clarity than in other parts [of his corpus], his fundamental view is apparent: He is not an ethnologist, he is an inquisitor."<sup>1</sup> Bustamante's statement is somewhat limited. Actually, Sahagún was both and more: ethnologist, inquisitor, paternalist, admirer, denounces, and the carrier of the banner of a dying dream. His perspective was neither fully nefarious nor innocent, and it easily escaped that limited opposition. Fr. Bernardino's experience was made up of coherent incongruities that leave the modern scholar with the image of a complex man in a complex era.

The complexity of Sahagún and how best to situate his work is reflected among modern scholars. The disagreement turns on the friar's "interpretation of events of the mid-sixteenth century and the historical role of the Franciscans in New Spain".<sup>2</sup> While Georges

<sup>1</sup> Bustamante García, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: una revisión crítica de los manuscritos y de su proceso de composición*, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas/Biblioteca Nacional/Hemeroteca Nacional, 1991, p. 376. As quoted by Browne, 1996, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Walden Browne, "When Worlds Collide: Crisis in Sahagún's *Historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*", *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 5, n. 2, 1996, p. 117.

Baudot firmly supports the theories that attach Sahagún to the millenarian movement, John Leddy Phelan argues that Sahagún's perceptions centered on a "peregrination of the church", or, as Phelan goes on to explain: "[A] geohistorical law the Christianity is being continuously placed from east to west".<sup>3</sup> Browne suggests that neither Phelan nor Baudot is entirely correct and that "Sahagún's understanding was only a modified version of the medieval historical thinking [...] incomprehensible without the conceptual backdrop of the millennial beliefs of his companions".<sup>4</sup> These theories should not be mutually exclusive. The struggle starts when Sahagún's life and work are treated as a singularity, rather than as an unfolding process. For example, he wrote in the *Historia* that

It seems to me that already that God our Lord is opening a pathway for the Catholic faith to enter into the kingdom of China [...] I believe that it will last for many years in that mansion because throughout the islands and New Spain and Peru, it has done nothing more than pass by on its way and even to form a path in order to be able to converse with those people of the regions of China.<sup>5</sup>

The constancy of Sahagún's fight against idolatry makes for the interpretation of the previous comment as one born out of temporary frustration, and not surrender. In 1585, in the *Arte Adivinatoria*, and at the ripe age of 85, Sahagún continued his struggle, and still referred to the church in New Spain as the "New Church".

Sahagún's complexity is also illuminated by the different dimensions which played a part in his work. As a scholar, he felt drawn towards the learning, understanding, and preserving of a language and culture (both homogenized in his mind) unlike anything he had known. As a teacher, Sahagún was moved by the culture and its people. He was impressed by his pupils' intellectual capacities and the speed of their accomplishments. Fr. Bernardino sincerely loved his students and the Nahuatl teaching tradition. He was so impressed by it that it became one of his goals to save it. As a Spanish man, he had to find a way to translate a fully foreign experience and position the indigenous version of "self" and the universe (to which he was constantly exposed) in relationship to Spain and Catholicism. Also, as a sixteenth-century Spanish man, Sa-

<sup>3</sup> John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, 2d ed., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> Browne, "When Worlds Collide", p. 117-18.

<sup>5</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. Ángel María Garibay K., México, Editorial Porrúa, 1956, p. 357, v. III, book XI.

hagún had to reconstruct the indigenous reality into something that could fit into his pre-existing categorical assumptions, such as redefining the position of indigenous females to match the Spanish one.

As a Franciscan, fray Bernardino had come to New Spain after taking vows of obedience. He had to fulfill his superiors' mandates to gather information. His position as a Franciscan also had him participating in the millennial movement. The messianic set up the Americas as the depository, willing or not, of the Catholic God's grace. This land would be the seat of the New Church and Christ would return to establish his millennial reign there. After Sahagún realized that the numerous conversions claimed by the first twelve Franciscans in New Spain were not complete or fully genuine, he set out to save the dream by sounding the alarm on the indigenous deceit. His solution was to record every idolatrous practice. This would make the practices visible and, hence, easier to eradicate.

So, Sahagún's agendas were many. Saving the culture and language conflicted with the extirpation of idolatry. Yet, Sahagún somehow managed to allow all these agendas to co-exist. Perhaps the greatest buffer—that which allowed the convergence of seemingly opposing goals—was the Friar's perspective on himself, his culture, and his religion as superior to the those of the indigenous peoples, to whom he referred in paternalizing and even infantilizing terms (e.g. as easily-deceived innocents). Pierre Bourdieu defines such a superior perspective as “strategies of condescension [...meaning] those symbolic transgressions of limits which provide, at one and the same time, the benefits that result from conformity to a social definition [Sahagún's contexts and categories] and the benefits that result from transgression [Sahagún's experience-near participation with the indigenous world]”.<sup>6</sup> For Sahagún, superiority and condescension allowed him to infiltrate the Nahua world and write about it in an era of the Holy Inquisition while maintaining an omniscient voice. The transgressions and conflicting agendas in Sahagún's work make exploring each of the separately and on their own terms essential to understanding the unfolding process of his monumental life's work.

### *Sahagún's Scholastic and Educational Interestests*

According to his nineteenth-century biographer Joaquín García Icazbalceta, fray Bernardino set out to learn the language as soon as he boarded

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and John B. Thompson, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 124.

the ship to cross the Atlantic. Icazbalceta wrote that given Sahagún's investigative character, he would not have passed up the chance to acquire as much of the language as possible.<sup>7</sup> In fact, after only a few years in New Spain, the friar's skills in Nahuatl had few rivals among the Spanish. His linguistic interests became a focal point of his *Historia*. In the prologue to Book I, fray Bernardino wrote, "This work is like a sweeping net used to bring to light all the idioms of this language [Nahuatl], with its proper metaphors, and all its manners of speech".<sup>8</sup>

Sahagún the scholar was also concerned with the preservation of a culture that he could not help but admire: "The boys and girls were brought up with great rigor [...]. They raised them in the community under very solicitous and rigorous teachers."<sup>9</sup> Miguel León-Portilla called it: "The most cherished concern of his life."<sup>10</sup> One can extrapolate that after developing relationships with his students and the elders working at the Colegio de Tlatelolco,<sup>11</sup> and burying so many colleagues during the great plague (1545),<sup>12</sup> Sahagún must have felt a need to save as much as possible of Nahuatl and the Nahua culture in which he had, and would continue to invest so much of his life. Sahagún's admiration, particularly about certain aspects of the Nahua world as he understood them, was genuine:

They were perfect philosophers and astrologers, and very capable in all the mechanical arts of defense, which was held in greater esteem than any other virtue. [...] Concerning religion and the care of their gods, I do not believe that there have been, in the whole world, idolaters of such devotion and dedication to their gods like these of New Spain; not even the Jews, nor any other nation had such heavy burden filled with so many celebrations.<sup>13</sup>

They were, certainly, in these things extremely devout to their gods, jealous about their republics, among themselves very courteous; to their enemies very cruel; to their own humane and strict; and I

<sup>7</sup> Joaquín García Icazbalceta and Agustín Millares Carlo, *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI. Catálogo razonado de libros impresos en México de 1539 a 1600*, nueva ed., México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954, p. 328. The Emperor charged Fr. Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo, who was also bringing Sahagún and other nineteen friars to New Spain, with the guardianship and protection of those returning Indians.

<sup>8</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 28, v. I, book I.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158, v. III, book X.

<sup>10</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, "Sahagún's Early Years in Tlatelolco", in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, ed. Eloise Quiñones-Keber, Lancaster, Labyrinthos, 1994, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Such as Martín de la Cruz: Nahua medicine man that put together the magnificent herbal *Codex Badiano* or *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indioium Herbis*. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Browne, "When Worlds Collide", p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 30, v. I, book I.

think that due to these virtues they achieved their empire, although it lasted them only a short while, and now all is lost.<sup>14</sup>

Still, “despite Sahagún’s professed admiration”<sup>15</sup> for the indigenous world in which he was an implant, his scholastic interests buckled repeatedly under the weight of his own impositions. His condescending superiority damaged his academic observations by encouraging the standardization of his object of study as lesser than, rather than distinct from, the friar, and by over-valoring his categorical assumptions. Sahagún the scholar was unable to write a true ethnography. His work fits best under Mary Louise Pratt’s terminology of “contact zone” writing created “in the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”.<sup>16</sup> At the starting point of the era of modern thinking, Sahagún still did not view the Nahuas as they represented themselves, but as they fit into his own culturally-determined, pre-conceived stereotypes: He referred to them as child-like<sup>17</sup> and wrote that in their ancestral beliefs they acted “more [...] like children without sense than [...] like reasoning men”.<sup>18</sup> While noting the ease with which he believed they could be deceived and misguided,<sup>19</sup> Sahagún directs himself to the indigenous people and lectures them, vehemently, about what he sees as mistakes and lies handed down to them by their ancestors.

Both condescension and admiration towards the indigenous people of New Spain coexisted in the Franciscan, and both colored the compilation of his ethnographic *summa*, the *Historia general* and other works such as the later *Arte adivinatoria*. In the *Arte*, Sahagún explained that the prophesy was given to Jeremiah: “Here, I have put my words in your mouth and I have made you superior to all the people, and placed you above all kingdoms”,<sup>20</sup> was given to the prophet to write, but its execution, and the Christian god’s grant of superiority over

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53, v. II, book VI.

<sup>15</sup> Browne, “When Worlds Collide”, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 255, v. II, book VII.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94, v. I, book I.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255, v. II, book VII; and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, “Arte adivinatoria”, in *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI: Catálogo razonado de libros impresos en México de 1539 a 1600*, ed. Joaquín García Icazbalceta and Agustín Millares Carlo, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1954, p. 387.

<sup>20</sup> Sahagún, “Arte adivinatoria”, p. 382.

other peoples and over kingdoms was, in Sahagún's interpretation, "granted to the Roman Pontiffs who in these times, after the centenary of 1600, govern the Catholic Church".<sup>21</sup> In his later years, the Franciscan still believed, in spite of his experience-near participation with the indigenous people, in the Christians' superior status, and that this was his God's will.

Academic concerns became secondary for Sahagún when the war against the "enemy of God and of men",<sup>22</sup> was so close to being lost in New Spain. Sahagún lived his American experience with anguish and anxiety on this matter, as illustrated in this question to his God: "What is this Lord? You have permitted that for so long that enemy of human kind, at his pleasure, establish lordship over this sad and forsaken nation".<sup>23</sup> His anguish was also evident in his exclamation about the sacrifices of children. Here Sahagún again cried out to his god: "Oh Lord, do justice upon this cruel enemy who does us so much evil, and wishes to do us even more! Take from him, Lord, all the power to do harm!"<sup>24</sup>

As important as the Franciscan's scholarly pursuits were to him, they still were only a part of the reasons that drove him to study and record the Nahua experience. His endeavor was not "the result of a merely academic restlessness. The epoch did not permit it, and the active life dedicated to evangelization gave Sahagún no time for it".<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, the culture and the language had to be recorded because it was "the vehicle to penetrate the native mind",<sup>26</sup> to completely and unquestionably gain all the knowledge necessary to eradicate idolatry. Once idolatry was eradicated, Nahuatl, and much of Nahua culture, hybridized with Spanish information, would be re-introduced in the service of Christ, to fit the "politico-religious utopia of the Franciscans".<sup>27</sup> The old indigenous world, once "cleansed of all the idolatry

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.; and , *Historia general*, p. 95, v. I, book I.

<sup>24</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 142, v. I, book II.

<sup>25</sup> Alfredo López Austin, "The Research Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires", in *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, ed. Munro S. Edmonson, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1974, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> Alfredo Lopez Austin paraphrases Miguel León-Portilla. *Ibid.* The original idea is from Miguel León-Portilla, "Significado de la Obra de fray Bernardino de Sahagún", *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 1, 1966, p. 13-28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114. Austin quotes José Antonio Maravall, "La utopia politico-religiosa de los franciscanos en Nueva España", *Estudios Americanos* 2, 1949, p. 199-228. Austin also bases his statements on Sahagunian millenarism on the work of Lluís Nicolau D'Olwer, "Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590)", *Historiadores de America* 9, Mexico City, Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1952, p. 155-170.

that it contained, and making it fully Christian, it would be re-introduced to this Indian and Spanish republic".<sup>28</sup>

A secondary purpose for this re-introduction was to remedy the damage made to the Indians by those who, in removing their ordered systems, and introducing Spanish ways, had promoted the fall into viciousness of the indigenous population. In fact, Sahagún blamed the land, and its climate, and added that it had affected the Spaniards in the same measure:

I do not marvel as much about the faults and madness of the natives of this land, because the Spaniards that live in it, and more so those who are born here, acquire those same bad inclinations. [...] But it is a great disgrace for us that the native Indians, old sane and wise men, knew how to remedy the damage that this land impresses in those who live in it; [...] and we drown under our bad inclinations; and certainly people are raised here, as much the Spanish as the Indians, that are intolerable to rule and a heavy burden to save. [...] If that old form of rule [...] once cleaned of all idolatry, and once made fully Christian, was reintroduced in this Indian and Spanish republics, it would certainly be a great good, and it would be the cause that could free one republic as much as the other of great evils, and free those who rule them from much effort.<sup>29</sup>

Still, Sahagún the teacher, through his experience at the *Colegio*, saw the parts of the Nahua world that did not conflict with his missionary calling with respect and admiration. He vehemently defended the qualities of his students and wrote with pride about their accomplishments, demonstrating his appreciation for the Nahua educational heritage: "Grammar, logic, rhetoric, and theology, we know from experience that they have ability for all of it, and they learn it, and know it, and teach it, and there isn't an art that they are not capable of learning and using".<sup>30</sup> Sahagún wanted to continue that educational heritage through the work of the Franciscans and the Native teachers and aids at the *Colegio de Tlatelolco*. Sahagún wrote that the school had functioned for over forty years, and the students had never erred "against God, nor against the Church, nor against the King, nor against his republic". Instead they had helped the apostolic work, and even composed sermons freed from any idolatry. Sahagún ended his

<sup>28</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 161, v. III, book X

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160-61, v. III, book X.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.158, v. III, book X

statement by expressing his own pessimism: "I have great fear that this will be completely lost".<sup>31</sup>

Sahagún wrote with sorrow about the damage done to the indigenous population, and particularly to the students at the college, during the plagues in 1545 and 1576. He was concerned that not only many were lost, but that it was due to the lack of Spanish support towards the education of the Nahua. That lack of education left them with no means to heal them:

The plague we had about thirty-one years ago hit the school greatly, and this new plague in this year of 1576 is doing the same. So much so that there is almost no one left at the school. Almost all leave dead or ill. [...] And if there would have been attention and care that these Indians were instructed in grammar, logic, natural philosophy, and medicine, they could have saved many who died [...] and so they die without help.<sup>32</sup>

fray Bernardino believed that indigenous there was a point in common between the American aborigines and the Spaniards. They shared a common descent, a shared lineage from Adam, he who the Christians accepted as the first man created by their God, and as the father of all subsequent generations. This shared lineage justified, in the eyes of Sahagún, a Christian obligation to care for the indigenous people, and to guide them to what he perceived was the right path: "It is certain that these peoples are our brethren, proceeding of the trunk of Adam. They are our fellow beings. We are obliged to love them as we love ourselves. We are the same".<sup>33</sup>

### *Sixteenth Century Spanish Male*

Sahagún the Spanish man was a subject of the Crown, and a member of the Catholic flock. He was, in the words of Mary Louise Pratt, part of the "historical-colonial-ideological explanatory apparatus".<sup>34</sup> In spite of his love for his indigenous students, and his admiration for certain aspects of Nahua culture, the Friar never did cast doubt on the Crown's or the Church's authority and he did not put the indigenous people's well being ahead of the Spanish-Catholic Imperial designs. His appar-

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1660167, v. III, book X.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167-68, v. III, book X.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31, v. I, book I.

<sup>34</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 137.



ently pro-Indian perspective was not truly pro-Indianism, but an apparently benevolent part of the colonialist rhetoric at large. He never approximated Bartolomé de Las Casas, who in his later years had come to believe that it was better for the indigenous population to remain free heathens than to exist as enslaved Christians, who supported indigenous autonomy, and who pushed “those who had robbed the Indians to make restitution”.<sup>35</sup>

Although Sahagún criticized Spanish abuses perpetrated on the Indians —“This has occurred to the Indians with the Spanish: They, and their things, were run down and destroyed to such degree that nothing was left of who they once were”—,<sup>36</sup> and although he wrote against the Spanish destruction of the pre-Hispanic indigenous order, which left them without “all the regiment that they had”,<sup>37</sup> Sahagún believed that it remained the obligation of the Crown and the Church to maintain control over the Indies and the native population. In turn, it was the obligation of the indigenous population to labor to learn “better the things of the faith and [...] subject themselves to the most Christian Prince”.<sup>38</sup> Idolatry, and hence the Nahua belief system had to be stamped out:

It was necessary to destroy all the idolatrous things, and all the idolatrous building, and even the customs of the republic that were mixed with idolatrous practices, which were nearly all the customs that the republic, with which they governed themselves, had. Because of that it was necessary to take it all apart, and to give them another form of rule that had nothing of idolatry in it.<sup>39</sup>

Sahagún believed that both the Church, and the Spanish secular powers, had the right and authority to meet resistance, or perceived resistance, with punishment: “They are obliged to believe, through the preaching they usually receive; and if they rebel, they are to be punished

<sup>35</sup> Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work* (DeKalb.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 203. Las Casas wrote: “None may lawfully deprive any group of men, be they Christian or gentile, of dominion over their lands and of the right to have kings or princes in order that they may freely govern themselves. The rulers of the Indians are independent and sovereign”, on Venancio Carro, “The Spanish Theological-Juridical Renaissance and the Ideology of Bartolomé De Las Casas”, in *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and His Work*, ed. Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen, DeKalb: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971, p. 268.

<sup>36</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 29, v. I, book I.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159, v. III, book X.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166, v. III, book X.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159, v. III, book X.

as heretics, because we have the ecclesiastic and secular authority to do so".<sup>40</sup> Thus, fray Bernardino was a willing participant in, and a supporter of, the Spanish colonial enterprise, and of the Catholic colonial-apostolic desire. He rationalized his participation and support by imagining the two fully different cosmologies, the Nahua and the European, as asymmetrical components of the one he judged superior, his.

The Franciscan molded the Nahuas to fit into his God's plan, and consequently he participated in the subjugation of the Nahuas under the yoke of Spanish-Catholic paternalist imperialism. Sahaguntine subjugation expressed itself in the friar's expressions of coercive, punitive love throughout his work: "Miraculously, our Lord sent a great plague over all the Indians of New Spain, as punishment for the war they waged against his Christians, who he had sent in this journey",<sup>41</sup> and again, "until they had repented of what they had done, and had the intention to not do it again; in this way they left instructed and punished".<sup>42</sup>

This was not an original action created in response to Sahagún's, and his world's encounter with New World experiences. Actually, Sahagún was following Christian tradition where "the two most central and richest symbols, [...] God and Jesus Christ [...] have their ambivalence of love and domination, the protective and the punitive".<sup>43</sup> Sahagún's love for the Nahuas, as his God's love for the Christians, was coercive. Sahagún joined in the creation of New Spain as a landscape for Catholic and Spanish action, and for a Counter-Reformation reaction:

Certainly, it appears that in this our times, and in these lands, and with this people, our Lord wished to restore to the Church that which the Devil had stolen from it in England, Germany, and France, in Asia and Palestine, from which we are left with the obligation to thank our Lord and to work diligently in this his New Spain.<sup>44</sup>

The transformation of the many upper Mesoamerican worlds<sup>45</sup> into New Spain, with all the implied connotations, required a revision of

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166, v. III, book X.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19, v. IV, book XII.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163, v. III, book X.

<sup>43</sup> John Keber, "Sahagún's Psalmody: Christian Love and Domination in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," in *Chipping Away on Earth: Studies in Prehispanic and Colonial Mexico in Honor of Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble*, ed. Eloise Quiñones-Keber, Lancaster, Labyrinthos, 1994, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 31, v. I, book 1.

<sup>45</sup> Meaning the many pre-Hispanic independent groups, and those interconnected, that had different traditions, languages, self-identifications, and loyalties.

the Spanish, and by extension of the Catholic, classification of the universe. This was not a radical transformation. Instead, it was the mere addition of the Nahua somewhere beneath the upper echelons already occupied by the Europeans. In Sahagún's paternalistic eyes, the indigenous people "were not capable of such perfection".<sup>46</sup> The Spaniards were still fueled by fervor of the *Reconquista*. They had no reason to question their superior placement in their categorization of reality. They saw themselves as the representatives of God, and thus their hegemony was unquestionable. "The discovery of the unknown lands and the conversion of pagan peoples appeared to the Spaniards as a clear sign of the providential mission that [their] God had indicated for the chosen people."<sup>47</sup>

Sahagún enumerated a series of "truths" discovered with the New World where he placed the Americas inside the somewhat expanded boundaries of Euro-Christian mythology, imposing a "Christian conceptualization of history".<sup>48</sup> He wrote that the lands under the "torrid-zone to the Antarctic" were inhabitable; that the ocean was not without end; that the population of the world began in Babylon and it had expanded into the New World; that the earthly paradise was in the New World where the bones of pre-deluge giants were also found; and that, although it was believed that no one had reached the Americas before, "now it is said with certainty that the boat of King Solomon came to Peru, and to the Island of Santo Domingo to take gold for the building of the temple", in Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup>

Sahagún's journey to New Spain had taken him through the proverbial looking glass. Once there, he had to make sense of what he witnessed and what he experienced. He provided for continuity by interpreting apparently coincidental phenomena, between the familiar and the non-familiar, as equivalent phenomena, in spite of their categorical incompatibility. For example, the indigenous informants explained a pre-Hispanic custom defined, in the words of modern historian, Inga Clendinnen, as "a condition of misfortune [that] had been contracted [where said...] condition could be ameliorated only by a cautious, correct, and respectful renewal of the correct relationship [with the sacred], so that the essential boundary would be back

<sup>46</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 162, v. III, book X.

<sup>47</sup> Enrique Florescano, *Memory, Myth, and Time in Mexico: From the Aztecs to Independence*, translations from Latin America Series, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1994, p. 77.

<sup>48</sup> Keber, "Sahagún's Psalmody", p. 56.

<sup>49</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 17-18, v. IV, book XII.

in place”.<sup>50</sup> Sahagún in turn redefined the custom as the confession of a sin, *pecado*. Neither confession, nor sin, are words that explain the actual native tradition, which was preoccupied with re-establishing the “proper way”, and not seeking redemption. Sahagún’s presentation of what he transformed into confessions was fully imbued with Christian idioms and interpretations. Sahagún fitted the very deity with whom the proper relationship needed to be reestablished, Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), into the Christian God’s model. This was in itself an unconscious heresy by Sahagún: “Oh our Lord, most humane, protector and aid to all! Already you have heard the confession of this poor sinner”.<sup>51</sup>

In Nahuatl terms, Tezcatlipoca was an unknowable god with deep sinister aspects. “He was also named *Moyocoyatzin*, ‘Capricious Creator’, *Titlacuhuan*, ‘He Whose Slaves We Are’, [and] *Moquequeloa*, ‘The Mock-er’.”<sup>52</sup> In fact, when Sahagún was compiling the information for Book III, about the origins of the gods, the informants were able to answer his questions about the other three major Gods, Huitzipochtli, Tlaloc, and Quetzalcoatl, and spoke of them by telling epic stories. But when asked about Tezcatlipoca:

the informants were unable to answer in a similar fashion about the supreme divinity, invisible and untouchable, creator of history but without a history. They answered with small prayers directed to him, and with the many names given him, [...] explanations of these names, and with information about the places where he was worshipped.<sup>53</sup>

Sahagún transformed this God into his image of an omnipotent God, and translated the indigenous experience into a Catholic confession. He used the Christian symbolism of the cleansing of sins: “You, Lord, who clean the faults of those who truly confess; forgive him and cleanse him, give him, Lord, the pardon and indulgence, and the remission of all his sins, which descends from heaven, like clear and pure water to wash all sins”.<sup>54</sup> He did this in spite that the festival of Tezcatlipoca was characterized by submitting to the sacred through “the deliberate yielding of one’s person to “dirt”, as with the prohibitions of bathing, and most particularly the [prohibition of] washing of the head”.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 76, v. II, book VI, chap. VII.

<sup>52</sup> Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> López-Austin, “The Research Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires”, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 76-77, v. II, book VI, chap. VII.

<sup>55</sup> Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 52.

The image of a Tezcatlipoca as perceived by the Nahua informants shows little in common with the Catholic God's qualities, imposed on the indigenous God by the Friar's Judeo-Christian categories: "The god *Tezcatlipoca* was believed to be a true god, invisible, who was every where, in heaven, on the earth, and in hell, and when he was on earth he caused wars, enmities, and disputes, from which there arose much suffering and instability".<sup>56</sup> And again: "He gave to those alive poverty and misery, and incurable and contagious sicknesses [...] He did as he pleased, and no one dared or could contradict him, [...] and he gave riches to whom he pleased and poverty and misery to whom he wished".<sup>57</sup>

Sahagún made other compromising and equivocal transformations. He stated that the indigenous god Quetzalcoatl was only a man that the Indians had taken for a god: "Although he was a man, they had him for a god, and they said that he opened the way to the gods".<sup>58</sup> The Friar went into a condemnatory diatribe against the indigenous god:

They called *Quetzalcoatl*, who was a man, corruptible and mortal, and who although had some semblance of virtue, according to them, was a great necromancer, friend of demons, and very familiar with them, worthy of confusion and eternal torment, and not of being celebrated as a god, or adored as such.<sup>59</sup>

Fray Bernardino's antagonistic disposition towards the Plumed Serpent,<sup>60</sup> and by no means limited to this one god, but applied to all Nahua deities, did not stop the Friar from capitalizing in the myth of Cortés being the Quetzalcoatl returning from the east. In Book XII, the Franciscan promoted the myth without any signs of disgust: "And as they arrived next to the vessels, and saw the Spaniards, they kissed the ships in signs of adoration. They thought that he was the god *Quetzalcoatl* that returned, as they expected from the story of this god."<sup>61</sup>

Sahagún's authorization of the 'Spanish-as-Gods' stories is suspect. Modern scholar David Carrasco wrote: "A comment is needed concerning the references in book 12 which show *Moctezuma* thought Cortés was *Quetzalcoatl*. This extremely important account was written decades

<sup>56</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 44, v. I, book I.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277-78, v. I, book III.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90, v. I, book I.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>60</sup> Reference to the god Quetzalcoatl.

<sup>61</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 25, v. IV, book XII, chap. II.

after the events described".<sup>62</sup> Also, the Franciscan gathered the information from one particular locality, Tlatelolco, from one specific social group, with very group-specific agendas: "These elders, while clearly within the Aztec hegemony, represented a position somewhat critical of the Aztec elite who conquered them nearly a century before".<sup>63</sup> The resulting version of the conquest constituted a revisionist story, a post-factum elaboration,<sup>64</sup> at both the Sahaguntine and the indigenous levels. Sahagún started the process, through the questions he chose to ask the native informants with his questionnaires. The indigenous elite of Tlatelolco then followed, and it ended with the imposition of Sahagún's interests and categorical assumptions during the long translation and organizing process. The Franciscan's role on the revision served to "produce a version in which the role of Cortés was elevated, Spanish actions justified, and the whole conquest presented as providential".<sup>65</sup> His subsequent elaboration and capitalization helped him define the superiority of the Spanish, and hence of his narrative by using the Tlatelolcans' own narrative. For these elders of Tlatelolco, the fabrication would serve to "expose [or rather to construct the image of] a hysterical *Moctezuma's* failure of nerve."<sup>66</sup> This would not be the betrayal it seems to be at first glance. The Tlatelolcans had been conquered by the Aztecs only one hundred years earlier. Separating themselves from Moctezuma's failure might have been perceived as a way to reach for some level of hegemony.

As a Spanish male, Sahagún also sought to impose the conditions of his interpretation of society, and its proper relationships, upon the New World. One such condition was the transference of the Spanish female proper-social-spheres to indigenous women. In chapters thirteen to fifteen of Book X, in very few pages, he defined the proper place of the indigenous female in familiar terms and categories. The qualities, positive and negative, that Sahagún applied to these women were those that Spanish society attached to its females. Fray Bernardino described them all following the "if they are good" versus the "if they are bad" format. A woman of noble cast was worthy of honor,

<sup>62</sup> David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* This author makes a differentiation between post-factum fabrication and post-factum elaboration, the latter being based on some truths.

<sup>65</sup> Inga Clendinnen, "Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty": Cortes and the Conquest of Mexico", in *New World Encounters*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*, p. 48.

esteemed, honorable, generous, kind, humane, meek, long-suffering, and a good governess for her family. If she crossed those boundaries, she was negligent, conceited and self-absorbed, and did not respect anyone.<sup>67</sup> The working women, *las mujeres bajas* (the lower women), were good if they were hard working, strong, firm, and knowledgeable of her trade. They were bad if they were weak, lazy, clumsy, and not good at her proper trade. If a woman was a medicine woman, Sahagún's categorization could be most dangerous: If good, she shared the positive qualities of the other working women, but if bad, Sahagún's conclusion could have had dangerous consequences. He claimed that she "uses witchcraft [...] and has a pact with the Devil".<sup>68</sup>

Sahagún defined *malas mujeres* (bad women) —prostitutes, adulterers, hermaphrodites, and *alcahuetas*— in sensual, if highly condemnatory terms. They were women that did not fit Sahagún's image of propriety. They were interested in sexuality, and were independent in their actions. The *alcahueta*, a typical Spanish character, was a troublemaker, a woman that facilitated illicit relationships, a woman who was capable of deceit, the Spanish version of the trickster. Sahagún's description of this social type is very reminiscent of the popular Spanish character *La Celestina*, the *alcahueta* of the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea* (1499).<sup>69</sup> Sahagún wrote of the *alcahueta*: "She is a demon and has its appearance".<sup>70</sup>

Sahagún described the good women as saintly Christians that could manage what the Franciscan saw as their proper spheres of domain. Bad women were ignorant of their proper occupations; they were sensual and therefore close to the Devil. Those were all Sahagunian impositions. For the Nahua there was "no value placed on male or female chastity, but rather the impulse, as in fasting and vigil, to free oneself for sacred engagement from the distractions of fleshy desires".<sup>71</sup> Sahagún's transformations depended upon his perception of his own cultural categories

<sup>67</sup> Adjectives used by fray Bernardino de Sahagún to describe noble women. Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 124-26, v. III, book X, chap. XIII. A good woman was "digna de ser honrada", "estimada", "honrada", "generosa", "bondadosa", "humana", "mansa", "sufrida", A bad woman was "soberbia y presuntuosa, [...] y no respeta a nadie."

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128-29, v. III, book X, chap. XIV.

<sup>69</sup> This Tragic-comedy is one of the fundamental works of the Spanish literature. It was published in Burgos in 1499. Authorship is not fully determined. It has been attributed to Fernando de Rojas, except for the beginning that is believed to have belonged to Juan de Mena or Rodrigo de Cota. It is a story of love between a handsome young man, and a sweet girl, that are helped in their romance by the intervention of old Celestina. This work had enormous success during the Spanish Golden Age. Information from Ramón Pelayo y Gross García, *Pequeño Larrouse Ilustrado*, Mexico, Ediciones Larrouse, 1988) p. 1199.

<sup>70</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 131, v. III, book X, chap. XV.

<sup>71</sup> Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, p. 164.

as the only valid measures of reality. In his Christian interpretation of the universe, fray Bernardino was oblivious to the Nahua understanding “which [...] c[a]me closer to the notion of the dangers of breaching proper boundaries by improper, ignorant, or excessive human action”,<sup>72</sup> than to concepts of sin and final judgments.

Fray Bernardino dedicated little time, and few pages to the indigenous women and their issues. This fact alone helps define his categorization of what he considered worth, or not worth recording. Despite recording in the *Primeros memoriales* an “extensive statement [...] about the activities of boys and girls in their respective schools and the function of the teachers, [he] paid little attention to such matters [in the *Historia*] for he does not discuss the theme of girl’s schools”.<sup>73</sup> His single-minded approach, where he had to force the Nahua world into familiar parameters, left much of the indigenous experiences untouched or malformed, contaminated by the Franciscan’s stereotypes, assumptions, and his Christian-Spanish sensibilities.

The Franciscan’s treatment of women in his writings was marginal, but when referring to the indigenous people’s notions about their goddesses, he simply wrote with superiority and disdain. His attitude perhaps reflected the Catholic ambivalence between the deification of Mary, and the insistence on defining her worship as the Mother of God, as intermediary between humans and the Christians’ God, and on her value as a catholic example of proper womanhood. This ambivalence, mixed with a fear that the indigenous people would adopt Mary’s image as the image of their own pre-existing Mother of the Gods, brought Sahagún, and other Franciscans, to participate in the “Franciscan conspiracy of silence as to the apparition and miracles”<sup>74</sup> of the Lady of Guadalupe. Their initial, violent rejection of the “Mariophany of Tepeyac”,<sup>75</sup> was firmly based on the “fear of seeing the Indians continuing to adore under the name *Tonantzin* the old mother of gods rather than the Virgin Mary”.<sup>76</sup>

Fray Bernardino expressed his opinion, on the deification of females, with particular force in the confutation at the end of the first book:

In many things the devils deceived your ancestors and mocked them, making them believe that women were goddesses and so they adored

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> López-Austin, “The Research Method of Sahagún: The Questionnaires”, p. 129.

<sup>74</sup> Arthur J.O. Anderson, in Edmonson, 1974, p. 20.

<sup>75</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, p. 192.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.



them and venerated them. [...] They also believed that women who died during their first child-birth became goddesses and they called them *Cihualeteo* or *Cihuapipiltin*, and they adored them as a goddess. This adoration of women is worth so much mockery and laughter, that it is not necessary to debate it using the sacred scriptures.<sup>77</sup>

In Sahagún's mind there was only one acceptable way to order society. That which he could not understand through the familiar he reduced to demoniacal, inferior, or just simply marginalized it. Only by turning the incompatible categories into familiar-negatives, Sahagún could reach out and attempt to make graspable the fully foreign New Spanish experience.

*Sahagún's Double Standards: "Las señales y los pronósticos"*

Sahagún condemned and demonized in no uncertain terms what he labeled the *Arte adivinatoria* of the indigenous Nahuas. Both the *Historia* and the *Arte* are filled with bereavement. His position on the subject of divination was firm: "Great evil came down upon the human race in the form of the Devil; and these natives are in good measure part of him, fill of this disease [divining arts]".<sup>78</sup> The Devil was the enemy, and the indigenous people were under his power: "Such idolatrous people, whose fertile fruits were only gathered by the Devil, and in his infernal fire he has them as his treasure".<sup>79</sup>

In spite of his attitude towards the indigenous arts of divination, Sahagún did not seem to have a problem in pointing out repeatedly those "sings and omens that appeared before the coming of the Spaniards, even before there were any news of them".<sup>80</sup> Fray Bernardino's tone when he spoke of these signs was completely different. Sahagún used them to solidify the Spanish and Catholic right to the Americas. Through this willing adoption, the prophecies became an integral part of the New World's Mythology. The Franciscan wrote that "[t]en years before the arrival of the Spaniards to this land, twelve years according to others, there appeared a great comet in the sky, in the orient, that seemed like a great and resplendent flame that sent out flashes of fire".<sup>81</sup> He went on to enumerate the eight *agüeros* (predictions) that

<sup>77</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 90-91, v. I, book I.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49, v. II, book V.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291, v. II, book VIII.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 291, v. II, book VIII, chap. VI.

foretold the coming of the Spaniards, and then he neatly introduced the conquest.

The *señales y pronósticos* (signs and omens), as they could be used to support the Catholic and Spanish claims to the Americas, did not bother the Friar. They were signs, not of the indigenous, idolatrous, demonic gods, but of his own God's presence, the one and only *Dios*. These signs legitimized Sahaguntine, and Franciscan messianism. Supporting the dream upon indigenous prophetic words gave it a new kind of authority and value. The power of the Christian god appeared greater, and Spanish legitimacy became hard to question when the conquered people themselves appeared to become part of the Catholic deity's greater plan. These acceptable signs provided the Spanish-Christian Empire with a divine justification for conquest and colonization:

Our Lord God has (purposefully) hidden this half of the world until our times, when through his divine nature he decided to make it manifest to the Roman Catholic Church, not so that the natives are destroyed and tyrannized, but to enlighten them from the darkness of idolatry where they have lived, and so that they are introduced to the Catholic church, and informed in the Christian religion so that they may reach the kingdom of heaven, dying in the faith like true Christians.<sup>82</sup>

Fray Bernardino wrote about the conquest with Christian fervor, abandonment, and a strong sense of superiority. He relished the telling of those first days when: "Our Lord made many miracles in the conquest of this land, where the door was opened for the preachers of the Holy Gospel so that they would enter to preach the Catholic faith to this most miserable people".<sup>83</sup> He depicted Cortés as the hero chosen, and guided by God. In a long eulogizing speech, Sahagún compared the conquistador to the greatest Spanish hero of the *Reconquista*, El Cid:

It is considered certain (given the beginning, middle, and the end of the conquest) that our Lord ruled over this great man and great Christian [...] so that he inspired him to do more than humanly possible [...] In everything that happened, it seems that God inspired him in what he had to do, as he had done on past times with the noble and holy Spanish captain, the Cid Ruiz Diaz, in the times of king Alonso of the honorable hand. Finally, as Cortés came out victorious, he did as most Christian man and loyal gentleman to his king should do. He offered the rewards of his labors to his emperor king, Charles V, and

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, v. IV, book XII.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

wrote to the Sovereign Pontiff asking that he send preachers of the Holy Gospel for the conversions of the Indians, which was our Lords intention when he began this project.<sup>84</sup>

The indigenous signs deserved condemnation, unless they spoke in benefit of the Spaniards and their God's plan. It is surprising that the Friar so easily made this leap given his adamant attitude about anything related to the divining arts. For the Friar, the indigenous people's voice was important as it served his purposes. When it did not, it was to be eradicated. Fray Bernardino turned the indigenous population into subjects of Spanish-Catholic-Franciscan action.

### *Sahagún The Franciscan*

As a member of the Order of Saint Francis, Sahagún's reasons for the creation of the compendium centered around several issues. Formally, he had to fulfill his superiors' mandates. He wanted to find redemption for his share in the success of the Devil in reclaiming the Nahuas, and he had to solve the damage done by gathering all the intelligence necessary to fight idolatry, warning the Nahuas of their precarious situation, and calling to action any good Christian that might help in the endeavor.

The first mandate came from the Minister General, Francisco Angelorum, who on October 30th, 1523, ordered the first Twelve, and those "who in the future should join [...] through the merit of holy obedience", to "convert with words and example the people who do not know Jesus Christ Our Lord, who are held fast in the blindness of idolatry under the yoke of the satanic thrall, who live and dwell in the Indies which are commonly called Yucatan or New Spain or Tierra Firme".<sup>85</sup> No price was too much to pay "with the last end of the world at hand [...] to gain victory [against idolatry and Satan's forces]".<sup>86</sup> The Franciscans had followed their founding father's example by coming to the New World "burning with the fire of Christ's love, and thirsting for the palm of martyrdom".<sup>87</sup> Sahagún also had to obey the orders

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20, v. IV, book XII.

<sup>85</sup> Partial quote from the "Orders Given to the Twelve" by fray Francisco Angelorum, Minister General on October 30th. of the year 1523 (Originally given in Latin). Francisco Angelorum, "Orders Given to the Twelve", in *Colonial Spanish America: A Documentary History*, ed. Kenneth Mills and William B. Taylor, Wilmington, SR Books, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

given to him directly —first by Motolinia<sup>88</sup> in the early 1540's, and later in 1557 by Father Francisco de Toral— to gather information on indigenous matters.

Angelorum's and Toral's mandates authorized and fueled Sahagún's work. "[I]n the eleventh hour of which the gospel speaks",<sup>89</sup> Sahagún had come to the New World as a seraphic soldier of Christ. And while the end of the world mentality was, at large, a direct response to the Catholic church's crisis in Europe due to its own corruption, and the struggles against the Reformation, for fray Bernardino it was part of his individual experience. The Americas and the indigenous population were perceived as the raw resources for the formation of "this New Church".<sup>90</sup>

The Franciscans, filled with missionary zeal, believed themselves to be the chosen soldiers of God: "The Eternal Father chose [... the Order of St. Francis] to exalt the glory of his Name and procure the salvation of souls, and to forestall the ruin which threatened the Church (and should she fall, save her and raise her to her primitive state)".<sup>91</sup> Their job was to prepare the way and aid in the creation of the seat of Christ's reign.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> It seems that Sahagún's disillusionment with the veracity of the first conversions did not allow him to give Motolinia the same credit he gave Toral. In fact, in 1572, his feelings against Motolinia would go beyond the written word. Reflecting what scholar Ascension H. de León-Portilla called, in 1993, "the dramatic end of a friendship". In Ascension H. de León-Portilla, Ascención H. de León-Portilla, "Las primeras biografías de Bernardino de Sahagún", *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 22, 1993, p. 250. Fray Bernardino denounced Motolinia to the Inquisition. This act shows, in the words of Georges Baudot, "the harshness that surrounded the elaboration of the *Historia general*", in George Baudot, "Fray Toribio de Motolinia denunciado ante la Inquisición por fray Bernardino de Sahagún en 1572." As quoted in León-Portilla, "Las primeras biografías de Bernardino de Sahagún", p. 250.

<sup>89</sup> Angelorum, "Orders Given to the Twelve", p. 49. Many other's believed the time predicted by the apostle John, in the Bible's Apocalypse, was near. Father Bartolomé de las Casas himself referred to those times as "the eleventh hour of the world". Statement made by the Dominican Father Bartolomé las Casas in his "Octavio Remedio". Quoted from Luis Rivera Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 59.

<sup>90</sup> Sahagún, "Arte adivinatoria", p. 383.

<sup>91</sup> Angelorum, "Orders Given to the Twelve", p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood". The Apostle John allegedly quotes Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Revised Standard Version*, New York, Published by W. Collins for Board of Publication of the Lutheran Church in America, 1971, Revelations 22: 12-15.

Sahagún's own Franciscan zealotry appears to have been compounded with a sense of personal failure. Because fray Bernardino put down his guard against the devil and his works, the success of the Messianic dream, and the post-apocalyptic establishment of Christ's millenarian kingdom in the Americas, were seriously compromised:

We held this information as true and as a miracle [...] and so, we abandoned the weapons that we brought well sharpened to fight against idolatry, and following the counsel of those fathers we began to preach moral things. After a few years, the lack of prudence that occurred in the foundation of this New Church became evident. [And] so the New Church was founded on false ground.<sup>93</sup>

While on the one hand he wrote with hope: "I can not believe that the Church of God will not prosper where the synagogue of Satan has prospered so well, according to the words of Saint Paul: There will be an abundance of grace where there was once an abundance of sin",<sup>94</sup> on the other he also noted: "I know for a fact that the Devil does not sleep, nor has he forgotten the honor given to him by these natives, and that he is waiting for the proper time to, if he can, get back to his rule".<sup>95</sup> In the words of modern Sahagún scholar John W. Keber, "a good part of [Sahagún's] motivation [...] was the growing conviction that the missionary effort had failed, that early conversions had been superficial, that idolatrous practices had continued —and that something had to be done".<sup>96</sup>

Sahagún embarked in a war against the work of the Devil in New Spain. This seraphic soldier fought the war in several fronts. Initially, he addressed directly the Nahua people. He warned them, vehemently, of the errors of their ancestral ways, and aimed to "illuminate the knowledge of the eternal truth, that is God, and the knowledge of false gods which is all a lie and invention of the author and father of all lies, the Devil".<sup>97</sup> The friar's acceptance of only one version of experience and belief as truth was unwavering: "You have all lived in the darkness of infidelity and idolatry in which your ancestors left you, as it is demonstrated in your writings and paintings, and in the idolatrous rites in which you have lived till now."<sup>98</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Sahagún, "Arte adivinatoria", p. 382-83.

<sup>94</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 30, v. I, book I.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269, v. I, book III.

<sup>96</sup> Keber, "Sahagún's Psalmody", p. 47..

<sup>97</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 85, v. I, book I.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77, v. I, book I.

Sahagún wrote with superior frustration: “It is more a thing of children without sense than that of men of reason. [...] Your ancestors invented other crazy notions without limits, so much so that there is not enough paper to write them.”<sup>99</sup> He allowed himself the right to put words in the mouth of the native idolaters, who he represented in no uncertain terms: “The mis-fortuned idolaters said: We erred in the way to the truth, we were not enlightened by justice, nor was it born on us the sun of intelligence.”<sup>100</sup> Then, the Franciscan set his God in asymmetrical contrast to the native gods:

In all written above it is clear how good and worthy of love, obedience, and reverence is our Lord God, protector, lord and governor of all things; in the same manner it is clear how evil, treacherous and liars, abominable and cruel are the gods that your ancestors honored and adored for such a long time.<sup>101</sup>

It appears that these emphatic speeches had the effect, if any, of alienating Sahagún’s intended audience. The Friar himself noted, in 1585, in the *Arte Adivinatoria*, that the Nahuas still had “the old faith mixed with the Catholic faith, in this time that has been clearly seen [...] They run away from hearing the preaching, and use such frivolous excuses that it is easy to see their wickedness”.<sup>102</sup>

Sahagún also reverted to the sharpening of “the weapons that we brought”.<sup>103</sup> He aimed to prepare, not only himself, but all the other *predicadores*<sup>104</sup> to do battle against the Devil and his idolatry: “It will be good for us to have weapons with which to come to his encounter.”<sup>105</sup> As an arsenal for God, his work served to “to give more opportunity and help to the preachers of this New Church”.<sup>106</sup> He firmly believed that the extirpation of idolatry depended upon his collecting of detailed intelligence on indigenous practices:

In order to preach against these things and even to know whether they exist, it is indispensable to know how they were used in the time of their idolatry. For in the absence of this knowledge they do many idolatrous things in our presence without our understanding; and

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94, v. I, book I.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>102</sup> Sahagún, “Arte adivinatoria”, p. 384.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>104</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 269, v. I, book III.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97, v. III, book X.

some say, excusing them, that these are stupidities or childish things, not knowing the source from which they spring—which is mere idolatry, and the confessors do not ask, or believe that such things exist, nor do they know the language for asking them, nor would they even understand if they were told.<sup>107</sup>

In his numerous interjections, be it prologues, confutations, addresses to the reader, or appendixes, Sahagún directly ensured that the significance of his work, the importance of his goals, and of the eschatological battle he waged, could not be missed.<sup>108</sup>

Sahagún also articulated a call to action that was eloquent and coercive. It was so directly aimed that it denounced any Christian who ignored it as a bad Christian deserving grave punishments. Sahagún appealed “in the name of God” to anyone who might read his work to disclose any knowledge of idolatry so that it could be remedied. He warned that, if the reader did not, he would carry a great burden because it was “the greatest of all sins” to cover or protect idolatry. The punishment would be severe “in this world and the next”. Sahagún wrote, “He who does not persecute this sin and its doers, through licit and merited ways, can not be considered a good Christian.”<sup>109</sup>

In 1585, the friar still held fast to the dream, although he was also sobered by the initial failure. He insisted faithfully on his points of war:

The investigation and inquiry to know all idolatrous things [...] the preaching by preachers, [...] and] the third thing that is necessary to remedy this project is that the confessors be informed of the idolatrous rites that they had since old. [...] The preachers must preach directly against the gods they had and adored, who they called *teleo*, that they are not gods, that they are not *teleo*, and it is necessary to name them by their names, striking them and abhor them as devils enemies of God, and enemies of all his creatures, and enemies of men.<sup>110</sup>

Like Sahagún's hero Cortés, who had enlisted the aid of Mesoamerican Indians to defeat the Aztecs, the friar sought to recruit the Nahuas and Spaniards to fight the Devil in the New World. The Nahuas would join by means of conversion, and would be brought to the fold

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27, v. 1, book 1.

<sup>108</sup> “Blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein [in Revelations]; for the time is near.” The Apostle John allegedly quotes Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Revised Standard Version*, Revelations 1:3.

<sup>109</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 94, v. 1, book 1.

<sup>110</sup> Sahagún, “Arte adivinatoria”, p. 384-85.

through the paternalistic *amor caritativo* (charitable love) that the Franciscans would offer after their baptism “so that they do not commit idolatry later”.<sup>111</sup> The Spaniards would join to fulfill their Christian obligation. Perhaps, as another tool of God, such as Sahagún believed Cortés to be, the friar held on to the Messianic dream, waiting for one more miracle. The Christian God had already proven himself to the Franciscan in “in this greatest and most important of endeavors”,<sup>112</sup> during the conquest. Then, “God freed him [Cortés] and many of his men, miraculously, from the hands of their enemies”.<sup>113</sup> Perhaps the Christian God would also aid the seraphic soldier in his service.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>112</sup> Sahagún, *Historia general*, p. 18, v. IV, book XII.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19, v. IV, book XII.



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