

Jaime Lara. *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain.*

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Reviewed by Allen J. Christenson

In this outstanding new contribution to the scholarship of the immediate post-contact world of New Spain (modern-day Mexico), Jaime Lara goes a long way in correcting the general misperception among many researchers in the field that the introduction of Roman Catholicism in the New World ended traditional indigenous culture and theology. For instance, in a paper pointedly titled "On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Precolumbian Art," George Kubler asserted that indigenous buildings, statues, paintings, and tools were so inextricably linked to the cultures that produced them that they became primary targets for destruction and replacement with more acceptable art forms:

In the sixteenth century the rush to European conventions of representation and building, by colonists and Indians alike, precluded any real continuation of native traditions in art and architecture. In the seventeenth century, so much had been forgotten, and the extirpation of native observances by the religious authorities was so vigorous, that the last gasps of the bearers of Indian rituals and manners expired unheard.¹

Lara rightly challenges Kubler's position, giving extensive evidence that although the introduction of Spanish rule and Christianity resulted in the abrupt suppression of indigenous art styles and many of its more public religious institutions such as human sacrifice, polygamy, and the worship of pre-Columbian stone images, much less of the old indigenous theology was destroyed than has been generally assumed. He asserts that, rather than being destroyed, authentic pre-Columbian rituals, symbols, and core elements of their theology survived by giving them new Christian names and metaphors. Lara suggests that this was not a simple process of syncretization, a haphazard blending of two cultures, but rather what he calls a "guided syncretism or synthesization" (10) in which the inhabitants of the New World actively selected those elements of Roman Catholicism that made sense to them within their own indigenous theology and

ignored those elements that did not. Too often in the past, scholars have divided themselves into two opposing camps—those who see indigenous society as an artifact of the pre-Columbian era, and those who see indigenous society as an artifact of the early colonial Christian eras. Both of these positions assume that indigenous people are incapable of assimilating new ideas without abandoning their own identity.

Following the conquest of the Aztec empire, centered at Tenochtitlan, the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés requested mendicant priests of the Franciscan and Dominican orders to commence teaching and baptizing the inhabitants of the New World. The first twelve priests arrived in the spring of 1524 under the leadership of Fr. Martín de Valencia. These twelve Franciscan monks, taking the title of apostles, were fired with a fervent millenarian zeal, seeking to establish a New Jerusalem in Mexico and Central America that would prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ, an event they believed to be imminent. They immediately set about baptizing the indigenous people of Mesoamerica by the tens of thousands, beginning with the surviving members of the old nobility. It is unlikely, however, that the Aztecs and Maya understood baptism as a sweeping renunciation of their ancient deities. As Cervantes wrote, “The initial enthusiasm of the Indians to accept Christianity had more to do with the Mesoamerican tradition of incorporating alien elements into their religion than with any conviction about the exclusivist claims of the Christian faith.”²

Lara gives abundant evidence that the early Franciscan missionaries saw the inhabitants of the New World as children of Israel and that they were much like “soft wax” ready to receive the seal of Christ upon them if only given the opportunity to be taught. Many held to the doctrine that Mesoamericans were descendents of the lost ten tribes, or that Aztec traditions of Quetzalcoatl represented vague recollections of an ancient visit by St. Thomas the Apostle, who they believed to have visited the New World following the death of Christ (68). Early missionary priests (including many of their best writers such as Durán, Motolinía, Torquemada, and Mendieta) wrote that Aztec temples were likely patterned after Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem with two sanctuaries separated by a veil, the inner “Holy of Holies” being visited only by a high priest when he conducted blood sacrifices.

Mendicant priests constructed temple complexes, often using the stones salvaged from destroyed pre-Columbian temples, that replicated the appearance and organization of the temple of New Jerusalem as described in scripture. Thus, at Huejotzingo, the friars built, with labor from the indigenous people, a monastery complex that included a highly

sophisticated hydraulic system of clay pipes, reservoirs, and aqueducts that brought water to a series of fountains that flowed to the four cardinal directions in emulation of the temple described in Ezekiel 47:1–12 and Revelation 22:2 (140–41). Yet at the same time, the Aztecs who helped to construct such complexes did not remain passive recipients of Christian and European culture. Stones from pre-Columbian temples and deity images were reused not so much because they were readily available building materials, but because they bore the living and animate souls of the Aztecs' ancient deities and ancestors. Crosses were carved to represent not crucifixes but pre-Columbian notions of the tree of life. Fountains were placed at the center of courtyards and cloisters as metaphors for the waters of creation that indigenous peoples believed to occupy the center of the world. In some cases, these symbols resonated with European Christianity. In other cases, they did not.

While the practice of traditional Mayan religion ceased to be a state function after the Spanish Conquest, many public ceremonies, such as ritual dance performances, survived. In many cases, elements of ancient pre-Columbian ritual dances and ceremonies were even encouraged by the Franciscan missionaries as a means of attracting potential converts. But such strategies of Christian appropriation actually fostered the survival of preconquest rituals and theology.

Fuentes y Guzmán wrote that although the Maya acknowledged the Christian saints during confraternity dances, they continued nevertheless to honor their pre-Columbian gods:

They celebrate today the festivities of the saints; dancing around with the tenacity, which we shall see, adorned with the same regalia, which they used in that deluded time [before the conquest]. . . .³

They dance singing the praises of the saint, which they celebrate, but in the prohibited dances they sing the histories and deeds of their ancestors and false gods.⁴

Yet Roman Catholic and other European elements in early Aztec and Mayan ritual practices were not a mask to hide an ancient and pristine indigenous worldview. The two religious systems are not separable, and any attempt to distinguish between the two would ultimately lead to an artificial construct that is foreign to indigenous experience and understanding.

Lara's stated objectives for this book were to correct the general misperception among scholars of the interaction between Spanish missionaries and the indigenous population of the New World in the sixteenth century, claiming that the interaction was much more complex and dynamic in both worlds than has been generally assumed. In this he has done a masterful job. He also aims to correct the tendency in past research

to ignore native voices and instead encourages scholars to look in meaningful ways at the traditional theology of all of Mesoamerica, particularly the Aztecs/Mexica and the Maya. Most of the text addresses the first goal, leaving the second goal less developed than the first. The book is overwhelmingly Mexica-centric, and Lara's exploration of indigenous theology is mostly descriptive, with few references to indigenous literature in which native writers might speak with their own voices.

Overall, this elegantly illustrated book is a welcome and important contribution to our understanding of the post-conquest world of Mesoamerica. Lara helps the reader understand that indigenous people have the capacity to change while maintaining their identity. The Aztecs and Maya adapted to their changing world by interpreting those changes in uniquely Mesoamerican ways. A young traditionalist Mayan priest once told me, "As the old people say, when the Spaniards came they broke off many of our branches. They even burned the trunk. But we will never die because the roots have power. We draw strength from the ancestors who live in our blood. If we as a people ignore our roots, we will all die."

Aztecs and Maya did not abandon their identities by accepting elements of foreign ideas in their worship. Nor are these Christian elements just a superficial gilding of Roman Catholicism to hide their "true" indigenous nature. The Maya in particular have adapted while keeping their identity for thousands of years, from Olmec beginnings, to Teotihuacan, to so-called "Toltec" influences, to contact with the Mexica of central Mexico. The capacity of indigenous people to change while maintaining their identity and core ideology characterizes much of the history of Mesoamerican culture. This capacity is a source of great comfort in the face of a modern world that is often cruel and ever-changing.

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1. George Kubler, "On the Colonial Extinction of the Motifs of Precolumbian Art," in *Studies in Ancient American and European Art: The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, ed. Thomas F. Reese (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 66.

2. Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 42.

3. Don Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, *Obras Históricas de Don Francisco Antonio y Guzmán*, ed. Carmel Sáenz de Santa María, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1969), 77.

4. Fuentes y Guzmán, *Obras Históricas*, 217.