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FOREWORD

MARK CHRISTENSEN

RELIGION in its many forms is a constant in every society. And how humankind develops, interprets, and conveys religion remains a topic of endless study. Indeed, Christianity and its global spread certainly has occupied its share of conversations. Did people convert, resist, a little of both? What did they make of Christ and Mary, heaven and hell, and how did it sit with preexisting beliefs? How was Christianity conveyed, and who did the teaching? Over the years, Ben Leeming and I have spent many hours discussing such questions often extending them to modern-day circumstances, and his knowledge of Nahuatl, colonial religion, and Catholicism in general always ensured a great chat.

Of course, we are not the only nor the first to have such conversations. Over the decades, scholarship examining the spread of Catholicism in central Mexico among its Indigenous inhabitants offered various conclusions from capitulation to resistance, European dominance to Indigenous survival, syncretism, and *nepantlism*. Amidst the dialogue, Indigenous voices have become clearer, sharper, and their participation in evangelization more recognized to reveal how they made sense of Christianity and their role in its colonial formation.

In the scholarly discussion of colonial Christianity, it should come as no surprise that religious drama showed up to contribute more than a few words. Like a colonial version of the currently popular television series *The Chosen*, the theatrical reenactments of important Christian events in early modern Europe and Mexico found an eager audience. After all, watching a play with its costumed actors, music,

and props must have been better than listening to a sermon. Early scholars noted as much, and Fernando Horcasitas's *El teatro náhuatl* (1974) proved a seminal work. Later, Barry Sell and Louise Burkhart's *Nahuatl Theater* project (2004–2009) produced four volumes that provided English readers unprecedented access to the religious plays that Nahuas helped create in their own language and, certainly, perform. Indeed, the plays revealed in new ways how Nahuas could promulgate Christian themes and stories in familiar ways.

Moreover, Indigenous people could take a lead role in preserving and shaping these plays along with other religious texts—something colonial officials largely tried to prevent. As a result, the conversation about what colonial Christianity looked like expanded beyond something Indigenous people simply tolerated to include something they actively adopted and constantly refashioned as a part of their everyday lives. Leeming's *Aztec Antichrist* and its examination and translation of two previously unknown Nahuatl Antichrist plays carries on this conversation while contributing important words of its own to the understanding of colonial religion.

The plays derive from a sixteenth-century notebook attributed to the Nahua author Fabián de Aquino and discovered by Leeming. All indications suggest that Aquino composed his notebook and its various religious texts outside the direct supervision of ecclesiastics. This is significant as it shows what Aquino decided to record regarding Christianity and how he interpreted and familiarized himself with its teachings. The plays provide uncommon examples of how Indigenous culture made its way into Christian doctrine to form various understandings and interpretations of the faith. Philological analysis and cultural background play an important role in revealing such examples. Yet they can threaten to steal the show. Here, however, Leeming welcomes into the discussion European antecedents and influences and effectively moderates the voices of both sides of the Atlantic, allowing Aquino's notebook to be a product of Indigenous and European cultures. This allows for a clearer understanding of the many parallels and differences between the two, while also recognizing the impact of Indigenous worldviews, the colonial context, and Franciscan mission and religious discourse in giving birth to the Aztec Antichrist. And all presented by Leeming in a friendly yet astute prose that beckons the reader to continue turning the pages.

The plays and their creative, sometimes unorthodox depiction of Christianity speak loudly of the contributions figures like Aquino could make to the Christianities circulating in the Americas. Moreover, viewing Aquino as a “cultural broker” and placing his work in the colonial and religious context of the early to mid-sixteenth century allows Leeming to view Aquino's Aztec Antichrist and apocalypticism in general as a possible response to the cultural and physical trauma experienced in the wake of Spanish colonization. This, then, adds another important

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perspective when considering why Indigenous people adopted Christianity. After all, perhaps the greatest role of religion is to bring order and meaning to the seemingly chaotic and unexplainable aspects of life. And, perhaps, for Aquino, what was needed to fill such a bill was an Aztec Antichrist.

Future research will continue to add additional voices and perspectives into the conversation discussing colonial religion. But this book has something to say now that is well worth our attention. So let us sit back and listen to Leeming and Aquino tell the story of Aztecs and Antichrists.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK owes much to a small cohort of mentors and advisors who have devoted the most time to reading and commenting on the first incarnation of *Aztec Antichrist*. Initially this was limited to Louise Burkhart, David Carrasco, and Walter Little; later on, William B. Taylor graciously accepted an invitation to read it and offer critical feedback. To these four must be added two anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript for the University Press of Colorado, offering both positive feedback and extremely helpful guidance on further improving the work. To these individuals I express my profound gratitude and admiration. From among the above, it was the encouragement of Carrasco and Taylor in particular that inspired me to rewrite major portions of the original work; what you will read here is less a revision than a new attempt on my part to tell the story of Fabián de Aquino and the Nahuatl Antichrist plays he copied into his notebook some four and a half centuries ago.

I also wish to express my gratitude to my early collaborators and teachers of Nahuatl, beginning with Galen Brokaw and Pablo García, then, fortunately for me, including Joe Campbell and eventually John Sullivan. *Huei tlamachtiani* Joe Campbell is the silver bullet for any *nabuatlahto* lucky enough to be on the receiving end of his generous helpings of advice; I am doubly lucky for being able to call him friend as well. It was with John Sullivan that I had my first intensive classroom instruction in Colonial and Modern Nahuatl at the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas in Zacatecas, Mexico, in the summer of 2009. John played a pivotal role in my decision to begin PhD studies upon my

return to the United States. Others who I have encountered along the way have aided me with their wisdom, insight, and encouragement. Principle among these are Mark Christensen, valued colleague and friend, as well as Fritz Schwaller, Frances Karttunen, Barbara Mundy, Camilla Townsend, Kelly McDonough, Lori Diel, Allison Caplan, Justyna Olko, Nathaniel Tarn, David Tavárez, Magnus Hansen, Julia Madajczak, Gordon Whittaker, Berenice Alcántara Rojas, Mario Sánchez Aguilera, Bérénice Gailleman, Agnieszka Brylak, Molly Bassett, Magnus Pharaoh Hansen, and many other generous colleagues at the annual meetings of the Association of Nahuatl Scholars. Many of these offered helpful suggestions regarding how to translate difficult passages from Aquino's plays. Working with this group over the past decade has been both an honor and a whole lot of fun. Despite all the help these individuals have offered, any errors in this book, be they in translation or analysis, are my own.

Thanks also to John O'Neill and Vanessa Pintado at the Hispanic Society of America in New York who aided me in accessing the archives that yielded Fabián de Aquino's devotional notebook back in 2014. I am also deeply grateful to the administration of The Rivers School, where I have been on the faculty for twenty-five years, for their unflagging moral and financial support. Special thanks are due to former Head of School Tom Olverson, Patti Carbery, Joan Walter, current Head of School Ned Parsons, and Dean of Faculty Leslie Fraser who have been important supporters of my work since the late 1990s when I first arrived at Rivers. Among the faculty, my friends and colleagues David Burzillo, Amy Enright, and Meghan Regan-Loomis have been treasured sources of encouragement and willing listeners for years; Darren Sullivan has offered the frequent wisecracks that have kept me humble (and laughing); for all of this I am very grateful.

Finally, to my family, *notlazohpiltzitzinhuan ihuan notlazohnamictzin*, I offer and dedicate this book. It bears your presence in every page and between every line since it was your support, patience, and love that formed a steady foundation enabling me to think and write (and rewrite) over the past ten years.

ca cenca namechnotlazohtilia amehuantin annocozqui annoquetzal

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A NOTE ABOUT TRANSLATIONS

UNLESS otherwise indicated, all translations from Nahuatl or Spanish to English are my own. The Nahuatl orthography of the primary texts reproduced in this book has not been altered or standardized according to modern conventions but appears here as it does either in the unpublished manuscripts or in the modern editions from which they are taken. However, when Nahuatl words appear outside of the primary texts as part of the book's narrative, the standardized ACK orthography (Andrews, Campbell, Karttunen) proposed by John Sullivan and Justyna Olko is employed. A more detailed discussion of my approach to translating the two Nahuatl Antichrist plays precedes their presentation in the appendix of this book.

PROLOGUE

Discovery

Toptli, Petlacalli

Injn tlatolli itech mjtoaia: in aqujn vel quipia in jhtacatlalotli, piatalotli:
anoço in jtla aqualli ijxpan muchioaia: aiac vel qujnextiliaia, vel toptli, vel
petlacalli: mjtoaia. Vel quipia in tlatolli, anoço tenemjliz.

—“THE DEEP BASKET, THE CHEST OF REEDS”

This proverb used to be said about the one who carefully harbored words that were whispered in secret, words that were entrusted to them, or something bad that happened in their presence; this person would not reveal it to anyone; they used to call this person “a deep basket, a chest of reeds”; they closely guard what is said or how people behave around them.

—FLORENTINE CODEX, BOOK 6¹

MANHATTAN is an unlikely place to encounter an Aztec Antichrist—or any kind of Aztec for that matter (Antichrists are perhaps more readily found).² The fact that the Aztec Antichrist in question lived four and a half centuries ago and has lain forgotten since then only adds to the oddity. This book is my attempt to unravel this mystery and to explain how it was that in the decades following the Spanish Invasion of the Americas a native speaker of Nahuatl (the language of the Nahuas) came to write the first American translation of the medieval legend of the Antichrist.

On the morning of July 15, 2014, I stood outside of the Hispanic Society of America, waiting for the building to open. The air’s heaviness augured another hot New York City summer day. While waiting, I took a picture or two, eager to document this next stop on my pilgrimage to a number of important archives and libraries. My area of research is the encounter of religions in early colonial Mexico; on that morning I was hunting for primary source material for my next research project. The Hispanic Society’s collection of colonial Latin American books and

manuscripts held a number of items written in my research language, Nahuatl, a language I had struggled for over a decade to learn. Finally in possession of the linguistic “key,” I was looking for historical “chests” to open. As the sun crested over the apartment blocks of the Upper West Side, the door swung open, and I stepped into the museum’s cool, marble interior.

Precontact Nahuas used the expression *in toptli, in petlacalli* (the deep basket, the chest of reeds) to describe a person who carefully guarded secrets entrusted to her. Linguists refer to expressions like these as *difrasismos*, or semantic couplets, sayings where a pair of words render a third, figurative meaning. In addition to describing a trustworthy person, *in toptli, in petlacalli* is suggestive of something hidden, mysterious, or valuable. In precontact times, Nahuas carefully wrapped sacred deity effigies or ritual objects in cloth bundles called *toptli* and stored their most valuable possessions—delicate quetzal plumes or finely woven cloth mantles—in deep reed baskets called *petlacalli*. As a researcher interested in the Nahuas before and after contact, I have come to view early colonial Nahuatl manuscripts as kinds of *toptli* or *petlacalli*. Many remain “bundled” in their original leather covers, their “secret words” hidden not just behind the sealed doors of the archive but also behind the veil of language. Seen in this light, translation becomes the act of opening these textual reed chests, revealing the fine quetzal plumes of Nahuatl writing.

Once inside the building, I performed the necessary ritual preparations common to visiting archives and special collections: deposit belongings in locker, remove laptop and pencil, show ID, sign in, fill out call slip, settle at table. While waiting, I took in my surroundings. The Hispanic Society’s reading room shared certain features with all such spaces: long oaken tables for researchers, walls lined with shelved volumes behind glass, and staid portraits gazing down from above. Here, the entire ceiling was an expansive skylight, which obviated the need for lamps on the tables and filled the room with bright, filtered light. Large standing fans cycled back and forth lackadaisically, slowly stirring the thick, warm air. The room was heavy with that unmistakable smell of the archive: a faint mustiness that is the product of dust, leather, and paper. This smell always triggers in me a sort of Pavlovian response, an intellectual salivation that precedes the arrival of the materials I have requested from the vault.

According to the catalog, the item I had requested that morning bore the title *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción*, “sermons and miscellany of devotion[al works].” Although the title was given in Spanish, the manuscript was written almost entirely in Nahuatl, the lingua franca of the Mexica Empire at the time of first contact. In the years immediately following the Spanish-Mexica War of 1519–1521, Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian friars had collaborated with native speakers to produce written materials in Indigenous languages as part of their effort to indoctrinate

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the Indigenous population. These included *doctrinas* (catechisms), *sermonarios* (collections of sermons), *confessionarios* (manuals for the administration of confession), as well as other works of a devotional nature: miracle stories, lives of the saints, prayers and songs, and even works of religious theater. The vast majority of these were written in Nahuatl; those that survive to this day constitute a corpus that numbers in the thousands of pages.

Initially, I had been drawn to the study of colonial Nahuatl upon discovering the existence of this corpus and realizing that there were few scholars equipped to read and interpret such a massive trove of documentation. Over time, my growing facility with Nahuatl eventually led to graduate studies in historical anthropology. I had grown increasingly fascinated by the way early colonial translations of Christianity had resulted in the proliferation of a diverse array of Indigenous “Christianities,” hyper-local manifestations of the colonizers’ religion.³ Up until relatively recently, Nahuatl sermonarios and doctrinas had been ignored by scholars in favor of the more visually appealing colonial painted codices, whose brightly colored glyphs and gods made for irresistible publishing. However, in the 1980s, some scholars had begun to pay more attention to the corpus of colonial Nahuatl religious writing, breaking open an invaluable new vein of data relevant to the religious experiences of colonial Indigenous peoples. Since this turn was still relatively new—and since friars and their Nahua colleagues had been so prolific in their literary production—there was still much uncharted territory in the field. My pilgrimage that summer was an attempt to find materials that had been overlooked, in hopes that I might discover a text suitable for translation and analysis.

After a short wait, a librarian approached my table holding the *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción* in her hands. I was immediately struck by the size of the item. It was a tiny, bound manuscript measuring roughly 4 inches by 5 1/2 inches. Though diminutive in size, it was of considerable length, reaching three hundred folios, or six hundred pages if each side of the leaf is counted. A modern binding, probably added by a collector in the nineteenth century, replaced the original leather one, now long lost. Gingerly opening its cover, I was treated again to the smell of paper and must. Wormholes and tidelines (signs of water damage) marred many pages. I noticed the characteristic stains caused by the oils from human fingers that darkened the most well-worn of its folios. These telltale signs not only hinted at the antiquity of the manuscript, they spoke of the many generations of Nahuas who had turned its pages, read its contents, and uttered its prayers. At what point the notebook had left Indigenous hands I did not know. I wondered how many people had turned its pages in the years since the manuscript first showed up in the historical record (in 1869) and was then acquired by the Hispanic Society (in 1914). In all likelihood the number was small. As to how many of those few could read and

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comprehend Nahuatl, surely the number was smaller still. Outside of a couple of references I would eventually dig up in nineteenth-century auction catalogs, neither the manuscript nor its contents had ever been mentioned in the time between its acquisition and the moment I called it from storage on that hot summer day precisely one hundred years later.

On the inside of the front cover of the manuscript a short description of its contents was pasted (see figure P.1). I later traced its authorship to noted German bookseller Karl Wilhelm Hiersemann (1854–1928). The description he wrote was included in the catalog for the auction at which the Hispanic Society purchased the manuscript in 1914. Evidently someone had simply cut out the relevant material from the auction catalog and pasted it onto the manuscript's front endpaper. Written in Spanish it read,

Aquino, Fabián de, order of Saint Francis, sermons and miscellany of devotion[al] and moral [works] in the Mexican language, Nahuatl. Manuscript from the end of the sixteenth century, with the signature of the author repeated various times.⁴

Taken at face value, this seemed to suggest that the author of this devotional notebook was a Spaniard and a member of the Franciscan order. However, this picture was immediately clouded by Hiersemann's next statement. He went on to observe that this Aquino's handwriting was *más india que española*, "more Indian than Spanish," and certain of the texts he redacted contained *titulos en un latin muy bárbaro, y castellano no menos corrompido*, "titles in a barbaric Latin and no less-corrupt Spanish." Further complicating the picture, Hiersemann concluded with these words,

Friar Fabián was probably one of the Indians who related the ancient histories of the Mexicans to Father Bernardino de Sahagún, and in this sense we could have here a kind of supplement to the immortal work of that wise Franciscan. It would merit, in any case, being examined and published by a courageous Americanist.

Here was an arresting statement. The name Bernardino de Sahagún looms large over both Nahua history and the history of early colonial Mexico. Sahagún was the famed Franciscan who, from the 1540s through the 1570s, worked with a team of Nahua scholars and scribes to interview surviving members of the nobility in an effort to record the history and culture of the Nahua people before it was lost. His *Historia universal [or general] de las cosas de Nueva España* has been called history's first ethnography, an encyclopedic work in twelve books that is more commonly known as the Florentine Codex after the library where it currently resides. Simply put, there are few works as consequential to our understanding of Nahua culture as the work Sahagún oversaw. That the manuscript I held in my hands may have

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MANUSCRIPT MS 3
1 Aquino, Fabian de, o. S. Franc., sermones y miscelánea de devoción y moral en lengua mexicana (nahuatl). Manuscrito de fines del siglo XVI, con la firma autógrafa del autor varias veces repetida. En-8 menor (13,5×9,5 gm.). Encuad. moderna de m. piel. 300 hh. fols.

Manuscrito de letra mas india que española, y de puño muy menudo, bastante legible, con algunos titulos encarnados.

El Conde de la Viñaza describe el presente manuscrito (pág. 261, núm. 846): „Sermones en mexicano. M. S. en-8, de muy mala letra, al parecer del siglo XVII. — Falta el principio, y la foliatura es moderna. — Contiene 300 hojas. — Hasta la hoja 55 llega la primera parte, que parece sea un tratado de moral. — Siguen después otras muchas piezas, entre las cuales se ven unos diálogos ó coloquios. — Es una verdadera miscelánea y no un Sermonario. — (Colección del P. Fischer.) — Icazbalceta, Apuntes, adiciones manuscritas, número 181.“

Es, en verdad, una colección de textos homiléticos, devotos y morales, en lengua mexicana, con titulos en un latin muy bárbaro y castellano no menos corrumuido. Basten como muestras: Sto. Anprossio, in tomum tuam, ad tempum, sacripicium, beneticos, saceltotes etc. El libro entero es de puño y letra de un fraile franciscano, indio converso, que á repetidas veces firma con su nombre en religion, Fabian de Aquino (hh. 55, 66 etc.) Una firma en la última página dice Fabian de . . . ; el resto es ilegible.

Citamos aquí algunos tratados con sus titulos originales:

De terribilitate iudicii finali et penie iuterni. h. 37—55.

Nican mitohua yntlahitla colpolloliztli ynitoca ynidulgencias y huan perdones (sobre las indulgencias obtenidas en 1560 por) totlacotatzin fray Francisco de Zamora, ministro general de la órden. h. 67—70.

Las hh. 71—115 parecen contener miráculos de la Virgen (estos sen miraglos acadus del maria de rosario yntonic del dicipulo). Sin duda composición original.

En las hh. 131—150 hay profecias de las Sibilas, Elias, Enoc etc. Al mismo tema se refiere un tratado que empieza en la h. 155 y termina en la h. 187. Parece que un hermitano habla de los demonios y especialmente de los antiguos dioses mexicanos: Dlaloc (sic), Dezcatlipoca (sic), Vitzilopochtli, Quetzalcovatl, Otontecuhtli, Civacovatl etc. y de las costumbres de los Mexicanos, mercaderos, alcahuetes, hipócritos etc.

H. 188—212: Historia de Adam.

Siguen pláticas de la Virgen Maria, pasos sacados de los Evangelios y otras historias del Nuevo Testamento. La ultima pieza (h. 297—300) es la historia de un cierto Martin: Cetlacatl nemiya ytoca mardin . . .

Sin duda este libro muy curioso incluye aun muchas particularidades relativas á los Mexicanos antiguos, á fuera de aquellas pocas que hemos podido comprender nosotros con nuestras escasas luces acerca de la lengua. Probablemente fr. Fabian fué uno de los Indios que contaron al P. Bernardino de Sahagun las historias antiguas de los Mexicanos, y de esta manera tendríamos aqui una especie de suplemento á la obra inmortal del sabio Franciscano. Mereceria, en todo caso, ser examinado y publicado por un americanista valiente.

Aunque la letra sea mala, el texto resulta bastante bien legible é inteligible para quien entiendo la lengua mexicana. El papel está poco apollillado, sin que por eso el texto hubiese sufrido daño perceptible.

FIGURE P.1. Catalog description of the contents of Fabián de Aquino, *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción y moral en lengua mexicana*. Hispanic Society of America MS NS 3/1, ca. 1550–1600. Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

been written by one of Sahagún's Indigenous informants was a graduate student's dream come true. If Hiersemann were correct, I had stumbled upon a text of singular importance, a potential trove of information. Even though he was probably incorrect about Aquino being a Franciscan—Indigenous people were almost never admitted to the order in those early years—these few scraps of information left behind by Hiersemann were tantalizing. Time would tell whether or not I would be the “courageous Americanist” he called for. Nevertheless, I eagerly began to explore the contents of Aquino's devotional notebook.

Roughly halfway through my survey I came upon something that caused me to stop short. At the top of the verso of folio 169 was a word written out in letters larger than all the others, the writer's equivalent of using bold font. The word was “Tezcatlipoca” (see figure P.2). Tezcatlipoca, whose name means “Smoking Mirror” in Nahuatl, was an important deity, or *teotl*, of the Nahuas prior to contact with the Spanish. The quintessential trickster, he was the deity the Spanish most closely associated with the devil. It is common knowledge that in the sixteenth century Catholic friars had carried out aggressive campaigns of extirpation, seeking to expunge the Nahuas' gods from the collective memories of their newly converted subjects. What was Tezcatlipoca doing in this notebook filled with Christian devotional texts?

On the next page, another caption read “Huitzilopochtli,” the patron deity of the Mexica, god of the sun and of war. It was Huitzilopochtli who had guided the ancestors of the Mexica from their mythical place of origin in Aztlan to the lacustrine site of their future capital, Tenochtitlan. With growing curiosity, I continued turning pages and found the names of four more Mexica *teteoh* (plural of *teotl*, “deities”): Tlaloc (god of rain and lightning), Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), Cihuacoatl (Serpent Woman), and Otontecuhtli (Otomí Lord) (see figure P.3). The colonial Nahuatl religious literature I have worked with often makes general references to these deities, but almost never by name, as if merely writing them would somehow ensure a dangerous perpetuation of their presence in the lives of Christianized Nahuas. Instead, the friars consigned these figures to hell, declaring them to be demons or perhaps *mictlan tecuanimeh*, “wild beasts of Mictlan [among the dead].” In the preaching and teaching of the friars, deities like Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli had been banished from the vocabularies and memories of Christianized Nahuas. Or so was the friars' intention. The presence of these six *teteoh* here in the pages of a Nahuatl-Christian miscellany was a true oddity.

Backtracking in search of the beginning of this text and some kind of explanation, I came upon another heading that I had missed the first time through: *Qu[i]toz antex̄pō* (see figure P.4). Right away I recognized the cluster of letters “x̄pō” as an abbreviation for *Cristo* (Christ), one that was commonly used by Franciscan writers

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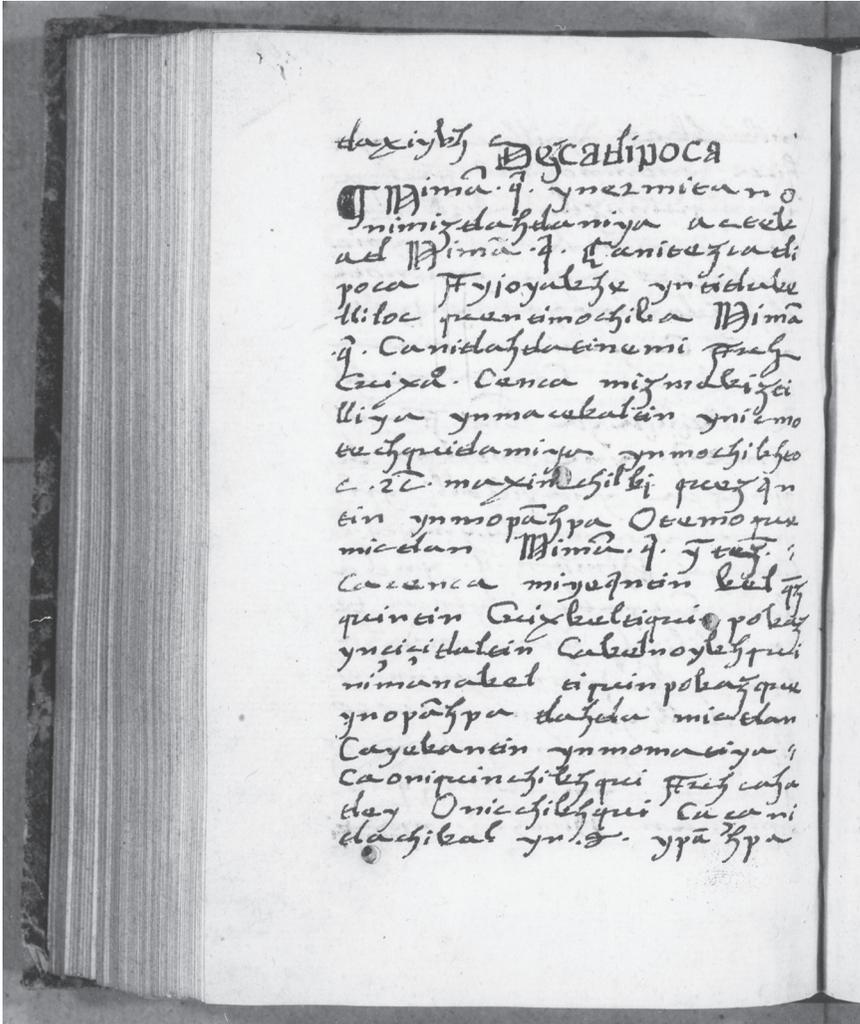


FIGURE P.2. Tezcatlipoca. Fabián de Aquino, *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción y moral en lengua mexicana*. Hispanic Society of America MS NS 3/1, ca. 1550–1600, f. 169v–170r. Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

and the Nahuas trained by them. But the addition of *ante-* here resulted in something entirely different: “Anti-Christ.” This, too, took me by surprise. Although the Antichrist was a prominent figure in medieval Europe, I could not recall a single instance in colonial Nahuatl religious literature where this harbinger of the Apocalypse was mentioned. The word preceding “Antichrist” was the Nahuatl verb

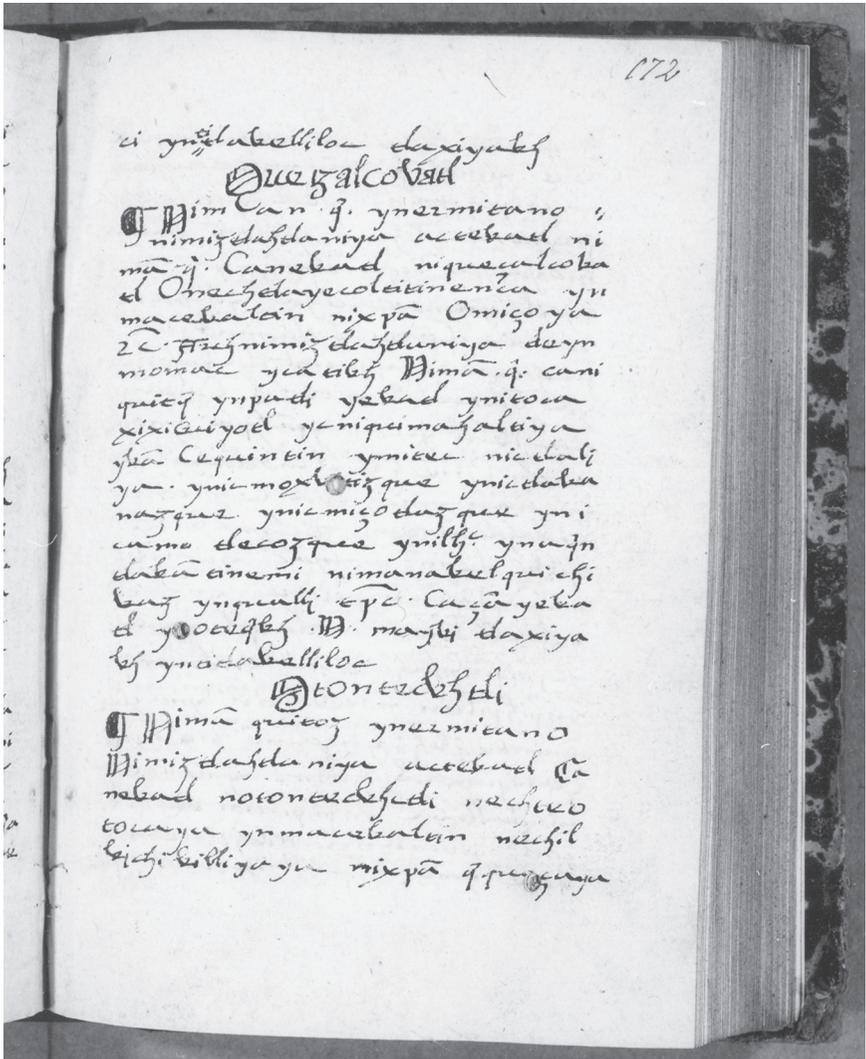


FIGURE P.3. Quetzalcoatl and Otontecuhtli. Fabián de Aquino, *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción y moral en lengua mexicana*. Hispanic Society of America MS NS 3/1, ca. 1550–1600, f. 171v–172r. Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

quitoz, “he/she will say it.” It appeared that this Antichrist was saying something. After some time, I was able to decode his speech. Over four centuries ago, a Nahuatl writer, perhaps the person named Fabián de Aquino, penned the following words for this mysterious, Nahuatl-speaking Antichrist:

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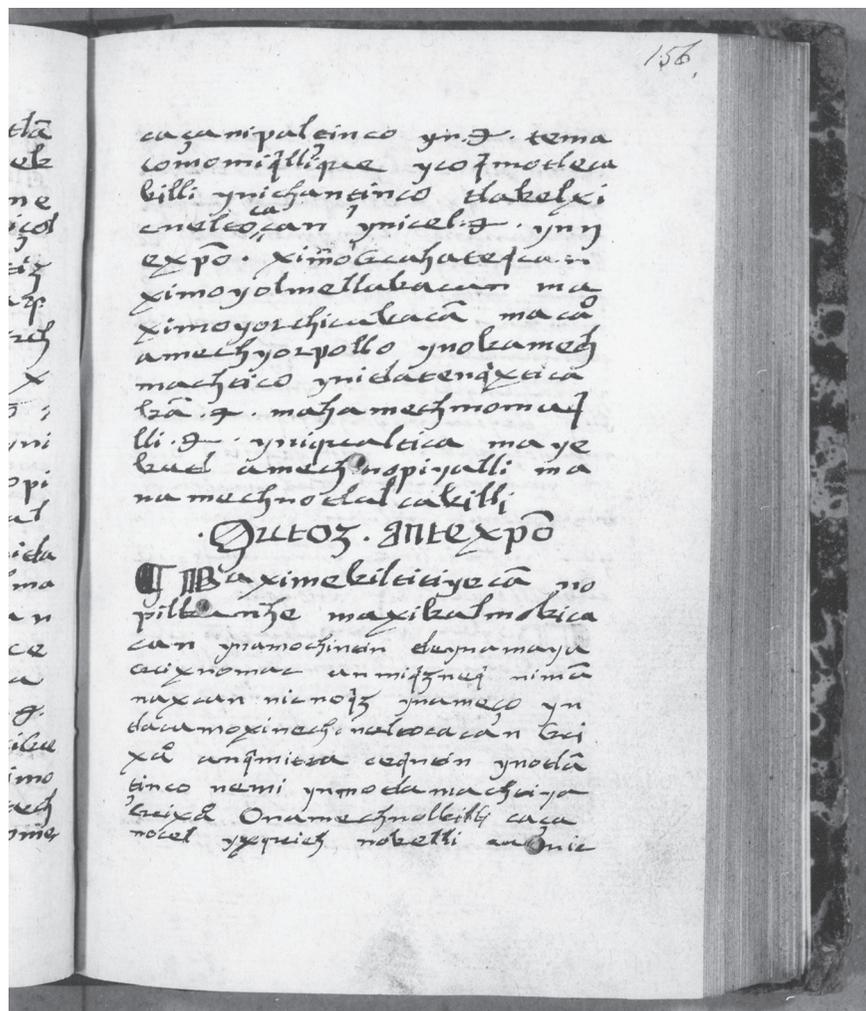


FIGURE P.4. *Quitoz antecristo*, “Antichrist will say.” Fabián de Aquino, *Sermones y miscelánea de devoción y moral en lengua mexicana*. Hispanic Society of America MS NS 3/1, ca. 1550–1600, f. 155v–156r. Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

Come, all of you. What are you doing? Do you want to die by my hand? Right now I will spill your blood if you do not believe in me. Have you not seen that those living with me are rich? Did I not say to you that I alone am all powerful, that I made all that lies growing? Do not behave foolishly! Why did you dismantle my home? In times past you served me well when you slashed open the chests of your captives and when you bled yourselves. And you, O rulers, why do you diminish your way of living?

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Why do you abandon your women? You used to have many mistresses! Now, devote yourselves to all the women, however many you want. This will really satisfy me. And also you women, I really wonder at you. You do not paint your faces anymore, you do not cover yourselves with feathers. And now, what has happened to you? Who has confused you? Devote yourselves to everything that you used to devote yourselves to! O my children, didn't you used to honor my words? I am your deity, your ruler! I am Christ! (f. 156r–157r)

The Antichrist that I began to glimpse in the pages of the Hispanic Society manuscript bore many of the recognizable traits of his European cousin. He was a powerful and frightening figure who spouted threats of violence, sought to deceive Christians into worshipping him as the Christ, and exercised evil powers granted to him by Satan to work false miracles. However, the author of this American incarnation had given him a decidedly Indigenous hue. His lament “Why did you dismantle my home?” suggested the author may have identified him as one of the *Nahua teteoh* (deities) targeted by the friars for erasure. Shortly after the military conquest, the Spanish authorities attempted to end the state religion of the Mexica, razing temples to the ground, burning deity images and sacred books, and most significantly, putting an end to the public performance of ritual sacrifices that were central to the maintenance of the cosmic and political order of the Mexica imperial state.

The ease with which Aquino's Antichrist slipped into this new Indigenous role was due in part to the plasticity of the legend itself. In Europe, much of its popularity was due to the ease with which it could be molded to fit whatever frightening or threatening circumstances captivated the public's interest at any given moment. At times the Antichrist was associated with the Jews, the Turks, despotic rulers, or even epidemics like the Black Death. Whoever had conceived of this Nahuatl adaptation seemed to have grasped the malleability of the Antichrist legend and deftly molded it to fit the local conditions of early postcontact Mexico. This figure was a powerful Indigenous being, an “Aztec Antichrist,” who violently opposed the evangelizing efforts of the friars and sought to draw converted Nahuas back to the religious practices of their ancestors. He urged men to reject the friars' insistence on monogamy and to return to the traditional practice of polygyny, and he pleaded with women to once more don paint and feathers as traditional adornments. Demanding a complete rejection of the new regime and its state religion, he cried, “Devote yourselves to everything that you used to devote yourselves to!” and proclaimed, “I am your deity [teotl]!”

The questions raised by this Aztec Antichrist soon began to fill my head and spill over into the pages of my own notebook. If the Antichrist was virtually absent from the official discourses of the friars, how had an Indigenous person like Aquino

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learned of the legend? Was Aquino even the author, or was it instead some friar? What significance might this legend have had for Indigenous people living in the midst of what surely qualified as apocalyptic times? And, most tantalizing of all, in light of the friars' relative silence on the subject, how should one interpret a Nahuatl-speaking Antichrist? Should it be seen as a sign of submission to the dominant regime, an act of resistance, or something in between? Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the matter of Indigenous appropriations of the colonizers' discourses, of the many creative ways that colonized subjects undermined, critiqued, countered, and reinterpreted the very narratives that were used to disenfranchise and dominate them. "Hidden transcripts," counter-narratives, and subtexts abound in the Indigenous-language documentation that has been the subject of much revisionist historiography since the 80s.⁵ Assuming that Aquino was the author, the text I was holding was clearly the product of the process of transculturation, whereby cultural material from a dominant culture is appropriated and invested with new meaning by members of a subordinate culture. This could explain the seemingly incongruous blending of Christian legend with references to pre-Christian deities like Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, and Quetzalcoatl, not to mention polygyny, face painting, and heart sacrifice.

Returning to the six Nahua deities, I could now see that they, too, were speaking. So were other people that I had not noticed before: a pagan oracle known as a sibyl, the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Enoch, one group of converts and another of martyrs, and a person simply called *ermitano* [*sic*] (hermit). Reading further, I observed that the six deities' speeches were followed by additional individuals who also seemed to be speaking. However, these were human beings drawn from the ranks of Indigenous society: a group of six *tletlenamacaqueh* (Indigenous priests), a *tonalpouhqui* (ritual specialist), a *ticitl* (Indigenous healer), a *pochtecaatl* (merchant), and a *tlahtoani* (Indigenous ruler). Every time one of these people spoke, their words were preceded by statements like *niman quitozque*, "then they will say," or *niman valquiçazque*, "then they will enter." With this it became clear that what I was looking at was the script of a play, that statements like *niman valquiçazque* were stage directions, and Tezcatlipoca, Tlaloc, the merchant and the healer, were characters in a lengthy production that seemed to center around the Antichrist, the Final Judgment, and a character called "Hermit."

I was very familiar with Nahuatl religious theater. My mentor, Louise Burkhart, was (and remains) one of the leading authorities of colonial Nahuatl theater. Just a few years prior to my discovery, she and her colleague Barry Sell completed a decade-long project that published nearly all of the known, surviving examples of what they termed "America's First Theater."⁶ I knew that soon after the military conquest, Spanish friars had worked with their Nahua colleagues to compose

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religious plays in Nahuatl for the purposes of engaging Nahua audiences and inculcating them in the basics of Christian doctrine. Thanks to Sell and Burkhart's work, I also knew that literate Nahuas soon appropriated this genre and began writing their own religious plays and that these Indigenous productions made ecclesiastical authorities nervous, eventually leading the church to ban them outright in the early eighteenth century.⁷

In the hands of Indigenous writers, Nahuatl religious theater—like all writing by Indigenous people—could quickly become the vehicle for the transmission of unofficial religious discourses. While these discourses rarely contradicted Christian doctrine overtly, they often altered and undermined the official message in more subtle ways. Just the act of casting Indigenous actors in the roles of Christ, Mary, and the saints and giving them lines that conform to Indigenous manners of speaking “indigenized” the message. These weren't merely Christian performances by Indigenous but performances of Indigenous Christianity (or *Christianities*). This was a dangerous reality that the church struggled to control throughout the entire colonial period. Unauthorized religious writing by Indigenous people was officially banned as early as 1555, and additional restrictions continued throughout the colonial period. All of these were largely unsuccessful. Wielding their literacy, Indigenous writers inverted the claim of Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija that “language is the instrument of empire.” Rather, once it had broken free from the control of colonial authorities, Indigenous writing demonstrated how language could also be the perfect instrument for pushing back against empire's hegemonic claims.

Although there was no signature at the end of the play, it was easy to see that it was written in the very same hand as texts Fabián de Aquino had himself signed. Many questions remain about the identity of this person and the precise nature of his role in composing what turned out to be not one but two Nahuatl Antichrist plays. After months of research, I came to conclude that not only were these plays likely the earliest surviving presentations of the Antichrist legend in the Americas but also that they could very well be the earliest surviving play scripts in the whole of the Americas in any language—Nahuatl, Spanish, or otherwise.

It strikes me as fitting to use the Nahuas' expression *in toptli*, *in petlacalli* to describe this mysterious Fabián de Aquino. As an educated member of the Indigenous noble class who copied, translated, and composed religious texts for the spiritual nourishment of his people, he was indeed someone who “carefully harbored” words that were “entrusted to him.” And his notebook, too, was *in toptli*, *in petlacalli*, since its covers guarded those “secret, entrusted” words. During Aquino's day, only those with the kind of education attained at one of the friars' schools could access the meaning of words written with the Roman alphabet. These words remained safely hidden deep within their Nahuatl “ chests of reeds,”

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unintelligible to those who ultimately snatched the notebook from Nahua hands, secreted it out of Mexico, and auctioned it off to the highest bidder. The discovery of Fabián de Aquino's devotional notebook enables me to present my unbundling of Aquino's "secret words" for the first time since his notebook left the possession of its Indigenous protectors.

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