

The Slippery Earth

*Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue
in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*

Louise M. Burkhart

F
1219.76
.R45
B87
1989

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

A15041459322

The University of Arizona Press, Tucson

cosmic conflict was between order and chaos, for Christians between good and evil. Both cast light against darkness, life against death, wisdom against madness, restraint against excess. But only in Christianity was it conceived as a struggle between moral absolutes.

Because the Christian deity is omnipotent *and* benevolent, theodicy, or the defense of that benevolence in light of the existence of evil, is a difficult and unavoidable task for Christian theology (Russell 1981:16–17). The problem of evil involves Christianity in a basic contradiction with no solution; over the centuries the problem has been masked, though never really solved, by two interrelated but conflicting trends of thought. One is a flirtation with dualism within an over-arching monotheism; the other is the denial of evil's ontological status.

Exposure to dualist philosophies during Christianity's formative centuries left lasting effects. Persian Zoroastrianism had divided the cosmos into equal and opposite forces of light and darkness. Greek cosmic dualism of the Orphic and Platonic sects set spirit against matter. Jewish dualism, manifested especially in Essene and apocalyptic thought, involved a moral struggle between good and evil enacted for or in the human soul (Russell 1981:32–33). All of these oppositions became incorporated into Christianity. In the New Testament the figure of Satan, the power of darkness, appears as a counterprinciple to Christ, the power of light (Russell 1977:222). The Desert Fathers, founders of Christian monasticism and early formulators of Christian doctrine, espoused a severe asceticism that debased the material and the fleshly while exalting the spiritual. This brand of matter-spirit dualism had little to do with Christ's teachings and much to do with the ascetic Hellenistic sects competing with Christianity for adherents (Bullough 1973:111; Dodds 1965:32–35). The moral struggle for the individual soul became a basic tenet of Christian doctrine, expressed in the belief in individual demons and guardian angels as well as afterlife beliefs.

However, mainstream Christian theology always asserted the superiority of God's power and his creations to the evil forces, leaving by the wayside fully dualist sects like Gnosticism and Manichaeism. Christianity evolved as a "semidualist" religion, characterized by a dynamic and creative tension between monism and dualism (Russell 1977:228). The pendulum never stopped swinging: the various Catharist heresies of medieval times ascribed to so profound a matter-spirit dualism that they denied the Incarnation—their Christ would not have befouled himself in earthly flesh.

Scholastic theology, led by St. Thomas Aquinas and following St.

GOOD AND EVIL, ORDER AND CHAOS

Nahua and Christian alike dwelt at the center of a vibrant universe where struggles of cosmic scale acted themselves out. For Nahuas the basic

Augustine's example, devised an ill-fitting monist disguise for the matter-spirit dualism so inextricably entrenched in Christian thought. Morality was equated with ontology, such that the most real and the most good were the same. This scheme had its roots in Plato's idealism. A moral/ontological hierarchy ranged from God—pure spirit—down through angels, humans, and animals ranked according to intelligence, then plants, inanimate objects, gross unformed matter, to total nonbeing (Russell 1968:53–54). To ascribe only limited "reality" to matter and evil is patently absurd, but the scheme provided so useful a solution to so many problems that the scholastics preferred to devote their skilled logic to concealing its flaws rather than to devising something else. The equation of evil with matter was preserved, while both were deprived of their status as cosmic forces in opposition to spirit and good. Only one universal, eternal principle existed. God was Being itself, and all lesser forms of being derived from this single source. The challenge of dualist philosophy was explained away, and a weapon was forged against heretics.⁹

Corollary to this scheme is the privation theory of evil. Since all being is good, nothing can be evil in itself. Evil exists only in the absence of good, in the turning away from good and from God. Evil increases with distance from God. Goodness, divine harmony, is the natural state of the universe; evil disrupts that harmony not as an active force but as an absence of things or conditions which ought to be present. Disorder cannot exist as an active principle, since it is merely a negation of order. The origin of evil is the will. Ideally, all creatures should choose to turn toward God, but in order for there to be a choice the option of evil has to exist. Devils and sinners have turned away from good: they are evil in that they have chosen not to be good. Since this is their own choice, evil cannot be blamed on God (Aquinas 1969; Russell 1968, 1984).

Here the cosmic struggle is not an opposition of forces but the yearning of all creatures toward their Creator, toward the perfection of the ultimate Being. The existence of free will demands of humans that they make choices; the individual must struggle to choose the good against the influence of those who have not. Life is a battle, whether one inclines toward dualism or toward the scholastics' solution. Evil cannot be denied completely. Indeed, folk belief in the Devil waxed particularly strong at the end of the Middle Ages in spite of the scholastics' arguments (Russell 1984). Under one guise or another, Christians retained their belief in the cosmic opposition of good and evil.

Nahua cosmic dualism was not cast in terms of good and evil. Despite

the many dual aspects of Nahua thought, its theology was monist. A single divine principle—*teotl*—was responsible for the nature of the cosmos, negative aspects of it as well as beneficial ones. It was a polytheist monism: that is, the divine principle manifested itself in multiple forms, some ambivalent, some expressing opposite principles in their different manifestations (Russell 1977:251). More accurate would be Klor de Alva's term *teoy-ism* (1979:7) (from *teoyotl*, the abstract form of *teotl*), since *teotl* could manifest itself in ritual objects, images, and human deity-impersonators—forms not necessarily consistent with the Western conception of deity.

Negative forces were not construed as enemies of goodness, nor as a turning away from good, but as essential, functional components of the cosmos. Disharmony was as necessary as harmony. Creative, ordering forces and destructive, chaotic forces were two sides of the same coin, each dependent upon the other for its functioning. There was no permanent structure, no ontological hierarchy or Great Chain of Being, but rather a process or a movement.

Order was temporary and incomplete, with chaotic forces dwelling at its interstices and peripheries. Order and chaos, structure and anti-structure, were subsumed within a larger pattern. Life came from death, creation from destruction. Unordered matter was the stuff of creation—it was not deprived of ontological status. Entropic forces eroded order, but they were themselves fertile and energizing, providing the substance for new establishments of order. This is the same sort of mythical chaos which Smith (1978:97), commenting on Eliade's work, describes as a chaos which is never overcome but "remains as a creative challenge, as a source of possibility and vitality over against, yet inextricably related to, order and the Sacred."

This is the dialectical dualism typical of Mesoamerican thought, as described by B. Tedlock (1982:42, 145–62) and D. Tedlock (1983:217; 1985:63). The opposites complement each other, existing within an overarching unity or synthesis. They cannot be reduced to an opposition between positive and negative. They contain elements of each other; thus, there is no need for mediation between them. The dualist philosophies that contributed to Christian theology posited no such synthesis; Christianity tended to assert unity by denying rather than incorporating the second element. This is an analytical dualism: dualities clash with each other. There can be mediators between them, but they cannot be resolved into a whole.

In the Nahua universe, how to align oneself with good and to avoid evil was not the basic problem of human existence. Rather, one had to

* discover the proper balance between order and chaos. One had to establish and maintain the order, continuity, and stability necessary for social and cultural survival while capturing just enough fertilizing energy to ensure biological survival. Order had to be forcibly wrested from chaos and then paid for periodically through ritual sacrifices. Contact with chaos could not be severed since it was the source of life. Graulich (1983) views this cycle of debt and repayment in terms of sin and retribution. Zantwijk presents a valid criticism of this interpretation, suggesting that what Graulich sees as sin would be better described as "the basic Mesoamerican concept of the 'holy war,' the creative struggle, the essential Mesoamerican struggle for life. . . ." (Comments, in Graulich 1983:583). This universe is not structured in moral terms. Human moral codes provide essential guidelines for interacting with and enduring cosmic forces, but the forces themselves are not subject to these rules. What is good or bad for humans may be meaningless to the higher powers.

The friars' writings portray a universe divided between powers of good and evil, light and darkness. Images of warfare and struggle abound. The basic goodness of creation is asserted, but mainly as a foil for the corrupting forces that plague it. For example, Fray Domingo de la Anunciación teaches that God made the world good but, because of our sins, it is against us and makes war on us (1565:56r). This attitude reflects the friars' self-conception as crusaders bringing light to the pagans, battling against the pagan gods/demons. Their emphasis on celibacy and poverty correlated with a strong inclination toward matter-spirit dualism. Here they bear perhaps a closer resemblance to the Apostles and the Desert Fathers than to the scholastics who were their more immediate forebears. Evil flourishes in their world, though less as a force in itself than as personified in its many minions: the Devil, the flesh, worldliness, sin, and sinners. In their teachings, evil appears more in the concrete than in the abstract, more in the adjective than in the noun: evil beings rather than Evil itself.

While Nahuatl is replete with terms expressing disorder and decay, it has no word for evil in the abstract sense. Terms for good and bad, right and wrong exist but are relatively concrete. "Good" was usually translated as *cualli*, derived from the passive of the verb *cua* 'to eat.' A second term used to mean "good" or "right" was *yectli*, literally meaning something finished or completed (Andrews 1975:487). Their opposites are simply their negations: *acualli* and *ayectli*. These terms had moral implications in indigenous usage. Expressions such as *cualli inyo* 'their hearts are good'

and *yecnemilice* 'possessor of a righteous life' seem too common and too idiomatic to be Christian inventions. However, these terms, and their more abstract derivatives *cualliztli* and *yectiliztli* 'goodness,' (or *acualliztli* and *ayectiliztli* 'badness'), were not universal evaluative categories into which all phenomena could be placed. The friars treat them as if they were.

Wickedness or perversion was often translated by the term *tlahuelilocayotl*, or *tlahueliloc* for the wicked person or in an adjectival sense. This corresponds to the abstraction "evil" no better than *acualli* does. Its root, *tlahuelli*, means anger; the term denotes frenzy or raving madness—an uncontrolled, disorderly state of emotion—rather than badness itself.

The friars insisted on Christian categories of good and evil but ended up expressing them in terms of the order-disorder dialectic. This was the only way of making their value judgments meaningful to the Nahuas, yet it effectively "Nahuatized" what they were trying to say. By placing great emphasis on certain things, they could work on altering content—for example, the punishment of sinners after death—but they were still operating within what was essentially a Mesoamerican universe.

GODS, DEVILS, AND HUMAN OWLS

The friars accepted the indigenous concept of deity, *teotl*, as a term for their own deity and an adjective for "holy." They merely insisted that there was only one being, named Dios, or the three of the Trinity (a concept extremely difficult to explain in Nahuatl) to which the term applied. Epithets pertaining to the major indigenous deities, Tezcatlipoca in particular, were applied to the Christian God if they were compatible with his character: *Ipalmohuani* 'He by Whom One Lives,' *Tloque Nahuaque* 'Possessor of the Near, Possessor of the Surrounding,' *Ilhuicahua Tlalticpaque* 'Possessor of Heaven, Possessor of Earth' (see Burkhart 1988). The terms *ángel* and *santo* were introduced to describe holy beings of lesser status to whom *teotl* could not properly be applied.

The indigenous deities did not, as a group, represent moral authority: there were tricksters, harlots, and drunkards as well as virtuous priests and benevolent grandmothers. The same being could incite immoral behavior and then afflict the wrongdoer. Deity, like creation itself, embodied order and disorder; the priestly culture-bearer Quetzalcoatl was forever challenged by the dissolute sorcerer Tezcatlipoca.

Christian teaching attempted to redefine *teotl* in terms of moral order while placing all the anti-structural aspects into the category of demon. Although the concept of *teotl* was adopted, all the individual beings who had been called by that term had to be stripped of their divine status. The friars, for whom devils were very real creatures, assumed that the indigenous deities were devils—not products of pagan ignorance but minions of the Prince of Darkness. And Tezcatlipoca was Lucifer himself (Burkhart 1988; Sahagún 1563:82r, 1579b:10v, 1953–82:I, 38; Weckmann 1984:I, 242).

Idolatry was occasionally explained in nondiabolic terms: for example, in Motolinia (1971:299), in Sahagún's appendix to his book on the gods (1953–82:I) and in Valadés (in Palomera 1962:226–27). The natives may have invented on their own the worship of images and the deification of natural objects, but even so these practices led to their enslavement by the Devil. The usual view, and one professed by Sahagún in other writings, attributed to Satan the origin of Nahua religion (Burkhart 1988; Klor de Alva 1982a; Sylvest 1975:48).

This diabolism exercised a strong hold on the Europeans in Mexico. Olmos was so convinced of the Devil's presence among the Indians that he translated into Nahuatl Fray Martín de Castañega's 1527 treatise on superstition and sorcery, a text based on the notion of the diabolic pact (Baudot 1972, 1979, 1983:244). Devils are everywhere in Fray Juan de Grijalva's chronicle of the Augustinians (1624). Not only the friars held this view but also conquistadors and colonial officials. Díaz del Castillo (1956:78, 206) calls the native gods devils and Tezcatlipoca the god of hell. In the *Procesos de indios* (1912) and *Relaciones geográficas* (Paso y Troncoso 1905–06), the Nahua gods are routinely referred to as devils or demons.

The terms *diablo* and *demonio*, and the names Lucifer and Satan, were introduced. However, a Nahuatl term was needed as well, one which would indicate nondivine status, malicious character, and dangerous power. *Tlacatecolotl* was selected for this function in the 1530s if not earlier.¹⁰ *Tlacatecolotl*, a compound of *tlacatl* and *tecolotl*, means "human owl." *Tecolotl* was a generic term for owl, and also referred specifically to the horned owl; the *Florentine Codex* describes its horns of feathers. The name was onomatopoeic; the owl's hoot was heard as "tecolo, tecolo, o, o" (Sahagún 1953–82:XI, 42). The term *tlacatecolotl* was not coined by the friars but referred to a particularly malevolent type of *nahualli*, or shape-changing shaman who took the form of an animal alter-ego during his or her trances. The *tlacatecolotl* inflicted sickness and death on people while

in the shape of a horned owl (López Austin 1967:87–88; Nicholson 1971:441–42).

Motolinia (1971:152), in his chapter on omens, describes the omen of the owl as the *tlacatecolotl*: a "man who goes about at night wailing or frightening [people], a fearful nocturnal man." According to Mendieta (1980:94), this phantasm was given the owl's name because the owl was an augury of evil. In Mesoamerica the owl is a bird of the underworld, emissary of the underworld deities (López Austin 1967:88; Tedlock 1985:158).

The *tlacatecolotl* was associated with the night, the underworld, sorcery, ghostly apparitions, human afflictions, even horns—all features of Christianity's Devil. And it was not a *teotl*. Of all indigenous concepts, this one was undoubtedly the best choice. It solved the major problem of deifying the native gods by identifying them with something which, though having superhuman powers, was essentially human. It played a small enough role in native ideology that it could take on new meanings more readily than something that was a major focus of attention. It also diminished the Devil into something less than the immortal Adversary—it better described someone who had a pact with that being. But since there was no intermediate, mediating category in Nahua thought between god and human, to parallel Christianity's good and fallen angels, the friars had to choose either a divine or a human being to represent both their Devil and the indigenous gods; apparently they preferred the latter option in the interest of discouraging idolatry.

In his *Historia* (1905–08:VII, 316; 1981:I, 334), Sahagún expresses the opinion that the term *tlacatecolotl* was used improperly for "devil" because it properly applied to a "necromancer or witch." Sahagún was concerned about the perpetuation of non-Christian beliefs. His stated opposition to the use of the name Tonantzin 'Our Revered Mother' for Mary has often been cited: the term was used for an indigenous mother goddess; Mary was better called *inantzín dios* 'God's revered mother' (1981:III, 352). However, in the doctrinal texts prepared by him and his students, the term *tlacatecolotl* is widely used, as is Tonantzin for Mary.¹¹

The Nahuas accepted the term *tlacatecolotl*. In indigenous writings the native deities are frequently referred to as *tlatlacatecolo* (plural of *tlacatecolotl*) as well as *diablos* and *demonios*, just as native artists learned to depict them like Christian devils (see Fig. 4). In the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976:143, 164, 207, 226, 227), the deities Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Huit-



Figure 4. Four priests sacrifice a prisoner of war to "the gods," here represented by a European-style demon. Illustration in the Florentine Codex, Book VIII, 34v. (Photo from Sahagún 1979.)

zilopochtli, Itzcueye, and Camaxtli are all called *tlacatecolotl*. Chimalpahin (1889:25) calls Tezcatlipoca the great *tlacatecolotl* (implicitly identifying him as Lucifer).

Other titles were used on occasion. The Tzitzimime or Coleletin, female or androgynous numens of the western sky, the twilight, and the end of the world, were lesser deities of unpleasant character and monstrous appearance. The application of their names to the devils was sufficiently standardized that Molina (1970:I, 45r) includes them after *tlacatecolotl* in his gloss for *Diablo*. The idea of deities descending through the western sky into the underworld looked to Christian interpreters like the fall of the devils from heaven to hell; this reinforced the connection of the Tzitzimime and also gods of the underworld with the devils (*Codex Ríos*



Figure 5. The mazacoatl. Illustration in the Florentine Codex, Book XI, 82r. (Photo from Sahagún 1979.)

1964: plates 3, 68; *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* 1964:4v, 18v; Weckmann 1984:I, 242).

The Devil was occasionally given descriptive names such as *mictlan cue-tlachtl* 'the wolf of hell' who drives away Christian sheep (Sahagún 1563:58v); or *mictlan coatl* 'serpent of hell' (Cornyn and McAfee 1944:324; Escalona n.d.:157v, 233r, 235r). In the *Psalmody christiana* the dragons vanquished by Saints Philip and Martha, and Lucifer's manifestation as the *draco* of Revelation 12:7 vanquished by Saint Michael, are all called *maza-coatl* 'deer serpent' (Sahagún 1583:79r–79v, 128r, 179v). This term describes a type of snake so named because it had horns like a deer's antlers. It was so large, according to the *Florentine Codex* description, that it could eat deer (Sahagún 1953–82:XI, 79).¹² Molina also attributes horns to it (Molina 1970:II, 50r). Sahagún's informants list three different types of *maza-coatl*; the third, a smaller variety, was used in an aphrodisiacal potion—it caused a man to ejaculate so much that he shriveled and died (Sahagún 1953–82:XI, 80). In appearance, this large horned creature was the closest thing to a dragon in Nahuatl animal taxonomy. The horns, the serpent identity, and the association with sexual excess were features appropriate to a Christian demon. Figure 5 reproduces the *Florentine Codex* illustration of the larger variety of *mazacoatl*.

Though the friars drew names for the devils from native ideology, in didactic art demons appear in forms consistent with medieval and early Renaissance art in Europe (Russell 1984; Weckmann 1984:I, 212-13): goat-like human-monsters with horns and tails, naked, sometimes female. They considered the (to them) horrid appearance of native deities an indication of their demonic nature, but these were guises of beings who really looked like ordinary devils.

SUMMARY

The Nahuas were the subjects of an intensive missionization program which aimed to transform their culture into a utopic Indian Kingdom of Christ. They all became Christians, at least nominally, but failed to yield so easily to the friars' attempt at cultural alchemy. In various ways, with or without the collusion of the friars, they managed to turn Christianity into something of their own.

The friars were obliged to accommodate their teachings to native thought categories to a greater degree than they—or their apologists—dared to admit, and even greater than they may have realized. The Indians' inability to become the model Christians their missionaries hoped for, a failure the latter attributed to the Devil's power or the Indians' weakness, was in part a result of poor communication. A significant portion of Christian doctrine was simply lost in translation.

The major obstacles to communication in the moral realm stemmed from a fundamental contrast between the monist, relatively amoral world view of the Nahuas and the dualist, morally charged world view of the missionaries. The Nahuas were not predisposed to accept good and evil as absolute principles, the material world as an evil place opposed to a morally positive spiritual plane, or the individual moral condition as the most important attribute of human beings. The friars viewed the Nahuas as being predisposed to Christianity because of the simplicity of their lifestyle, judging them by superficial attributes interpreted through a Christian screen and ignoring essential aspects of their thought system.

Terms chosen to express basic Christian moral concepts fostered continuity between traditional religion and the Nahuas' version of Christianity. The concept of *tlatlacolli*, or damage, usurped the place of sin, changing the latter concept from the cause of universal human guilt into a basic principle of the cosmic process. Good and evil were phrased metaphori-

cally in terms of the principles of order and chaos, but, since the Nahuas did not view good and evil as universal principles, such phrasings lost this aspect of their metaphorical load and became references to reality as the Nahuas already conceptualized it. The Nahua concept of deity, *teotl*, was retained in its essence if not in its object; the Devil was diminished to the status of a sorcerer—superhuman but a poor rival for Europe's Lucifer.