

## [Edwards on Christensen, 'Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan'](#)

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**Mark Z. Christensen.** *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. xiv + 318 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8528-0.

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### **Multiple Catholicisms in Colonial Mexico**

Traditionally, scholarship on the indigenous adoption of Catholicism in colonial Latin America has focused on the Spanish clergy's difficulties in introducing the European religion to the native population. This Catholicism was understood by earlier generations of scholars to be monolithic and highly prescriptive, and indigenous conversion was viewed as hampered by the persistence of traditional religion. In the last few decades, however, historians have begun to reconsider the processes of conversion and the ways that indigenous religions and Catholicism mingled in the region during the colonial period. Kenneth R. Mills's *Idolatry and Its Enemies* (1997), for example, examined the juxtaposition of Catholic and traditional practices via campaigns to end idolatry. He showed that there was a diverse range of religious beliefs in the mid-colonial Andes. In his new publication, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms*, Mark Z. Christensen has expanded our understandings of indigenous religious beliefs in central Mexico and the Yucatan. Christensen's study reflects Kevin Terraciano and Lisa Sousa's comment after reviewing recent historiography that "general statements about the status of Indians under Spanish rule should be avoided." [1] In the realm of religion and indigenous Catholic beliefs and practices, Christensen argues, variations were the rule rather than the exception.

The centerpiece of Christensen's *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms* is the comparative analysis of seventy-one religious texts (forty-one in Nahua and thirty in Maya), including baptismal and confessional manuals, testaments, and catechisms, which were produced between 1546 and 1855. As missionaries arrived in Mexico, they began learning indigenous languages and developing ways to write them in the Roman alphabet. By the mid-sixteenth century, Nahuatl and Maya dictionaries and grammar had been produced and could serve as a basis for translating or composing religious texts. Some texts mention indigenous participation in the translation or writing process, while others contain orthographic clues of native authorship.

Christensen's comparative analysis of these religious texts reaps the reward of "uncommon insights into how Nahuas and Mayas interpreted and applied Catholicism" (p. 13). Perhaps the most important insight gained from this study is the diversity of indigenous Catholicism in colonial Mexico, and the significant participation of indigenous religious aides in shaping multiple Catholicisms. Even though numerous extant religious texts were based on the same or similar European texts, "rarely did two Nahuatl or Maya texts contain identical messages or interpretations of the religion.... The

purpose of this book is to illustrate how Nahuatl and Maya religious texts both prescribed and reflected various forms of Catholicism throughout colonial central Mexico and Yucatan" (p. 3).

Christensen gives substantial attention to native religious assistants, called *fiscales* in central Mexico and *maestros* in the Yucatan. Chapter 2 categorizes texts according to their authorship and intended readership: category one texts, which were published works produced by clerics and/or their indigenous aides for both Spanish and indigenous readers; category two texts, which were unpublished works written by ecclesiastics and their native aides and intended for local audiences; and category three texts, which were "unpublished, unofficial texts written by natives for natives" (p. 84). Category one texts were the most likely to be orthodox, and category three texts tended to be least orthodox. While this may not be a surprise, the chapter's lengthy discussions of the production of these texts, the significant roles of indigenous religious aides, and the utilization of the texts in colonial Mexico make it the most compelling part of the book.

Unfortunately, chapter 3's detailed comparative analysis of specific texts is the weakest aspect of *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms*. The discussions of the Ten Commandments and other doctrinal and prescriptive texts will be interesting and appealing to graduate students and scholars who work on indigenous-Spanish relations and religious history, but the detail of these sections may overwhelm the nonspecialist reader.

Later sections on texts relating to baptism and confession further strengthen Christensen's argument about the range of religious understandings in the region and the critical roles of indigenous ecclesiastical aides. Time, place, and intended audience informed guides to baptism and confession and, in turn, shaped Catholicism, sometimes in quite distinct ways. Overall, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms* paints an interesting and compelling picture of the diversity of religious beliefs in colonial Mexico and adds an important layer to our understandings of indigenous-Spanish relations over time.

Note

[1]. Kevin Terraciano and Lisa Sousa, "Historiography of New Spain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*, ed. José C. Moya (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

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