

Spanish Colonialism & Catholic Syncretism in 17th Century Mexico

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From the outset of Spanish exploration of the Americas, church and state wedded to conquer the native populations economically, politically and spiritually. Several factors played significant roles in this marriage of convenience. Spain had recently won a political and religious war against Islam in its own European territory. Only a few centuries earlier the Spanish Inquisition sought to eliminate indigenous practices from its population. And a series of Crusades joined military and religious fervor together in hopes of conquering the Holy Land. Political and religious power also brought economic power. Whoever controlled territory also controlled trade routes. In addition, in Palestine the economics of pilgrimage, especially during the Middle Ages, increased the coffers of the Franciscans, the designated Roman Catholic custodians of the Holy Land. England and Spain engaged in battles for prominence on the seas and, for the Spanish, the discovery of gold, coffee, chocolate and spices in the ancient Aztec, Mayan and Incan cultures of the Americas provided ample impetus for colonization.

The *conquistadors* brought missionaries – Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians and Jesuits – along with them. Almost immediately the Dominicans built cathedrals and universities, indicating their commitment to educating the native population for ministry. Yet disentangling the religious motives from the political, social and economic ones proved difficult, as people of those times tended not to compartmentalize their lives and actions in the way we do today. Even the missionaries looked first to the practical aspects of life in the New World and only secondarily to theological implications of their treatment of the indigenous populations and of the environment.¹ With the notable exception of Bartolome de las Casas in Hispaniola, most of the Spanish apparently avoided thinking about the Other in whose lands they were technically guests. James Hillman, in his psychological study of aggression, conquest and war, claims that war is normal, inhuman and sublime, and that religion itself is war.

It is belief that brings us to war...Regardless of whom or what you believe in, belief as a psychological phenomenon urges action...The stronger the belief, the more action takes over, the more motivated we become and the surer and narrower our justification for what we are doing. Even believers in peaceful non-violence assemble, march, and demonstrate...When the claims of any divinity such as Jahweh or Allah or a self-divinized leader...or an abstracted idea of a people, a class, a race or a nation is believed to be the prime reality, truth, goodness and power, it will fight against the claims of all others to the same rank and status. The borders which singleness of belief defends may be both geographical and doctrinal; in either case transgressors shall be expelled, imprisoned, converted, or put to death.²

¹ Noll, Mark A., *The Old Religion in a New World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002, p. 42.

² Hillman, James, *A Terrible Love of War*. New York: Penguin Press, 2004, pp.181-182.

In 15th through 17th century Mexico, the Spanish *conquistadors*, missionaries and settlers practiced all four of these methods of dominance on the indigenous peoples. In an apparent contradiction, they also inter-bred, creating *criollo* and *mestizo* classes. Perhaps this pragmatic approach contributed to the public order that Spain successfully maintained for so long in her American colonies. Close interrelations spurred cultural syncretism in language, where indigenous vocabularies and poetic diction entered the civil discourse, just as musical forms and cultural practices permeated the festal ceremonies of the missionaries, defining a distinctly different Catholicism than that practiced in Spain. Catholic theologians, particularly the missionaries located in the midst of this forced conversion, often responded as unreflectively and brutally as their secular counterparts. Their primary focus on action and practice delayed and diluted the theological reflection that would require them to treat natives and African slaves, and the corresponding progeny of intermarriage – *criollos* and *mestizos* – as fully human. A modern philosopher, Hannah Arendt, posits that this addiction to action creates a banal sort of evil. By contrast she describes the positive results of thought.

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever comes to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it? ...And is not this hypothesis enforced by everything we know about conscience, namely that a “good conscience” is enjoyed as a rule by only really bad people, criminals and such, while only good people are capable of having a “bad conscience”?³

Regardless of the failures of the institutional church in Mexico, many *criollos* and *mestizos* entered monasteries. Most sexual relationships between the early European colonizers and the indigenous population remained outside the bonds of legal marriage. While Mexican society tolerated both adultery and common law marriage, mixed race children rarely enjoyed social and economic privileges. Beauty, talent and native intelligence might buy a position at the viceregal court, providing them with opportunity and visibility. However, short of military service for men and marriage for women, options outside the church remained few. Larger cities supported many convents and monasteries, under a variety of monastic rules, for both the impoverished worldly and the deeply religious.

At the end of the seventeenth century in Mexico City, according to Gemelli Carreri, who was there in 1698, there were twenty-nine religious communities of monks and twenty-two of nuns. The population of the city numbered some twenty thousand Spanish and *criollos* and some eighty thousand Indians, *mestizos* and *mulattos*. We should not be surprised by the numbers of people in religious communities...for the majority of monks and nuns the cloister was a career, a profession...the temper of the century was religious, as ours is scientific and technical. The function of the cloisters was threefold: religious, in the narrow sense of the word, as exemplified in the austerities of the Carmelites; worldly, in providing an occupation to thousands

³ Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978, p.5.

of men and women who otherwise would have found themselves without a livelihood; and societal: in welfare, charity and teaching.⁴

Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1648-1695) exemplifies this syncretism of European intellectualism and American spirituality, with its many crossings of secular and sacred boundaries. An illegitimate *criolla*, born Juana Ramirez, she held many identities: a self-educated member of the viceregal court in Mexico City, a beautiful virgin who maintained close and erotic friendships with both men and women, a talented musician who entertained the clergy and intelligentsia of her day, a speculative theologian who came to faith long after she entered the convent, an astute intellectual whose library gained the respect of philosophers and scientists both local and overseas, a poet of startling imagery and diction, a financially adept manager of her house's affairs, a submissive servant of the church who eventually gave up her extensive library and ceased writing, and finally, a humble middle-aged woman who died in her convent while nursing her sisters during an influenza epidemic.

Primarily affiliated with the Jesuits in Mexico, Sor Juana found initial support for her poetry from an order noted for their cultural sensitivity. Her Jesuit confessor steered her to the liberal convent of San Geronimo when a trial novitiate with the Carmelites discouraged her. As Sor Juana became increasingly outspoken and respected by the intellectual community in Mexico, her clerical supporters gradually withdrew or outright betrayed her. Sor Juana's problems with the church hierarchy resulted from her blending of secular and sacred poetry and music. Although common practice in Reformation Europe (John Donne wrote both holy and profane sonnets, employing highly erotic imagery to describe the Trinity; Johann Sebastian Bach chose a chivalric love song to set the chorale text "O Sacred Head, Sore Wounded", the centerpiece of his *St. Matthew Passion*), Catholic Spain suspected heresy, particularly from a woman so capable of defending her theology. Sor Juana composed a form of musical poetry called *villancicos*, which enacted the stories of feast days, although in a secularized manner, with indigenous musical instruments and dance.

The business of the Iberians in the New World wasn't just colonialism but conversion; one strategy for converting the Indians was diverting them, so missionaries incorporated aspects of indigenous language and ritual into Christian ceremonies to lend high spirits to the rites that the natives would appreciate. The frequent humor and call-and-response elements of the sacred polyphonic songs, or *villancicos*, were looked down on by stuffier Europeans as threatening to "turn the church into a theater" (as quoted in scholar Rui Vieira Nery's excellent, erudite booklet essay).⁵

⁴ Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 117.

⁵ Stereophile, "Villancicos y Danzas Criollas de la Iberia Antigua al Nuevo Mundo (1550-1750)", Stereophile Online [home page online]; available from <http://www.stereophile.com/recordingofthemonth/504rotm/>; Internet; accessed 21 October 2004.

While the churches in Mexico encouraged, and often commissioned, Sor Juana to write these plays, they objected to her theology, her use of profane imagery in the context of sacred music and her insistence on investing her secular poetry with sacred themes. Like La Virgen de Guadalupe, who appeared more than a century before Sor Juana's birth, the implications of Sor Juana's poetry formed the roots of a liberation theology that threatened both the social and clerical status quo.

Sor Juana wrote her *villancicos* for specific churches in various Mexican cities. They each have peculiar flavors, reflecting the diction and culture of the city where they would be performed. Some poems are macaronic: mixtures of Spanish and Latin. Others contain language similar to the African tribal dialects spoken in the United States' South. Still others employ vivid abstractions and intellectual puzzles. *Villancicos* require a refrain, sung by cast and audience, but Sor Juana sometimes disguised her refrains through word order inversions. Because people dance to *villancicos*, they typically utilize $\frac{3}{4}$ time, with percussion instruments or handclapping to keep the beat and to indicate syncopation. Christmas provided the most popular excuse for a festival of poetry, music and dance, but many of her *villancicos* celebrate the Marian Feasts (Birth, Annunciation, Visitation and Assumption), as well as those of several European females, likely the patron saints of the churches who commissioned them. Popular for two centuries – from about 1550 to 1750 – the *villancico* form incorporates musical and rhythmic elements from Western Europe, West Africa and the Americas in a unique blend of instrumental sound and textual concept that has not been replicated since. One of the successes of colonialism, these

cultural imports of the Iberian colonizers mixed fruitfully with the native legacy of the Indians and the traditions of transplanted Africans. In music, the boundary between Old World and New—as well as the barriers between high and low, sacred and secular—were being blurred out of both convenience and mutual fascination. The colonization was a forced (and often brutal, exploitative) marriage, but it produced the rich musical inheritance of Latin America...you hear vivid examples of instrumental dances and madrigal-like songs from Spain, Portugal, Mexico, Peru, and Guatemala. Spiced with Afro-Indian rhythms and textures, complex European polyphony takes on a new flavor, the sonic gumbo conveyed by viola da gamba, harp, guitars, fiddles, an exotic battery of percussion, and occasional brass and organ, as well as by solo and ensemble voices.⁶

Recently Western culture has rediscovered the poetry and music of 17th century Spanish America. Among the surprises are these *villancicos* and Sor Juana's vast array of sacred and secular poetry.

⁶ Stereophile, "Villancicos y Danzas Criollas de la Iberia Antigua al Nuevo Mundo (1550-1750)", Stereophile Online [home page online]; available from <http://www.stereophile.com/recordingofthemonth/504rotm/>; Internet; accessed 21 October 2004.

One of Sor Juana's *villancicos* from a Christmas cycle illustrates her ability to combine abstract and concrete imagery in vivid language. In it she merges intimations of crucifixion and death with incarnation and birth. Her repetition of the four elements and inclusion of local natural events (ice, snow, hoarfrost, volcano) would likely appear unorthodox to clerics. The elements alternate to counteract the Christ Child's state: fire warms Him in the cold, air restores His breath, water quenches the volcano's flames and earth provides His bed. Sor Juana hides the refrain in this *villancico* and, as it varies from verse to verse, it was most likely sung by the cast of the play rather than by the entire audience. *Villancico* verses alternate among soloists, allowing for contrasting vocal texture as well as diction and structure. The performance of *villancicos* verges on the ecstatic. They are quite rowdy. The text of this particular one however, sets a stately and tender tone for the opening song (and dance) of the cycle.

Nativity of Our Lord, Puebla, 1689, First Villancico (concluding lines)

Since Love is shivering
in the ice and cold,
since hoarfrost and snow
have ringed him round,
who will come to his aid?

Water!

Earth!

Air!

No, Fire will!

Since the Child is assailed
by pains and ills
and has no breath left
to face his woes,
who will come to his aid?

Fire!

Earth!

Water!

No, but Air will!

Since the loving Child
is so burning hot,
that he breathes a volcanic
deluge of flame,
who will come to his aid?

Air!

Fire!

Earth!

No, water will.

Since today the Child
leaves heaven for earth
and finds nowhere to rest
his head in this world,
who will come to his aid?

Water!
Fire!
Air!
No, but Earth will!⁷

Ten years earlier Sor Juana wrote a *villancico* cycle for the Feast of the Assumption (August 15th) in Mexico City. Her many Marian Feast song cycles indicate the prominent role that veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary played in the religious life of 17th century Mexico. Likely all Marian Feasts evoked La Virgen de Guadalupe, who represents a sister to the poor and oppressed native population. This poem opens with a brief stage set, identifying the singers as African women ('two Guinean queens'). Its refrain uses rhyming words and phrases from a West African tribal language. Chosen for their sound and not their sense, these words also alter the rhythm. With their accents on the third syllable they form trochees, giving the effect of forward motion to the dance. For her verses, Sor Juana created a slang-like lingo that privileges the female African voice. Clearly slaves, these women abandon their tasks in favor of worship. Their word play amuses: associating cakes (ladyfingers) with the fingers of Our Lady, and punning on sweet potatoes, chick peas and sweet chicks. The poem ends in a startling metaphor, describing Mary's assumption to heaven in terms of fireworks emanating from the thurible of incense in the church. The stars on the mantle of La Virgen and the starlike exploding fireworks combine in the stars of heaven, with Mary as Regina Coeli.

Feast of the Assumption, City of Mexico, 1679, from the Eighth Villancico, a medley

At the sacristan's voice
there slipped into the church
two Guinean queens
with faces of jet.

Seeing the gaiety,
they thought they would help
and, setting baskets down,
sang the boys this song:

Refrain Ha, ha, ha!
Monan vuchila
he, he, he,
cambule!
Gila coro,
gulungu, gulungu,
hu, hu, hu!
Menguiquila,
ha, ha, ha!

Verses Fanny, this mo'nin'
we's full of glory,

⁷ Trueblood, Alan S., *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 136-137.

don' les sell ladyfingers
o' them almon' kisses.
We've sumpin' better:
Mary's fingers to kiss!
Ha, ha, ha ...!

Le's get a move on
an' skip the kitchen.
We won' sell no sweet 'taters
o' chick-peas to the gals
'cause plenty of sweet chicks
will be comin' to the fair.
Ha, ha, ha ...!

There never was a slave
as devout as that Handmaid
of the Lawd. She done serve Him
with her heart an' soul,
an' fo' bein' sech a good slave,
they natch'ly set her free.
Ha, ha, ha ...!

See her there cleavin'
the sky like a rocket,
like a pilla' of smoke
shootin' up from the incense,
sittin' down in the stars
at the right hand of the Lawd.
Ha, ha, ha ...!⁸

Theologically riskiest, her cycle for Saint Catherine of Alexandria's feast day focuses on the intellectual and artistic talents of a young girl, who dies a virgin. Catherine, one of the most popular saints in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, was martyred in the 4th century, on a wheel. She appears in **The Golden Legend**, the most likely source of Sor Juana's information. Catherine must have been particularly attractive to Sor Juana, since they shared many characteristics and talents. The account of Catherine's victory over the Wise and Prudent Men of her community can easily be read as Sor Juana's challenge to the church hierarchy in Mexico. In fact, this is one of her last cycles. Two years later, to ensure her survival, she would recant her theology, cease writing completely, give away her extensive library and collection of musical instruments, and retire to a cloistered life. With that knowledge we might read this *villancico* as a prophetic statement of her vindication. Sor Juana herself, and her poetry, is *sui generis*. She has no counterparts in her era, either in the New World or the Old. Her writing and music lay disregarded and unread for nearly three centuries before Mexican poets and musicologists interested in Latin America discovered and popularized it.

Santa Catarina, 1691, *Villancico* VI

⁸ Trueblood, Alan S., *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 128-129.

Refrain

Victor! Victor! Catherine,
who with enlightenment divine
persuaded all the learned men,
she who with triumph overcame
- with knowledge truly sovereign -
the pride and arrogance profane
of those who challenged her, in vain.
Victor! Victor! Victor!

Verses

There in Egypt, all the sages
by a woman were convinced
that gender is not of the essence
in matters of intelligence.

Victor! Victor!

A victory, a miracle;
though more prodigious than the feat
of conquering, was surely that
the men themselves declared defeat.

Victor! Victor!

How wise they were, these Prudent Men,
acknowledging they were undone,
for one conquers when one yields
to wisdom greater than one's own.

Victor! Victor!

Illumination shed by truth
will never by mere shouts be drowned;
persistently, its echo rings,
above all obstacles resounds.

Victor! Victor!

None of these Wise Men was ashamed
when he found himself convinced,
because, in being Wise, he knew
his knowledge was not infinite.

Victor! Victor!

It is of service to the Church
that women argue, tutor, learn,
for He who granted women reason
would not have them uninformed.

Victor! Victor!

How haughtily they must have come,
the men that Maximin convened,
though at their advent arrogant,
they left with wonder and esteem.

Victor! Victor!

Persuaded, all of them, with her,
gave up their lives unto the knife:
how much good might have been lost,
were Catherine less erudite!

Victor! Victor!

No man, whatever his renown,

accomplished such a victory,
and we know that God, through her,
honored femininity.

Victor! Victor!

Too brief, the flowering of her years,
but ten and eight, the sun's rotations,
but when measuring her knowledge,
who could sum the countless ages?

Victor! Victor!

Now all her learned arguments
are lost to us (how great the grief).
But with her blood, if not with ink,
she wrote the lesson of her life.

Victor! Victor!

Tutelar and holy Patron,
Catherine, the Shrine of Arts;
Long may she illumine Wise Men,
she who Wise to Saints converts.

Victor! Victor!

Sor Juana's particular life reflects the development of the institutional church in the Spanish colonies of the Americas. Alternating between openness and oppression, the church hierarchy reacted in fear of powerful indigenous voices, especially those of intelligent women. Nevertheless, the spirituality of the Catholic church adopted many customs of Latin American culture. Some of these traditions permeate the faith of Catholics today, from intense veneration of La Virgen, to Christmas posada processions, the quinciniere rite of passage celebrations, and Dia de los Muertos ceremonies. None of these practices remains exclusive to the Hispanic community. Rather, the traditions spread through ethnic Catholic churches into mainstream culture, such that their religious attributes no longer predominate. The legacy of religious education in Latin America, established with the rapid formation of universities and the establishment of monastic orders for primary and secondary education, also continues in the present day, both within Latin America and among immigrant communities in the United States. Although church and state have subsequently divorced, strong connections remain. Catholicism dominates in Latin America, where a majority retain a devout faith. Liberation Theology developed in Latin America as a response to those governments' consistent failures to promote justice, freedom and opportunity. Martyrs of that movement includes several Maryknoll Sisters and the Jesuit Bishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero. As a consequence, the Roman Catholic Church still holds a privileged position as moral critic of the state in Spanish America.

⁹ Peden, Margaret Sayers, trans., *Poems, Protest and a Dream: Selected Writings of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz*; New York: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 188-191.

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