
The thought of "reviewing" my own book makes me uneasy. After all, how objective can I be with something that cost me nine years of my life in research and writing? After the gestation period and the subsequent birth, I have to admit that I like the offspring that I have produced.

Back in the 1980s, while traveling throughout Latin America, and particularly Mexico, I started to notice buildings, religious rituals, and Spanish words that reminded me of what I had learned in my medieval studies. I began to understand that sixteenth-century Mexico was really a continuation of the Middle Ages on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and that in order to understand the Hispanic experience I had to apply a sort of medieval template; then I could see that experience through the medieval lens that formed what we call New Spain (present-day Mexico).

The book is a direct outcome of those interests and experiences. In addition, I realized that the book of Revelation (the Apocalypse), and millennial thinking, was a large part of the mind-set of the missionaries. The mendicant friars (Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians) who evangelized the New World a century before the arrival of the first Puritans were anticipating a proximate end of the world and/or a golden age of religious renewal and reform prior to the return of Christ for the last judgment. Political historians of America have almost totally overlooked this crucial aspect of the "conquest" and Christianization.

As an art/architecture historian and a student of liturgics, I wanted to see if I could demonstrate and "prove" my thesis by visual and ritual evidence. Little if anything was written in this vein, and I soon found myself mulling over the original diaries and chronicles, and sleuthing the dusty shelves of colonial libraries in Mexico. Insights started to jump out, and I think that my three hundred and twenty photos, and the text, make the point that more was going on in the New World than words like "conquest," "domination," and "political hegemony" allow. I think that I have also helped to uncover some of the creative energy that appeared as native Americans accepted and adapted Christianity to an Aztec worldview.

For the book I chose to unpack three paradigms or architectural metaphors: the city, the temple, and the theatrical stage. Each was actually built in stone and mortar; each had both Aztec and European precedents; and each was used in religious, ritual, and eschatological ways. In the introduction I laid out my method in the light of cultural anthropology and church history, addressing issues like millennial expectations, the Lost Tribes of Israel, and church reform at the middle of the second millennium. In chapter one I described the architecture of conversion, the so-called "fortress monasteries" or evangelization centers that were created all across Mexico. In the second chapter I looked at how the book of Revelation was envisioned throughout the Middle Ages, and how that vision passed to the Americas. Then I
considered the city of Jerusalem—the real and ideal Jerusalem—as a model for utopian city planning. I returned to look at iconographic details of the conversion centers, especially the huge stone crosses, as proof of a medieval and eschatological mentality, and then turned my attention to the Christian rituals that were performed in these architectural substitutes for the Aztec pyramid-temples. Finally, I wanted to demonstrate how many of these same rituals and worldviews were ingeniously incorporated into a truly inculturated Christianity and Christian liturgy, and how they continue until today.

The University of Notre Dame Press did a wonderful job with the photos and layout, on high quality paper—so much so that the book has been nominated for a graphic arts award. Whether or not the text and the author's theories deserve the same praise is for the reader to decide.

I have finished a second and related book which deals with the Christian worship of the first converts, and their sacramental practice. Christian Texts for Aztecs: The Liturgical Conquest of Mexico will appear next year, with translations from the first Latin ritual books brought to the Americans, and from the Nahuatl (the ancient Aztec language) bibles, breviaries, psalm books, hymns, etc., created for and by the neophytes. It will of course have images, about one hundred in color, that I hope will demonstrate that the sixteenth-century in the New World was a time of tremendous creativity and enthusiasm. In many ways it was the meeting of the best of both worlds, Old and New.

[And all this happens as the ISM is planning a tour of Mexico in May 2006....]

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