Sacred Space

Shrine, City, Land

Proceedings of the International
Conference in Memory of
Joshua Prawer

Edited by

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MACMILLAN

THE ISRAEL ACADEMY OF
SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

First published 1998 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London, and by
THE ISRAEL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
Jerusalem

ISBN 0–333–66129–X

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98

Typeset by Judith Sternberg, Jerusalem

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

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The Cult of Santa María Tonantzin, Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico

Richard Nebel

The commemoration of the "discovery," conquest, colonisation and missionizing of the American continent by Europeans, beginning some 500 years ago, is a fitting time for pondering the themes of Christianization and the mixing of cultures and religions in that part of the world.

Our starting point is the Acontecimiento Guadalupano, the "Guadalupan event." Following the capture of the Aztec capital city México-Tenochtitlán by Hernán Cortés in 1521, there began, according to the account of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún OFM,[1] a cult of veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe by the indigenous population at the place where a shrine to the deity Tonantzin Cihuacóatl (Our Venerated Mother Lady Snake) had formerly stood. This veneration drew its inspiration from what came subsequently to be known as the "Guadalupan event," though "events" might be a more accurate designation. These consisted of four apparitions (from the 9th to the 12th of December 1531) of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the hill of Tepeyac to the north of the former Aztec capital, which today lies within the boundaries of Mexico City; the message conveyed by the Virgin Mary to the recipient of the vision, a Christianized Indian called Juan Diego, and transmitted by him to the first bishop of México, Fray Juan de Zumárraga OFM, together with her request that a church be built in her honour at the place of her apparition; the "miracle of the flower" on Tepeyac hill; the virgin's appearance before the visionary's sick uncle and the latter's recovery; the "miracle" that took place in the presence of

the bishop, in which the image of the Blessed Virgin was impressed on the cloak (*tilma*) of Juan Diego; and, finally, the unique historical role played by this scarcely verifiable series of events, which, after four hundred years, is still imbued with an aura of the wonderful and the miraculous. Its social, cultural and religious influence on the development of the colony of "New Spain" and, later, of independent Mexico was profound. Above all, the "Guadalupan message" has spurred a variety of developments in the church, theology and society of both Americas, including: theologies of liberation, the Bishops' conference at Puebla in 1979, the "New Evangelization" of America, and various religious, social and political movements in Nicaragua, Brazil, the southwestern United States and other countries. The shrine to "Our Lady of Guadalupe," situated in the megalopolis of Mexico City, with its population of twenty-two million, is today one of the most frequented Christian places of pilgrimage in the world, and it continues to gain in significance.

Of the available literature on Guadalupe, much is of a sensational nature. Very little serious research has been carried out on the subject, partly for political reasons and partly as a consequence of the overwhelming wealth of material. Mention must be made here of the pioneering works of Francisco de la Maza (1953),[2] Jacques Lafaye (1974),[3] Ernesto de la Torre Villar and Ramiro Navarro de Anda (1982),[4] Edmundo O'Gorman (1986)[5] and Francisco J. Noguez Ramírez (1987).[6]

The Guadalupan phenomenon should be considered first of all against the devotional and doctrinal background of the cult of Mary, especially in Spain, and the origin and development in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of the pilgrimage site known as "Nuestra Señora Santa María de Guadalupe" of Villuercas in Spanish Extremadura.[7] We should also bear in mind the many Spanish accounts of apparitions of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe in Extremadura, and the arrangement and reconstruction of these accounts in Roman-Christian antiquity, under the influence of Judaism and Islam and in the European medieval tradition.[8] This Spanish Guadalupe ("Wolf river") became, at the time of the Catholic monarchs and in the period of Spanish colonial expansion in Africa, Asia and above all, America, a symbol of Hispanicism.[9]

The traditions that began to spread after the capture of the Aztec capital México-Tenochtitlán (1519–1521) also contained

autochtonous Mexican, that is, especially Otomí-Toltec-Aztec, elements.[10] In view of the character of our source material, it is difficult to speak with certainty about the origins of the Guadalupan event or to identify historically indisputable records and testimonies.[11] We may assume that in the 1530s — perhaps even at the outset of the evangelization of central Mexico in the year 1523 — a chapel in honour of the Virgin Mary, named "Our Lady of Guadalupe," was built on the hill of Tepeyac. Only in the second half of that century, however, did the location become the focus of an active cult of the Virgin, and from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward it exercised a far-reaching and politically significant influence, in particular as a centre of the Creole movement for independence from Spain.[12]

With all due scepticism regarding the historicity of the apparitions of the Mother of God, the extraordinary impact of the Guadalupan event on all sectors of Mexican society and culture may be described as unparallelled. It permitted the descendants of the peoples and cultures of Central America to lay claim to a legitimate place within the imposed social system of colonial New Spain. In the apparition of the Virgin to a representative of the indigenous peoples, they, the conquered, the Indios, the marginalized, discovered their human dignity, their capacity for "acceptance" of the Christian faith and their cultural equality. The Virgin of Tepeyac, the "Morenita," thus increasingly became a powerful symbol, pregnant with hope and life, and ultimately a signal for the people to throw off the Spanish yoke, with God's approval. They all felt themselves to be *hijos de Guadalupe* (children of Guadalupe). This applied both to the Indians and to the *mestizos*, the growing population of mixed Spanish-indigenous parentage and culture, which was in process of developing self-confidence and independence with respect to the Spaniards and Europeans.[13]

In its literary manifestations, the Guadalupan event represents a transculturation of Christianity. Its character is clearly evident in the text of the *Nican Mopohua* (Here is told), a document of singular importance to the development of a genuine Mexican theology and to theological praxis and church policies in present-day Mexico, with its approximately 10% Indian and 70% *mestizo* population.

The *Nican Mopohua*, in the 1649 version in Náhuatl by Lasso de la Vega,[14] is an impressive narrative of the apparitions and

message of the Virgin Mary, known as the "Guadalupe," to the Nahua Juan Diego. It is a Spanish-Aztec "fusion of two worlds" which poses a whole series of difficult, and largely still unresolved questions regarding its content and transmission and its literary-critical, textual, linguistic and editorial analysis. It is a theologically-conceived narrative[15] which became, as it were, a "Gospel-in-culture." Structurally, it demonstrates great structural similarities to the Extremaduran legend of the fourteenth century,[16] while simultaneously inculcating the basic truths of the Christian gospel and belief, and evincing in the process an anthropologically determined theology. On the other hand, it is written in classical Náhuatl, the language of the Aztecs, rich in metaphors. Its language and content reflect the spirit of Toltec-Aztec philosophy, mythology and theology.[17] The question of the authorship of the *Nican Mopohua*, which may have been formulated and recorded in the sixteenth century by one or several students within the circle of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún OFM (Colegio de Santa Cruz de Santiago Tlatelolco), remains unsolved. The search for the original has as yet been unrewarded. In all probability, however, we can assume that the text, which emerged from the dialectics of Spanish-Occidental as well as early Mexican culture and society, was given its existing poetic-artistic form by a final editor. In this transformational process, the character given to the story by its Spanish-Christian provenance was modified by the influence of the Nahua culture in a similar way to that which occurred in the case of the "Cantares Mexicanas,"[18] religious poetry of the early colonial period, or in that of the religious discourses of the first twelve Franciscan friars with the Aztec scholars in the year 1524.[19]

An investigation of the theological significance of the *Nican Mopohua* from a linguistic, anthropological and cultural point of view indicates that, within the context of the Christian Guadalupan message, a new interpretation and orientation of early Mexican values and beliefs took place, which the four seventeenth-century "Mexican evangelists" — Miguel Sánchez,[20] Francisco de Florencia Sg,[21] Luis Lasso de la Vega,[22] and Becerra Tanco[23] — made an integral part of the Christian process of salvation. Thus, the *Nican Mopohua* should not be viewed as a historical account, but rather as a theological message that opened up a new perspective in relation to the changed historical situation of Mexico, or, more precisely, New

Spain. Adhering closely both to historical events and to legends, the message was directed towards bringing about a state of harmony between different peoples, cultures and religions, in order that, during a period of radical change, new possibilities of coexistence could be envisaged.[24]

The "Guadalupan event" has had continuing theological repercussions, as attempts are made to forge links between past and present and to emphasize the implications of the phenomenon for present-day Mexico, the Americas and the whole of Christendom. Both the Guadalupan image and the Guadalupan message, together with the popular religious manifestations which have resulted, have provided cues for theological reflection. There have been three different theological approaches to the theological interpretation of the image. The historical-prophetic interpretation, initiated by Miguel Sánchez in 1648, saw in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation a confirmation of the authenticity of the apparition of the Virgin on the hill of Tepeyac and a preview of Mexico's later history.[25] The historical-nationalistic interpretation, first espoused by Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1765–1827) and later by major public figures, claimed that Mexico had to follow its own political, economic, cultural and religious direction.[26] Finally, the conceptionistic-Guadalupan interpretation saw the Guadalupana as the key figure in a particularly Mexican conception of Roman Catholic belief.[27]

In recent decades, it has been less the image than the Guadalupan message, as expressed in the *Nican Mopohua*, that has been the focus of interest. One approach, concerned with morality and dogma, finds a confirmation in this text of fundamental Christian teachings regarding God and the Virgin and of the moral values of the Gospel.[28] A second approach, concerned with social ethics, evaluates the document in terms of its significance for marginalized, indigenous groups in the population, drawing upon it for liberation theology and feminist concerns.[29] A third approach stresses the exemplary character of the *Nican Mopohua* with regard to evangelization and "inculturation" in a Mexican, or, rather, indigenous context. It provides a basic model of a "Gospel-in-culture," a classic example of the Mexican realization of Christian belief, theology and living, and a paradigm for the resolution of social tensions and injustices.[30] This approach points in the direction of traditional Mexican Catholicism,

centred on devotion to Jesus Christ as a self-sacrificing man of sorrows, as well as to the Mother of God, the consoling Morenita of Tepeyac. In this conception, the Indio sees the suffering figure of Christ as a reflection of his own tragic past and present. He seeks consolation and refuge in his mother, the Virgin Mary, and above all in the Virgin of Guadalupe. This devotion is expressed in various ways, in prayers, poetry and songs, as well as in a highly developed folk art.[31]

As a result of a general revaluation of popular religiosity by Christian theologians and by the Church, the Guadalupanismo of the various ethnic groups is experiencing a revival. It has been passed into the service of liberating trends in pedgagogy, catechesis and the pastorate in the Mexican church, and in other states of the American continent. The influence of this kind of Guadalupanismo appears, for example, among Chicano theologians in the United States[32] as well as in the spiritual approach adopted by Mexican dioceses that follow the basic principle of "Evangelización Indígena por Indígena" (EVIPI)[33] — that is, evangelization of Indians by Indians, in accord with the model of the *Nican Mopohua*, and not by missionaries dispatched from the diocese or from Europe.

Present-day Guadalupanismo, then, is no more a relic of the past. Firmly embedded in social realities, it continues to develop and to open up perspectives for the future, thus becoming a source of religious, cultural, social and political inspiration.[34]

The interpretational models of Guadalupanismo which have emerged in the course of history are extremely varied. They reflect both the clash of different cultures and religions and the struggle to integrate Christian, Spanish and Nahua cultures and to adapt and transform Christian and Toltec-Aztec traditions, each in its own particular way. Each interpretational model bears within it historical conflicts inherited from the past that still persist and are expressed, for example, in Indigenism, Hispanicism or Mexicanism.

Indigenism — the glorification and revitalization of the great pre-Hispanic Mexican past — is alive in the Guadalupe phenomenon, which radiates a force creative of identity. The cult of the Virgin has been regarded from the beginning as part of the Indians' particular religiosity, expressing the religious substance of their cultural identity. One consequence of this movement has been anticolonialism, expressed in polemics against Spanish colonization

and missionary work and in the rejection of "Western" culture as a form of "alienation." Here, "Guadalupe" has been used for the purposes of self-assertion, serving as an answer to the ideology that has sought to justify colonialism (or rather its modern manifestations) by maintaining that it has been the task of the "progressive" nations to transform underdeveloped, uncivilized peoples, hardly distinguishable from children, into civilized, mature, fully-developed human beings.

Hispanicism, which regards Mexico as a colonial "branch" of Spain and Europe, also finds inspiration in "Guadalupe." Proponents of Hispanicism tend to glorify the civilizing and cultural mission of the Conquista and colonization (or rather industrialization and modernization along Western lines), which enabled Mexico to participate in universal culture and "development." This cultural Hispanicization (or Westernization) implies the acceptance of European systems of values and norms, as well as ideologies, and their internalization within the framework of the educational system. Hispanicism tends to monopolize the Guadalupe as representing a Spanish or European variety of Christianity.

"Guadalupe" has also contributed to the creation and development of a "Mexicanidad" or "Mexicanism" characterized by a balanced view of the Conquista, recognizing Mexico as a *mestizo* nation, a product of the meeting of European and autochtonous peoples and cultures. Mexicanism seeks a dialogue between the countries of Europe and other continents on the basis of a renewed national consciousness. In the realm of religion and theology, the phenomenon of the "Morenita de Guadalupe" is relevant to both past and present, representing as it does the *mestizaje*, in the sense of a successful synthesis through cultural integration.

Santa María Tonantzin, Virgen de Guadalupe, so familiar and present in Mexican life, is a source of inspiration and tradition, created by centuries of cultural intermingling between Orient and Occident, Europe and America, Spain and Mexico. She is an expression of a nation's identity and of the soul of the Mexican people, a symbol of national unity transcending racial barriers, and of the rights and dignity of the people. The *Imago Guadalupana* is both reality and transcendence, truth and utopia. This reality is literal and allegorical at the same time. It is a forever-intensified reality, reason and imagination in equal measure — an image with a thousand

facets, in which individuals find intimacy and companionship, so that, together with other *hijos de Guadalupe*, they may search for their own history and mould their future.

Notes

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12. W. Jiménez Moreno, "La Crisis del Siglo XVII y la Conciencia Nacional en Nueva España," *Revista de Indias*, XL (1980), nos. 159–162, pp. 415–423; De la Torre Villar & Navarro de Anda, *Testimonios Históricos* (above, note 4); Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl* (above, note 3).
13. Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Breve ragguaglio della prodigiosa e rinomata imagine della Madonna di Guadalupe del Messico ...*, Cesena 1782; Cayetano de Cabrera y Quintero, *Escudo de Armas de México ...*, Madrid 1785; de la Torre Villar & Navarro de Anda, *Testimonios Históricos* (above, note 4).
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