Spanish Theater and a New Religion in New Spain:  
Don Bartolomé de Alva’s Mexican Catholicism

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Introduction

The Catholic religion has traveled across the globe from land to land since its inception. This occurred both through a natural transfer of ideas and also through the forced conversion of oppressed people. Of those who spread the Catholic faith and imposed it on new lands and subjects, the Spanish Monarchs Fernando and Isabel, also called the Catholic Kings, were perhaps the most far reaching. Catholicism reached what we now know as Mexico City in 1521. It was then that Hernando Cortés arrived in the city of Tenochtitlan and defeated the Aztec people by leveling the city. A few short years after the empire fell to Cortés, the evangelical efforts of the Spanish began with the arrival of the Franciscans in 1523 and 1524.\(^1\) With the Franciscans came the Roman alphabet. These friars taught their alphabet to the noble boys of the Aztec, or Nahua, community in schools such as that at Tlatelolco, where the students were also educated in Christianity.\(^2\) These boys then became scribes and some wrote down all they could about pre-conquest life. That was in addition to translating texts from Spanish or Latin into Nahuatl. The texts that were translated were usually religious in nature and were translated with evangelical intent. In the course of translation, the Nahua boys would often change aspects of the original texts in order to make them more familiar to natives.

Among these texts were stage plays that Spanish friars thought there could be a use for in proselytizing. There is evidence that there was a tradition of public performance in pre-conquest Nahua society. Of the early alphabetic Nahua historic annals, one historian states that, “The surviving early alphabetic annals give every indication that performers had traditionally included relatively lengthy or dramatic speeches: at moments of conflict, where we find dialogue, and at

moments of ceremonial resolution, where we find grave pronouncements.” These annals would have been recited orally on feast days and at ceremonies and therefore the implication that performers made dramatic speeches would indicate that there was a tradition of what we would call theater even if it was confined to individually delivered monologues. Due to the fact that many Nahuas were not accustomed to receiving their history and religion in the traditional mass and sermon fashion of the Spanish, but instead in dramatic oral readings, the friars began to believe that theatrical performance would be a better way to reach the masses. As early as the 1530’s Spanish friars began to implement this idea, and the Nahuas took to this form of religious representation, possibly due to the fact that it was similar to their traditional religious practices which were based more on public rituals and dialogue and less on private prayer and study. The majority of the plays that were translated or written by Nahua scribes were evangelical in nature. They ranged from biblical stories, to saints’ stories, to morality plays that mostly advised what not to do. None of these colonial plays in Nahuatl were ever published, though, and very few have known authorship.

It has traditionally been said that the spiritual conversion of the natives was more of a spiritual conquest in which the Spanish friars would slay the old ways of religion and ride in as the white knights of Christianity. In 1933, Robert Ricard wrote Conquête Spirituelle du Mexique or The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico, which was later translated into English by Lesley Byrd Simpson in 1966. The ideas presented in Ricard’s book were respected and viewed as the leading theory in the field until recent years. Ricard terms the conversion of the Mexican natives as a “spiritual conquest,” implying that the Spanish missionaries “conquered the souls” of the natives. It is important to note that Ricard based his conclusions solely on Spanish writings

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4 Personal communication, Camilla Townsend, February 12, 2010.
and what Spanish friars wrote about their own achievements was taken as fact by Ricard. From this limited base of sources he states that, “All of these reasons [mainly, the Spanish inquisition and the Counter-reformation] make it comprehensible why the missionaries insisted on presenting Christianity, not as a perfecting or a fulfilling of native religions, but as something entirely new, which meant an absolute and complete rupture with the whole past.” However, I argue that the clergy, although they clearly wanted to tear down the old ways of worship, built off of some elements of native religion. They had to because of how tightly the Nahua religion was integrated into the Nahua society. Initially, when the clergy and the natives had difficulty communicating, misunderstandings occurred and created a base of mixed-up and merged religious concepts that needed to be clarified but that may not have ever really been resolved. I agree that something new was created in Mexico, but in my opinion it was a largely new form of Catholicism: a Mexican-ized form of the faith that incorporated both Catholic orthodoxy and Nahua norms.

In contrast, Ricard claims that, “A Mexican Church was not founded [at all]… What was founded, before and above all, was a Spanish Church, organized along Spanish lines, governed by Spaniards in which native Christians played the minor part of second-class Christians.” Not only do I argue that a Mexican Church was created, even if the majority of the administration and clergy were Spaniards but that the native Christians played a major part in their conversion and the creation of a Mexican Church. By a Mexican Church, I do not mean an institution or a building or a hierarchy, I mean that there was a distinct blending of traditions and faiths to create a new form of Catholic orthodoxy that the Nahua people understood and accepted as their new religion. The clergy, both the limited number of Nahua clergymen and the Spanish clergy, tried

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6 Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, 308.
with great effort to relate Christian ideas to Nahua practices and cultural understandings. I believe that the Nahua people, although they may have been treated as second-class citizens and therefore as second-class Christians, had a major role in their adaptation of Catholicism. They had to have had! As seen in other situations, it was possible to be baptized without being truly converted. A fitting example of this would be the Crypto-Jews within Spain at the time of the Spanish inquisition, who were able to maintain many of their Jewish customs in secrecy after being baptized. The Nahua people were no less rooted in their religion than the Jewish people of Spain were and yet they chose, for the most part, to convert to some form of Christianity. It is true that the Nahua religion was polytheist and therefore more open to the idea of adding a Christian God to their pantheon, still, there was a choice to be made.

This is not to say that all Nahuas decided to convert. On the contrary, there were many, especially in the beginning, who refused to give up their old gods and their old ways of worship. When Franciscan friars approached Nahua priests with this new religion, the native priests are said to have stated, “They [Nahua ancestors] left us this our custom of worshiping our gods, in which they believed and which they worshiped all the time that they lived on earth…It would be a fickle, foolish thing for us to destroy the most ancient laws and customs left by the first inhabitants of this land…” Ultimately though, Mexico became a mostly Catholic nation and the Nahua people who did decide to convert had a great deal to do with their conversion and with creating their own understanding of Christianity. This was done, partly, through the plays and theater productions I have mentioned. One of the main contributors to this effort was a mestizo priest named Don Bartolomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, who wrote a guide to the act of contrition, *Confessionario mayor y menor en lengua Mexicana*. In addition to writing this work, he also

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translated three works of Spanish Golden Age Theater, adding his own native “spin” to the stories as well as altering the works so as to be more familiar to the native people. However, conversion was not all about religion. It is likely that many different Nahua people had many different reasons for converting. Some might have felt that conversion could help their financial situation, some might have converted to get ahead politically, and others might have converted social reasons. It is more than likely that Alva was well aware of all of the reasons that his parishioners might have converted. So then, his job was to work with them to create a better understanding of the religion that they now practiced. By looking at his works, it is clear that he had a part in the conversion and religious instruction of the native people, and that it was not a process that was free and clear from confusion. Instead it was a process of evaluation, of interpretation, and of slight manipulation of doctrine for the sake of Nahua understanding, and eventually their acceptance and belief.

I have come to this conclusion after closely reading the three plays that Alva translated and analyzing two of them for specific nuances and changes that seem to indicate Alva’s intent to Mexican-ize the works for his parishioners’ benefit. I begin however, by looking at other religious plays from about the same time period. These other plays, though, have no known authors or even specific dates of translation or publication; still I feel that they show that Alva was not the only Nahua translator who felt that the works of literature would be better understood if they were altered to better fit into the Nahua culture of that time.⁸ I am aided in my analysis of these works by interpretations of these plays, as written in essays by Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart. I have also closely read the modern translation of Alva’s, A Guide to

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Confession Large and Small.⁹ Using these three sets of sources, I have made the argument that the native people, especially those who were wealthier and educated, played a large part in the conversion of the Nahua people and in the creation of a Mexican understanding of the Catholic Church, its doctrine, and its practices.

I do not claim to be able to truly understand the feelings and motives of the Nahua people after the conquest, or before it for that matter. I believe that this cannot be done. What I have done is tried to get a sense of what the motives of a mestizo priest, who grew up in a multicultural household and who seems to have internalized the values of Christianity, may have been when creating and translating texts meant to aid in the Nahuas understanding of Christianity and the Spanish understanding of Nahua culture. This subject is, I think, slightly taboo in our politically correct, pro-diversity society. The idea of missionaries pushing, or forcing, their religion on another culture is unnerving to most people today. In a society of religious freedom it may seem that my argument that the Nahua people may have decided to convert and that some may have even preferred the new religion and helped in the missionary activities that ultimately ignited the fire of Catholicism in Mexico, would tend to sound like a superior Christian attitude. However, I do not argue that Christianity is in any way superior, or inferior, to any other religion, just that it seems as though the Nahua people, devastated by the conquest of their ruling city, and completely cognizant of the fact that they were no longer the dominant people of their society, may have willingly converted to Christianity for a wide variety of reasons.

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⁹ I have access to the English translation of this text thanks to John F. Schwaller and Barry D. Sell’s translation in Barry D. Sell and John Fredrick Schwaller, trans. and eds. A Guide to Confession Large and Small in the Mexican Language, 1634, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).
Chapter I: The Nature of Nahua Theater

Why the Spanish Friars Utilized Theater.

Early in the evangelistic efforts of the Spanish friars, specifically the Franciscans, it was observed that the native Nahuas did not need to be converted to Catholicism so much as they needed to be instructed in its orthopraxy and orthodoxy.\(^\text{10}\) The native religion was very conducive to the idea of adding this new Catholic God to their pantheon, so to speak. This was commonly practiced when one Aztec group would conquer another Aztec group and the conquered would add the main god of the conqueror as one of their lesser gods.\(^\text{11}\) However, the Spanish friars wanted the Nahuas to give up their gods and acknowledge the Catholic God as the one true God. The native high priests would not agree to this, and this hostile stance was observed in a document composed under the direction of fray Bernardino Sahagún, a Franciscan, which alleges to reproduce a dialogue that took place between a founding party of twelve Franciscans and the high priests of Tenochtitlan. The Nahua holy men were reported to have responded to the religious explanation by stating:

> We have heard the words that you have brought to us of the One who gives us life and being. And we have heard with admiration the word of the Lord of the World which he has sent here for love of us, and also you have brought us the book of celestial and divine words. You have told us that we do not know the One who gives us life and being, who is Lord of the heavens and of the earth. You also say that those we worship are not gods. This way of speaking is entirely new to us, and very scandalous. We are frightened by this way of speaking because our forebears who engendered and governed us never said anything like this. On the contrary, they left us this our custom of worshiping our gods, in which they believed and which they worshiped all the time that they lived on earth…It would be a fickle, foolish thing for us to destroy the most ancient laws and customs left by the first inhabitants of this land…Watch out that the common people do not rise up against us if we were to tell them that the gods they have always understood to be such


\(^{11}\) Personal Communication, Camilla Townsend, February 12, 2010.
are not gods at all. It is best, our lords, to act on this matter very slowly, with great deliberation.\textsuperscript{12} James Lockhart observes that in this dialogue the high priests “do not challenge the strangers’ god directly but instead argue for preserving their own divinities, who from time immemorial have provided the spiritual and material means through which they [the Nahuas] and their forebears have sustained life.”\textsuperscript{13} It is likely that the natives believed that the Spanish God was even more powerful than their own deities, due to the fact that he must have helped them conquer Tenochtitlan. However, they were unable to understand why they were not allowed to continue to worship their own gods as well. For this reason, the friars decided that they would merely need to teach the Nahuas more about Christianity so that they could practice it correctly, since they were not altogether against its practice.

For a while this worked out and produced what Lockhart has called a “Double Mistaken Identity, whereby each side takes it that a given form or concept is essentially one already known to it, operating much in its own tradition, and hardly takes cognizance of the other side’s interpretation.”\textsuperscript{14} That is to say that the Spanish thought that the Nahuas had begun to purely worship Jesus, Mary, etc., when in reality it is very possible that the Nahuas continued for a time to worship their own gods at the same time, without attracting the attention of the Spanish. This may seem like defiance. However, it is more likely that it was a misunderstanding, in which the Nahuas assumed that they were worshiping the Spanish god correctly while also paying homage to their own deities, and the Spanish did not take note of any wrongdoing. The Nahuas simply did not consider that they were doing anything out of the ordinary and in turn the Spanish assumed that all of the Nahuas understood the principles of Catholicism and were adhering to

\textsuperscript{12} Sahagún, “Coloquio,” 21-22.
\textsuperscript{13} Lockhart, The Nahuas, 205.
\textsuperscript{14} Lockhart, The Nahuas, 445.
them correctly. But this misunderstanding could only be maintained for a short period of time. A new generation who had no experience with the pre-conquest gods would eventually challenge the religion of their elders, and the Spanish would be informed by those Nahuas who either entered the clergy or who had direct and regular contact with the clergy that things were not as orthodox as they had thought. More instruction would be needed.

Theater was a wonderful way to instruct the Nahuas in the correct orthodoxy because it could reach the masses quickly and in a fashion that the Nahuas would be familiar with. Inherent in this, however, was the issue of making these plays familiar enough to the Nahuas that they would be able to relate to them and accept their intended message. In an effort to do this, Spanish plays would first need to be translated into Nahuatl. This was accomplished with the help of Nahua scribes who were given Spanish or Latin texts to translate. It is unclear exactly how much autonomy these Nahua scribes had, but it does seem that they had some. They may have had just enough to leave their impression on the play in a way that can be seen today.

The Autonomy of Native Translators

There are numerous ways to try to determine the degree of autonomy that a translator had when working with a script. The most notable is the language that was used. A number of misspellings of Spanish words as well as doctrinal inconsistencies can all lead one to believe that the directing friar had little to do with the play after it was given over to a translator. One example of a doctrinal inconsistency is particularly telling. In a play about the Magi, a misconception is present that was very important to the friars and surely would have been noted and changed had the friar who sponsored the work looked at the Nahua scribe’s work once the translation was finished. “In the play in question, the Virgin expresses her gratitude to one of the
Magi in the following terms: ‘I thank you, Baltasar, on behalf of my precious child; his precious honored father the Most Holy Trinity has sent you here.’ The misconception here is that the ‘Most Holy Trinity’ did not include Jesus. This would have alarmed the friars if they had noticed it because of the importance of the Trinity and the common native misunderstanding of the concept. Lockhart uses this passage to support his conclusion that “A[n]…indication of some Nahua autonomy in the production of the final versions is the existence of occasional doctrinal irregularities in the plays, things that the friars surely would not have tolerated had they been fully aware of them.”

There is additional evidence that after the plays were translated they were not looked at by the friars. In addition to misinterpretations of doctrine, there are sentences in Spanish that end nonsensically, and numerous misspellings and incorrect translations that imply that the work of the Nahua scribe was the end of the work. “It is as though the directing Spaniard, although in a sense probably deserve to be called the author of the play, never looked at it again once he had given it to a Nahua to translate and realize as he [the Nahua scribe] saw fit.” Although the majority of the time the Nahua scribes had limited autonomy and very few composed works on their own, they did leave their mark even on those works that were almost entirely Spanish in origin. It is clear that most of the Nahuatl theater was Spanish-inspired and in a way it had to be. However, those Nahuas who could influence it may have left just enough to show that even in the plays that were meant to teach the natives orthodoxy and orthopraxy, there were still misconceptions and misunderstandings. Through this one can see how the process of conversion, or instruction, was not at all as easy as wiping a slate clean and starting over. It

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included a highly integrated learning experience both on the part of the natives and on the part of the friars.

As important as the misspellings and misconceptions are to the deduction of some Nahua autonomy, they are not going to demonstrate intentional influence on the works. There are examples of cases that may show true autonomy, though. One of the most convincing cases that can show a true and most likely deliberate Nahua effort to influence is one that is present in the play The Sacrifice of Isaac. In this work Abraham speaks to his son in much the same fashion as a Nahua father would deliver the Nahua Huehuehtlatolli or “old speech,” that was preserved by Sahagún in the Florentine Codex, a collaborative work that was meant to preserve the beliefs, practices, and cultural customs of the Nahua.\(^\text{19}\) Abraham’s speech to Isaac in the play goes thus:

> You my golden jewel, my jade bracelet, my silver necklace, you my beloved child, come. With great contentment I give you orders as well as embrace you since All-powerful God the Father made you, he by whom everything on earth, the seen and unseen, was made. Listen, O my beloved honored child, do not sometime soil your spirit and your soul with something. Always regard it as a jade, as a precious pearl, since it is a work of God. And as to the precious honored royal commands of our lord, God: his commands are three; do not violate a single one. Inschrive them well on your heart. Always remember them, for there exists your Engenderer and Creator who made you and is eternally worthy of praise in heaven and on earth. Now know, O my beloved honored child, that those of your lineage will be coming here to see you and you know how very much I esteem you, my beloved child.\(^\text{20}\) (Italics mine)

The speech captured by Sahagún in the eighteenth chapter of the Florentine Codex is far longer and dictated by a father to a daughter, but even so there is similarity. An excerpt that shows the similarity to Abraham’s speech goes thus:

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\(^{19}\) Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano, “Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” in Mesoamerican Voices, edited by Matthew Restall, Lisa Sousa, and Kevin Terraciano (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 202. The Florentine Codex was a collaborative work directed by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún a Franciscan missionary and linguist. Sahagún worked with young Indian noble boys who had learned to write in Spanish and surviving elders to construct an extraordinary work about the beliefs, practices, and culture of the Aztecs.

Here you are, my dear child, my necklace, my feather, my offspring, my progeny, my blood, my color, my blood relation. Now please understand, please listen for you came to life, you were born, for our omnipresent lord, the maker, the creator, has sent you here to earth…. Listen. I declare you, especially, that you are a noble. Consider yourself as a precious person. Although you are a woman, you are a green stone, you are a turquoise. You were cast, you were pierced. You are blood, you are color (highborn), you are a spine, you are a thorn. You are one’s hair, one’s fingernail (of noble origin), you are illustrious, of noble birth. And so now I say to you: do you no longer listen very well? Is it true that, it is said that, you pile up earth, potsherds? Are you on the surface of the ground? For already you understand a little, you observe a little. Do not, just of your own accord, bring dishonor upon yourself. Do not do something to bring shame upon our lords, the rulers who have gone leaving us. Do not become a commoner; do not lower yourself.21 (Italics mine)

The similarities are numerous and it is clear that there was a Nahua influence on the speech of Abraham. The repeated references to these children being precious stones and jewels are an endearment that is distinctly Nahua. The same use of repeated words of salutation is also seen in a midwives speech that was also recorded in the Florentine Codex.22 This was a common occurrence in the Nahua world that was surely used to create a feeling of familiarity to the natives watching this play. Additionally, the concept of being noble and not lowering yourself or dishonoring yourself or your name was also a Nahua ideal. Noble youths were held to higher expectations and they were commonly more harshly punished for wrong doing due to their nobility because they were expected to set an example for the common people.23 Abraham’s speech uses this concept in a more Christian fashion, saying, “Do not sometime soil your spirit and your soul with something,” however it is conveying the same kind of message in a more Catholic way, making a comment on the soul rather than on the social status of the individual.

Abraham’s speech could have been written up in this fashion purposely by a Spanish friar who was familiar with the Florentine Codex or the work of Sahagún with the clear intention

that the interchange would be more familiar to the Nahuas watching, but that is not very likely. It is more likely that the Nahua translator used his creative license and obvious knowledge or even memory of the *Huehuehtlahtolli* to influence the speech of Abraham. Unfortunately there is no conclusive way to tell either way. What is clear, however, is that whether or not the Nahua translators were the ones to make the alterations, there was a trend towards making the works of theater more familiar to the native people in order to better instruct them in the practices of Catholicism. This would show that there was a great deal of interest in making sure that the plays were understood, and that the natives would be able to relate to the work in a way that would help them to internalize the values of the new religion.

**The Lessons of Nahua Theater**

It is hard to tell whose voice is being heard in most of the theatrical material from colonial Mexico that we have today. Very few of the published plays have named authors or dates. However, using contextual information it is possible to get a general sense of when the work was produced and whether a Nahua or a Spaniard was the main composer, or author. Whether the author is deemed to be Nahua or Spanish, it is clear from the early plays that were written and meant to take place in the seventeenth century that the lessons were based around what to do, and especially, what not to do, in order to live a Christian life. Barry D. Sell, using his knowledge of the Nahuatl language, determined that three of the plays that he has worked to translate were probably less supervised and more independent than most others that he has looked at and worked with. I am relying on his expertise and using two of the plays he considers to be more independent, *Final Judgment* and *How to Live on Earth*, to show how theater was used and what it meant to teach Nahuas in the seventeenth century. I use the plays that are more
independent in the hopes of glimpsing a more native perspective even though it is possible that that may not be the case.

The most obvious use of theatrical performance was to show the Nahuas what the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church was and how to go about practicing it. Plays usually helped to explain new religious practices and concepts, but in one case I found that the author used a pre-conquest practice to serve as a reminder of new practices. In the case of the play Final Judgment, it seems the author introduces the character named Sweeping to be used as a connection between the sacred of pre-conquest times and the sacred of the contemporary colonial times. Sweeping was a constant and holy act that women were responsible for performing\textsuperscript{24} and in the play the character of that name makes the following speech:

They do not remember what they do not desire; they just want to go on sinning. Do I not exert my effort? I always cry out to them, every day. I induce them to sweep things; to keep vigil, to arise in the morning, to do penance, to suffer cold, that is, in a sacred way to sweep their spirits, their souls, to fast, to abstain from food so that they will receive compassion and be pardoned. And if not, there is no way at all that they will be able to enter the royal home of our lord God. They will not be able to be pardoned if they do not first do penance. I bring the instrument of penance…\textsuperscript{25}

There is a distinct Nahua influence in the creation of this character. This character was almost certainly used due to the significance that the act of sweeping held in the Nahua world. In associating the act of sweeping with penance it almost certainly created a connection that at least women would relate to. In pre-conquest times sweeping was definitely a sacred task that required vigilance, and so its association with religious vigilance was a notably clever way to create a connection between pre-conquest sacredness and Christian sacredness. Offering the native people a connection like this one was one way in which to convey to them the importance

\textsuperscript{24} Clendinnen, Aztecs, 169,208.
of penance and other Catholic practices, placing the practices at the level of importance that sweeping held in the Nahua society.

But however interesting the monologue regarding sweeping is, most of the plays were not only designed to create a connection to the pre-conquest faith, but also to discredit it. The play Final Judgment attempts in the opening monologue to explain Hell to the Nahua. Saint Michael is more than blunt in his explanation that Hell is to be feared and that it is a very frightening place. This seems obvious to anyone living in the western world today. However at that time the Nahua culture did not even have a translation for the concept of Hell. They used their word for “the place of the dead,” Mictlan to translate the word Hell in texts. Traditionally, though, this was not a place that was feared, it was simply the land that the dead went to. Without a fear of the place of the dead, the natives had little reason to regard the act of contrition with any real relevance. Therefore, the friars worked within these dramas to create a fear of Hell so that there would be a motivation to do penance and to live a good Christian life. In the end of this play, the main character, Lucia, is damned because she had sinned and did not have enough time to repent before Judgment Day. She describes the terrors that she is sent to as punishment for her life on earth:

I am a sinner. I have merited suffering in the place of the dead…. Ah! May the earth I used to kick be despised, and the rags that I used to wear, for they all have turned to fire! Ah! Greatly do they burn me, the fire butterflies that come hanging here from my ears. They signify how I used to beautify myself with my earrings. And here, wound around my neck, is a very frightening fire serpent. It signifies my necklaces that I used to put on. And here I come girded with a very frightening fire serpent, the heart of the house of the place of the dead. It signifies how I used to enjoy myself on earth. Ah! Ah! If only I had gotten married! Ah! How unfortunate I am!  

This monologue of regret and suffering is clearly meant to portray the place of the dead as a place to avoid at all costs. The thought of being “girded” by “a very frightening fire serpent” is not something that would have been inviting to anyone. Lucia is explicit about what she did to deserve her fate, saying that the clothing she was once vain of has turned to fire that surrounds her and that her beloved earrings and necklaces have turned to fire creatures. She also exclaims that she should have gotten married and not remained a single woman. It is most likely that these things, dressing frivolously, wearing jewelry, and remaining “lustfully” single, were the actions of Nahua women that most upset the friar who supervised or wrote this play. This was meant, however, to be a warning of what not to do so that other Nahua souls would be saved from the same fate. The friars believed that they were saving souls by teaching the natives the Catholic way of life and worship.

In contrast to this negative way of thinking about death, in the play How to Live on Earth there is an exemplary couple who have confessed in a timely manner and then they die within the frame of the play. However, they are spared from the pains of death. When the character Death comes to the couple he states, “I have really come in a hurry so that I will quickly get you set up [prepare you for death], because you have very lovingly served and well pleased your creator, God. Therefore you will not suffer here on earth.”29 This is in stark contrast to both the pain that Lucia suffers in the place of the dead in the Final Judgment and to the fate of the condemned one in How to Live on Earth. The condemned one in that play also suffers the pain and torment of the place of the dead as Lucia did. The contrast created within the same play is significant, in that it is providing an exemplary model to follow and also a model of what not to do. The clear intention was to create two mirror images in which the Spanish friars hoped that the Nahuas

would see themselves in. Their goal was to discourage bad Christian behavior and to encourage good Christian behavior.

The level of notable misunderstanding and misinterpretation goes deeper than not having a pre-existing concept of Hell. The Nahua culture also did not have a concept of original sin, or a sense of a permanent stain or mark of evil on one’s soul, and in turn they had no way to express confession or penance either. They did have a concept of wrong doing and of punishment but this was not a concept of eternal damnation, but instead one of earthly balance. Therefore it was necessary for the friars to instruct the natives in the concepts of sin and confession and to find a way to express these terms in a way that would be understood by the Nahua people. Since Nahuatl did not have a word to express the concept of a sin they used the term *tlatlacoa* that meant “to soil something.” In this case that “something” would have implicitly meant one’s soul. In order to explain the concept of confession they used the term *yolcuitia*, which translated literally as “to heart-straighten” or to acknowledge one’s failings. There was great concern about the nature of confession, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. The main concern, though, was that the Nahuas would not confess for fear of getting into legal trouble with Spanish authorities. They were untrusting of the clergy and would hold back larger sins and only confess to lesser sins so as not to get into trouble or be tried in any way.

To combat this, there was an emphasis on the fact that Judgment day was too late for contrition and that one must be pious throughout one’s life in order avoid the fires of Hell. To exemplify this, at the end of *Final Judgment* Christ appears, along with the Anti-Christ. Lucia,

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because she has been a sinner, believes that the Anti-Christ is the real Christ. Lucia tries to beg for forgiveness and explain her shortcomings but Christ condemns her for her lustful, unrepentant life on earth. “Today in the time of judgment there is no longer any pardon.”32 This creates a sense of urgency when considering confession and penance. This concept was important because the process of repentance was so integral to the Catholic faith.

These plays were also a place in which the friars could explain that the deities of preconquest times were evil and that they were really devils who tricked people into believing in them and then dragged them off to Hell. The word “demon” when used by an angel is translated to the Nahua word *Tzitzimitl* which in pre-conquest religion referred to “monstrous female or androgynous numens of the western sky, the twilight, and world destruction.”33 This use of a Nahuatl word equated demons and devils with something Nahua. In addition to the translated word, there is evidence in the speech of one of these demons that they are still being worshiped by Nahuas. He states: “How am I to leave [the people]? You angel, come here. Listen. It is they who are unable to leave me for a moment… They cry out to me, even though they do no cry out to God… I laugh heartily at them and I do many things to the fools, who do not catch on. How am I to leave them if they will not leave me? You say that I am to leave them if they will not overcome me?”34 The implication that the native people will not “leave” the demon seems to be suggesting that the demon is a deity of the pre-conquest religion to whom many Nahuas still call on and worship. The conversation between the angel and the demon is meant to explain to the Nahuas that they must throw off their demons, or old gods, and that if they do not they will wind up in Hell.

The plays are not all negative, though. They are used to convey advice that is meant to pull the people up and away from their old sinful ways and bring them to the light. These plays are meant as warnings, and, as with any warning, they not only describe what not to do, but also what to do in order to live right. In How to Live on Earth the condemned one is the one who provides the warning. In this case his warning is one meant for parents, imploring them to teach their children well in the ways of Christianity. He warns: “It is my father’s fault. He did not make your name [Christ] known to me… You who bring up children, you who raise children, do not be idiotic, as if you were not rational. Open your ears! Listen to the sermon and the exemplary model. You are not going to fall into the fiery crag like I am now about to do!” His statement makes it clear that his is not a path that should be followed. There is a sense of hope, that if you are educated, by listening to the sermon and the exemplary model, you will be able to save yourself and perhaps your children as well. The idea of teaching your children well was already important to the Nahuas and so this was likely to be a warning meant to convey that parents should teach their children Christianity rather than the pre-conquest practices in order to teach them well. Likewise, in the end of Final Judgment the priest who is with Lucia throughout the play also makes a plea for people to do all they can to avoid Lucia’s awful fate. He warns:

O my beloved children, O Christians, O creations of God! Now you have seen an ominous marvel! It is correct. It is written in the sacred book. Be prudent! Rouse yourselves, look at yourselves in the mirror, the way that it happened to your neighbor. And may it not happen to you the same way. It is a model, a measuring stick, which our lord God gives us. Tomorrow or the next day, the day of judgment is going to happen. Just pray to our lord, Jesus Christ, and to the noblewoman, Saint Mary, that she pray to her beloved honored child Jesus Christ, so that afterward you will merit and obtain joyfulness in heaven, glory. May it so be done. Ave Maria.  

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His warning expresses his belief in the fact that the Day of Judgment is coming. In this time this was not an uncommon sentiment. It is clear from both examples that the friars felt that it was important that the Nahuas had a model to follow and that they understand that the plays are meant to be a model. This warning also implies that all hope is not lost. There is a way out, so that the Nahuas can avoid the fate of the condemned.

It is important to note that saving souls and helping the natives live in a Christian society was most likely the goal of the friars as well as the translators. The Nahua scribes would have been better educated in Christianity than the common people and it is likely that they had internalized the values of Christianity, and thus would have been genuinely concerned for the souls of their friends, family, and people. This is the most credible motivation behind the act of religious conversion and instruction in any sense. For this reason, I believe that Don Bartolomé de Alva wrote his confession manual and translated works of theater, in order to instruct native people and to save them from the tortures of Hell.
Chapter II: Don Bartolomé de Alva, The Priest.

The Life of Don Bartolomé de Alva

Don Bartolomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl was born around 1597, close to a century after the first Nahuas were educated in both Christianity and writing in roman letters. Don Bartolomé was a mestizo whose mother, Doña Anna Cortés de Alva Ixtlilxochitl was descended from the native ruling house of Tetzcoco, the city second in power after Tenochtitlan. Although he still had a Nahua identity and clearly felt part of both worlds, the Ixtlilxochitl family had been intermarrying with the Spanish for two generations and they had begun being baptized four generations prior to don Bartolomé’s birth. They maintained a strong tie with their native identity probably due to the prestige of their native line. The name Ixtlilxochitl was a famous native name and was traced back to the time of ancient mythology. Don Bartolomé de Alva’s lineage can be traced back to Hernando Cortés Ixtlilxochitl, one of the many sons of Nezahalpilli, a famous Tezcocan king who aided the Spanish, and Doña Beatriz Papantzin a relative of Cuitlahuac, nearly the last Aztec emperor. Hernando Cortés Ixtlilxochitl was therefore connected to two ruling families and his daughter, Doña Ana Cortés Ixtlilxochitl (the elder), married don Francisco Verdugo Quetzalmamalintzin-Huetzin. Their daughter, Doña Ana Francisca Verdugo Ixtlilochitl, married Juan Grande, a Spaniard and their daughter, Alva’s mother then married Juan Pérez de Peraleda, also a Spaniard, and together they had three daughters and six sons, one of whom was Don Bartolomé.

38 John Frederick Schwaller, forward to Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, vol. 3 of Nahuatl Theater, ed. Barry D. Sell, Louise M. Burkhart, and Elizabeth R. Wright (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), xi. Burkhart, preface to Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, xv-xvi.
39 The genealogy of Don Bartolomé de Alva was constructed using John Frederick Schwaller, “Don Bartolomé de Alva, Nahuatl Scholar of the Seventeenth Century,” in A Guide to Confession Large and Small in the Mexican
Don Bartolomé was well educated and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Mexico in 1622. He was completely bilingual, with a mother who was the *Cacica*, or hereditary governor of San Juan Teotihuacan, a subunit of Tetzcoco.\(^{40}\) Don Bartolomé would have been raised by his mother among the Nahua community and although she would have been in charge of collecting the taxes from her people she also would have been responsible for looking out for their well being. Because of his upbringing he would have been well acquainted with the Nahua culture and practices.\(^{41}\) His Spanish father was a devoutly religious Christian and had established a chantry, or an endowment for a chapel, where Bartolomé could serve as a priest, requiring that in this chapel masses be said for his wife and him as well as their parents and grandparents each month in addition to other required masses, demonstrating his religious devotion.\(^{42}\) His mother was also Catholic and perhaps because she was a governor of a Nahua community, she was well aware that in order to be a part of the Spanish Mexico she needed to be Christian as well as Nahua. In 1634, Don Bartolomé completed his only published work, *Confessionario mayor y menor en lengua Mexicana* or *A Guide to Confession Large and Small in the Mexican Language*.\(^{43}\) This publication set him apart; it was unusual due to his youth and his mestizo heritage.

Don Bartolomé’s older brother also published books but with very different intentions. Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl’s works consisted mostly of his family’s historical annals. He wrote them in Spanish, for the Spanish, with the intention of emphasizing his great grandfather’s role in helping Cortés and the Spanish with the conquest of Tenochtitlan. In a time

\(^{40}\) Schwaller, forward to *Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation*, xi.

\(^{41}\) Personal Communication, Camilla Townsend, April 7, 2010.


\(^{43}\) Schwaller, forward to *Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation*, xi.
when the Spanish were in charge, it was common for Native families to proclaim allegiance to them, and especially for those who fought against Montezuma with the Spanish, to request more just treatment as recognition of their assistance. The aid of the Ixtlilxochitl family explains Doña Anna’s Spanish first surname, suggesting that Cortés sponsored the baptism of her grandfather and that his name stuck with the family. The transcribing of family annals was not uncommon at this time and Don Fernando’s retention of his native surname was likely due to the pride that the Ixtlilxochitl’s took in the fame of their name and the ancient line from which they descended. Unlike his brother, Don Bartolomé eventually dropped his native surname, most likely due to his admission to the University, as natives were not allowed to enroll. Despite the fact that he dropped his Nahuatl name, he wrote both in Nahuatl and in Spanish, with the intention of creating a mutual understanding between the two communities and he surely continued to identify with his native community.

It is worth mentioning why any Nahua man might have been inclined toward Christianity, and why he may have been so passionate about spreading his faith among the native people, even though it is a subject that is difficult to approach today. To begin with, it is not fictional that the Nahua people had many violent conflicts by virtue of having many governments in a small area. There was a great deal of warfare, and human sacrifice was in fact practiced. Even after the conquest was complete, children would have been told stories about pre-conquest times, and likely would have known that men who were not suited for warfare often found themselves captured and sacrificed or killed in battle. Additionally, even if they were able to stay alive, such men’s progress through the ranks would have been hindered, seeing that social mobility through warfare was based on number of enemies captured and/or killed. They would not have had a particularly promising future. A noble boy who was not suited for warfare, however, usually

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44 Schwaller, “Don Bartolomé de Alva, Nahuatl Scholar of the Seventeenth Century,” 4n8.
turned to the priesthood.\textsuperscript{45} So it is possible that Don Bartolomé was not one who would have been an excellent warrior, and as in pre-conquest times, turned to education and the priesthood. Having knowledge of the brutality of past wars, and being educated in Christianity as well, it is not unfathomable that he may have seen Christianity as a positive change from the pre-conquest times.

Although Christianity is by no means superior or inherently more peaceful than any other religion, it is possible that to a bookish man it may have seemed like a peaceful alternative to the violent wars that had persisted. It is also possible that the priesthood was an answer to the question of identity that I believe the Nahua men must have been struggling with. This was a common occurrence in North America among the tribes of the West who identified mainly as warriors. It is true that the Nahua men were also farmers and had responsibilities other than going to war and hunting with weapons, but farming was not what they wrote about and it was not the identity they chose to give their grandfathers in historical annals. The documentation of this is limited to annals that mention the great Aztec grandfathers who were brave warriors and skilled archers, using these skills to defeat their greatest enemies.\textsuperscript{46} With the loss of this warrior identity men may have been looking for another source of identity to fill this void. This was not a problem that was experienced by the women in this culture because the conquest did not have a significant effect on the role of a woman. However, once conquered, the masculine warrior role of the man was obliterated, but for a bookish, less athletic male the identity of a holy man, which was also a male identity in pre-conquest times, may have seemed inviting.

It is also possible that there was an attraction to this new religion due to the sense of hopelessness that was brought on by the devastating population loss and the now Spanish-run

\textsuperscript{45} Clendinen, Aztecs, 113-115.  
\textsuperscript{46} Personal communication, Camilla Townsend, February 12, 2010.
institutions that were in place and were putting more far more taxation pressure on the native people than had existed there previously. It could have been that there were native people who sought hope in these newly introduced gods. For a man like Alva who had fully put his faith in this new spirituality it would have been important to make sure that those who were looking to the Christian Trinity and saints for hope would receive the help they were seeking. In order to see to that, he would have to make sure that the people were practicing the faith of this new god and the saints correctly in order to have their prayers answered.

It seems as though Don Bartolomé had two purposes for writing and translating. The first purpose seems to have been the religious correction, instruction and conversion of the Nahua people. That is, his works all have an instructional aspect in which he attempts to correct religious practices and to explain religious concepts. The second purpose seems to have been a mediating one. He writes both for the Spanish clergy and for the Nahua parishioners, in a way that implies that he wanted to ease tensions and create a mutual understanding between the two cultures. His intentions might have been that he wanted to improve the daily lives of his parishioners by easing the communication between them and the Spanish friars. Alva perhaps wanted to create an understanding between the powerful and the vulnerable. It is clear that defying the Christians was not going to make them go away and therefore the easiest way to continue living would have been to comply with their demands. What Alva seems to have accomplished was an unofficial compromise between the Nahuas and the Spanish by creating a familiar yet Christian doctrine that was understood by each culture.
Religious Conversion and Instruction

In his work *A Guide to Confession*, it is clear that Don Bartolomé de Alva is attempting to bring to light the inappropriate “old” ways of religion that the natives were still practicing and to create a fuller understanding of the natives’ practices, so that the clergy would be able to better provide guidance and penance to save the misguided natives’ souls. The main focus of this work was to help priests and natives to better understand one another by creating a text written both in Spanish and Nahuatl, set up side by side so that it could be used as a reference and guide when taking and giving confession in the Mexican language. John Frederick Schwaller, who has extensively studied Alva’s works, states that, “The core of the work seeks to reform the spirituality of the Indians through the recognition of the vestiges of their old spirituality still present in their worship and through its destruction, which would result in a purer form of Christianity. The guide clearly shows the concern the clergy had about syncretism and backsliding at the time…”47 It seems likely, however, that syncretism was exactly what Alva was attempting to create in order to aid in conversion.

Alva was educated in Christianity and it is likely that he was also very familiar with the native practices, both as they were when he was growing up and after he was ordained. In that case, it would be logical that he would want to do all that he could to help his fellow natives to better understand the religion and spirituality that he, presumably, had become devoted to. One way in which to understand this is to look at how Alva tries to tear down the old ways of Nahua religious practice but in turn he tries equally hard to rebuild new ways of worshiping and practicing the Catholic faith. He does this primarily by using this guide to teach Nahuas the basics of the Catholic faith that should replace their old ways of worship. For instance, he instructs priests to ask their parishioners, “When someone died – perhaps your relative or maybe

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some other person – did you accompany, bury and wrap each one of them up with henequen cloaks, tobacco, tumplines, sandals, money, water, food, [and all] unbeknownst to the priest?"\textsuperscript{48}

The purpose here would be to call to attention the unorthodox behavior of the native burial practices. These practices were no doubt intended to comfort the relatives and friends of the deceased, and so in return Alva explains the basics of Heaven and Hell as well as Limbo and Purgatory seemingly in an attempt to comfort the survivors in a Christian way. He explains Heaven as “the royal palace of God, and there all are eternally enjoying themselves, rich and prosperous and enjoying [their just] rewards. No affliction and pain reaches there; all live forever. There go the friends and beloved ones of God who obeyed and served Him, who doubted and rejected not His divine commandments and who truly believed.”\textsuperscript{49} In a sense this was meant to comfort the people who had lived a “good Christian” life. His description of Purgatory was also meant to give hope by providing those who lived less than a perfect Christian life with a chance to redeem themselves in the afterlife.

On the other hand, Alva also describes the pains of Hell. This is presumably something that would be instilled in anyone who was raised with Catholic values but was entirely foreign to the Nahua. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the only equivalent to Heaven or Hell that the Nahua had was a place called \textit{Mictlan} which just meant the place of the dead. Similar to the way Hell was described in \textit{Final Judgment} and \textit{How to Live on Earth}, Alva and others described Hell to Nahua by saying that it was a burning place with no chimney or smoke vent.\textsuperscript{50} The purpose would be to instill in the Nahua an understanding of the importance of penance and why correct


\textsuperscript{49} Alva, “Guide to Confession, Large and Small, in the Mexican Language,” 89.

practice was imperative in order to go to Heaven and be saved. It is notable that one of the plays that he later translates, *The Great Theater of the World* is almost entirely based on the circumstances under which people go to Heaven, Limbo, Purgatory, and Hell due to their life and actions. The explanation of the Christian afterlife was obviously something that Alva felt was important and tried to emphasize where he could.

Beyond the explanation of consequences, which is something that was also found in early works of theater, Alva’s guide is considerably more practical regarding the everyday lives of his native parishioners. It is likely that confession was a very insecure venture for the Nahuas in colonial Mexico. There was a lack of trust between the clergy and the native upper classes, and between the native upper class and the native lower class as well. In order to combat this, Alva explains that priests are sworn to secrecy and that they are not allowed to tell anyone what is confessed to them. He writes this in the dialogue of the priest, “And also do not let the devil make you think that I might say and reveal them [your sins] to another. It can in no way occur because God has ordered all of us confessors to completely shut up and guard in our hearts other people’s sins.”51 In combining these two concepts it is likely that Alva was trying to make confession more inviting to natives. If a Nahua was under the impression that he would go to a horrible place if he did not confess his sins to a priest, but he also believed that this priest would inform the authorities or simply spread rumors about him, it was not likely that he would go to confess something that was shameful or illegal. However, Alva’s attempt to make confession seem important and also to make priests and clergy seem like real people who were bound not to tell of confessed sins, made it possible for a native to go to confession with confidence.

If it is likely that making confession more inviting and also more understandable was the immediate goal of Alva, it seems that his long-term goal was saving souls. It was clear that he

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had to break down the old understandings of religion: both the religious understanding of the Spanish and the religious understanding of the Nahuas and it is likely that he may have accomplished this. In doing so, he made confession something that was not feared but understood and embraced. In addition, he made an effort to replace the old ways of worship with new ways to worship the new Christian gods. For example, he provides admonitory speeches about the seven sacraments and it is easy to see that within those universal life events, such as birth and marriage, Alva made connections to the old practices of religion.

The term admonitory speech in itself is reminiscent of the pre-conquest Huehuehtlahtolli or “old speeches” in which parents would advise their children. More specifically, Alva’s speech about baptism focuses on the same concepts that the midwives’ speech focuses on. Although the speech is not as similar in form as was seen in the play The Sacrifice of Issac, the concepts in the speech would have been familiar to a Nahua listener. Both speak to the burden that one is responsible to carry here on earth and both speak about the importance of fulfilling those responsibilities. In the one case those responsibilities include battle and tending to the household, in the other they include serving God and living a good Christian life. Alva’s speech states, “Because of this you who are their parents are very responsible for teaching them how to serve God and showing them the divine words and the things pertaining to God.” This sense of parental responsibility to teach their children about life was important to pre-conquest Nahuas and surely would not have been less important in post-conquest society, which is likely to be why Alva included it. This pre-conquest speech would have been made, or associated with the

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bathing of the child after birth, which is likely to be the connection that Alva was trying to make. It is very possible that Alva was trying to replace the speech of the midwife with the ritual of baptism so that the people would not feel that they were losing an age old ritual.

Additionally, the admonitory speech that Alva writes about marriage stressed the fact that, “You are taking each other for always and cannot abandon one another tomorrow or the next day even if you have a change of heart.” Similarly, the speech of the mother in the Florentine Codex states, “Never at any time abuse your servant, your husband. Never at any time betray him; as it is said, do not commit adultery.” In addition, the father’s speech states that a girl should not want to leave her husband even if he is poor, “a poor eagle warrior, a poor ocelot warrior, even if he is a poor warrior, of poor offspring, or one who struggles for existence. Do not detest him.” These two speeches show the importance of keeping a true marriage in pre-conquest society. Although there is no way to tell whether Alva was intentionally making this connection or whether it is simply coincidental that both cultures held this belief about marriage, it is interesting that with the other sacraments, ones that did not have any universal purpose or connection to Nahua ritual, Alva made no effort to connect them to anything Nahua. It seems as though the most important sacraments, namely baptism, confession, and marriage, at least the most important in terms of converting and saving the souls of the natives, were the ones that Alva concentrated on making most familiar. It is also possible that these are the sacraments that would be replacing native traditions and therefore were the ones that most needed to be explained and made acceptable to the natives or else they would continue to be preformed in the pre-conquest fashion.

55 Restall, Sousa, and Terraciano, “Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy,” 219, fig. 9.2.
Alva knew that defying Christianity would not help his people and would only create more tension and trouble between the natives and the Spanish. His attempts to make both sides understand one another better show his versatility as an ambassador from one world to the other. His blunt and forward claims against the ‘old’ ways may seem at first to be just another way to ‘force’ the natives into a religion that they were not willing to embrace. However, it seems as though the natives had already embraced parts of Christianity but were at the same time firmly rooted in their traditions. Therefore, Alva used what he knew as a Spaniard, a Christian, a theologian and a Nahua to bring the natives closer to the Catholic orthodoxy and consequently, from his perspective, closer to salvation. In the mind of a seventeenth century Catholic priest it is likely that salvation may have been just about all that mattered.

Easing Social Tension and Trying to Reduce Confusion

A Guide to Confession seems like it may have also been Alva’s way to provide a text that the clergy and the Nahuas could use to understand each other better. One of the largest obstacles he had to clear was that of the language barrier. There were many subtleties in the Nahua language that would be difficult for a non-native speaker to understand. This linguistic obstacle created a host of other misunderstandings that Alva also had to address in order to create a better understanding between the clergy and the parishioners. Being partially Nahua, Alva was able to understand both worlds in which he lived. Being raised in this bicultural setting implies that he would have been well acquainted with both ways of life, and therefore would be able to see the mistaken understandings of Christianity and of Nahua practices.

In addition to the spiritual aspect of the work, namely the idea that it would help to save souls, The Guide to Confession also served the very practical purpose of eliminating, or at least
attempting to eliminate, a language barrier. It was nonsensical in the mind of a Nahua who entered the priesthood that native Nahuatl speakers would be praying and confessing in a language such as Latin, which they did not completely understand, if they understood it at all. At the end of the guide Alva provides the basic Christian prayers, Nicene Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Ave Maria, and the Salve, translated into Nahuatl. “…Alva found it incongruous that Mexican Indians might pray in Latin, totally ignorant of what they were saying.”59 The first step to understanding this foreign religion was to have it presented in a language that was understood. However, there remained obvious complications with the guide and the extent of its use, as it would never have been possible for a confession to proceed in the exact manner that Alva had laid out and therefore words would be spoken that would not be understood and questions asked that were not planed for. In addition it would be very difficult for either side to fully understand the other even though they were speaking in the same language, the way that it is difficult to understand another language, even with the help of a dictionary, when you are a novice. It is likely that Alva knew this but was doing what he thought he could to help the situation and to quell misunderstandings that might have escalated.

Alva begins his guide by creating an analogy between himself and Jacob, using the story from chapter 31 of genesis where Jacob struggles with an angel until the appearance of the dawn when he is given the blessing of the angel. In this explanation of his work Alva uses an intentional play on words by using his name, Alva, which was frequently written Alba,60 meaning dawn in Spanish, to imply that he is meant to be the one to bring the light of Christianity to the natives. He states that:

I took an example from this, most illustrious lord, so that neither the cares of the benefice nor fears of my shortcomings might dishearten me from availing myself of Your

Lordship. That was [like] struggling with an angel, with regard to whom I confess myself conquered with honors and defeated with favors, and to whom I humbly offer the labors and vigils in a night of Mexican ignorance, pleading that they do not lose the blessing of Your Grace, because the dawn [i.e., the Alva] comes, if not like an angel, [then like] a prince in the ministry.\(^{61}\)

Alva’s description of the battle between Jacob and an Angel seems to be meant to parallel his battle against faith in the darkness of the Mexican culture. Alva knows the wrongs of the natives and wishes to help them realize these wrongs and to make them right. He wishes to have the blessings of his Spanish colleagues and mentors within the Catholic Church. This introduction is only written in Spanish. It is likely that Alva was trying to impress upon the Spanish the importance of a Nahuatl translation of the process of the act of contrition and that only a native Nahua would be able to effectively make such a translation meaningful.

Alva’s dual background provided him with the ability to more fully understand Nahuatl and use this understanding to instruct Nahuas in how to correctly make confession. He begins instructing Nahuas by advising that they be very direct in their speech to the priests, saying, “Do not speak nonsense, do not hide and wrap up your sins with [a multitude of obscure?] words, for thus you will put your confession in danger and the confessor will not rightly understand you…”\(^{62}\) It could be that by saying this he is advising his fellow native Nahuatl speakers not to use a common Nahua form of backward talk in which reversal is used as a form of expression.\(^{63}\) Alva could be referring to an elaborate form of courtly speech. “It had its own grammar and relied upon a code of polite inversion that all elite Nahuas understood. A prince might address his social inferiors as “my grandfathers” and they might call him “my child.” He might say to them that he was unworthy to receive the honor of such a visit, when they were to understand

\(^{63}\) Townsend, Malintzin’s Choices, 86.
that they were lucky he was taking the time to see them at all.” This form of speech was always used with ambassadors and in a confession, a style of speech that makes what you are saying completely the opposite of what you mean would surely complicate the confession and in turn the penance that is required. It seems that the clergy had already noticed this and had by this time, become frustrated by it, because Alva makes note of it. It is more than likely that a native Nahuatl speaker would be the only type of person who would fully understand this form of speech.

This is not the only way in which Alva attempts to help the clergy understand the natives and Nahuatl. He also provides clarifying marginal notes in the Spanish version of the text. For example, he provides an explanation of who Ahuaaques, or Tlaloques, are. In the margin he writes, “Ahuaques, or Tlaloques: Gods of rain in heathen times.” These gods were likely ones that the natives still called to for help therefore explaining the reference to them being made during the confession dialogue that Alva presents. “Do you believe until now that there are Ahuaques?” is one of the questions that Alva has the priest ask in the dialogue. The explanatory note indicates though, that these native gods were a reference that some of the Spanish clergy would not have been familiar with. The outline of questions was meant to help both the Nahuas and the priests, so that the priests could speak to the Nahuas in Nahuatl and understand their answer in order to give correct penance.

It is clear throughout the text that Alva is attempting to make it clear to the natives that their current practices of faith are not orthodox in the least. His outline of exactly what questions should be asked by the priests in order to prompt the natives to confess to unorthodox practices, including drunkenness, idolatry, and incorrect burial practices indicates that these practices were

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64 Townsend, Malintzin’s Choices, 86.
those that were the most common and therefore those that most needed to be confessed and thereby corrected via penance. He attempts to make the Spanish an example of how the old ways of worship cannot be the right way by stating, “now your neighbors the Spaniards (good Christians), surpassing [you] and you not reaching [i.e., equaling] them in wealth and riches: do they go around warming up little idols called ‘turquoise children’ and ‘turquoise toads?’ Do they go around wrapping them up in cotton? No, they just go around putting their faith and hope in the one true deity, God…”67 This seems terribly condescending and it would seem that Alva cared little about his Nahua parishioners. However, it seems that he cared very much about his parishioners; just not for their traditional practices and that he was harsh on them simply because he cared for their fate. It is very likely that he truly believed that it was his job to save their souls. This is also seen in the Spanish Inquisition, where some priests seemed to truly believe that what they were doing was right to save the souls of the people they punished. In this case it also seems likely that by breaking down the old traditions of the Nahuas, Alva believed that he was saving his parishioners.

His work shows his passion both for Christianity and for the Nahua people. In his later works of theater he shows the same kind of passion, only in these works he more than subtly alters the Spanish originals, which is very different from the way other Nahuatl plays were only subtly altered from their Spanish origins. His works show a blatant Nahua influence that was meant to make the purpose of the plays more meaningful to the natives. Although there is no direct evidence that these plays were ever performed, they probably were, and it is more than likely that Alva intended that they be used to spread the word and stories of Christianity in a way with which the natives might identify. His ability to straddle both worlds enabled him to better make changes, both subtle and obvious, in the plays that made them more Nahua than Spanish.

Chapter III: Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, or in Mexican Understanding?

Don Bartolomé de Alva: The Playwright.

In 1640 and 1641, Alva completed the translation of three works of Spanish Golden Age theater, The Great Theater of the World, The Animal Prophet and the Fortunate Patricide, and The Mother of the Best. These works were never published but were used to support Father Horacio Carochi’s linguistic research. Carochi was a Jesuit and a brilliant linguist, whose writings still teach modern scholars much about the Nahuatl language. What is most indicative of Carochi’s brilliance, however, may be Alva’s own testimony, for he stated that “[Carochi]… has attained the ability to explain masterfully… what the very natives [meaning native speakers], although they reach an understanding of it, hardly manage to express.” It is likely that Carochi invited Alva to assist in his work. It could be that Carochi and Alva met while Alva was at the University, and it is no small feat that Alva attracted the attention of Carochi. Alva served as an informant for Carochi’s grammatical publication, Arte de la lengua Mexicana, partly by translating the plays.

We will never know which of the two men decided which scripts to translate, but it seems that the three plays were a sort of sampling from the theatrical styles of the time. In the past these plays have been looked at as significantly less religious than Alva’s previous work, namely his confession manual. John Frederick Schwaller states that, “Among theatrical pieces, they

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69 Burkhart and Sell, preface to Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, xvi-xvii.
71 Burkhart and Sell, preface to Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, xvii.
[Alva’s three works] also stand out for their limited emphasis on Christian moral teaching.”\textsuperscript{72}

This statement is meant to compare Alva’s three translations to the types of plays that were mentioned in Chapter 1. However, I feel that the plays that Alva chose do have a similar religious fervor. They are simply less direct, less blunt. It could be that Alva felt that the parishioners whom he knew well were able to understand the more subtle religious teachings that were present in the plays he was translating, as they had already spent months or years listening to him. It is true that these plays were less directly instructive, but in some ways they were more religiously significant. The feeling that the plays were religious in nature has been expressed recently: “The choices [That is, Alva’s translated texts] were religious texts appropriate to the evangelical purposes of both a Jesuit missionary and a mestizo parish priest, while the wide range of conversational styles they encompassed bolstered Carochi’s Nahuatl education.”\textsuperscript{73}

These translations show that there was an interest in creating a Nahua understanding of the texts and of the religious base on which the texts stood.

Carochi’s intentions for the translation project and for his extensive grammatical works were ultimately religious, but with the goal of educating the Spanish clergy and not in educating the natives. It was only logical that the clergy would be the ones to learn a new language due to their lesser numbers. Carochi believed that, “it is necessary to hear the Indians speaking or to read things written by them or those raised among them” in order to master the Mexican language.\textsuperscript{74} This is likely to be why Carochi took such an interest in Alva. His work in translation would be infinitely more valuable to the education of the clergy because he was raised among native Nahua. Of the two plays that I will focus on, The Great Theater of the

\textsuperscript{72} Schwaller, “Don Bartolomé de Alva, Nahuatl Scholar of the Seventeenth Century,” 12.

\textsuperscript{73} Burkhart and Sell, preface to Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation, xvii.

World and The Animal Prophet, the latter was clearly heavily influenced by or simply edited by Carochi. He included many marginal notes in Spanish that explain the use of Nahuatl words and phrases as well as the native flora and fauna that Alva includes. For example, when Alva writes, *tlapalyzquixōchitl* or “red popcorn flowers,” Carochi describes this flower in Spanish as “Flowers from the hot lands. Slight, white and somewhat reddish; fragrant.”\(^\text{75}\) These notes were likely for the clergy whom Carochi was hoping to educate using this translated text.

Alva, on the other hand, was probably less interested in instructing the clergy with these works. Although it is clear that his confession manual was for both the clergy and for the parishioners and was meant to create an understanding between the two, the plays seem to be more for the Nahua’s benefit, at least in Alva’s translation. The three texts that Alva translated were clearly meant to be performed: “[the] ‘Mexicanized’ content as well as his attention to stage directions suggests that he intended them to be suitable and ready for performance.”\(^\text{76}\) The “Mexicanized content” was not just the addition of local flowers but also the native naming of characters and the omission of other characters. The plays themselves were altered in order that they would suit their Nahua audience as well as their Nahua actors. One of the major alterations that Alva makes to these plays is that he makes them shorter. He takes out many lines and simplifies the dialogue. The Nahua did not have a history of scripted theater and there were no professional actors. By shortening the lines, the parts would be easier to perform for a cast of inexperienced actors. In addition to the lack of experienced actors, there was also a lack of experienced theater goers. The standard time allotment for a theatrical performance was set by the morality plays that were featured in Chapter 1. Alva was likely to have been familiar with these plays, and because of this, he felt that the length of his plays should match what his native


\(^{76}\) Burkhart, “Nahuatl Baroque: How Alva Mexicanized the Spanish Dramas,” 35.
parishioners were already used to. Alva was clearly concerned with fitting these texts into the current society and culture as well as making them more familiar to his parishioners so that the religious concepts would be better understood.

**The Great Theater of the World**

The play *The Great Theater of the World* is an *auto sacramental* in which abstract ideas are represented by actors who play a specific role in life, such as A Ruler, A Pauper, Beauty, Prudence, A Rich Man, and A Child. The other characters are not roles in life but instead they are Earth, Order, and Our Savior. The play is based around the idea that “all the world’s a stage” which was an idea that was well known to the people of Europe and was a common theme for literature and art as well as works of theater. However, Alva was trying to convey this idea to an audience who had not heard of this analogy, obviously due to the fact that they did not have a theater culture with which to make the analogy. Louise Burkhart points out, “There were no special terms for role, lines, cast, theater, company, director, stage, prompter, or dressing room. How was he to translate a play that, rather than telling a story, was about life itself being like a play?” As a result of this Alva chose to downplay the theatrical component of the play and instead to focus on the moral and religious component of the play. This is evident by the replacement of the role of Director in the Spanish version with the part of Our Savior in the Nahuatl version. In order to bypass the fact that this is an analogy for the world as a stage, Alva simply makes Our Savior the director of the action in the play and therefore the world.

In addition to significantly shortening many of the lines in the play, more interestingly, Alva has omitted an entire character. In the Spanish version of the play there is a character

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called Plowman. He seems to be the most interesting character in the play; he is also the most vocal about social injustice. “One plausible theory to explain this omission suggests that Alva prudently left out a character whose protests might resonate too much in light of colonial Mexico’s social inequalities.”

The strongest example of the Plowman’s language of protest in the Spanish version is as follows:

PLOWMAN: Who ever saw greater toil than mine? I tear at the heart of the earth that gave me life, for only in this way will she yield to me my food. I work with this plow that scars her face, and thus pay for the gifts that she gives to me. The weapons I toil with are sickles and hoes: my sickle is for the harvest and the how for the sown fields. … And giving me much taxation that is this century’s burden, life takes endless aim at the unfortunate plowman. Yet I work hard and I sweat it, and the fruits of my labor will be paid by those who buy them at the price I settle on. I don’t want to fix the price, nor worry about those people who, when they buy, blame the one who kept the rate. And I know that if this April there’s no rain, I pray to God there will be no rain, my crops will sell for many more ducats. And then I will be this land’s Nabal or Carmel, and all will need me, but I’ll be so fattened then, that I wonder, what could I do? LAW [OF GRACE]: (sings) Do good works, for God is God. DISCRETION: Why didn’t you hear the prompter [LAW]? PLOWMAN: ‘Cause I’m def when it suits me.

It is easy to understand that this type of protest would not be likely to help the Nahuas feel any better about Christianity or about their new social status. To begin, most of the natives were farmers and those farmers paid taxes that were often too high to be paid without suffering. This fact gives enormous weight to the line, “And giving me much taxation that is this century’s burden, life takes endless aim at the unfortunate plowman.” It was clearly not Alva’s goal to render the common natives any more disgruntled than they already were over their station in life. It is also possible that the line “The weapons I toil with are sickles and hoes” could have struck a sour note with those men who still wanted to identify with their grandfathers who were the great warriors who were written about in the annals of their history. Although, the major loss of a

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warrior identity among the men of native cultures is more traditionally associated with the natives of North America, I believe that it is very likely that many men felt a loss of warrior identity in Aztec society as well. It is true that Alva could have simply altered the text or omitted particular lines of the Plowman, but seems as though it may have been easier to omit the character altogether.

This creates an ironic juxtaposition between my claims: Alva was constantly trying to relate his material to Nahua society and yet now he is taking out the one character who is most like his parishioners! It is also interesting that, as I will discuss later, in The Animal Prophet Alva underscores social injustice and class divisions between natives, mestizos, and Spaniards, making his work with these plays slightly incongruous. The conclusion that he prudently left out the Plowman is not at all unlikely or it could be that Carochi suggested he leave him out in order to avoid any tension. It could also have been that the copy of the play that Alva was working from was one that did not include the Plowman.\textsuperscript{81} That would then explain the complete omission of even any reference to the character. This theory is strengthened by the fact that Alva’s version of this play “is actually the oldest extant version of the most famous Eucharistic drama” therefore it is impossible to know what version Alva used for his translation. It is impossible to know for sure what the real case was. It is likely, though, that if Alva did encounter the script that included the Plowman that he would have found the character a little too much like the most discontented parishioners and therefore considered it wise to exclude a character who could cause more social unrest. His work with the confession manual shows that he was interested in creating understanding and cooperation, not unrest, which always ended badly for the natives. Therefore it would have been logical not to contribute to vocalizations of social protest.

\textsuperscript{81} Wright, “A Dramatic Diaspora: Spanish Theater and Its Mexican Translation,” 21.
The alterations aside, the text was clearly intended to be a tool to spread Christianity, and ultimately this play had the potential to reach far more people than Alva’s confession manual, making it a more effective educational tool. This play was, effectively, an outline of what behavior would land one in Hell, Heaven, Limbo and Purgatory. These were all concepts that were foreign to the Nahuas. As previously discussed, the concept of Hell was one that was stressed in works that were meant to teach natives about Christianity. This work is different in that there is less of an emphasis on how horrible a place Hell is and more of an emphasis on what acts will send a person to which afterlife. It is possible that by this point Alva felt that his parishioners knew that Hell was a place that they wanted to avoid, and that now they needed instruction on how to avoid it. The fate of the six characters is a direct reflection of their actions throughout the play, therefore making this play akin to How to Live on Earth.

At the end of the play, Earth states, “All now come to an end. Let me take from them the things I gave them with which they made themselves attractive for the lives they lived on earth.”82 The things that he mentions are the objects that they were given at the start of the play as the props that would identify them in their role. Taking away the gifts of the earth at the end of the world, once all are dead, implies that everyone is made equal in death, and therefore all that one is judged on is one’s actions during life. Once all of the objects are reclaimed by Earth, Heaven opens and Our Savior calls out to all who exist in the world of the play. However, it is clear that not all will go to heaven. He states, “Even though I am inviting people to a banquet, only those who served me will enter. As for the others, let them depart from me right away. Let Pauper and Prudence come; let them also rejoice.”83 The implication is clear, that those who have suffered on earth will not suffer in the afterlife. Prudence is constantly repenting

throughout the action of the play and was equipped with mecatl which literally translates to “rope, cord, whip” which was associated with acts of penance.\textsuperscript{84} Pauper lived poorly but was constantly comforted by the fact that God was always watching over earth and that if he lived a good life he would be rewarded in Heaven.

The idea of original sin is addressed by the fate of the Child. Child asks, “Why don’t you show favor to me? Did I do something wrong?”\textsuperscript{85} Baptism was the most well known sacrament in New Spain, but it may not have been the best understood. Alva attempts to explain the fate of an un-baptized child who was still stained by original sin in Our Savior’s answer to the Child’s plea. “You were born in sin and not baptized. You will not suffer from, nor will you delight in anything.”\textsuperscript{86} Although this does not provide the best understanding of what original sin is it makes it clear that the Child does not suffer for this sin, however they do not rejoice by being freed of it either. This is a distinctly Nahua way to explain the lack of life that an un-baptized child would experience. For in the traditional Nahuatl midwives’ speech to an infant the emphasis is placed on the idea that life is suffering and life is joy, so a life without this suffering and joy would be no life at all.

The only character who is sent to Hell in this play is Rich Man. It seems that this Rich Man is meant to represent the more prestigious Nahuas due to his treasures consisting of precious stones and jade, as well as gold and silver.\textsuperscript{87} Our Savior speaks to him harshly, saying: “Call me that [my savior] no longer, for although you are my creation I have already scorned you, since you did not carry out my divine commands.”\textsuperscript{88} Rich Man has proven throughout the action of the play to be, not only a poor servant of God but also a poor servant of the Ruler. He

\textsuperscript{84} Alva, “The Great Theater of the World,” 135.  
\textsuperscript{85} Alva, “The Great Theater of the World,” 145.  
\textsuperscript{86} Alva, “The Great Theater of the World,” 145.  
\textsuperscript{87} Alva, “The Great Theater of the World,” 85.  
\textsuperscript{88} Alva, “The Great Theater of the World,” 145.
responds to having to bow to the king by stating, “It is extremely irritating to me to bow low in reverence to him.” This sort of defiance would not be tolerated but it is likely that it still existed among the ruling class of Nahuas who were put under much strain by both their own people who had trouble paying taxes and by the Spanish who required high taxes. The fact that this character was sent to Hell after his ill temper toward his ruler would have sent the message that the King was next to God and was to be respected. This sentiment was likely stressed, seeing as the King of Spain would be the King of the natives. Rich Man shows himself to be a poor servant of God when he turns away the Pauper who asks for his help. He states, “It is better you go. Do not turn my stomach in disgust.” He is not charitable to the Pauper, who is unable to do for himself, and when death comes to other’s in the play he is content to enjoy himself until his time comes, opting not to pray for forgiveness for his sins. His actions indicate that the ruling class or wealthier Nahuas should be loyal to the king but also charitable to the common Nahuas, represented by the Pauper. His defiance of both his ruler and of God’s commandments send him to Hell in the end of the play, in order to make an example of what not to do.

The last circumstance of the afterlife that is discussed is the concept of Purgatory. This was a sticky subject in New Spain, and the doctrine regarding it was being called into question in Europe around the same time. Leaders of the Counter-reformation were making large efforts to reinforce the idea of Purgatory. In New Spain priests had to be careful with their explanations of Purgatory. They did not want to imply that those who were not baptized, such as marginally Christianized ancestors, were going to go to Heaven or even Purgatory. In The Great Theater of the World the two characters who find themselves in Purgatory are Beauty and Ruler. These two were far from perfect but they did practice at least partial penance and showed remorse for their

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sins before they died, so these things contributed to their fate. Our Savior comments on their fate by saying, “Beauty and Ruler will come to rejoice, but since they sinned let them still make up for it, let them still purify themselves in purgatory, let them suffer.”

How they will ascend from Purgatory to Heaven is also addressed, but not in a clear way. Prudence pleads with Our Savior, “Have pity on Ruler, for he had pity on me” and in response Our Savior answers, “Let him suffer just a little while, since you speak on his behalf.”

Through this response it is evident that prayers will help to lessen the time spent in Purgatory. However, paying for masses to be said in the name of the deceased was the conventional way to help release loved ones souls from Purgatory. This is likely to be vague on purpose, so that those with no assets would not lose hope. The concept of Purgatory is one that Alva explores again in The Animal Prophet, where he is more expressive about the concept.

The instruction present in this play is far more subtle than the instruction present in the plays in Chapter 1 or in the confession manual. However, the concepts treated are also a bit more abstract. It is possible that Alva felt he needed to tread softly while explaining these concepts, as they were being questioned elsewhere in the world and the last thing he would want to do would be to cause anyone to question his faith any more.

The second play that I will discuss is a far more interesting story, and as I mentioned earlier, could have been meant, in part, to make a social commentary. The religious message within The Animal Prophet is more specific and far more positive than that of any of the works we have looked at so far. No one goes to Hell and even dead parents, who may or may not have been baptized, are released from Purgatory to enter Heaven.

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The Animal Prophet and the Fortunate Patricide

In the hagiographic play, The Animal Prophet, the story of the life of Saint Julian is told. The story starts when Julian kills a deer, and in turn that deer prophesies that he will kill his own parents. Consequently, Julian plans to flee his homeland out of fear of this prophecy, however, not before seeing his beloved Malintzin. She is presumably a Native girl whom Julian has deflowered. The implication that he has bedded her comes from the wording of Malintzin’s statement to Julian, when she says, “While I’m still staying here you shall still see me.”94 In Nahua terminology, to “see” someone meant to “know” them intimately.95 This is further made clear when Julian’s servant Tizoc, comments moments after the intimate exchange between Julian and Malintzin, “Is it time for me to leave?”96 After much deliberation though, Julian decides it is best for him to leave immediately in order to avoid fulfilling the deer’s prophecy. When he leaves her behind, Malintzin curses him for not fulfilling his promise of marriage.

Throughout his trip and the rest of the play Julian is accompanied by his constant sidekick and servant, Tizoc, who is also a native. Once Julian finds himself in another town, or altepetl, far away, he marries a Spanish woman named Laurencia. However, he suspects her of adultery due to the eavesdropping of his servant Tizoc and his own misinterpretation of the sleep talk of his wife. He pretends to be away for a night in order to catch his wife. The ironic twist comes here. Laurencia allows two beggars to enter her house, and when she discovers that they are her husband’s parents she allows them to stay in her bed. It is one this night that Julian expects to catch her in bed with another man, namely Federico. So when he creeps back to the

house in the middle of the night and finds two figures in his bed, he kills them both, only to find out that the two beggars to whom his wife had been so hospitable were his own parents. Therefore, the prophecy of the deer has come true.

The religious message of the play begins at this point, Julian feels so badly about what he has done that he begins to do as many good works as he can. He is termed Julian the Hospitaller. He and his wife go about helping anyone they can and set up hospitals where the poor and sick members of society can come to rest and get well. In one case the devil appears to Julian disguised as a sick man looking for help, and tries to convince him that his parents are burning in hell because of his misdeed. However, Julian is also visited by Boy Jesus, who has to convince Julian that all is not lost:

JULIAN: Because of my sins, God has already consigned me to hell…Although I’m alive, he has already passed judgment on me in this way.
BOY JESUS: Who has passes judgment?
JULIAN: God himself.
BOY JESUS: You just deceive yourself. It is not true.
JULIAN: And he has already cast my father and mother into hell.
BOY JESUS: You have just been deceived, that you say those things. Be certain of it. If you saw your father in purgatory now, what would you say? ...All of heaven and earth are in my hands. Look, see your mother and your father, who are in purgatory and are about to go to heaven.97

Christ shows Julian that his parents wait in Purgatory and can be redeemed by his good works. This discussion of Purgatory makes it clear that through his good works Julian has saved his parents. His parents likely represent the baptized but only partially Christian generation of Alva’s parents and grandparents.

This is a story of hope, in that it shows that no matter how far one has strayed and “followed the road of the deer” it is always possible through good works and acts of repentance

to be welcomed into God’s kingdom and forgiven. Burkhart explains that in Alva’s time deer were associated with moral deviance. She states, “‘to follow the road of the deer’ meant to go astray, morally as well as spatially, into dangerous peripheries. Small wonder Julian, who in this scene is disordered by sexual desire and has further decivilized himself by putting on ragged clothing (in order to pass incognito onto his sweetheart’s country estate, gets in trouble when he follows a deer into the forest and shoots it, Chichimec style, with a bow and arrow.”98 She alludes to the idea that Julian was uncivilized in his whole demeanor in these first scenes of the play. The bow and arrow specifically connect Julian to the ancestors of the Nahua people. This may have been a purposeful alteration to the original dagger that is used in the Spanish version of the play to make Julian’s story more congruent with those that the Nahua would be used to hearing. However uncivilized Julian was at the start of the play, he is still able to correct his actions and is ultimately saved by his good works. The important idea is that no matter how unchristian someone has acted there is always hope for forgiveness and it is never too late to be saved through good works.

There is a social commentary that is made throughout the play that is exemplified by Alva’s alteration of the names of specific characters, which I will explain one at a time. The names that are changed are as follows. The Spanish play’s Irene, Julian’s lover, is changed to Malintzin. Her father, Alexander, is changed to Colhua Teuctli. Vulcan, Julian’s sidekick, is changed to Tizoc. Tizoc’s father’s name is only mentioned but is made to be Mexicatl. Julian’s parents’ names are changed into the more common Spanish names of Susana from Rosamira and Luis from Ludovico. Some of the name changes that were made were meant to be comical to someone who understood the context, as a native Nahua would. However, the first name change

of Irene to Malintzin is significant in another way. It is likely that this change was made as a dig at the local stratification among the natives and the Spanish and possibly even a comment on native women being taken advantage of and never being married. Before exploring this fully though, I would like to look at the lighter name changes first.

The most significant humorous change is that of Vulcan to Tizoc. This was a consequence of the name Vulcan being amusing in the Spanish version and so Alva made a similar joke with his native character, one that would make sense to a native audience. In the Spanish version, Vulcan tells Irene, “I’m Vulcan. My father was a Roman who had the custom of naming us children after gods, and so he called me Vulcan, after a well-known god.” This would be comical, because a Spanish audience would know that Vulcan was the misshapen son of Juno who married the adulterous Venus. However, this would not have been common knowledge to the Nahuas. In addition, the idea of naming children after gods, plural, was not something that a priest, who was trying to break the polytheistic tendencies of his parishioners, would want to suggest doing. The Roman polytheism by that time was accepted as myth in Europe and was commonly used in allegory; however calling attention to the fact that Europe had had a tradition of polytheism would not serve the purpose of teaching the Nahuas the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church. This is likely to be why Alva did not replace the name Vulcan with the name of a native god. Not only had native gods, for the most part, been turned into demons in literature, but it would inhibit the goal of trying to break down the old ways of religion.

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Instead, Alva uses the name of a native king. The character, Tizoc, tells Malintzin, “I’m Tizoc. My father is Mexicatl. They gave us royal Mexica names that are feared everywhere in the world.”\textsuperscript{100} The humor in this is that Tizoc was a famously inept ruler who only kept his throne from 1481 to 1486, and may even have been murdered to be replaced with a better ruler.\textsuperscript{101} This is, at least, how it is written in the Nahua historical annals, which is what the Nahua people would have been familiar with. In reality, it could also have been the case that there was a sibling rivalry that caused the murder of Tizoc and that in order to legitimize the act it was written that he was an inept ruler. The truth is not important in this case, though. What is significant is that Alva was clearly playing on the knowledge that the native Nahua had in order to make his version of the play contain the same level of satire that the Spanish version had.

The other name changes that occur, namely Tizoc’s father and Malintzin’s father, are also meant to be humorous, but in a way that is so subtle it is likely only a native would pick up on it. Burkhart, who translated the text into English, states that, Mexicatl, Tizoc’s father, is a “humorously generic name, analogous to ‘Joe Aztec.’”\textsuperscript{102} This type of subtlety is not likely to be understood by those who did not fully understand the language. Whether Alva was just trying to have the name purposely lack symbolism or whether he was attempting to make the name comical is impossible to deduce, however, he uses a relatively generic name for Malintzin’s father as well. “Colhua Teuctli means ‘Lord of the Colhuas,’ the Nahua group that claimed the strongest link to ancient Toltec ancestry. Like Alexander the name suggests pre-Christian greatness…. However, as a personal name it is humorously generic, analogous to ‘Big Shot

\textsuperscript{100} Alva, “The Animal Prophet and the Fortunate Patricide,” 171.
\textsuperscript{101} Burkhart, “Nahuatl Baroque: How Alva Mexicanized the Spanish Dramas,” 43.
\textsuperscript{102} Burkhart, “Nahuatl Baroque: How Alva Mexicanized the Spanish Dramas,” 42
Pagan Lord.” The repetition of the generic native name could indicate that Alva was trying to make a joke out of the names. He could also have been trying to give the characters the abstract quality that the characters had in *The Great Theater of the World*. What is more relevant, however, is the social impact that the names held.

The fact that Alva decided to make some of the characters native and to leave others Spanish makes the social stratification on one hand ambiguous and on the other hand more defined. The ethnic identity of Julian is very ambiguous. Julian seems to be European at times; however, at times his parents seem like Nahua noblemen. But with a Hispanicized son? The fact that Julian’s parents, with their Christian names, were saved would imply that they were either Spanish, or baptized Nahua, but the truth is unclear. This ambiguity was most likely what Alva was attempting to create with the name changes. The multiple interpretations were probably purposeful, so as not to tread on anyone’s toes, specifically, the natives whose parents where not baptized and the clergy who might not agree that natives who were not good Christians, even if baptized, could be saved. The less ambiguous names, those that are Nahua and indicate that the character was probably not baptized, would create a connection to those in the audience who may have still identify more closely with their Nahua self.

Tizoc was likely to be meant as a go between or a sort of ‘interpreter’ between the native audience and the less native or entirely non-native Julian. He was also portrayed as a sinful native, who is seen drinking excessively and who makes many complaints and uncouth jokes. As an interpreter, Tizoc is often seen eavesdropping and then in an aside, is heard recapitulating what has happened. One example of this comes when Julian and Federico, the nobleman who wishes to have Julian’s wife Laurencia, stand off against each other. After the two go offstage to

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prepare to fight, Tizoc states, “Now they’ve gone. They’ll kill each other. Alas! Let another
deer talk to us here and tell us what’s going to happen. Now the noblewoman is coming out.
What good would it do for her to hear this? Let me follow the others. May God calm
[Federico’s] heart. How will Federico destroy us? Aren’t me and my lord like little dogs that
he’ll shake in his teeth…? 104 He is clearly indicating that, if you missed it, the two were ready
to come to blows over Laurencia, and that Julian is likely to lose.

Another example is one in which Tizoc recognizes the Demon who comes in the guise of
a poor sick man. After the Demon claims that Julian would receive no mercy from God, Tizoc
responds:

Quiet, stinky. Do you also talk [like that] around other people? Is it your business?
Come, mange from hell. Isn’t the deity, God, powerful? Why can’t he have mercy on
him? Maybe you’d say Tezcatlipoca is Giver of Life and is very merciful? It’s the same
with a ruler here on earth: if someone who’s offended him humbles himself before him,
[the ruler] pardons him. How much more [merciful] is the ruler of heaven?! You’re just
fools to say that [God will not have mercy on Julian]. 105

This passage shows Tizoc’s faith in God and His mercy. In addition, he is the first to openly call
the Demon as such; calling him “mange from hell.” Tizoc uses a Nahua reference to accuse the
Demon of a lack of Christian faith. His question, “Maybe you’d say Tezcatlipoca is Giver or Life
and is very merciful?” was as good as calling the poor sick man a heretic. *Tezcatlipoca* was a
pre-conquest god who was a giver of life but one historian believes that he had become closely
associated with the devil by this time. 106 By stating that the Demon would believe that
Tezcatlipoca was the “Giver of Life” would imply, at the very least, that this Demon was a
follower of the pre-conquest gods and therefore would have little faith in the Christian God. At

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the worst, this comment could have been as good as calling the Demon a devil. Because the character is never called a demon explicitly, Tizoc’s character ensures, by stating it outright, that everyone in the audience understands now, if they did not before, that the sick man is a demon in disguise.

Tizoc is given a peculiar dichotomy of being faithful to God at times and also being sinful at times. It seems that Tizoc was truly supposed to be a native Nahua. He is found drunk on pulque in some scenes, which was considered by Alva to be one of the main failings of the Nahua people, but ultimately he was faithful to God and the Christian faith, which is most likely the way that the majority of Nahua Catholics lived, and for that matter the way that most all Catholics live. Tizoc seems to be the character that was meant to “speak” to the Nahua audience who might otherwise see the play and its characters as foreign and unfamiliar. Tizoc’s role is more of an intermediate character rather than an actual interpreter between the audience and Julian. Whereas Julian is gravely sinful and later unfailingly virtuous, Tizoc’s actions are more balanced and less extreme, making his character more real and relevant to the lives of the Nahuas.

Malintzin’s character also seems meant to be real and more than likely native. Her character and specifically her name is possibly the most significant change made by Alva. The most famous Malintzin at that time would have been the translator for Cortés. Alva would definitely have known of her and her part in the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlan. Most people at this time had some knowledge of the female interpreter for Cortés and of her “forced” marriage to a man she was not willing to marry. In this well-known scenario Malintzin was
brushed aside by Cortés, her lover and the father of her child, who then forced her to marry a lower ranking Spaniard called Juan Jaramillo who was one of Cortés’s original captains.\(^\text{107}\)

Alva would have been generally familiar with Malintzin, as the woman shunned by Cortés, due to popular knowledge, but he may have been more familiar with her story because of her involvement in Tetzcoco’s history. It is virtually certain that Alva would have heard the stories written about the division of Tetzcoco and the ultimate succession of Ixtlilxochitl over his brothers and half brother,\(^\text{108}\) especially because his brother, Don Fernando, was one of the authors who wrote these stories down and included Malintzin’s role in his historical writings. The retention of the name Ixtlilochitl is evidence that even through Alva’s generation, the decedents of Ixtlilochitl took pride in the narrative that described his patient rise to power, in which narrative, Malintzin was included. Malintzin would have been essential to Cortés’s understanding of the familial dispute in Tetzcoco.\(^\text{109}\) Does this involvement in Alva’s family history have anything to do with his decision to name the disempowered native woman, who is left at the beginning of the play, Malintzin? Unfortunately we can never know the answer to that question. However, it does seem like this was a very deliberate name change, one that would have been understood by the Nahua community at that time.

Malintzin’s role in the play is short and isolated. As her character is only present in the very beginning of the play it is possible that Alva used this name as a “hook” that would catch the audience’s attention. Considering the play was unusually long for a Nahua play at that time,

\(^{107}\) Townsend, *Malintzin’s Choices*, 148-149. In reality, it is more likely that Malintzin had weighed her options and decided to marry Jaramillo based on the fact that being a mistress to a high ranking Spanish man was less advantageous than being married to a still high, but lower ranking Spanish man. The difference is the title that the woman would hold. However, this theory is relatively new and would not have been the popular story at the time that Alva was translating this play.


the fact that Malintzin is the first in the play to speak and speaks her own name while reading a letter from Julian may intrigue a native audience who would know other stories about Malintzin. She was also used as a vehicle for making social commentary in my opinion. As Tizoc had exemplified the Nahua male who found himself drunk at times but was at other times faithful and virtuous, Malintzin seems to exemplify the Nahua woman who had been in a sexual relationship, often with an uncaring Spaniard, but had not completed the sacrament of marriage. It is likely that this was a concern of many priests at the time as seen in the play, *Final Judgment*. It could also be the case that this was meant to be a dig at the Spanish men who sought native women for pleasure but did not plan to marry them, even if the comment was only meant to be understood by the native audience, due to the fact that Julian’s ethnicity is left ambiguous. As the choice not to marry was not Malintzin’s and as Julian is not directly identified as Spanish, these thoughts are merely speculations.

Malintzin, the historical woman, not the character, made a specific decision to marry a Spaniard who was able to give her a political and monetary advantage. This was something that was common of Nahua noblewomen and Alva’s mother and grandmother both married Spaniards perhaps to gain that same advantage. This fact could have prompted Alva to be sympathetic to the women who had been left behind by men who had already taken their virginity. But ultimately, his treatment of Malintzin is no different than that of the Spanish version of the play. His decision to name the character Malintzin could have been a simple acknowledgement of how the character was similar to the real Malintzin and many other native women and therefore the character would be more memorable. In addition, Malintzin curses Julian at the end of her role and at the time a “curse” would have been more suited to a Nahua woman than a Spanish woman, although Irene, in the Spanish version of the play, also curses Julian. The significance
in the name Malintzin was surely not an accident and was just as deliberate as the other name changes. However, I believe that Alva’s motives for this name change are less clear and more susceptible to interpretation.

Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Understanding

Alva surely intended to make his translations more familiar to his Nahua parishioners. He was trying to make the plays into works that would be understood by a Mexican, or Nahua, audience. Without a doubt his deliberate name changes meant something to a Nahua audience and were far from arbitrary. The changes that he made added to the entertainment value of the works but also created intriguing social dynamics and political statements that the native people would understand and might be grabbed by. The religious concepts in these plays seem to be less important than the entertainment itself, unlike the plays, Final Judgement and How to Live on Earth. It is likely that Alva did this partially because he was helping Carochi, who would need extensive lines and passages with complex grammar for his work. But it is clear that he intended for these plays to be performed and it seems more than likely that he believed that the more subtle religious message, especially in The Animal Prophet would be understood by his parishioners.

Alva intended his works to be used to help Nahua parishioners to understand the actions that would lead to specific consequences in the afterlife and how these actions could be corrected. His goal seems to be to make sure that his parishioners knew what to do to live a good Christian life and how to avoid Hell, but also to provide an entertaining format for these values to be portrayed. The religious messages were not missing from these works. Alva still used these plays to explain Heaven, Hell, Limbo, and Purgatory. He is clear about which
characters are sinful and which are virtuous as well as why. The less explicit nature of the
“instruction” is probably due to the innate religious nature of both plays: the one being solely
about life on Earth leading to an afterlife in one of the four orthodox Catholic afterlives, the other
being about a saint’s shaky beginnings and his quest to save both his parents’ souls as well as his
own soul through good works and virtue. Alva’s work shows his devotion to both his faith and
his people. Without his insight and input while translating these plays it is likely that a native
Nahua would not have understood them as well or have been motivated by them.
Conclusion

The term “spiritual conquest” is not one that I would consider fitting to the conversion of the Nahua people. Not only were there some natives who willingly converted but there were those, like Alva, who wanted to spread this new religion. The fact that the Spanish clergy took the time to learn that theater might be the most effective way to teach their values and practices to this new group of people, shows that they did intend to have the natives understand the Catholic faith, rather than practice it blindly. Additionally, there is a clear influence on these works, both Alva’s and those that have unknown authors, that show that someone, be they Nahua or Spanish, was trying to make the religious theater more appealing and understandable to a native audience. This fact alone could show that the clergy were not interested in simply exterminating the cultural practices of the Nahuatl community, but rather were interested in trying to build their religion into the existing society while teaching the Catholic orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

It seems like good intentions lie behind all of the works that were looked at. The plays from Chapter 1 seem harsh and blunt, but there was a purpose to that sort of clear language. First of all, it is difficult to misunderstand something that is said directly and bluntly. In addition, it may be that because the priest had trouble understanding the native culture they felt that their parishioners would not understand such subtleties. Even if the plays had been written in a more poetic and entertaining style, it would have been difficult for a translator without a full understanding of both Spanish and Nahuatl languages and cultures to truly translate and interpret the subtleties of the plays.

For these reasons, Alva was ideal as a translator and as an interpreter between the two cultures. The work he did in his confession manual was surely intended to create a better
understanding between the Nahuas and the clergymen. This was a goal of Carochi as well, as evidenced by his conviction that the clergy should really know the language of their parishioners, and should make an effort to read work written by natives in order to gain an even deeper understanding of the language. Alva clearly felt the same way and also believed that the texts of the religion should be translated so that Christian Nahuas could understand them. The translation of the main ideas of Catholicism was the first step to truly converting anyone. The longer the language of the ideas remains a mystery, the longer the religion itself remains clouded. Alva clearly understood this and went so far as to explain the main concepts in terms that would be well understood by the people he wished to reach. In addition, he used his knowledge of both worlds to create a more familiar religion, if only by making the characters of that religion more familiar.

There was a deliberate attempt on the part of Alva and Carochi to make the language less of a barrier and therefore to bridge the gap that was presently separating the native parishioners from their clergymen. The purpose behind this, I believe, was mainly because they felt that this was the only way to truly save the souls of the natives who had been baptized but still misunderstood concepts such as confession, penance, original sin, Purgatory and Hell. It is hard to conceive of today because of the controversy that religion creates, but these men most likely truly believed with their whole heart that their way was the only way to salvation and that they had sworn to help guide their parishioners to salvation and if they were unable to do this that they would have failed their parishioners and their God.

Unlike the plays in Chapter 1, those in Chapter 3 did include more subtle language and complex story lines. The reason behind this was, without a doubt, that Alva fully understood both languages and cultures and was able to create a truer translation of the original work. His
work translating the plays shows that he was not only interested in berating his parishioners in order to get them to turn away from their old ways and embrace the new religion. It also seems that he was interested in creating a religion that the people would want to follow and believe in. By providing them with subtle forms of religious “instruction” he indicates that his native parishioners were intelligent, cultured people who enjoyed an entertaining show, just as all people do. He worked to create theatrical scripts that were congruous to their Spanish originals, but rather than leave them exact, he was able to change those concept that were too Spanish into ones that were almost too Nahuatl, such as the joke of Tizoc’s name. His plays also invoke a sense of displeasure with the status quo of society, not so explicitly that Alva would have been guilty of rabble rousing, but enough so that his people would understand his works and be able to relate them to their own lives.

It is unfortunate that Bartolomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl never wrote a diary that survived to this day so that we could look at and know exactly what he was thinking at the moment that he entered the University and dropped his Nahua name, or the moment that he completed the translation of *The Animal Prophet*. This is too often the case when looking at historical figures and their public works. There will never be a way to know exactly what Alva thought about his own works or what his motives were when he created them. I do think, though, that there is a great deal of insight that can be gained through a thoughtful look at the works we have of his.

One thing is clear, the hearts and souls of the Nahua people were not “conquered.” Human beings have an amazing ability to keep living even in the wake of disaster. The conquest did not end the life of all of the Nahua people, and for those who survived life when on. They were not blank slates who did not have a concept of religion or of right and wrong; their culture already had a set of norms when the Spanish arrived. They, ultimately, may not have had much
of a say in their decision to become Christian, however, they did have a say in how they understood who they would be as Nahua Christians. As a culture, the Nahua people had a major part in the establishment of the Mexican church. The natives, I believe, had a lasting impact on the Catholic religion that is still present in Mexico today.
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