

AZTEC MYTHS AND COSMOLOGY:
HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS MISINTERPRETATION AND BIAS

"I have read many histories written by the Spanish of things of this nation and all of them are very different from the original history...instead of saying one thing, they say another, some speaking about passion, others speaking about industry and others relating fabricated fables in the language of the moment of these and others...the Spanish do not understand well our language or what the elders are saying..."

Ixlilxóchitl

PART I--COSMOLOGY AND THE UNIVERSE: COLONIAL MYTHS

Central to the understanding of Aztec culture and civilization is the cosmogony and cosmology of the pre-Columbian peoples. Moreover, study into the European medieval mind is requisite in view of the religious-political motives behind the Spanish invasion of the Americas.¹ It is these factors along with censorship and the Inquisition that are responsible for the distortion of historical/political and religious concepts of a basically non-Western Amerigenous civilization. Distortions of pre-Columbian concepts abound: (1)polytheism among native cultures, (2)the concept of Hell, i.e., *Mikltan*, (3)fatalism, i.e., view of death, (4)the native belief of the Spanish as gods, (5)*Ketalkóatl* as a Messiah(6)imperialism, (7)slavery, (8)*chikomoztok* as the seven cities of gold or *Áztlan*, (9)cannibalism, (10)human sacrifice by blood-thirsty priests, (11)Drunkenness, (12)the myth of the debased woman (13)the myth of *Áztlan* in the United States (14)European etymology of the word *America* (15)*Náhuatl* as a name for a national language or culture.

It is the intent of this writer to show that questions of pre-Columbian religion, history and culture that were projected negatively by Spanish chroniclers (including acculturated informants) were largely projections originating from the medieval world of

fable, fantasy and religious superstitions, notwithstanding a culture of inequities and plutocracies that operated on a material/physical plane.

The Middle Ages and the Medieval Mindset

The area of religion is the domain that has been most maligned since the first diaries were written by Spanish chroniclers. When Pope Alexander VI declared by fiat that all of the lands of the Indies were to be the property of Spain, he marked the beginning of religious imperialism in the Americas. It should be noted that the medieval church had been practicing a type of Roman theocracy that imposed its will on civil as well as religious institutions since the first council of Constantinople.² It is not, however, until the beginning of the Crusades that are called for by Pope Urban II that the Church will become a powerful institution dominating governments, controlling military regiments and establishing itself as a powerful economic empire.³ It is crusading that will provide the Church with a dominating political/economic base and the establishment of the *Santo Oficio* (Inquisition) with a tyrannical political/religious instrument to subvert nations with its obsessive mission to become the Universal Church. The popes, with their *plenitudo potestatis* decreed absolute power by declaring holy war, a practice defended by the law of *bellum justum* of St. Augustine.

Thus, the Crusades mark the beginnings of European religious colonialism with the underlying motives of expansionism (imperialism), the imposition of Roman Catholic Christian rule and dogma, and the papal idea of creating their Roman Christian church as the Universal Church of the world.⁴ From crusading stem the ideas of invasion, plunder and booty with materialism and avarice as motivating forces. The idea of might is right practiced in the Middle Ages brings about the concept of power as a fundamental right developing as a consequence, imperialistic and despotic tendencies. Moreover, the

leading and ruling families of all of medieval Europe derived from a warrior tradition, a Nordic warrior spirit that was extended to all of the nobility in Europe as well as Spain.⁵

Finally, the most infamous of all institutions was the *Santo Oficio* (the Holy Duty). Its creation as a product of the Middle Ages originated in A.D. 1215 with the Fourth Lateran Council called by Pope Innocent III. Persecution of heretics, however, had already existed as early as 1022 when King Robert of France had thirteen heretics burned at the stake in Orléans. In Spain, the persecutions against heretics also exist one century prior to Innocent's Fourth Lateran Council.⁶ In Spain, it is the Dominican Order founded in 1216 by Domingo de Guzmán (Santo Domingo) that serves the Roman Church not only as preachers, theologians, saints and martyrs, but as inquisitors.⁷ Persecutions against Jewish people (*conversos*) and Moors become folly as repression spreads from Aragon to Castilla; the cities of Toledo, Sevilla, Burgos, Valencia and Barcelona were centers for general torture and human sacrifice.⁸ Under Inquisitor Torquemada, 8,000 people were sacrificed alive; under the reformer Cisneros, 1,5000 were burned alive not including hundreds of thousands of other types of punishment. It is the latter Inquisitor that runs Spain after Isabela la Católica dies in 1504 until his death in 1517 at the age of 82. He is responsible for the eventual expulsion of the Jews and Moors from Spain, instituting Christian political colonialism. Isabela la Católica not only sponsored Columbus, but she also applied in secret for institutionalization of the Inquisition in Spain. After her death, the king that personifies most the *Sanctum Officium*⁹ is Felipe II, a fanatical and dogmatic king without scruples, who declares holy war against all heretics, using fraud, treason and assassination to accomplish his goals.

What is important here is the background of the Spanish framed within a medieval world in all its violence and fanaticism. When Columbus stumbles into "Hispaniola", Spain is involved in terrorist inquisitional activities; when Cortés lands in the mainland of Veracruz, México, Spain is being governed by an Inquisitor who will govern Spain for thirteen years. When Friar Sahagún is writing his *Historia...*, Spain is

still burning people alive, i.e., the *Moriscoes*, the *Franche comté* of the northern Alps, the southern Netherlands and countless Lutherans, Calvinists, mystics and scientists of the times. It was the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* that was the official organ for censorship of materials both in Spain as well as colonial America.

Looking at the aforementioned principle accusations levied at Aztecan culture, it is clear that these are all European medieval cultural and religious characteristics. It is the Jews and Moslems who saw the Europeans, at the time of the Crusades, as polytheists. The cults of saints and relics had roots in a kind of paganism or fetishism; they saw the provincial West producing a kind of particularism, a fondness for the physical manifestations of the divinity, a desire to draw near the object of worship and possess it.¹⁰ Thus Western piety was less transcendental, more familiar, materialistic, seeing the human nature of Christianity instead of the divine. Saints, demons and angels occupied the total mind of the medieval person; a comet became a sign sent by God; hallucinations became supernatural visions; a storm became an expression of the divine power; miracles were expected and hoped for on a daily basis. When the Spanish arrive and invade the Americas, it is this perception of reality that occupies their mind and vision. When they saw monumental works of sculpture with images that were incomprehensible to them, they quickly projected their own view of reality and levied accusations of polytheism formerly levied at them by Jews and Moslems (a characteristic of medieval Roman Catholicism) on a world they could not understand. Moreover, it was the intent of the Roman Catholic Church with all of its inquisitorial powers to subvert the existing culture and supplant their own medieval religion and culture. The visual images, style, symbols and religious framework within the descriptions of both the civilian/military and clerical writings are exemplary of a Judeo-Christian medieval world (e.g., Satan and Hell). Even if there had not been an Inquisition or a Roman brand of Christianity, one can doubt that the friars would have understood the cosmogony of the high cultures of the pre-Columbian peoples. It is their superstition that makes them accusatory. If it is not within

the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church, then it must be the work of the devil (St. Augustine). It is St. Augustine who gives the Church the freedom and law to provoke war with his *bellum justum*. When Spain invades the cultures of the Americas, she does it with righteousness, with the sword and the cross, official symbols of the Inquisition. Thus, not only are they blind to new knowledge but are intolerant of any other culture and religious views.

The Myth of Aztec Polytheism

In pre-Columbian America, the cosmogony of the various high cultures (Olmekah, Teotihuakan, Maya, Toltekah, Meztzika, Aztekah, Inca) is seen through science, i.e., astronomy and mathematics. Thus, they did not have a religion as we know religion

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