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Author

Crider, John Alan

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with than the later period. The only studies done with respect to public policy towards abuse prior to the early nineteenth century concern the early Puritans. Is her conclusion that Puritans were unique in attempting to regulate abusive behavior therefore correct? Shouldn't she have examined laws from other colonies, or at least acknowledged this gap in the literature? Isn't part of the task of the synthesizer to acknowledge what we do not know yet?

Holly Brewer
University of California, Los Angeles

Louise Burkhart. *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico.* Tucson: 1989.

An ambitious book-length treatment of the evangelization of Mexico as "communication event" is Louise Burkhart's *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Burkhart investigates the endeavors of several sixteenth-century missionary scholars who worked in central Mexico and who composed religious texts in Nahuatl to facilitate the indoctrination of their indigenous laity. Specifically Burkhart is concerned with the linguistic means by which they attempted to "translate" Christian ideas of morality and sin into Nahuatl. In addition, her innovative analysis enables her to assess the relative success by which they communicated these ideas across formidable culture and language barriers.

The primary sources upon which Burkhart bases her study are half-dozen or so religious texts of various types--several *sermonarios* and catechisms, one *confesionario*, and one *psalmodia*--written by friars usually with the assistance of native informants. This situation of collaboration has led Burkhart to coin the term "dialogical frontier." But Burkhart is quick to point out that the conditions of this dialogue were neither equal nor democratic. The friars were the *empowered*, and their objective was conversion.

In this "borderland" of communication (or rather, partial communication) between the two cultures, Nahua moral terminology was borrowed and greatly modified to express Christian notions such as sin, contrition, and absolution. Though there was no need or attempt to translate the complexities of Christian moral theology for the

modest purpose of catechizing the Indians, the translation of only the basic tenets of the faith proved challenging.

In evaluating the efficacy with which Christian moral terms were introduced into the Nahuatl language and Nahua consciousness, Burkhart applies a two-fold regimen of analysis. First, she textually analyzes those passages in her sources about morality and sin, noting which Nahuatl words and concepts were thus employed. At this stage, we can appreciate the ingenuity of the friars, and it is easy to understand why so much of the historical literature, beginning with Robert Ricard's classic *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, has treated these figures like Olympian intellectual heroes, proto-linguists and ethnographers born from the womb of Renaissance Humanism. Next, using sixteenth-century ethnohistorical sources, primarily the *Florentine Codex* of Sahagún, Burkhart traces these borrowed and modified Nahuatlisms back to their emic or original indigenous context. For Burkhart this stage of investigation yields a completely different impression of the evangelical success of the friars (than Ricard suggests).

Central to Burkhart's work is the concept of culturo-specific mental-conceptual categories; or in linguistic parlance, "semantic domains." It is "through" such subjective categories that humans order their perceptions of exterior and interior reality. Western man, for example, has inherited distinct notions about the relations between time and space or between body and soul which are radically different from the way other cultures categorize these dualistic terms. The Aztecs for instance, did not share with their European conquerors the concept of *cause* being distinct from *effect* in the frame of reference western man calls "time," which we most often conceive as being linear (98). Nor did they share the Europeans' conceptualization of body being distinct from soul. For the Aztecs body and soul were more implicitly fused; individual organs were thought of as being the seats of individual spiritual qualities or essences (183).

All of which had an important bearing on how the Aztecs themselves were accustomed to conceive of sin. For them sin was equated with bodily "pollution" or "damage" which afflicted one during his residence on earth. One could fall into a state of pollution (i.e. a state of sin) in a number of ways. One way was to transgress a moral boundary, custom or rule. This is the sense which most approximates the European sense of sin. But there were other ways: one could become polluted by traveling in places that were unsafe. In the moral geography of the Aztecs the center, the city, was a

place of virtue, while the periphery was a place of vice and uncleanness. Merely by traveling on the road a man could expose himself to the great peril of "damage."

In Christian moral lore, a sin might cause a person to become physically afflicted, but such an effect was considered secondary. The more serious primary effect of sinning for the faithful Christian was the eternal peril to which he subjected his soul. Burkhart also demonstrates that some sixteenth-century theologians, deliberating on whether the physical ailments endured by some Biblical sinners were allegorical or real, pronounced that they were the former. In Christian moral thought, then, there was a symbolic or metaphorical relation between the physical and moral peril caused by sin; for the Nahuas the relation was metonymic, to sin was to damage the body directly.

From this kind of cross-cultural comparison Burkhart concludes that, despite the innovative linguistic and ethnographic labor of the very capable mendicant friars, the enterprise of accurately and adequately translating moral concepts across the Nahua-Spanish *dialogical* (as from or characterized by dialogue) frontier was precarious at best: "The friars were not modern linguists, they lacked sensitivity to the relationship between language and thought, between words and mental categories. They looked for synonyms and used whatever they could find" (11).

Implicit in this position is Burkhart's assumption that she is privileged by hindsight, by her access to the theoretical apparatus of modern linguistics: "...approaching the friar's records with attention fixed on both sides of the dialogue, one can come to understand native culture--and the friar's impact on it--better than they did themselves" (10).

With these claims Burkhart is clearly placing herself in a revisionist position against what might be termed the "Spiritual Conquest School" originated by Ricard. The antagonistic tone that sometimes invades her otherwise sober treatise when she discusses previous studies of the evangelization of Mexico is forgivable. Indeed, I think that Burkhart has done a remarkable job of synthesizing the classic treatments of this subject with newer, more speculative models of interpretation.

John A. Crider
Tulane University, New Orleans