



The Baroque Paradise of Santa María Tonantzintla (Part I)

JULIO GLOCKNER

Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla, Puebla
julioglockner@yahoo.com.mx

ABSTRACT

The baroque church of Santa María Tonantzintla is located in the Valley of Cholula in Central Mexican Plateau and it was built during 16th-19th century. Its interior decoration shows interesting symbolic fusion of Christian elements with Mesoamerican religious aspects of Nahua origin. The scholars of Mexican colonial art interpreted the Catholic iconography of Santa María Tonantzintla church as Assumption of Virgin Mary up to celestial kingdom and her coronation by the holy Trinity. One of those scholars, Francisco de la Maza, proposed the idea that apart from that the ornaments of the church evoke Tlalocan, paradise of ancient deity of rain known as Tlaloc. Following this interpretation this study explore a relation between Virgin Mary and ancient Nahua deity of Earth and fertility called Tonatzin in order to show profound syncretic bonds which exist between Cristian and Mesoamerican traditions.

KEY WORDS: syncretism, altepetl, Tlalocan, Tamoanchan, Omteotl, Nahua culture, Tonantzintla

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to take the reader through some of the cultural and religious aspects of the temple of Santa María Tonantzintla that might otherwise be forgotten. These

less tangible features are essential to understand the mythological and historical background of the temple. Indeed, this magnificent church was once considered by Aldous Huxley to be the most unique temple in the Christian world. The baroque style in the interior of the temple reflects the great melding of two worldviews: those of the Judeo-Christian and Mesoamerican societies. Since this is a Catholic temple, the symbolism of this religion is the most explicit, especially if we consider that Christian evangelization had already developed fairly precise rituals of faith within its practitioners when the temple was decorated towards the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th. However, we cannot address its Catholic symbolism without feeling we have left multiple elements behind. That same atmosphere, felt immediately upon entering the temple and contemplating its grandeur, reminds us that there is something else. That something, evident in the fascinating ornamentation of the church, reminds us of the Mesoamerican influence; and it is that reality – no longer truly visible but still imaginable – we want to present to the reader in these pages.

The settlement of a town and its cult

The church of Santa María Tonantzintla is located in a valley with a rich cultural tradition. The nearby, thousand-year-old city of Cholula serves as a sacred site for the Tonantzintla people. Puebla, like Cholula, is another important social, cultural, and religious city, whose magnificent Rosario Chapel, finished in the late 17th century and incorporated to the temple of Santo Domingo, became an inspiration for the construction of the church dedicated to Tonantzin “Our Dear Mother.” The process of construction was long, it begun in the 17th century and lasted until the 20th. Initially, it was a small construction with only one nave with a cupola and a tower. Later on, in the 18th century they added the transepts that give the church the Latin cross for which it is known today. During the 18th century, builders also extended the nave to the front, removing its primitive façade and placing the bell tower behind the old façade. The vault covering the choris was finished by the end of the 19th century, yet the fascinating interior ornaments were finished mostly during the 18th, when economic resources motivated the rural community to begin the works.

Culturally speaking, the present rural communities in the Eastern plains of the Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl volcanoes have origins that date back to the first decades of the 16th century. It was then that the two fundamental components, the Amerindian and European traditions (the later conformed by the Celtic, Arab, Greco-Latin and Judeo-Christian traditions) began to fuse together, a centuries-long process not without violence and mutual rejection within all the spheres of the social life.

Before the conquest and the Spanish colonization, the native people from the Central High Plateau had a highly developed social organization known as *altepetl* in the Nahuatl language. The so called Mesoamerican “empires” prior to the conquest were in fact large conglomerations in which some *altepetl* dominated others. An interesting fact is that both the one that paid the tribute as well as the one who received it went by the same name: *altepetl*. Etymologically, this word (used in the same way in singular or in plural) means “the waters, the mountains” or “into a mountain” and it alludes mainly to the people that have control over a specific territory.

James Lockhart said that there was nothing stopping the *altepetl* from growing through a natural increase in the demographics or through the absorption of immigrants, thus becoming more complex, with one or more of the elder chiefs of the *calpulli* (“big house”, “district” or “neighborhood”) transforming into a *tlatoani* (“governor”, Pl. *tlatoque*). On the other hand, there was nothing stopping the more developed *altepetl* from falling apart and turn it into one of the simpler orders, which would happen if the community suffered setbacks or mishaps, like the decrease of the population due to migration, illness, or a military defeat.¹ That is precisely what happened with the *altepetl* in Cholula when under the Spaniards’ domain the population left their lands to found Tonantzintla.

Every *altepetl* was composed of two or more *calpulli*, the most important of which had a governor or a *tlatoani* to monitor commercial, administrative and religious functions; therefore, the palace, the temple, and the market were often located near each other. One of the consequences of the Spanish conquest was that it fragmented the imperial conglomerate into its ethnically formed *altepetl*. These *altepetl* were later reorganized under similar spatial and administrative notions that remain today, like the district, the town, and the municipality.

However, *altepetl* is also a concept with a strong cosmological, mythological, and ritual connotation. The mountains and the water formed a sacred geography where many people worshipped the hills, the volcanoes, the water springs, and the currents, and they also created a symbolic notion alluding the fertility of women and Earth – broadly speaking, to the growth of the plants and human beings, to the abundance of the products of the Earth, and to the health and prosperity of the community.

¹ LOCKHART 1999.

Nowadays, every municipal seat maintains the ancient trilogy of the *altepetl* that combines the temple, the palace, and the market. This way, even when social relationships suffered large transformations throughout their history, the small rural settlements in these valleys preserved a structure composed by four levels: the relationship of the community with the political and administrative powers; the relationship of the community with a designated space for the trade of merchandise, ideas, and social relationships like the market or the weekly *tianguis*; the relationship of the community with a temple or house of deities and saints, through which they established the link to the supernatural world that includes the world of their dead forefathers; and finally, the relationship of the community with the nature surrounding the space inhabited by men, including the farming fields, the pastures, and even the volcanoes Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl and Matlalcueye, all of which rose on the horizon.

The quick growth of the city of Puebla in the last decades and the accelerating process of urbanization on these once rural communities have shifted soil usage away from agriculture toward industrial or residential use. Regretfully, we may be the last witnesses of the socio-cultural expressions of the rural communities in the area.

The town of Santa María Tonantzintla emerged in the middle of the 16th century as the result of the regrouping of the native people of Cholula, a population that suffered devastating epidemics that reduced the population of the area by 70%; for the Spanish Crown, this created a compelling need to gather the laborers and the corresponding tributes of the native people in new communities.

According to Antonio Rubial García's studies, it was the viceroy Luis de Velasco who granted in 1556 the first communal lands to natives who had been living in the slopes of the Poxtecatíl Hill and had once adored the image of the goddess Tonantzin. After three decades, in January of 1587, another viceroy, Marques Villamanrique, founded a new congregation and relocated the people on the slopes of the Poxtecatíl Hill on the lands where they live today. The new village received the name of Santa María Tonantzintla in order to relate the name of the new settling to the missing sanctuary where Tonantzin was worshiped.²

While this process of regrouping occurred, the Franciscan Order from the nearby convent of San Gabriel, located today in San Pedro Cholula, decided to found a second convent at the head of San Andrés Collomochco, nowadays San Andrés Cholula. These

² RUBIAL 1991.

were the friars that begun the systematic evangelization of the natives and who repressed the cult to Tonantzin, replacing it with the cult to Virgin Mary, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. There are still no archeological diggings that locate the remains of the old temple of the goddess Tonantzin, whose name nonetheless gives the local people an affective and reverential feeling; Tonantzin means “The Place of our Dear Mother” or “The Place of our Venerable Mother.”

Between the second half of the 16th century – in which Tonantzintla emerged with a small chapel as the center of its Christian cult – and the second half of the 17th century – in which the construction of the present temple initiated – a long century went by, when the process of evangelization was probably not tense and regular enough, due to the lack of an adequate space for the Christian cult. This situation favored among natives the preservation of their domestic ritual practices (public ceremonies had been prohibited since they were considered work of the Devil), performed by small groups of neighbors and relatives, in an almost clandestine way; rituals that were difficult to erase and difficult to meld with the Catholic orthodoxy.

The cult of Earth

Among the ancient Mexicans, Earth was conceived as a giant caiman or androgynous monster, always hungry, with terrible dented snouts at the joints. This primitive being received the name of Tlaltecuhltli, meaning “Lord or Lady of the Earth.” According to the Nahua myth, it was at the beginning of time when the creator gods, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, transformed themselves into two enormous snakes to bring down from the sky a savage, biting, and massive alligator covered with eyes and snouts. The gods broke its body in two, dividing it into two different halves, thereby forming Heaven and Earth. Immediately, the gods undertook the task of raising all existing things from its body; thus, trees germinated from its hair; its body was covered with flowers and grass; and from its eyes emerged the springs of water, wells and caves; valleys and mountains were formed from its nose, and from its mouth came the rivers and the big caverns; from this alligator also came all the food, mainly the corn, that was deified with the name of Centeotl or Xilonen, the feminine goddess of the tender corn.³

³ TEOGONIA 1985.

Even though today this story has been replaced with the Hebrew myth of the Creation that appears in the biblical Genesis, the original Nahua farmers still consider Earth, in its variety of forms and its products, as something for which they must pay tribute to the creator gods, to the Creation itself, to the fertility, and to the reproduction of life and its products. Despite the fact that modest modernization in this area has contributed to the disappearance of a rich variety of farming rites, some communities still maintain these traditions (especially those close to the volcanoes). In these communities, farmers seek to attract rain to ensure the abundance of food by the simultaneous invocation of several saints and spirits that inhabit nature, or ancient gods like Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl. This implies that in the mentality of the farmers that built or helped to build the temple of Tonantzintla, Catholicism already predominated, but as a version of Christianity that had deep roots in the ancient cults and in the Mesoamerican religious ideas. This component is fundamental to understand these people's relationship with nature and their relationship with the Christian Sanctoral and the Virgin placed on the main altar of the church.

The cult of water

The first people of Cholula – whose true origins are still being questioned – settled around a small and shallow lagoon several centuries before the Christian era. There they built their houses on the edge of a spring of water to which they paid tribute by building on top of the spring an altar with shape and dimensions still unidentified. However, archeologists Gabriela Uruñuela and Amparo Robles discovered that the altar is a platform built with adobe during the 1st century of our time,⁴ as well as the first pyramidal base of eight structural phases, built successively in the course of two millennia. This large structure, a constant throughout centuries, is perhaps what allowed Cholula to become the most ancient American city to be populated uninterruptedly.

From the beginning, the cult of land, water, and rain was the fundamental characteristic of the religious thought and ritual practices regarding the natural world. When the Spaniards arrived, the pyramidal ensemble – nowadays considered the widest in the world – had been abandoned for centuries and was covered with vegetation so that it resembled a hill, back then known as “Tlachihualtepetl” or “Hill Made by Hand.” To that day, many sacrifices were still being performed on the top of the gigantic monticule to favor rain and to obtain plentiful harvests. Tlachihualtepetl kept the appearance of a hill

⁴ URUÑUELA/ROBLES 2012.

until the first decades of the 20th century when in 1931 the first archeological investigations in charge of Ignacio Marquina began.⁵

During the second half of the 16th century, friars and Spaniards devoted themselves to organize those natives who were available to work on the dismantling of the temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, tearing down its engraved stones and placing instead a Franciscan convent dedicated to Gabriel, the archangel, which you can still visit today in downtown San Pedro Cholula. Something similar happened with the pyramidal ensemble known as Tlachihualtepetl, where a church was built on its top, consecrated to the Virgin of the conquerors: Our Lady of the Remedies.

One of the most important chroniclers of the 16th century, the Dominican friar Diego Durán – who tried to demonstrate that the inhabitants of these lands were descendants of the ten tribes of Israel alluded to in The Book of Kings (chapter 17) – found the support for his argument when he interviewed an old man from Cholula, well versed in his own history (according to the friar's judgment), and “of the age of one hundred years, so old that he walked bent towards the Earth.” When Diego Durán questioned him about the beginning of the World, the old man from Cholula told him the following story:

At the beginning, before the light or the Sun were created, there was this Earth, dark, in the shadows and empty of all created beings. It was completely flat, without a hill or ravine, surrounded in all ends by water, without trees or any creations. And then, when the light and the Sun were born at the East, some giant men of deformed height appeared on the Earth to possess this land. These men, eager to see the birth of the Sun and its decline, resolved to go look for it. And dividing themselves in two groups, some went to the West and some to the East. They all walked until they found the ocean, where they decided to go back to the place from where they parted, and once back at this place, which name was Iztac Zulin Inemian, not having found their way to the Sun, in love as they were with its light and beauty, they resolved to build a tower so high that its top could reach the sky... and having climbed it up as high as they could (so that people even said it seemed to have reached Heaven), the Lord of the Heights, angry, said to the inhabitants of the sky: “Have you noticed how those of the Earth have built a tall and arrogant tower to climb up here, in love of the light of the Sun and its beauty? Come and let us play them because it's not fair that those from the Earth, living in the flesh, be mixed with us.” And thus the inhabitants of the sky left from the four parts of the world, like lightning, bringing

⁵ ASHWELL 1999; MATOS 2012.

*down the tower that was build. Astonished and filled with fear, the giants divided and spread all over the Earth.*⁶

Without considering the possibility that the old men from Cholula was telling a story he had heard from the Christians, friar Diego Durán eagerly accepted the indigenous man's account as authentic proof that the people from Cholula were in fact descendents of the Israelites: "And so I am persuaded and want to persuade you that this story ties our ancestors and forebears. And that these natives, part of God's chosen people (in my opinion), for whom God did marvelous works, have come to understand the words and art of the Bible, and of all of the mysterious qualities of this land and what happened to it, albeit ignoring it at first." In his *History of the Indies of New Spain*, friar Durán exposed a series of theological arguments to explain how the Spanish conquest was "the strict punishment God promised to these ten tribes for their misdeeds, abominations, and vile venerations, as well as for parting from the cult to their true God."⁷

In the spectacular pyramidal ensemble which friar Diego Durán compared with the Tower of Babel, people worshiped water as the god named Chiconquiahuitl "New Rain," the calendar name of one of the five brothers of the merchant god, Yacatecutli, in the Tolteca and Chichimeca cultures.⁸

Besides being one of the biggest religious centers of Mesoamerica, Cholula was also a very important commercial city inhabited by merchants who traveled very long distances to exchange their products, establishing relationships in faraway places like today's Republic of El Salvador.⁹

When the merchants, called *pochtecas*, returned from their long journeys they celebrated with splendid ceremonies where they ostentatiously flaunted the wealth and the power they obtained in the middle of a spectacular display, thereby enforcing their own prestige before both the guests who were invited to the orgiastic feasts and before the general population.

Pochtecatl (*Poxtecatl*) is precisely the name of the hill where the inhabitants that were brought together by colonial authorities settled, those who would later found Tonantzintla.

⁶ DURÁN 1884, vol. II, pp. 16 - 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 16 - 17.

⁸ SAHAGÚN 1982, p. 47.

⁹ MERLO 2012.

Pochtecatl is the singular of *pochteca* and it means “merchant”, “trader.” When the *pochteca* traveled to foreign lands they organized long caravans and picked the best day in the calendar for their departure, often choosing a *Ce coatl* day (snake day). Before leaving, they made a banquet for the old merchants and their relatives to let them know the places they were going to travel to. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún mentioned they did this to emphasize their achievements and to win more prestige, and respect. At midnight they invoked the Sun (as the fire god Tlaltecuhltli), the Earth god, and Yacatecuhtli, the “Nose Lord,” who was meant to lead the caravan as guide, symbolized in a staff to which they pay tribute to by offering food and drink at their return from the expedition. When a *pochtecatl* thought he had accomplished enough wealth he organized a great feast to squander his fortune in dances, food, music, and drink. The first thing eaten during these collective banquets were “some little black fungus they call *nanacatl* that intoxicates people and gives them visions, and even provokes lust; this is what they ate before sunrise, and they drank cocoa before sunrise too; they ate the fungus with honey, and when they began to feel warm because of them, they began to dance, and some sang and some other cried because they were intoxicated with the little fungus.”¹⁰

The foundation of Tonantzintla

In the early 1587 Marques Villamanrique, viceroy of New Spain, gave the instruction to the people living at the slope of the Pochtecatl Hill to relocate in the current town of Santa María Tonantzintla; that is to say, around the temple consecrated to the Immaculate Conception, who the natives called Tonantzin from the beginning when they recognized in her the figure of their Cosmic Mother; placed on a moon and over the body of a snake. Both the moon and snake symbols were related to the fertility and to the perpetuated renovation of life. This is the reason why from the very beginning the town was called Santa María Tonantzintla in the same way a name and its last name are combined to identify a single person.

This new congregation was complete with the required ceremonial: the public servants, in companion with the tunes of a trumpet and a scribe, arrived to the place where the Indians gathered and, within several days, they limited lots and sites. A chat about the purpose of the congregations was offered along with a mass. Finally, in a public act, family chiefs took their lands and a reasonable period of time was set for them to build their houses.¹¹

¹⁰ SAHAGÚN 1982, Book IX, Chap. VIII.

¹¹ RUBIAL 1991, p. 24.

Even though the town had a long period of growth and prosperity it was not exempt from grave calamities that constantly weakened the community's health, tranquility, and lives of the inhabitants. By the end of the 17th century the region suffered, along with the valleys of Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Mexico, a great famine due to an excess of rain that prevented them from having a good harvest. After some decades, already in the 18th century, a new farming crisis provoked a hepatitis epidemic that took many lives during 1737 and 1738. About two decades later, the outbreak of another epidemic killed many people. Both the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries were fatal to the poor sector of the population in New Spain; from 1768 to 1810 there were 16 consecutive epidemics.¹²

Within this social, emotional, and psychological context, in which death was constantly present, began the construction, expansion, and above all, the decoration of the interior of the temple with the baroque motifs that would later make the church so particular. In 1933, while on a visit to San Francisco Acatepec and Tonantzintla, Aldous Huxley wrote in his journal that the smooth and wavelike hills that surrounded these churches seemed to him similar to those on the Italian countryside. The color of the many tiles that cover the front of the church of Acatepec made him think in a flock of parrots, and he admired in the interior the work in stucco and the laborious woodcarving with baroque style that decorated the entire church. Later, a fire destroyed this magnificent work of carpentry. However, Huxley did not see in the temple of Acatepec an "indianized" baroque like the one he discovered, fascinated, in Tonantzintla. These are his words:

*To see the importance of indianization one must go to Santa María Tonantzintla. From the exterior it could resemble any other Mexican church. The same cupola, the same pleasant and colorful façade... But when you come inside you find yourself in what is probably the most eccentric church of Christianity. The complete interior is filled with stuccos, golden and shiny, painted in red, green, blue, and pink over an immaculate white base. And what stuccos! Some cherubs, with Aztec feathers on the hair, are watching us from the walls. On the vault, above us, a group of Indian angels play violin (I suppose drums were considered too close to the old religion to be tolerated in a Christian church)... it is about a baroque theme interpreted by artisans with a Neolithic mentality, but interpreted in a much free manner (and also with higher artistic abilities) than all I have been able to appreciate in any other of the churches I have seen in Mexico or Guatemala.*¹³

¹² RUBIAL 1991, p. 34.

¹³ HUXLEY 1934/1994.

Tlalocan and Cihuacoatl-Tonantzin

In order to understand better the world view of the ancient Mexicans one must put aside the temptation to think the Mesoamerican pantheon as a group of individual gods, each of whom “represents” a natural phenomenon. The colonial sources are, to a large extent, responsible of this trivialization, especially friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who in his *General History of Things of New Spain* established a series of analogies like these: “Chicomecoatl was the goddess of maintenance, of what is eaten and drunk, is another Ceres; Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of water, sister of the gods of the rain that are named Tlaloques, is another Juno... The lords and kings worshipped this goddess; along with Chicomecoatl and the goddess of the salt, whose name is Huixtocihuatl, because they believed these three goddesses fed the people so they could live and multiply.”¹⁴

Within this logic, Tlaloc is the god of rain, Quetzalcoatl the god of the wind and Xochipilli the god of flowers. This means that the ancient Mexicans who imagined these gods ruling different areas of nature, and for which they paid tribute, supposed the existence of a group of gods, identified individually. We should ask ourselves if this point of view does not impoverish the complex Mesoamerican world view by just delivering a simplified simile to things; and also, if this thinking shuts down the possibility to comprehend a world view that conceives the universe as a sacred entity, alive, unitary and multiple at the same time. Actually, to have a better comprehension of the nature or their religion, we should probably consider their deities not as individuals who represent this or that thing, but as metaphors of the universal interrelated cycles.

In Mesoamerica, like in other great ancient cultures, Western or Eastern, the gods are the symbolization of the processes that happens in the deified nature. Therefore they cannot be conceived within the narrow margins of individuality, even if they are presented with their own name and can be identified in the recurrence of certain appearances and attributes. Furthermore, we must make an effort to look beyond these appearances to understand that they are but the poor expression of the flux of forces that intertwine in the world. Tlaloc is the god of rain, under the premise that rain exists in the world; yet Tlaloc is associated with other forces and phenomenon that make rain possible and notorious: the clouds, the wind, the top of the mountains, the lightning, the thunder, the running or still water on the surface of the Earth, the green of the fields, the growth of the plants, the blooming of the flowers. This array of phenomena, which manifests and vanishes

¹⁴ SAHAGÚN 1982, Book I, Chap. VII, pp. 33-36.

cyclically, along with the weather stations, symbolizes a group of gods with imprecise outlines provoking each other, arousing each other, and replacing each other eternally in alternated appearances and disappearances. This permanent metamorphosis is nothing but an attempt to express within the religious field the recurrent changes that happen in the universe. According to this perspective, if we think about Tonantzin as the mother goddess, we can see her intimately associated with the gods of the Earth, fertility, birth, reproduction, and growth of plants, animals and human beings; as well as with the cycles of renovation, death, and rebirth of human beings.

Halfway through the 20th century, a talented historian of colonial art, Francisco de la Maza, had the correct idea to relate the exuberant ornamentation of the church in Tonantzintla with the Tlalocan, a paradisiacal place of the antique Mexico, ruled by Tlaloc, the rain-thunder-god and other deities of water. It is necessary to set straight that the Mesoamerican deities are androgynous and can be represented under feminine or masculine appearances, like the Tlalocan from Teotihuacan, which according to several authors' interpretations is an aquatic feminine deity. The most fortunate pictorial representation of the Tlalocan can be found in the murals of Tepantitla, inside an urban complex of the Great Teotihuacan. For the ancient Mexicans the destiny of the souls after death was not determined by the people's actions, like in the Christian world, but by the social class to which they had belonged in life, and especially, by the manner in which they died. Some people thought that the way to die was the way how gods manifested their predilection for a person, giving them a type of death in accordance with the deity's attributions.¹⁵ Therefore, the warrior killed in combat or sacrificed in the temple after being prisoner had been chosen by the Sun to serve in the Eastern Paradise; dead women in labor were also compared to warriors and therefore taken to the Western Paradise, because back then it was considered they had died taking a men prisoner (the new born). That is the reason why they were honored like warrior women, receiving the Sun at the zenith from the hands of the warriors and taking it to the West, as far as the sunset, until the Sun entered the interior of the Earth and crossed it, underneath, through the obscure underworld, to reappear the next day on the East. This underworld, named Mictlan, was the destiny of those who did not die in a special way. Finally, another destiny of the dead was the Tlalocan, similarly conceived to the Christian paradise as a fertile place with abundant vegetation, flowers and fruits, birds, butterflies and rivers of crystalline water. To this place arrived those chosen by Tlaloc, lord of the rain, the storms, the hail, the

¹⁵ CASO 2011, p. 21.

lighting, the rivers and lakes; that is to say, those who died of some sickness associated to water (leprosy or dropsy), to the hills and mountains, drowned, or beaten by lightning. The exuberant vegetation of Tonantzintla is, simultaneously, the evocation of the paradises in Teotihuacan and in the Christian world, as Francisco de la Maza strongly stated.

If back then, the paradise of Teotihuacan was ruled by Tlaloc, nowadays, the Mexican paradise of Tonantzintla is ruled by the Virgin Mary under the idea of the Immaculate Conception, to whom secularly people refer as to Tonantzin “Our Venerable Mother.” But, who is Tonantzin? During the second half of the 20th century, the historians of colonial art who wrote about the temple of Tonantzintla failed to attend this question, which answer can be found in the work of the friar Bernardino de Sahagún, who addressed the religious mosaic inherited by Christianity:

*This goddess is named Cihuacoatl, which means Woman of the Snake; and they also call her Tonantzin, which means Our Mother. On these two things it appears that this goddess is our Mother Eve, who was tricked by the Snake, and they knew about what happened between her and the beast.*¹⁶

If Bernardino de Sahagún identified Tonantzin with Cihuacoatl, two hundred years later another important chronicler, the Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero, identified her like many other Mesoamerican deities, represented indistinctively in the masculine and in the feminine form. Centeotl had many names: Tonacayoua, “The One That Feed Us”; Xilonen, the goddess of tender corn; Iztacacenteotl, the goddess of white corn; or Tlaltauquicenteotl, the goddess of red corn. In other words, the names of this deity indicated the stages of maturity of the corn plant and expressed the varied characteristics of each stage. Clavijero wrote that the temple of Tonantzin was in a hill three miles north of Mexico (referring to the Tepeyac Hill, where she transfigured into the Virgin of Guadalupe), and that people from many villages went there to worship her by performing sacrifices before her image.¹⁷

Friar Diego Durán left us an image of Cihuacoatl when he wrote she was celebrated everywhere and that people held her high in their faith:

¹⁶ SAHAGÚN 1982, Book VI, Chap. XXVIII.

¹⁷ CLAVIJERO 1982.

*The goddess Cihuacoatl was made of stone, she had a big wide open mouth with visible teeth; she had long and abundant hair on her head and a woman's habit, entirely white, with a skirt, a blouse, and a mantle.*¹⁸

There is a building named Tlilan (Place of Darkness) in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, which was consecrated to Cihuacoatl. The temple was named Tlillan because it was completely obscure, and the light it received entered through a small door so little that it was possible to enter inside only crawling. It also had an outer door so darkness remained absolute. There lay the image of the goddess, and glued to the wall were different representations, in all sizes, of the hills, the mountains, and the volcanoes. Only priests and old men assigned and consecrated to her worship could enter this precinct. Twenty days before the festivity of the month named Tecuihuil "Feast of the Great Lords" (between June and July) they chose a slave, who then was dressed in white clothes to represent Cihuacoatl under the name of Xilonen. She was paraded through markets and streets, and she was taken to weddings and other celebrations, drinking pulque and some potions prepared with psychoactive plants to make her cheerful and happy. Friar Diego Durán referred to this process in his writing: "They gave her some spells so that she could be always cheerful not remembering she was going to die." When the day of her consecration and sacrifice arrived, she was placed before the door of the Tlillan, in front of which, engraved in stone, was the *teotlecuilli* or "divine fire pit" that had already been burning oak wood for four days. Four prisoners of war were also prepared to die before the image of the goddess. One by one, they were held by hands and feet by four priests, who carried them through the air, shook them four times to then toss them into the burning fire pit just to pull them back immediately before they died to extract their hearts and present their half burnt bodies to Xilonen. After the sacrifice of these four prisoners it was the turn of the goddess' representation: the slave was placed on top of the four prisoner's corpses to have her throat slit. Her heart was also offered to Cihuacoatl's image, and her blood was carefully recollected in a container to be spread on the representations of the hills, the mountains, and on the fire pit. Afterwards, the bodies of the victims were returned to their owners so they could celebrate the ritual feast.

The Cihuacoatl priest had his chambers beside the Tlillan, and it was referred to as *tecucuillin*. Now and then one of these priests announced the goddess was hungry, for

¹⁸ DURÁN 1984, Vol. I, Chap. XIII.

which they sacrificed a war prisoner inside the Tlillan. If the proper time for her feeding passed, the priests asked a trustworthy woman to go to the market with a crib and choose, amongst the wealthiest woman traders, one to take care of her “son”; then she was supposed to leave the crib with the woman, which actually contained an obsidian knife. The merchant announced to the audience that Cihuacoatl had left her son because she was hungry. Then the priests went crying to the market to take away the knife with great reverence, thus expecting to obtain a new victim for their sacrifice.¹⁹

The description of these rituals is shocking to the modern sensibility even though it is not unique among other terribly violent scenes. For example, it should be remembered that in the three million inhabitants Europe, Protestant and Catholic inquisitors managed to burn alive, under the charges of witchcraft, nearly 500,000 people between the 15th and the 17th century; or the horror that meant the willpower of extermination in Auschwitz, just to bring up two isolated events. However, the religious violence accomplished in the sacrifice responds to a different logic, where we can only put aside the idea that this ritual is about a simple and cruel homicide by approaching its comprehension.

In the referred sacrifice to Tonantzin-Cihuacoatl, the blood of the victims is consecrated as a divine substance that possesses the power to regenerate life, a force that allows the continuity of the reproductive cycles in farming, animals, and humans. This is why the blood is spread like a divine resource over the corn, the earth, the temples, and the images of gods. It is a form of reciprocity, a way to return to the forces of the deified world that what is obtained from them, at the same time that it favors what is expected of them: abundance and prosperity.

The burning of the four slaves has a direct relationship to the myth of the origin of the Sun and the Moon in the city of Teotihuacan, when the gods gathered to create the fifth sun that rules the era in which we live. The myth tells that after four attempts of throwing himself into the fire pit prepared by the gods to become the Sun, the noble Tecuciztecatl abandoned his will. However, humble Nanahuatzin threw himself at once, thus becoming the luminous star that makes life on Earth possible. Tecuciztecatl became the Moon. However, both remained still in space, without being able to move in the sky. Therefore, the gods sacrificed themselves so the Sun and the Moon could move, thus creating the time and order for the life on Earth with the succession of night and day. This is why humans, as a reply to the exemplary sacrifice made by the gods, sacrificed

¹⁹ DURÁN 1984, Vol. I, Chap. XIII; ROBELO 1982.

men and women as their representation (named *ixiptla*), and offered the organs and vital substances, like the heart and the blood, to preserve the astronomical and seasonal cycles.

A very significant fact is that these rituals were developed in a dark space (named *Tlillan*), like the one described in the story, and that another name for Cihuacoatl-Tonantzin had been *Tititl*, meaning: “Our Womb” or “The Womb Where We Were Born.” The darkness of the maternal womb is also the terrestrial darkness where the vegetation is reborn during every rain season. The allusion to this darkness is merely suggestive; therefore I exhort the reader who wants to know more about this to go to the first volume of the work *Spheres* by Peter Sloterdijk, where the subject is broadly analyzed.

Tonantzin and the Immaculate Conception

It seems evident that one of Tonantzin’s faces, previous to the conquest, was that of Cihuacoatl, the Snake Woman. This association provoked serious doubts about the convenience of spreading the cult to the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Tepeyac Hill, which was associated to Tonantzin since the 16th century. The concern with this analogy came from the religious beliefs of the Franciscan, Dominicans, and Augustinian friars, and all the colonizers, who considered the snake as the incarnation of the Judeo-Christian God’s enemy: Satan. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún wrote about it in his *General History of Things of New Spain* when he referred to the new cult to the Virgin of Guadalupe, very close to Mexico City:

*Near the hills there are three or four places where people used to make solemn sacrifices, and to which many arrived from faraway lands. One of these places is here in Mexico, on a small hill named Tepeyac, which the Spaniards called Tepeaquilla, and now is named Our Lady of Guadalupe; in this place they had a temple consecrated to the mother of the gods the natives called Tonantzin, meaning Our Mother; there they made many sacrifices in honor to this goddess [...] and now that the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe is built, they also call her Tonantzin. It is not known for sure where the foundation for this Tonantzin was born, but we know the word comes from its first imposition to the former Tonantzin, this satanic invention seems to palliate the idolatry under the mistake of the name Tonantzin...*²⁰

In the valley of Cholula, the Franciscan friars from the convent of Saint Gabriel surely had the same caution when they discovered the disguised “idolatries” in the cult of

²⁰ BAEZ 1994, p. 71.

the image of the Immaculate Conception. However, from the natives' point of view, this image revealed two familiar symbols because the Virgin is posed on a half-moon stepping on a snake; that is to say, it represented the traditional apocalyptic Virgin. This image is an engraving from the 16th century placed in the altar of the first church built by the Franciscan friars. Today it has a luxurious dress, a human hair wig and a golden crown.

If Sahagún and the evangelist friars thought that the snake represented only the Devil, the history of religions has demonstrated the universal importance this image has on the iconography and the rituals of the great goddesses of fertility, from America to central Australia, and from Africa to Buddhist India. Mircea Eliade says that the symbolism of the snake has a disturbing versatility; however, all the symbols converge into the same central idea: it is immortal and it regenerates. Therefore, it is a "force" of the moon, and as such, it distributes fertility, a prophetic science, and even immortality.²¹ The snake is an epiphany of the moon and both are represented in the image of the Virgin Mary under the name of Immaculate Conception, thus making the symbolic bond with Tonantzin-Cihuacoatl inevitable.

Despite Sahagún's high interest in the costumes of the native Mexicans, as I am sure he was, it was impossible for him to capture the cosmogenic meaning the snake had for these people. As in other cultures of the world, in Mesoamerica the snake was a powerful symbol for renovation and fertility, and it was associated with the moon; however, the friar could only see what his cultural referents allowed him to see, that is to say, the evil was who induced the first human couple to disobey the divine command. For this reason, when he heard of the existence of Tonantzin-Cihuacoatl, he did not think about the terrestrial deity for fertility, related to the birth and healthy growth of plants and children; he thought about the reappearance on pagan lands of the original sin between Eve and the Snake. This is why it was very important, before the cult of Cihuacoatl (the Snake Woman) to also promote the cult of her Christian antithesis: the immaculate woman that brought Jesus to the world, the Virgin Mary under the concept of the Immaculate Conception.

The snakes belong to the elements of Water and Earth, and in the pre-Hispanic Mexico these animals were represented, maintaining a close relationship among each other, in the figures of Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, and Tlaloc. In the Florentine Codex, the goddesses of the corn and fertility appear as women with a grouping of snakes to their feet or between their legs.

²¹ ELIADE 1981.

As goddess of the Earth, Cihuacoatl is intimately associated to Centeotl, the deity of corn, and at the same time to Xochipilli, the goddess of the flowers, the dance and the song. Cihuacoatl was one of the main goddesses because people associated her figure to the cyclic regeneration (a quality of the lunar snake), to the fertility of the Earth, maternity, and the endless ability to generate products that benefit humankind. She is the Mother Goddess that ensures the maintenance and wellbeing of humanity. The Franciscan friars surely understood the importance of this feminine deity in order to introduce the concept of the Virgin Mary, dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, as a replacement for such a significant goddess. This is how, on a smaller scale, a similar syncretism to that of Tonantzin and the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Tepeyac Hill was produced; a syncretism expressed during the 16th century and later in the baroque decoration of the church that displayed the harmonic coexistence of both the Christian and the Mesoamerican symbolisms. For example, the Virgin was placed under the chorus at the end of the 19th century, surrounded by young musicians, sweet pomegranates, *cuitlacoche*²², and children's faces with feathery headband emerging from serpentine bodies embedded with flowers.

In the book of Genesis of the Old Testament, in the Judeo-Christian myth of the Creation, the snake is the evil animal that seduced Eve, and through her Adam, to disobey the instructions of the Creator when they ate from the prohibited fruit that grew from the tree of the science of right and wrong, in the middle of the Garden of Eden. When Eve confessed to God that the Snake had induced her to eat the fruit, God spoke these words to the reptile:

*Because of this you are cursed above all livestock and above all beasts on the field; you shall go on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; she shall break your head and you shall bruise her heel.*²³

Stigmatized by the Judeo-Christian God, damned among all animals, this snake had to be reconciled with María, blessed among women. There it began the agony of a thousand-

²² Cuitlacoche or huitlacoche is a kind of fungus which grows on the ears of maize. It has been considered to be delicacy in Mexico and had been part of Mexican cooking from time immemorial (author's note).

²³ BIBLE, Gen. III, pp. 13-15.

year old cosmology that had the snake as standard and symbol in temples, codex, mural paintings, songs, prayers and spells, monumental sculptures and premonitory dreams.

Rightfully, Alfonso Alfaro wrote that if the beginning of the conflict between the two enemies, the Woman and the Snake, narrated in the Genesis happens in the altered serenity of the Garden of Eden, the outcome has its place in the terrible scenario of the end of times. And it is described in the last of the revealed texts. In the Apocalypse of Saint John a woman “dressed with the sun, the moon under her feet and a crown on top of her head” faces a “great red dragon of seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems over its heads” in a “struggle where Saint Michel, captain of angels, intervenes”.²⁴ The Virgin of the Apocalypse along with the archangel Saint Michael triumphs over the Evil Snake. Today, it is possible to admire the complete scene in Tonantzintla, where halfway through the 20th century the image of Saint Michael was introduced, holding his sword high, on the superior part of the neo-baroque tabernacle, where the image of the Virgin was also placed.

The temple of Tonantzintla works as expression of the communitarian life, and the activities that its inhabitants actions are decisions made by its members most of the time. In a summary of these activities done by the anthropologist Ligia Rivera stand out baptisms, first communions, fifteen-years-old ceremonies, weddings and masses for the dead, among the activities for the family and the consequent ties. But there are also communitarian actions derived from the agricultural cycle: the Blessing of the Seeds on February 2, Day of Our Lady of Candelaria, and the water request to Holy Burial that also helps with the diseases. Then, there is the Passion Week celebration; the Day of the Holy Cross on May 3 – that month the young women offer flowers to the Virgin; and on the last day of October and the first of November they celebrate the Day of the Dead. Finally, Christmas and New Year’s Eve masses close the ceremonial cycle of the church.

To be continued in next volume.

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²⁴ ALFARO 1997, p. 46.

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