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The Renaissance Reception of Nahua *Paideia* in the Writings of Bernardino de Sahagún: An Aesthetic Approach to Religion

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Abstract: In this article, I propose that books I–VI of Bernardino Sahagún’s *Códice florentino*, which discuss the moral and religious philosophies of indigenous Mexicans, should be interpreted through the lens of Renaissance humanist linguistic and philosophical theories. I demonstrate that, utilizing Franciscan–Bonaventuran epistemology, Sahagún put forward a method of evangelizing that intended to separate “the good from the bad” in indigenous cultures. In an effort to defend my claim, I first lay out some of the problems surrounding the *Códice florentino*. Second, I describe the general theological and cosmological views held by the Aztecs, so that, third, I may develop the main principles of the philosophy of *flor y canto* (*in xochitl in cuicatl*). Against a political interpretation that is often defended by appealing to the traditional rituals performed in the Aztec empire, I contend that their philosophy should be interpreted from the perspective of Nahua religion and aesthetics. I also discuss Sahagún’s reception of Aztec philosophy in the *Códice* with a focus on his interest in the linguistic and empirical dimensions of Nahua religion.



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1. Introduction

Bernardino de Sahagún was born in Spain in 1499 and died in Mexico in 1590. He belonged to the Order of the Franciscans and is widely considered Mexico’s “primer nahuatlata” (first student of the Nahua culture and language). He studied philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca until 1520 and was ordained a Franciscan priest in 1527. The intellectual tradition in which Sahagún was trained explains his method of classifying and documenting each phase of his research in America: at the University of Salamanca in the 16th century, the medieval scholastic methods of knowing were just as prominent as more contemporary humanist and Peripatetic Renaissance methods.

Sahagún arrived in Mexico in 1529 as part of the second wave of Franciscans sent over by Carlos V. He composed most of his major works while at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, which was founded by the Franciscans due to an initiative by the viceroy Antonio de Mendoza. The primary motivation for establishing this school was to provide indigenous aristocrats with a proper education in European humanism. The curriculum of the school included grammar, Latin (from which texts were translated to Nahuatl), and religion. Philosophy and theology were reserved for the most advanced students. Franciscans such as Sahagún would travel to other schools for the indigenous, such as Tepepulco and the Convento de San Luis in Tlamanalco (where Sahagún was based from 1530 to 1532). In 1536, Sahagún transferred to the Colegio de Santa Cruz, where he instructed distinguished members of the Mexican aristocracy, such as Antonio Valeriano from Azcapotzalco and Martín Jacobita from the school of Tlatelolco (see [Mendieta 1945](#); [García Icazbalceta 1886](#); [León-Portilla 1987, 1999](#)).

Having given classes at a number of schools, Sahagún slowly gathered knowledge of the Nahua tradition, primarily using detailed questionnaires developed by his colleague Fray Andrés de Olmos and himself. The *Códice florentino* ([Sahagún 1577](#); see [Hill Boone 2000](#))

was one of the most notable results of his investigations. It is a trilingual volume, containing text in Nahuatl, text in “Romance” (or Spanish), and pictographs in the indigenous Mexican style.¹ The volume is organized into twelve books, which are organized according to a structure that reflects the medieval mentality of Sahagún. The initial chapters deal with subjects related to God (religious ceremonies and sacrifices, the origin of Gods, judiciary astrology, and predictions), and it gradually “descends” into more mundane subjects, such as human beings, plants, and minerals, closing with the arrival of the Spaniards.

The different volumes of Sahagún’s *Códice* were published between 1575 and 1577, but from 1558 to 1565, Sahagún prepared the two *Primeros memoriales*, known today as the *Códices matritenses* (which, it must be said, are not identical to each other, but complementary). One is in the Royal Library and the other one in the Library of the Royal Academy of History, both in Madrid. In the *Códices matritenses*, there are no versions of books VII and XII of the *Códice florentino*, which is an indication that they were elaborated on later. It was not until the 19th century that Sahagún’s *Códice* acquired true relevance through the scientific approximation to this text undertaken by Carlos María Bustamante (see Sahagún 1829–1830). The most serious studies of the *Códice* appeared in the 20th century (see Sahagún 1950–1981, 1988, 1999; Wolf et al. 2011; Ríos Castaño 2014; Lee 2017).

The *Códice* contained a section that was widely considered missing until, in the 20th century, López Austin ([1976] 2011), a “Nahuatlata”, recovered most of the contents of the section. According to him, the objective of this section was to establish that the *Códice* had been written for the sake of gaining familiarity with the indigenous culture and for establishing a new method of evangelization in light of its failed initial stage. In the eyes of Sahagún (1577, vol. I, pp. 1–3), this initial phase failed due to the evangelizers’ lack of knowledge of the local culture. Another objective of the section was to preserve the ancient Mexicans’ truths during times when Mexico’s first archbishop, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, was burning Nahua codices. Zumárraga’s propensity to burn Nahua codices is frequently cited in history books. He considered them diabolical since they documented a polytheistic religion, polygamous practices, anthropophagy, and human sacrifices (León-Portilla 2003, p. 101). However, some researchers have brought it to our attention that others also participated in these practices (Aspe Armella 2002, p. 28; Aguilera 2001, p. 68) and still others abstained from them (Cheetam 1974, p. 180).

López Austin’s reconstruction also shows that, in this section, Sahagún attempted to compose a record of the Nahuatl language and important terms in its vocabulary (see Velázquez 2019, p. 27). Sahagún’s special interest in language is to be emphasized here, as it is one of the most important means of understanding the entire text. As is well known, during the Renaissance, interest in the *Corpus Aristotelicum* centered specifically on the grammar and rhetoric in contrast to the focus on syllogism and metaphysics during the Middle Ages. Thus, the sixth book of the *Códice*, which expands on the moral and religious philosophies of the indigenous Mexicans as transmitted to Sahagún through the *Huehuetlatolli* (or “Sermons of the Elders”), reflects the broader linguistic and philosophical interests of Renaissance humanism. Book IX of the *Códice*, which indexes the flora and fauna of Mexico, reflects the naturalistic and scientific tendencies of the era’s Peripateticism.

The Franciscan theologico-philosophical tradition is unique and has to be taken into account when framing the task undertaken by Bernardino de Sahagún in the *Códice florentino*. The theology shared by the likes of Saint Bonaventure, Scotus, and Ockham reveals a special sensibility. Here, a technical discussion of whether these thinkers focused on terrain distinct from that of reality is not attempted, nor do I indicate whether their views align with those of the Neoplatonic, Aristotelian, or Augustinian traditions (see Merino Abad and Martínez Fresneda 2004). Instead, the consistencies between their theologies and Sahagún’s, showing how they guided the composition of the *Códice*, are pointed out. After all, it is noteworthy that Sahagún chooses to follow these figures as opposed to Thomas Aquinas. What I try to show is that Sahagún was convinced that he could identify the “vestiges of God” (“vestigios de Dios”) in the conversations and speeches of the ancient Mexicans, and this conviction must be understood in the light of Bonaventuran thought.

In the *Códice florentino*, it is clear that Sahagún thinks of human understanding and divine understanding as equal in potency. Moreover, he thought that familiarizing himself with the religions specific to indigenous societies would allow him to teach the indigenous how to separate “the good from the bad”, two categories that had been confused by Nahua religion for as long as evangelical law had been absent in America.

It seems that Sahagún’s view on this first topic comes from Saint Bonaventure’s epistemology in *Cuestiones disputadas de la ciencia de Cristo*, in which the latter wonders if the knowledge of Christ, insofar as he is the Word, actually extends to infinite things. Following Saint Augustine (2019, Civ. Dei, XII), part of his response is that the human understanding has a potency equal to that of divine understanding. For Bonaventure (1999, qq. I and IV), one must accept that, although the understanding can stand on its own, in some way, eternal reason must serve as its regulating and motivating principle. Eternal reason does not serve this function on its own and in complete clarity but works in conjunction with reason insofar as it is created and known as a mirror and an enigma.

The secondary literature (see Saranyana Closa 2007, p. 267; Gilson 1952, p. 412) agrees that, for Bonaventure, every creature proclaims the existence of God (*De Mystério Trinitatis*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.). The result of such teachings is that the Word is taken as the starting point as “essential archeology in the order of being” (Merino Abad and Martínez Fresneda 2004, p. 170). This connects the infinite being with finite beings, the creator with the creature, assigning the value of either reality or contingency to beings according to which has divine freedom. For Bonaventure, created beings partake in what is true, consisting of a mixture of good and evil. They also have the ability to contemplate the outside world and to reflect on themselves despite being in a state of “shadows” that needs to be illuminated by evangelical light. The main reason for relating the doctrines of Buenaventura with Sahagún’s approach to Nahua culture is the Bonaventuran ideas of seminal reasons and of the vestiges of God in the natural world. These had an effect on the interpretation that some Franciscan novices, such as Sahagún, had about the Naha universe (Bonaventure 1993). Moreover, some of Bonaventure’s main works, such as *De Mystério Trinitatis* and *Quaestiones Disputatae de Scientia Christi*, have what could be called an “ascending structure”: they start talking about the world and then move on to the inner human dimension and, finally, to the ascent to divinity through the theology of love. Bonaventure’s ideas are to be distinguished from Aquinas’s insofar as the former gives primacy to the good and not to the truth. The result of his proposal is a dynamic philosophy and preaching (Bonaventure 1882, 1999; Delbosco 2010; Lázaro Pulido and Bordoy Fernández 2019).

Adopting this epistemology and metaphysics of creation in the *Códice*, Sahagún aims to distinguish “the good from the bad” (according to his perspective) from Nahua *paideia* in order to carry out his evangelical mission. The importance of knowing the American outer world and the autochthonous inner world pushed the Franciscan friar in an important direction: he felt the need to delve into the ancient interpretations of external and internal reality to discover the divine vestiges of the Word in it and, thus, lead indigenous peoples to Christianity. The linguistic interests of 16th century Spanish Renaissance humanists contributed positively to this endeavor, since, due to the interest in the rhetoric and grammar of his time, Sahagún was able to invoke arguments that he considered effective and, with these, devise a plan suited to his purposes.

2. The *Códice florentino*: Why Book VI?

The facts presented in book VI presuppose that the reader is already familiar with the contents of books I–V, since these books document the Nahua culture’s theology and forms of religion. Yet, part of what I am claiming here is that the Nahua forms of religion cannot be understood if what happens in book VI, in which Sahagún discusses Nahua morality and rhetoric, is not grasped. The true meaning of life, according to the Nahuas, surfaces in their philosophy of “flor y canto” (*in xochitl in cuicatl*), and this philosophy is only discussed in book VI. The structure and contents of this book support the claims made here, and other specialists are in agreement with me on this point (León-Portilla

2001; López Austin [1976] 2011; Soustelle 1994). Of course, it is crucial to keep in mind that, for the Spaniards who arrived in America, the ultimate meaning behind various Aztec religious rituals was interpolated through the warrior ideology of Tlacaélel, Moctezuma Ilhuicamina's minister (Soustelle 1994, p. 107). It appears that Sahagún is aware of this fact, and this awareness in turn motivates his study of the religiosity and aesthetic sensibility of the Aztecs, as they are displayed in the philosophy of *in xochitl in cuicatl*. Moreover, this represents just one reason motivating the genesis and organization of the *Códice florentino*, especially book VI, which expresses the true significance of Nahua religiosity.

In addition, it is now known that book VI of the *Códice* was Sahagún's first attempt to write about Nahua religion (Aguilera 2001, p. 92). In other words, the contents of book VI do not only have thematic precedence with respect to the content of the other books composing the text but also chronological precedence.

It is also worth mentioning that the questionnaires prepared by Olmos and Sahagún lent rigor to the arguments and discussions of book VI. The process of writing and structuring the *Códice florentino* and the version of it in Spanish took about 40 years (Aguilera 2001, pp. 140–41). The close attention to method and information gathering displayed by the text proves that Sahagún had a serious interest in rigorously reporting on all the facts that he received.

Generally classifying speeches, talks, or advice from fathers to sons and mothers to daughters, and common teachings on how to conduct oneself inside or outside the home, the forms of discourse documented in book VI document the Nahua truths fundamental to leading a quality life, both in the sense of mundane, everyday life and in the sense of higher domestic, social, or political forms of existence. Before speaking about them specifically, it would be important to lay out some points from books I–V that illustrate Sahagún's perspective on these teachings.

3. Religion, Beliefs, and Juridical Practices in Sahagún's *Códice*: Some of the Basic Contents of Books I–V

The theology and worldview contained in the opening books of the *Códice florentino* describe, first and foremost, the supreme deity. After this, they proceed to describe the gods in general, their classes, and their various roles and appearances depending on the distinct traditions with which and adherents with whom they are associated. The books present the entire Nahua mythology and the genesis of divine beings. Some of these beings came about as a result of human actions, while others were responsible for the formation of the material world. In any case, the first five books of the *Códice* lay out the Nahua's theogony and creation myths. These books also explain how divine beings brought about and affected the human realm as well as the connection between the mundane world and the divine world present in the Satraps² interpretation of human action.

Authors such as David Brading (2003, pp. 122–40) state that, on account of his medieval worldview, Sahagún characterized the idolatrous Mexican exodus as a new Israel. Such authors, basing their views on the doctrine of Franciscan millenarianism, conclude that Sahagún found the Aztec religion diabolical. These authors do not realize that the Mexicans situated Tula and their god, Quetzalcoatl—the plumed serpent—in a fantastical story. According to popular beliefs, Quetzalcoatl and his people were the first to practice all of the arts and access the knowledge that would benefit the Mexicans. Sahagún was indeed familiar with such stories. He also understood that this is why the Mexicans interpreted the arrival of the Spanish as the return of Quetzalcóatl, the blonde god previously expelled from Mexico. The Mexicans took on the mythology of Tula to distance themselves from the spurious tradition that legitimized them as an ancestral culture. By this means, the Mexicans adopted a mythology that preceded them and culminated in Catholicism. The theory of the fifth sun documented in the Aztec calendar—the wheel-stone text—is already alluded to in Tenochtitlán, and this partly documents Aztec human sacrificial practice. Sahagún himself alludes to this as well as the founding of the Aztec empire of Mexico-Tenochtitlán in the *Códice*. He traced the origin of the Mexica back to the eagle devouring a snake on

a cactus on a rock surrounded by water and states that Itzcóatl is the first emperor of the Aztec empire.

According to the Nahuatl worldview, the surface of the earth was a great disk located in the center of the universe; it expanded vertically and horizontally “extending as far as the waters that surround it meet the sky, so it was conceived as a large disk of land surrounded by waters” (Rueda Smithers et al. 2000, p. 379).

Soustelle (1994, p. 102) asserts that, previously, Quetzalcóatl, king of the Toltecs, had never accepted human sacrifices and that such a Mexica practice warranted the denial of Tlacaélel’s warlike policy. The famous flowery wars did not occur until the formation of the triple alliance of the sovereigns of Mexico, Texcoco, and Tlalpan with the dominions of Tlaxcala, Huexotzingo, and Cholula. Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and war, only reigned supreme until the inception of this alliance (Soustelle 1994, p. 107). From this point on, human sacrifices became a means of preserving life in the face of death. According to several of the pre-Hispanic codices (such as the Chimalpopoca Codex, the Vatican Codex A and B, and the Borgia Codex), this mythology presented a conception of a world in constant motion, unfinished and unstable, which only survived due to the blood of the human sacrifices obtained by the flowery wars, or *xochicayótl*. War was conceived as a religious duty that served to feed the gods (Caso 1953).

In book III of the *Códice florentino*, Sahagún elaborates on this information when he says that the Mexica believed in immortality and that their conception of the natural world was pessimistic only because of the weight they lent to destiny. In the *tonalpohualli*, or *Book of the births and fortune*, Mexicans used symbols to express the particular destinies of all newcomers to the world. He also mentions (Sahagún 1577, vol. I, p. 42) that bad symbols previously led to the imposition of punishments and death. Throughout books I–V, he documents eloquent poems contained in sacred books and the knowledge of initiates in deciphering or discovering the best possible signs for birth with numerical characters, which were used to get closer to the good and away from the “disastrous” (Sahagún 1577, vol. I, p. 211). Through the discipline of the *tonalpohualli*, the Aztec culture brought awareness to the afterlife with delightful words that justified the struggle; they encouraged religious duty and deference to the divine by means of metaphors and images.

Although in the Nahua culture, birth set the specific destiny of each individual in stone, making destiny unavoidable, human action had value because humans could choose to embrace and face their destiny in certain ways. The individual, they thought, could adapt in a better way as they elevated toward a higher state of understanding that could only be attained through acts of heroism that reflected the dynamism of the divine. It is precisely this kind of individual action that the discourses documented in book VI of the *Códice* discuss, and so it is time to turn to this book.

4. What Is the Aim of Book VI?

Sahagún (1577, vol. 2, p. 1) gives the *Huehuetlatolli* or *Sermons of the (Indigenous) Elder* the title *Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy of the Ancient Mexicans*. The book consists of 42 sermons that parents told their children regarding how their children should conduct themselves in the most important moments of their lives.

Sahagún (1577, vol. 2, pp. 1–33) firstly documents the prayers the Indians made to their god Tezcatlipoca in times of pestilence, plagues, poverty, war, evil, death, and drought, and, secondly, he does the same with the conversations held between elders or parents and elected rulers or progeny (Sahagún 1577, vol. 2, pp. 38–67). The most relevant chapters are the ones that talk about love for sons or daughters; about having an internal life and rectitude of conscience; and about practicing chastity, abandoning oneself to the gods and embracing destiny. As previously mentioned, it was also relevant for Sahagún to document the adages and sayings the indigenous people had: their jests and riddles and their humor and metaphors, all of which made up and enriched their language. Sahagún’s selection of topics shows that he documented everyday modes of communication and customary

phrases, doing so in order to better understand the habits, attitudes, and feelings of the indigenous.

Regarding this interpretation, it must be said that specialists do not unanimously agree on the purpose of this text. Traditionally, the schools of Ángel María Garibay and Miguel León-Portilla have posited that book VI was focused on recovering the Mexicas' remote traditions and history (see [Garibay 1992](#); [León-Portilla 1999](#)). However, new studies ([Díaz Cántora 1995](#)) opt for an ethical interpretation of the sermons. According to this interpretation, book VI mainly contains “conversations”, pieces of advice given by parents to their children regarding the way in which they should conduct themselves inside and outside their home. Although the difference between these two schools of thought may be subtle, it is still relevant, and, in what follows, my reading draws more inspiration from the second line of interpretation.

As previously stated, Sahagún constantly changes the theoretical and linguistic schemes of the text according to the addressee. This is also the case in the *Huehuetlatolli*. Here, the interlocutors are most likely European linguists of the day: in this part of the book, a deep analysis of the Nahuatl language as well as a categorization of the sermons according to the classic rules of the rhetoric of the time can be found. The lineal exposition is designed so that the indigenous people can recognize the “sayings of the elder” in a language filled with mnemotechnic resources. In this way, the addressee can memorize with ease the messages and traditions by aesthetic images and delectable sayings that seek to evolve either interior or external proceedings.

Melodious repetitions and metaphors are often used in passages that refer to inner states and acts of the Nahuatl soul. Nahuatl is presented as a graphic language that expresses an intrinsic relationship between the external and the interior human condition with metaphors. Sahagún seems to think of it as a language that unites corporeal expression with the mind and its psychological processes. Each external expression, action, and mannerism internalizes a strong belief and allows for virtuous practices to grow, thus stabilizing moral conduct. There is no pure separation of concepts, no *merely* abstractive processes—even references to scientific knowledge are visual, never departing from natural elements, and any transcendent ideas are symbolized with plants or animals, colors, and sounds.

The Nahuas formed their *paideia* emphasizing that equilibrium comes to be by “sculpting” a face and a heart—in *ixtli in yollotl*. Linguistic expressions, Sahagún thought, could serve to express sounds, habits, and inner states of the mind. Their structure manifests the association between the mind and the body. At the same time, the sermons communicate the ethical values and convictions of the Nahua community, as can be seen in the following passage:

Daughter of mine, my little bird, you have already heard and noticed the words of your father, you have heard the precious words that are rarely said to you, that are not heard: they have come from the entrails and the heart in which they would be treasured, and your very beloved father, well he knows that you are his daughter, begotten by him—you are his blood and his flesh, and God our lord knows that it is so, although you are a woman and the image of your father [. . .] I ask you to keep, to not forget what your father has said, because they are all very precious things: so that they rarely divulge such things, which are words, of elders, and potentates, and sages, precious as precious stones [. . .]. ([Sahagún 1577](#), vol. 2, p. 80).³

This is the reason why Sahagún classifies the sermons according to genres and the specific roles they seemed to play in society. He uses some chapters of the book to talk about the subject of riddles ([Sahagún 1577](#), vol. 2, p. 197) and metaphors (*ibid.*, p. 199). In book VI, examples of sermons that deal with the domestic sphere and others with pregnancy, birth, and breeding are to be found; some sermons were given to girls and others to the youngsters who would soon face their initiation rites at college. He also

documents public and political sermons, which were declaimed when a member of the aristocracy was proclaimed as such.

The most relevant sermons begin to appear in chapter XVII of book VI. In these sermons, parents provided their children with advice regarding life's guidelines: they exhorted their children to care for the structuring, planning, and development of their own lives with great care and consistency. Here, the divinity—*Tloque Nahuaque*—appears as the cause of everything that has been given to us, and it is recommended to communicate with him and to live in peace with others. Thus, in chapter XVII, the most symbolic, philosophical, and theologically oriented sermons begin to appear.

Sahagún also presents the sermons given to girls who have grown up. The exhortations advise them on how to adequately rear children and how to conduct themselves with prudence in public and private life. These sermons also recommend “to not shame the nobility nor to stain the red or black ink” (Sahagún 1577, vol. 2, p. 46), which means wisdom. It is interesting to see how the sermon relates “being poised and not like a *chachalaca*” and “not to walk with their face down to be humiliated, nor with their chin upward to denote haughtiness” (ibid.). The sermons recommend that the girls be “clean but not vain” and “calm while walking and not affected by the gossip” (ibid., p. 57). As can be seen, all these recommendations refer to inner virtues as well as to an awareness of actions and desires. Sermon XXI also deals with the observance of continence, which is compared to “a very bright turquoise, just like a round and polished jade, well formed” (ibid., p. 91). Mnemonic devices are used plentifully in this sermon:

[...] without stain, quite well it has burst the heart, the life of those who live in purity; like a jade and turquoise shine, glowing in the presence of *Tloque Nahuaque*; like wide and green quetzal feathers, beautifully arched on the floor, that is how those who live in purity, those who are said to have a good heart, are (ibid., p. 91).⁴

The sermons portray the transformation of a simple rhetoric into an ethical system that does not separate inner virtues from outer customs and culture. Sahagún calls attention to the way in which indigenous wisdom integrates the body and psychological processes when discussing human flourishing. Moreover, if we examine various trochees and metonymies are examined, it can be seen that Sahagún wants to use these resources to “preserve the good and remove the bad”, as it were, in order to make the Christian message more interesting to locals through proper knowledge of their culture and theology and focusing on values such as life, reproduction, obedience, humility, and chastity. Thus, book VI becomes a testimony to the beautiful conversations held between parents and their children as well as of the indigenous people's norms regarding family and social life. In addition, it is a testament to the ways in which the autochthonous mentality already coincides with the European message. Sahagún, then, is trying to discover common ground between indigenous beliefs and Christianity, and the sermons collected in book VI, as well as Sahagún's own comments on them, are the main result of this task.

The portions of the sermons documented in book VI that elaborate on transcendence and divinity are “attenuated” with passages on human practices that reflect a subordination to the divine.⁵ Thus, to obtain an adequate idea of religiosity (that is, not only theological ideas and beliefs about the transcendent and the divine but about the influence of these in daily life, customs, and rituals), an analysis of the classification of the discourses in book VI will be useful to us. For the rest, several of the points mentioned in the sermons of book VI are also addressed in the general wisdom of the *flor y canto*, which can be appreciated in a variety of poems also documented in other sources. Therefore, in the next section, I develop some of the most important points of Nahuatl *paideia* from a variety of sources.

5. The Wisdom of *Flor y Canto*—In *Xochitl In Cuicatl*: Life, Sensations, and Religiosity

The ancient Mexicans protected their fundamental truths in what they called “the black and red ink”, not because they wrote in those colors, but because those colors represented

“the primary”. This “book” or recollection of wisdom was preserved by the *tlamatinime*, the “wise men”, which some could even call, in some sense of the word, philosophers. Sahagún was able to put some of these pieces of wisdom in writing through his documentary efforts, as previously mentioned.

Educated or “wise” Nahuas talked to Sahagún about *Tloque nahuaque*, the being to which, they thought, they owed the existence of everything (Lehmann 1938, pp. 100–6), saying what they considered to be their supreme truth. After that, in their conversation with Sahagún, they strongly criticized the Christian imposition (León-Portilla 1986, p. 100). They detailed their own convictions elsewhere:

You said / that we do not know / the Lord of what is close and what is near, / that to whom the heavens and the earth belong. / You said that our Gods were not true. / This is a new word, / that which you speak—we are perturbed by it, / we are bothered by it. Because our progenitors, / those who have been, / those that have lived on the earth, / did not speak thusly. // They gave us / their rules of life, / they believed they were true, / they worshiped them: / they honored their gods. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 19)⁶

The *tlamatinime* defended their own culture in the face of the Spaniards. They had reflected on “what lies beyond” (that is, what happens after death), and although they felt faintly skeptic about what this implicated, they accepted that the constant change and contingency of earthly things were proof of the insufficiency of the world:

Is it true that one can live above the earth? / Not forever on the earth, / just a small amount of time here: even if it is jade, it breaks; / even if it is gold, it breaks; / even if it is quetzal plumage, it comes apart. / We are not on the earth forever, / just a little while. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 19)

A certain fragment gives an initial glimpse of what they considered to be their *paideia*:

The toltec [artist] of the black and red ink, / creating things with black water [. . .]. [T]he good painter: it is understood that God is in his heart. / He divinizes things with his heart, / he talks with his heart. / He knows the colors, applies them, / applies shades. He paints the feet, the houses, / sketches the shadows, achieves a perfect finish. / As if he were a toltec, / he paints de colors of the flowers. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 19)

We see that virtue, for the Nahuas, has an active function: the training of one’s *face* and *heart* (*in ixtli in yollotl*): “He who gives being to clay / possesses a sharp eye, molds, / cleans the clay. / The good potter / puts style in everything, / teaches the clay to tell lies. / He talks with his own heart” (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 20). This “flower and song” philosophy sought to transform the human being into “a face and a heart”—it aimed to unify the “face” and exterior shape of a human being with the interior aspect, with his “inner person”. The Nahuas believed in the inseparability of sculpting *both* a face and a heart: they were searching for a complete identification between emotions and desires—they expressed their rationality in a poetic manner. For them, “flower and song” philosophy was incarnated by a mentor who was able to preserve and convey that wisdom to others:

To him belongs the transmitted wisdom, / he is the one who teaches, / he follows the truth, / he never ceases to admonish. / He makes the faces of others wise, / he makes the others take a face [a personality]. / He makes them develop it. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 22)

Now, how does the Toltec accomplish this task of transforming others?

He puts a mirror before others. He opens their eyes [. . .]. / He prepares and creates order. / He applies his light over the world. / He knows what is above us, / the region of the dead. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 22)

The task does not imply an imposition of criteria but rather “brings out” what each one can develop. We are presented with the image of a sort of facilitator or “coach”, someone who propitiates an inner opening. “He can comfort anybody, correct anybody, / teach

anybody. / Thanks to him, people humanize their desires/ and receive a strict teaching” (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 22). The mentor would be a person who treasures this knowledge—the task of sculpting oneself inwards similar to an artist that carves a sculpture. However, here, the task is helping with the flourishing of others in a delicate way: as delicate as butterflies, creatures considered delicate, the most fragile, in Nahua culture. A certain, especially religious version of this wisdom would have been housed in the so-called “temple of butterflies”, just as Teotihuacans and Toltecs had done.

The Toltec knows that this knowledge is profound and desires for it to be understood and shared:

“May the earth remain, / may the mountains remain on their feet”. Thus said Ayocuan Cuetzpalzin / in Tlaxcala and Huexotzingo. / “May the earth remain. May the mountains stay on their feet. / May the maize flower be shared. / May the cocoa flower be shared. / May the earth remain”. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 21)

These Nahua verses begin to delve into the permanence of thought and the mind’s activity. They emphasize a self-made task in education, which consists of understanding the inside of consciousness, relating it with external signs:

The wise man: a light, a torch, / a thick torch, / that does not smoke. / A perforated mirror, / a mirror with holes on both sides: / to him belongs the black and red ink, to him belong the codices, / to him belong the codices. He himself is writing and wisdom. / He is the path, a true guide for others. / He leads people and things, / he is the guide for human activity. / The true sage is careful, like a doctor, / and keeps the tradition. (Aspe Armella 2018, p. 22)

León-Portilla (1968) has explained how Huexotzingo, one of the rival kings of Talacélel before the Spanish conquest, was known as the home of music and illustrated books; their temple, named “Place of the Butterflies”, was called that way because Huexotzingo’s accomplishments were compared with flowers. There, “wise men” essentially had a formative task: *ixtlamachiliztli*, “giving wisdom to the others’ faces”. Education was the expression of a will through which each human group sculpted or “adapted” their destiny, as for the Nahua, this task was not individual. Rather, it was a shared activity, a ritual event which expressed their inner life represented poetically through songs. Language made an appearance through the lyric songs.

The teachings of the Nahua schools—the *Calmecac* for noblemen and the *Tepoxcalli* for the general public—participated in the formative task of the face and the heart. When addressing one another, people at these schools used the expression “your face, your heart” (*in ixtli, in yollotl*) to refer to each other. The face and the heart were symbols of a moral physiognomy that Torre Villar (1979) has interpreted as a dynamic principle, for the face and the heart were juxtaposed and seemed to imply that a strong will represented the greatest concentration of life.

Virtue (*omáxic oquichtli*) was accomplished by those who had received Nahua education. On the contrary, vice (a “shrouded heart”) was understood as a heart in need of a mask. Accordingly, the teacher or *temachtiani* has the task of being a facilitator to others, helping them to take or sculpt their own face, to develop it, to know it, and to make it wise by making their hearts strong (*iztech netlacaneo*).

A noticeable feature of Nahua religiosity and aesthetics is its constant use of linguistic imagery: poetic and metaphoric expressions, which all ancient cultures developed in particular ways (León-Portilla 1962, 2012). Regarding their beliefs, the words used are always indispensable elements for ritual sounds that help in the ethical development of communities, for it is with speech that one develops virtues. The chants and oral speeches keep memory and myths alive. The Nahuas built their sayings with aesthetic elements that pleased the ears forging memory—what is remembered by them is their *paideia*. The Nahua do not establish their sayings as ancient historic testimonies, but as formative advice for the personality. “The ancient word” of the city is not a historic document, but a “saying” that comes “from the heart”, a discourse that indicates that these speeches are

not mere words or stories, but their strongest beliefs and convictions. These words are the path to understanding their world vision, what they thought was the correct way of expressing oneself in its flow. Repetitions, rituals, and sayings are simple because the intent is adapting, through words and sounds, the mind's internal rhythm.

6. The *Cantares Mexicanos* and Sahagún's Book VI: A New Horizon of Meaning

The *Cantares Mexicanos* is a compilation put together by Bernardino de Sahagún and Durán (Garibay 1992, pp. 153–56). It is a reconstruction of the philosophical vision of the Mexican Nahuas. According to León-Portilla (2001, p. 17), the *Cantares* represent a solitary reflection that characterizes their philosophical–religious thought, something that Greeks such as Parmenides also expressed with verses and metaphors. The *Cantares* were lost for centuries until, in 1889, José María Vigil, intellectual and director of the National Library of Mexico, discovered 85 pages in neglected boxes, perhaps from some convent that was closed during the times of the Reform Laws of Benito Juárez. The Nahuatl and Spanish editions were then produced. Authors such as Ángel María Garibay, Josefina Muriel, and Miguel León-Portilla collaborated in various versions until the latter produced the definitive version in 1961. This finding allowed scholars to recover authentic Nahua wisdom, which had been unfairly interpreted as bloody, religiously zealous, warrior like, and sacrificial by the politics of Tlacaélel. Due to this discovery, the wisdom of the *flor y canto* was inserted into the studies on Nahua thought, although it was present in the text of Sahagún long before, as shown.

In this section, texts that originally appeared in the *Cantares* and that are one more example of the Nahuatl *paideia* are presented. This helps show that, through another textual piece of evidence edited and developed by much later authors and intellectuals, Sahagún has carried out an interpretive and documentary task in line with the intellectual interests of the Renaissance.⁷

The poem *Cuicapeuhcáyotl*, a title that León-Portilla (2006, p. 20) translates as “El comienzo o principio”, begins as follows:

I speak with my heart / Where shall I find beautiful, fragrant flowers? / Whom should I ask? / Maybe I should ask the precious hummingbird, the jade-colored hummingbird? / Should I ask the butterfly the color of the Zacuan? / Because knowledge is theirs, / they know where the beautiful, fragrant flowers sprout. (León-Portilla 2006, p. 21)⁸

The poem also identifies precious stones and their colors with strength, an aesthetic means of representing a more solid and enduring plane of understanding. The language of the heart is that of beautiful flowers: the allusion to their scent invites a delightful song in a rhetoric that excites the human mind. Far from resorting to philosophical abstractions, the song begins with the metaphor of the bird and the butterflies, stating that knowledge resides in them. Every facet of the poem invites the union of the aesthetic with wisdom.

For as long as they live / I listen to their flowery song. / It is as if the mountain responds to them. / In truth, the precious water flows next to them / the source of the blue bird. / There he launches his songs, he responds to himself with songs / the mockingbird, bird of four hundred voices; the coyoltótotl answers him. / There is music of rattling, varied, precious songbirds. / There they praise the Owner of the land, their voices resonate well. (León-Portilla 2006, p. 21)

The allusion to four hundred voices, which is relatively common in Nahua poetry, invites the audience to imagine a dialogue: the voices respond, and their every reverberation and echo can be heard. The poem then mentions the Owner of the land alongside their booming voices.

A poem by Netzahualcáyotl titled *¿Eres tú verdadero?* reveals the way the face and heart are to be sculpted:

Are you true (do you have roots)? / Only the one who dominates all things is true, / the Giver of life. / Is this true? / Isn't it, as they say? / That our hearts

should not be tormented! / Everything that is true / (that has a root) / they say is not true / (has no root). / The Giver of life / appears to be arbitrary. / Oh, that our hearts shall not be tormented! (León-Portilla 2006, p. 95)

7. Conclusions

The task undertaken by Bernardino de Sahagún was to document and classify Nahua religion, rhetoric, and beliefs following the Bonaventuran–Franciscan tradition that sustains that God expresses his will in the created world; the task for Sahagún was to describe Nahua culture in order to neatly separate the will of God from the deviations observed in their culture. This method allowed Sahagún to familiarize himself with and preserve the wise teachings of Nahua culture while accentuating the aspects of their culture that coincide with Christian doctrine. The *Códice florentino* is proof that Sahagún considered that the religion and rhetoric of the ancient Nahuas reflected the goodness of the divine Word despite the fact that such truths were presented in the absence of evangelical law. His methodology allowed him to bring about a new wave of conversions. The objective that drove the friar to develop the *Códice* is helpful in understanding that the beliefs and convictions of the Nahua culture were preserved and valued due to his assimilating them with the Franciscan philosophical–theological tradition and Renaissance humanism.

The general message of this book is that neither the religiosity nor the religious and aesthetic products of the Nahuas can be merely understood through the politics of the Aztec empire. There is a parallel wisdom that emerges in Huexotzingo and that also promotes the self-shaping task of sculpting a face and a heart, *in ixtli in yollotl*. It is from this perspective that the wisdom of the ancient Mexicans can be truly considered as that of a *paideia*.

Nahua notions relating to religion and “the meaning of life” are preserved by *tlamatinime* and by a trifold language: orality, pictographs, and symbols (points and glyphs). This language contains what is in “black and red ink.” The task is to integrate visual, anatomic, and biological elements with inner stages of mind and emotions in a profound but simple way. This “black and red ink” language conveys attitudes, desires, and thoughts. In this way, the presence and orientation of a mentor—the *Toltec* or artist—guides others as they seek the configuration of their face with their heart.

The higher form of understanding attained in Nahuatl religion and reported in the wisdom of the *flor y canto*—*in ixtli in yollotl*—results in the configuration of a quality life in the social sphere, in which reverence for the divine consists in a subordination to the highest realities. The destiny that one is assigned from birth is accepted and is embraced throughout all of the vicissitudes observed in the world. These vicissitudes contain less wisdom than their oral teachings learned by way of the constant performance of corporeal expressions that integrate sounds, images, and repetitive ritual practices. The practice of memorizing primal truths fosters the connection between the social and religious life with everyday language, reminding us of the lofty heights to which human language may ascend. These speeches and dialogues are in themselves symbolic vehicles for expressing that the human world is a “land of books”, of songs in the ancient tongue that describe social virtues and vices that signify the singular fragility of each man and the improvement that one attains by living in a unified community.

The mythical language of the Nahua culture is fertile and primal: its constant repetition expresses the original human impulse of the supreme, dual-natured deity, which unfolds itself in the transcendent and the mundane. The language expresses both fragility and heroism in the face of what is certain, conveying words and actions that allow one to touch the permanent, although never in a direct way. This lends itself to a picture of a dynamic cosmos alongside a supreme reality that is neither exhausted nor defined by this world but can be expressed in artful language. These songs about the complexity of our heterogeneous environment allow us to overcome contingency through constant repetition.

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Notes

- ¹ The structure of the text allowed Sahagún to successfully (albeit temporarily) evade the Inquisition and the censorship imposed by regal and ecclesiastic authorities. Sahagún often wrote his true intentions in Nahuatl so that foreigners would be unable to decipher it. To secure his objective, he occasionally makes use of another resource: in prologues written in Spanish, he criticizes and “refutes” the indigenous practices.
- ² The Satraps were the priests or conjurers responsible for demonstrating the significance of animals and certain events that foretold the future.
- ³ “Hija mía muy amada, muy querida palomita, ya as oído y notado las palabras de tu señor padre, has oído las palabras preciosas, y que raramente te dizen, no se oyen: las cuales han procedido de las entrañas, y coraçon en que estarían atesoradas, y tu muy amado padre, bien sabe que eres hija engendrada del, eres su sangre y su carne, y sabe dios nuestro señor que es así, aunque eres mujer e imagen de tu padre [. . .] te encargo mucho que guardes, que no olvides lo que tu señor padre ya dixo, porque son todas cosas muy preciosas: de manera que raramente publican tales cosas, y que son palabras, de señores, y principales, y sabios, preciosas como piedras preciosas[. . .] (also see Sahagún 1999, p. 356). My translation.
- ⁴ “[. . .] sin mancha, dijéronlas los que perfectamente vinieron a este mundo; son como piedras preciosas que se llaman *chalchihuites* y zafiros, muy resplandecientes delante de nuestro señor —*tloque nahuaque*— y son como plumas ricas muy finas, y muy anchas y muy enteras están arqueadas; tales son las que tienen en costumbre, y llámanse personas de buen corazón.” My translation.
- ⁵ It is worth mentioning that Sahagún (1577, vol. 3, pp. 19–116) also brings up these ideas in other parts of the *Códice*.
- ⁶ The translations of all Nahua poems presented here are owed to Erik Norvelle. They had appeared previously in Aspe Armella (2018).
- ⁷ I selected these passages because they were studied and analyzed by Ángel María Garibay and Miguel León-Portilla, whom I followed in my text. Furthermore, these two authors have already discussed the connection between the *Cantares* and the *Códice florentino* (see León-Portilla 2001).
- ⁸ I am the author of all translations of poems that appeared in León-Portilla (2006) in Spanish.

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