An insightful look into Nahua life and religion in colonial Mexico City

Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan

Nahuas and Catholicism, 1523–1700

By Jonathan Truitt

What happened to indigenous life after contact with the Spanish? In the complex interaction of cultures, how and to what degree did traditional ways persist? What role did religion play?

Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan addresses these and other questions by focusing on Mexico City in the colonial era. Moving beyond the standard narrative of Spanish domination, author Jonathan Truitt uses Nahuatl- and Spanish-language sources, drawn from multiarchival and multinational research, to provide an innovative look at indigenous life on the southern half of the island capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. While Spanish authority was important, indeed central, it was far from omnipotent and depended each day on the assistance of the indigenous people. In many ways, Nahua life continued much as it had prior to Spanish contact. While certain elements of precontact life, such as public human sacrifice, were eliminated, others, such as traditional gender roles or belief in divinity, persisted.

Before and after contact, religion was central to life on the island capital. Truitt uses Spanish and indigenous interactions with religion as a window on daily life in the city. As quickly becomes clear, Nahua men and women were active in most areas of city life. They took pride in their achievements, defended their religious buildings, fought against abuse, and ignored the idea that women should not be active members of the community. While change occurred during this era, it was controlled and directed as much, if not more, by the indigenous population as by the Spanish.

Truitt’s innovative use of previously neglected Nahua and Spanish documents sheds new light on indigenous life in New Spain, making Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan an important contribution to a deeper understanding of the era.

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