

Book Review – Aztec Thought and Culture

Americans are often most familiar with the Indians of the US and Canada, but probably the greatest and most powerful Indian people lived in modern Mexico, the Aztecs. The Aztec Empire stretched from Central Mexico to Guatemala, and early Spanish accounts speak of unrivaled wealth and power. After the Conquistadors destroyed the Empire in 1521, friars promoted Roman Catholicism, and the people mixed Catholicism with their pre-Columbian beliefs. In his book, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Miguel Leon-Portilla explores some of these early Aztec understandings. Leon-Portilla, an Emeritus Professor of Historical Research at the National University of Mexico, is widely regarded for his work in this area.

Ancient inhabitants of the great valley of Mexico, the Aztecs, Texocans, Chohulands, Chalcans, and Tlaxcaltecs, were descendants of the Toltecs and united by the Nahuatl language. They are thus often referred to as the Nahuas, and their culture as the Nahuatl culture. Like Greek and German, the Nahuatl language uses many prefixes, infixes, and suffixes, thus allowing complex ideas to be captured in one long compound word. The author's technique throughout the book is to cite a portion of Nahuatl text and then write a commentary on it, similar to what Christians, Muslims, and Jews do with their holy books.

Early Nahuatl philosophy, encapsulated in poetry, concluded that everything must eventually vanish, including such hardy stuff as stones and precious metals. Everything is transitory, and man is incapable of discovering truth. Nahuatl priests were experts in the gods and in their rituals, while Nahuatl "wise men" were experts in astronomy, the codices, calendars, and chronology. Thus, we discover a bifurcation between popular religion, led by the priests, and more exclusive philosophy, led by the "wise men".

According to Aztec cosmogony, the fundamental Aztec deity, Ometeotl, was the creator and sustainer of the universe. He embodied everything masculine and feminine, and gave rise to four sons. The sons caused time and space to "enter the universe" and created the first humans. These divine sons warred against each other, with each one gaining supremacy for a time. The history of the universe was encapsulated in Suns or Eras. When a god was defeated, his Era or Sun would close and everything would be destroyed. The Sun of the now predominant god would begin, and things would begin anew.

The Aztecs were living in the fifth Sun, and their primary task was to avert or at least delay the end of their Sun. To this end, the Aztecs fought wars of conquest to expand their empire, multiply their wealth, and increase their power. In their mythology, Nanahuatzin ("the pimply one") threw himself into the fire to become the Sun, thus creating a new era. As demonstrated by this example, only human sacrifice can prolong life and existence. Blood was a key to sustaining the Sun, such as the blood of enemies shed in ritual human sacrifice. Eventually, sacrifice and ceremonial warfare constituted the core of their personal, religious, military, social, and national life.¹

Leon-Portilla describes a 1524 confrontation between Spanish friars and Aztec tlamatinime (wise men). He notes their courageous but respectful opposition of the conquered Aztecs, with whom his sympathies clearly lie. The popular religion was polytheistic, which the Catholic missionaries opposed, but the wise men described their religion as monotheistic. The other gods were merely manifestations of Ometeotl; similar to Hindu incarnations of Krishna. At the same time, there is an epicurean or even a hedonist strain; a belief that since everything is transitory, the best way to live life is to have the most pleasure possible.

Fate was very important. The tonalpohualli or "day count" identified good and bad days that governed one's life. A person born on a good day would be blessed, but one born on a bad day would be cursed. The tonalamatl or "book of horoscopes" was used to predict the lives of individuals. A person associated with the numbers 3,7,10,12, and 13 (birthday, etc) would have good luck, while one with 4,5,6,8 and 9 had bad.

¹ Aztec Thought and Culture, 61

People had a chance to affect their fate, however. The parents of a son born on an unlucky day would name him on a lucky day, thus partly negating the curse. Couples picked their wedding day to give them the best chance of fertility and marital success. By virtuous behavior and success in war or other endeavors, a man could improve his destiny. Similarly, by poor behavior and failure in his endeavors, a man could worsen his earthly destiny. One's eternal destiny, however, was simply the decision of Ometeotl – individual action did not matter, but the nature of one's death did. Blessed people went to Tlalocan while the cursed went to Mictlan.

Aztec boys would all attend school, a remarkable fact since education was not compulsory in the West until hundreds of years later. Some would go to the Telpochcalli (house of young men) and others to the Calmecac (a school of higher learning in which nobles and priests were educated. Girls also received some education, but theirs was separate. Knowledge, but more importantly virtue, and enculturation into Aztec society, was the purpose of education for both sexes.

Tlacaehlel was one of the most important leaders in Aztec history. Though never emperor, he transformed Nahuatl culture in a mystic-military line. He led Aztec armies to secure their independence from and even sovereignty over their neighbors. He then created a military aristocracy, and finally rewrote Aztec history, eliminating or reinterpreting defeats and transforming them into glory and victory.

Evaluation

Aztec Thought and Culture is a worthwhile book, but lacks some information that I would like to see. Leon-Portilla provides a good overview of Aztec language and philosophy, but he is weak on religion, food, dress, and other aspects of culture. The author is better at *Thought* than he is at *Culture*. What were Aztec cities like? How did they fight their wars? What were the relationships between men and women, young and old, native and foreigner? What did they eat, and how did they get their food? What about a brief overview of Aztec history? Had Leon-Portilla included more of the answers to these questions, it would have been a better book.

Conclusion

Aztec Thought and Culture is useful reading for scholars interested in pre-Columbian America, and those who want to see some of the origins of modern Mexican culture. Pastors and lay Christians should spend their time reading something more practical to day to day Christian living or Christian ministry. Missionaries to Mexico may benefit from Leon-Portilla's work because it will help them understand some of the syncretistic beliefs that they will encounter. Students of world religion will benefit from reading *Aztec Thought and Culture* because the power of the Empire in the past resonates through religions in Meso-America today. There are remarkable similarities to Greek and even Hindu culture, suggesting a universality of some parts of human philosophy.