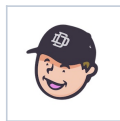
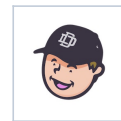


Translating the Sacred: a Hermeneutical Analysis of Nahuatl-Christian Syncretism in Early Seventeenth-Century Confessionarios

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Abstract

This study explores the linguistic and theological negotiations in early seventeenth-century Mexican *confessionarios* (confession manuals), focusing on how Spanish missionary priests and indigenous assistants translated complex Christian concepts of sin, penance, and divinity into Classical Nahuatl. Using a historical-hermeneutical and philological framework, we analyze how terms like *tlahtlacolli* (traditionally translated as "sin" but indigenously meaning "damage" or "disorder") and *teotl* (sacred force vs. monotheistic God) created a syncretic space where Mesoamerican cosmological concepts persisted beneath Christian dogmatic structures. By examining the *Confessionario mayor y menor en lengua mexicana* (1634) by Bartholomé de Alva and related period texts, this paper demonstrates that translation was not merely a tool of unilateral spiritual conquest but a dialectical site of cultural negotiation. The resulting syncretism reveals how Nahua penitents and bilingual friars co-constructed a hybrid religious vocabulary, reshaping both Christian theology and indigenous metaphysics in colonial New Spain.

Introduction

The spiritual conquest of Mesoamerica relied heavily on the mastery of indigenous languages, particularly Classical Nahuatl, the lingua franca of the Aztec Empire. Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit missionaries recognized that physical subjugation was insufficient; true conversion required the colonization of the indigenous consciousness. To achieve this, early colonial friars and indigenous scribes produced a vast corpus of bilingual texts, including catechisms, doctrinal treatises, and *confessionarios* (confessional manuals).

Confession manuals served as critical instruments of social and spiritual control. They were designed to interrogate indigenous penitents, systematically rooting out idolatry, polygamy, and non-Christian ritual practices. However, the process of translating abstract European theological concepts—such as original sin, transubstantiation, contrition, and the Holy Trinity—into a language deeply embedded in a polytheistic, immanentist Mesoamerican worldview created unexpected semantic shifts.

This study examines early seventeenth-century *confessionarios*, focusing on the works of Bartholomé de Alva (1634) and Fray Juan Bautista (1599), to trace the hermeneutical negotiations inherent in these translations. Far from being passive receptacles of European dogma, these bilingual texts represent a dialectical space of linguistic and conceptual syncretism. This article seeks to answer: How did the translation of Catholic sacramentals into Nahuatl inadvertently preserve Mesoamerican cosmological categories? What does this linguistic negotiation reveal about the nature of syncretism in colonial Mexico?

Literature Review

Early historiography, influenced by Robert Ricard (1933), characterized the evangelization of New Spain as a swift and complete "spiritual conquest." However, postcolonial and ethnohistorical scholarship has dismantled

this narrative, demonstrating that indigenous peoples actively negotiated, adapted, and resisted Spanish religious impositions. Louise Burkhart's seminal work, *The Slippery Earth* (1989), established that the translation of Christian morality into Nahuatl resulted in a dialogical process where Nahua moral philosophy subtly modified Christian concepts.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the philological analysis of Nahuatl doctrinal literature, often referred to as the New Philology. Scholars like James Lockhart and Stafford Poole have highlighted the role of indigenous elite aides—the *tlacuiloque* and bilingual assistants—who worked alongside friars. These intermediaries did not merely translate words; they filtered Catholic concepts through their own cultural frameworks. This paper builds on this linguistic turn by focusing specifically on the early seventeenth century, a period when the initial evangelical optimism had waned, giving way to a more institutionalized, suspicious, and linguistically complex pastoral approach.

The *confessionario* remains a unique genre within this corpus. While confession was meant to enforce orthodoxy, the dialogic nature of the confessional encounter—interrogation and response—forced a unique linguistic intimacy. By analyzing these texts through a hermeneutical lens, we can uncover the subterranean survival of indigenous metaphysics, transforming the confessional from a site of pure discipline into a site of profound semantic hybridization.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a historical-hermeneutical and philological methodology. Hermeneutics, as formulated by Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, allows us to analyze the "surplus of meaning" in translated texts, where the collision of two distinct horizons of understanding produces new semantic realities. We combine this hermeneutical approach with a close philological analysis of Classical Nahuatl terms used in early seventeenth-century *confessionarios*, tracing their etymological roots and semantic shifts from pre-contact usage to colonial doctrinal adaptation.

The primary sources analyzed in this study include Bartholomé de Alva Ixtlilxochitl's *Confessionario mayor y menor en lengua mexicana* (1634) and Fray Juan Bautista's *Confessionario en lengua mexicana y castellana* (1599). Alva, a secular priest of noble indigenous descent (a descendant of the rulers of Texcoco), provides a unique perspective as a native speaker of Nahuatl who was also fully integrated into the Spanish ecclesiastical hierarchy. His work is contrasted with the earlier, more rigid Franciscan manual of Juan Bautista to highlight the evolution of translation strategies.

The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages. First, we identify key theological terms related to the sacrament of penance: "sin" (*tlahtlacolli*), "God" (*Teotl*), "contrition" (*vollocopa neyoltequipacholiztli*), and "confession" (*neyolmelahualiztli*). Second, we conduct a comparative semantic mapping, tracing how these terms functioned in pre-Hispanic Nahua cosmology (using sources like the *Florentine Codex* and early bilingual dictionaries like Molina's 1571 *Vocabulario*) versus how they were deployed in the *confessionarios*. Third, we analyze the syntax and interrogative structures of the confessional questions to understand how indigenous agency and worldviews were structurally anticipated and managed by the text.

Results

The central finding of our philological analysis concerns the translation of "sin" as *tlahtlacolli*. In Western Christian theology, sin is a moral transgression against God's law, incurring personal guilt and spiritual stain. In

contrast, the Nahuatl root *itlacahui* means "to damage, spoil, or break something." In pre-Hispanic thought, *tlahtlacolli* referred to an action that disrupted cosmic, social, or physical order—an error that caused damage rather than an offense against a transcendent moral lawgiver. By using *tlahtlacolli* for sin, the *confessionarios* inadvertently framed the sacrament of penance not as the absolution of individual moral guilt, but as the restoration of cosmic and community equilibrium.

Another critical site of semantic slippage is the translation of "God" as *Teotl*. For Spanish theologians, *Teotl* was the closest equivalent to the monotheistic, transcendent Creator. However, in Nahua cosmology, *teotl* did not signify a personal, morally perfect deity, but rather a diffuse, immanent, and often dangerous sacred force that could manifest in natural phenomena, objects, or humans (*teixiptla*). In Alva's *Confessionario*, the phrase *nelli Teotl* ("true God") is frequently used to distinguish the Christian deity from indigenous *teteo* (plural of *teotl*). Yet, the persistence of the root *teotl* allowed Nahua readers to conceptualize the Christian God as a localized, highly potent concentration of sacred power, maintaining a continuity with their traditional pantheistic and animistic worldview.

The *confessionarios* place immense emphasis on "contrition" (sorrow for sins out of love for God) rather than mere "attrition" (sorrow out of fear of punishment). To translate this deeply interiorized, psychological state, missionaries relied on metaphors involving the heart (*yollotl*), which in Nahua medicine and philosophy was the seat of life, will, and memory. The phrase *yollocopa neyoltequipacholiztli* (literally, "the crushing or troubling of the heart of one's own free will") was used for contrition. Our analysis shows that while friars intended this to mean spiritual remorse, Nahua penitents interpreted this through a physicalist and somatic framework. To have a "troubled heart" was a state of physical illness and cognitive disorientation, linking confession to indigenous practices of medical and spiritual healing rather than abstract judicial absolution.

Finally, the structure of the questions in Bartholomé de Alva's manual reveals a deep anxiety regarding the persistence of indigenous ritual practices. Questions concerning the consumption of ritual beverages (*octli*), the consulting of diviners (*nahualli*), and the preservation of household deities are framed in highly specific Nahuatl terms. Ironically, by naming and describing these practices in detail to ask if the penitent had committed them, the *confessionarios* acted as repositories of indigenous cultural memory, preserving the very practices they sought to eradicate and providing a linguistic blueprint for their covert continuation.

Table 1. Table 1: Philological comparison and frequency of key Nahuatl-Christian theological terms analyzed in early seventeenth-century *confessionarios*.

Nahuatl Term	Traditional Mesoamerican Concept	Spanish Missionary Translation	Syncretic Semantic Shift	Occurrences in Alva's Confessionario (1634)
Tlahtlacolli	Damage, disruption, physical or social disorder	Pecado (Sin)	Moralized as individual spiritual guilt and offense against God	142
Teotl	Immanent, ambivalent, sacred/cosmic force	Dios (God)	Monotheistic, transcendent, and exclusively benevolent deity	89
Neyolmelahualiztli	Straightening or aligning of the heart/mind	Confesión (Confession)	Sacramental, oral disclosure of sins to a priest for absolution	64
Tlamacehualiztli	Deserving merit, penance, cosmic balancing act	Penitencia (Penance)	Punitive and restorative acts to satisfy divine justice	51
Yollocualli	A good, balanced, and stable heart	Virtuoso / Santo (Virtuous / Holy)	Internalization of Christian moral purity and grace	37
Mictlan	The underworld, place of the dead (non-punitive)	Infierno (Hell)	Geographical site of eternal, fiery punishment for sinners	43

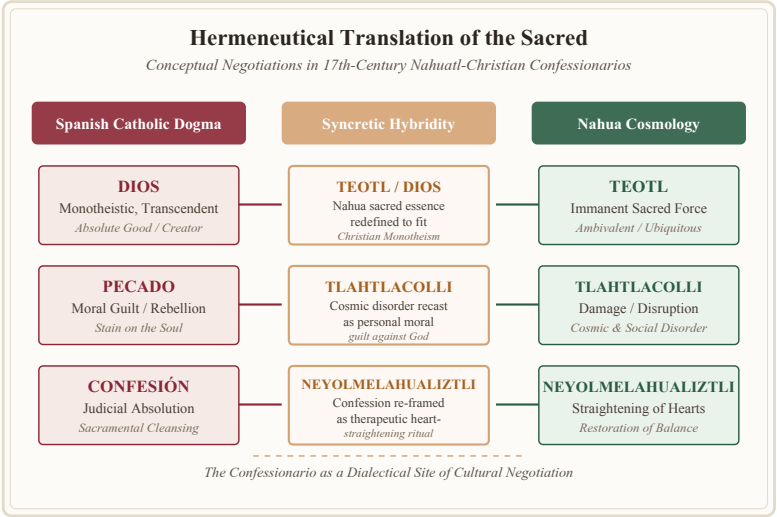


Figure 1. Figure 1: A conceptual mapping of the hermeneutical translation process in 17th-century confessionarios, illustrating how traditional Nahua cosmological concepts and Spanish Catholic dogmas negotiated and merged into a syncretic, hybrid religious vocabulary.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that translation in colonial New Spain was a double-edged sword. While the Spanish church successfully established the external structures of the Catholic faith, the internal semantic framework of that faith was profoundly shaped by the very language used to propagate it. The use of Classical Nahuatl as a vehicle for Christian dogma did not result in a pure replication of European Catholicism; instead, it produced what we term "terminological syncretism." Because languages are not neutral systems of signs but are culturally embedded systems of meaning, the adoption of Nahuatl terms imported pre-Hispanic ontological and cosmological assumptions into the heart of Christian sacramental life.

These findings challenge the traditional "spiritual conquest" paradigm by illustrating the agency of both the Nahuatl language itself and the indigenous and mestizo actors who shaped it. Bartholomé de Alva, as a high-status indigenous descendant, navigated two intellectual worlds. His *Confessionario* reflects an attempt to make Christianity intelligible to his fellow Nahuas, but in doing so, he engaged in a radical act of cultural translation that validated Mesoamerican modes of thought. This suggests that syncretism was not merely a passive, unconscious blending of traditions practiced by uneducated masses, but an intellectual project of translation and adaptation carried out by bilingual elites.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on prescriptive texts written by ecclesiastical authorities. While *confessionarios* reveal what priests asked and how they expected penitents to understand theological concepts, they do not provide direct, unmediated access to the voices of the ordinary Nahua penitents themselves. Future research should cross-reference these bilingual manuals with secular Nahuatl documentation, such as wills (*testamentos*), land petitions, and local court records, to observe how these translated theological concepts were deployed by indigenous individuals in non-ecclesiastical, everyday contexts.

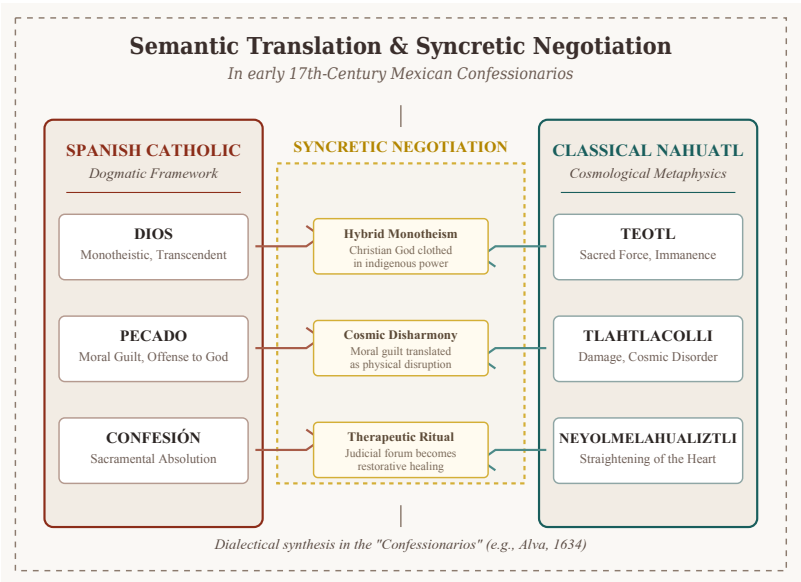


Figure 2. Figure 2: A conceptual diagram illustrating the semantic translation and cosmological negotiation of theological concepts between Spanish Catholic dogma and Classical Nahuatl metaphysics in early 17th-century confessionarios.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that early seventeenth-century *confessionarios*, particularly those written by bilingual figures like Bartholomé de Alva, served as complex sites of linguistic and theological negotiation. Through a hermeneutical analysis of key terms such as *tlāhtlacolli*, *teotl*, and *yollocopa*, we have demonstrated that the translation of Catholic dogma into Classical Nahuatl did not erase Mesoamerican metaphysics. Instead, it created a syncretic linguistic space where indigenous concepts of cosmic balance, immanent sacred power, and somatic psychology persisted within the framework of colonial Catholicism.

Ultimately, the translation of the sacred in colonial Mexico reveals that language is a dynamic site of resistance and adaptation. By examining these historical texts, we gain a deeper appreciation of the complexity of cultural encounters and the enduring power of indigenous worldviews to reshape dominant colonial discourses. This research contributes to a broader understanding of global Christianities and the postcolonial study of translation as a dialectical process of cultural survival and transformation.

Highlights

- Analyzes early seventeenth-century bilingual confession manuals to trace Nahuatl-Christian syncretism.
- Deconstructs key linguistic shifts, demonstrating how indigenous terms like *tlāhtlacolli* and *teotl* retained Mesoamerican metaphysical meanings.
- Employs a hermeneutical framework to critique the "spiritual conquest" model, framing translation as a dialectical negotiation.
- Highlights the agency of indigenous translators and bilingual intermediaries in shaping colonial religious discourse.

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