The Epistemological Politics of Vernacular Scripture in Sixteenth-Century Mexico

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The year 1577 was a watershed for linguistic politics in Mexico. After more than five decades in Mexico, the Spanish crown signaled a break from its previous tolerance of the use of indigenous language in catechesis and doctrinal publications. The landmark case is the crown’s confiscation of Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia General* in 1577. Simultaneously, the Mexican Inquisition pursued an assault on vernacular Scripture, confiscating dozens of Spanish scriptural editions, and culminating in the Inquisition’s prohibition of Nahuatl and other indigenous-language translations of Scripture, in particular Ecclesiastes and the *Epístolas y Evangelios* (Epistles and Gospels). Also central was the second trial of a noted Erasmian, Alonso Cabello, who had spent much of the same year in house arrest in Tlatelolco. All this came on the heels of the establishment of the Holy Office in Mexico in November 1571 and its first full-scale purge of prohibited books, including well over 200 editions of Scripture—dozens of them in Spanish and a few in Nahuatl—that had circulated freely in Mexico. Prior to the 1570s Mexico had witnessed intense debates about the role of language in missionary projects, in catechesis, and in the education of indigenous Mexicans, alongside those regarding the proper language for Scripture and devotional works. Deep distrust of translation projects, of the continuing use of indigenous languages in catechesis and preaching, and of abiding Erasmianism in the Franciscan order would result in
various proscriptive rulings. At the same time, the attack on vernacular Scripture and spiritual devotional works—in both Spanish and Nahuatl—did not come without considerable resistance from an organized part of the Franciscan order, as well as from many high-ranking royal and ecclesiastical officials.

In 1577 the Mexican Inquisition called on some of the foremost Nahuatl language experts, including Bernardino de Sahagún and Alonso de Molina, to debate whether or not exceptions to the ban on vernacular language translations of Scripture should be allowed. The ban on Nahuatl scriptural editions had been promulgated by the General Council of the Spanish Inquisition in May 1576, specifically noting a Nahuatl translation of Ecclesiastes that was then circulating. But as the Mexican Inquisition had also moved against the circulation of Spanish Bibles, the debate on Nahuatl Scripture took place within a much broader battle over the availability of vernacular Scripture and devotional works.

This article offers an overview of the debate surrounding vernacular Scripture. Although the major events of 1577 (the confiscation of Sahagún’s work and the inquisitional attack on Nahuatl and Purépecha scriptural translations) were the ostensible culmination of the campaign against vernacularization, this article devotes attention to the broad global background for these events, that is, the development over time of an anti-vernacular scriptural epistemology in which 1577 represented the political denouement. Under consideration are some of the major arguments about Spanish vernacularization of the Bible and the diffusion of vernacular Scripture and missals in Mexico. Accordingly, the article begins by examining the ideological background of the epistemology of vernacular language as it related to Scripture. Second comes an examination of the editorial history of vernacular scriptural editions in Spain and their subsequent widespread diffusion in Mexico, evidenced by the hundreds found in the inquisitional purge of libraries in the winter of 1571-1572 led by the Dominican censor Bartolomé de Ledesma. Third, the article assesses the specifically Mexican debate about indigenous vernacular versions of Scripture and spiritual

4. There are various allusions to the ban from the Suprema found in the Mexican Inquisition’s files. The clearest evidence for this date is a letter in inquisitor Bonilla’s hand of 1579 (the month is illegible, though probably October) that refers to the Spanish Inquisition’s ban on Nahuatl translations of Ecclesiastes or any other parts of the Bible, issued on May 10, 1576: AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 1. Likewise, a letter of April 9, 1578, from inquisitors general in Madrid to the Mexican inquisitors references the May 10, 1576, date of the ban: Georges Baudot, La pugna franciscana por México (Mexico: Conaculta, 1990), p. 213 n20. The original document cited by Baudot is in AGN Inq., vol. 223, exp. 21, f. 60. The questionnaire sent to Sahagún and Molina, as well as to the Dominicans Domingo de la Anunciación and Juan de la Cruz, was circulated sometime in 1577, though certainly before the responding 1579 letter, which refers to the questionnaire in AGN Inq., vol. 1A, exp. 41, and again c. 1577 in AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 4, f. 133-139.

5. The memoria is found in AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22.
works, as seen in the cases of Maturino Gilberti’s Purépecha literature in Michoacán and of Nahuatl Ecclesiastes and Proverbs manuscripts. It will also illuminate a debate within the Franciscan order in Mexico that has received relatively little attention: the split between humanists and conservatives, which was refracted in the 1573 and 1578 trials against Alonso Cabello, a Franciscan Erasian who had easy access to Erasmus’s works in Tlatelolco, San Francisco de México, and Cholula.6

While a good deal of attention has been paid to the indigenous language debates in Mexico by ethnohistorians, we know less about the broader global debate regarding vernacular Scripture as a whole. Indeed, the Mexican case in itself highlights the broader epistemological debate about spiritual knowledge and its relationship to language.7 Likewise, a good deal of attention has been given to the process of producing vernacular Bibles in Italy and Spain, while the processes of enforcing the bans on those vernacular editions have received less attention.8 This article examines both the formation of vernacular editions and the ensuing controversy over their dissemination in Mexico. In 1559 the Spanish Inquisition issued its first complete Index of Prohibited Books, fol-

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6. The split is discussed in Martin Austin Nesvig, Forgotten Franciscans: Works by an Inquisitional Theorist, a Heretic, and an Inquisitional Deputy (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

7. This article is indebted to the extensive indigenous-language historical scholarship, better known as the New Philology, but also looks to examine debates about Nahua use in Christianization efforts in a multilingual context, in which theologians were concerned about both Nahua and Spanish vernacular access to theological mysteries. An excellent example of the application of New Philological approaches to religious and theological questions is found in Mark Christensen, “Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Ecclesiastical Texts and Local Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatán” (Ph.D. diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2010) and Christensen’s “The Tales of Two Cultures: Ecclesiastical Texts and Nahua and Maya Catholicisms,” The Americas 66:3 (January 2010), pp. 353–377. For the classic model of the New Philology, see James Lockhart, The Nahuaas after the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992). Lockhart’s Nahua and Spaniards: Postconquest Central Mexican History and Philology (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) offers discussion of language in multilingual contexts, especially for the Toluca Valley case. For a recent and complex cultural history of the Toluca valley, see Caterina Pizzigoni, The Life Within: Local Indigenous Society in Mexico’s Toluca Valley, 1650–1800 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012). For an overview of the development of indigenous language studies, see Matthew Restall, “A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History,” Latin American Research Review 38:1 (2003), pp. 113–134.

owing on a briefer version in 1551. Its publication is associated with the inquisitor general Fernando Valdés and his chief theologian, Melchor Cano, who together engineered the arrest and trial of the archbishop of Toledo, Bartolomé de Carranza.

My intent here in prefacing the Mexico debate with the 1559 Index is to trace the ideological roots, if not the practical implications, of that Index. It is clear that from a purely theological and juridico-ideological standpoint, the 1559 Index had very specific targets: Luther, Calvin, and vernacular Scripture. In theory, the 1559 Index reversed an older tradition that allowed for the partial translation of the Epístolas y Evangelios. The 1559 Index would be issued at a moment when Erasmianism had already been dealt severe setbacks in Spain, and it was increasingly dangerous to express sympathy with Erasmus or the kind of internal spiritual devotion advocated by him and broadly associated with the devotio moderna.

In the mid-1930s, Marcel Bataillon offered a still-useful broad outline of the demise of Erasmianism in Spain, showing that by the 1540s Erasmianism was all but crushed in Spain, the victim of the purges of the 1550s: the downfall of Carranza, the autos-de-fé and public executions of suspected Lutherans in Valladolid and Seville, and the 1559 Index. Some recent scholarship suggests that the religious politics of the mid sixteenth century were more complex than we once believed. Lu Ann Homza, for example, shows that the presumed divide between pro- and anti-Erasmian forces obfuscates the delicate balance between Catholic spiritualism and fear of Lutheranism. Studies of early modern Spanish religious culture demonstrate that, even if it had become politically dangerous to be an Erasmian, a vibrant form of internal spiritual devotion and religiosity continued despite the efforts of the Inquisition’s apparatus of control.

Spanish historiography has in recent decades moved away from the Black Legend that construed the Inquisition as an omnipotent force of repression, and has shown instead that Spanish religious society was complex and often paradoxical. Thus, although many recent studies emphasize nuances and complexities, it is worth remembering that scholars were indeed targeted for promoting a vernacular scriptural tradition. Fray Luis de León was imprisoned for translating the Song of Songs into Spanish, and humanists like the Valdés brothers did, in fact, flee Spain.\textsuperscript{15} The Erasmian cathedral preacher in Seville, Constantino Ponce de la Fuente, died in the Inquisition’s prison while awaiting trial.\textsuperscript{16} Although it may be an argument of sorts, albeit a simplistic one, to state that the Inquisition succeeded in the total repression of vernacular and popular spiritual devotion in Spain, my discussion here aims to elucidate a global conflict over efforts at vernacularized Scripture and internal spiritual devotion. At the same time, humanism in Mexico may have outlasted its Spanish counterpart. The full effect of the turn in ecclesiastical politics in 1550s Spain, seen in events such as the ban on vernacular Scripture and the suppression of Lutheranism, would not be completely felt in Mexico until nearly the 1580s.

**The Vernacular in Mexico to the 1570s**

Until the 1570s in Mexico, vernacular Scripture was controlled by powerful members of the political elite, but works of Erasmus, despite the ban on many of them, were allowed to circulate widely and could be found in virtually any Franciscan friary as late as 1572. Even the prohibited vernacular Spanish Epistles and Gospels were extremely popular. Various manuscript translations into Nahuatl and Purépecha of the Epistles and Gospels, specifically Nahuatl manuscripts of the Book of Ecclesiastes and a hybrid Nahuatl paraphrase of the Proverbs, were viewed as linguistic treasures and necessary aids for missionary efforts. However, all such works were completely banned in 1559, even though they had continued to circulate widely and, seemingly, freely for more than a decade in Mexico. Why? It is tempting to attribute the continued strength of humanist tendencies and the availability of vernacular Scripture in Mexico to structural reasons. There was an ocean separating Mexico and Spain, effectively impeding the imposition of a global colonial order. Geography made Mexico difficult to police. There is also a tendency to argue that Mexico

\textsuperscript{15} For discussion of the fray Luis case, see *Proceso inquisitorial de Fray Luis de León*, Ángel Alcalá, ed. (Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y León, Consejería de Cultura y Turismo, 1991). For a recent study of Valdés and humanism in Spain and Naples, see Daniel A. Crews, *Twilight of the Renaissance: The Life of Juan de Valdés* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

was behind the times, and that it therefore had to have taken some time for
trends in the metropole to reach such a remote location. Indeed, there is some
truth to that view; for example, physical copies of the Index were scarce in
Mexico. Perhaps it did take some time for royal edicts to reach Mexico, but a
lag in cultural sophistication and awareness was not the case—everyone knew
of the ban on vernacular Scripture. Otherwise we would not be able to explain
why copies of *Don Quijote*—the hot book of 1605 and, for that matter, most
of the seventeenth century—were showing up in Veracruz within months of its
first publication.17

There was indeed something else going on. The political forces supporting
Erasmus, the devotio moderna, the translation of Scripture into vernacular—
whether Spanish, Catalan, Nahuatl, or Purépecha—and the dissemination of
vernacular versions were extensive both in Spain and Mexico. While one may be
tempted to paint with a broad brush the inquisitorial repression of 1550s Spain,
we know that exemptions for various rules of the Index were common. The pic-
ture of inquisitional censorship in Mexico is analogous to that offered by Henry
Kamen for Catalonia.18 Kamen shows that the 1559 Index was ineffective in
Catalonia for many of the same reasons it was in Mexico: lack of centralized
control in a world where no single court had a monopoly on book censorship,
an understaffed Inquisition, and the porosity of ports that served as entry points
for books—phenomena seen in similar cases in Sardinia and Sicily.19

One may wish to consider the Mexican case, in which widespread distrust of
inquisitorial power resulted in contingent application of its authority, in the
Spanish imperial context.20 One may look to places with similar jurispruden-
tial relationships with the Castile-centered Inquisition, such as Sicily, charac-

17. In his ship inspections in September and October 1605, the inquisitional deputy of Veracruz found
sailors who had brought copies of *Don Quijote* with them to Mexico: AGN Inq., vol. 276, exp. 13, fs.
291–332; vol. 291, exp. 6a. The first scholar to show definitive proof that copies of the first edition of *Don
Quijote* arrived in the Americas appears to be Francisco Rodríguez Marín, in *El “Quijote” y don Quijote en
América* (Madrid: Librería Hernando, 1911). For data on the success of Cervantes’s novel, especially in the
transatlantic market, see Carlos Alberto González Sánchez, *Los mundos del libro: medios de difusión de la cul-
tura occidental en las Indias de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, Diputación de Sevilla,
1999); Pedro Rueda Ramírez, *Negocio e intercambio cultural: el comercio de libros con América en la carrera
de Indias (siglo XVII)* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, Diputación de Sevilla; Madrid: Consejo Superior de

18. Henry Kamen, *The Phoenix and the Flame: Catalonia and the Counter Reformation* (New Haven:

19. See Angelo Borromeo, “Inquisizione spagnola e libri proibiti in Sicilia ed in Sardegna durante il XVI
219–271; and Angelo Rundine, *Inquisizione spagnola: Censura e libri proibiti in Sardegna nel ’500 e ’600* (Sas-

20. I have provided a portrait of an Inquisition in Mexico characterized by internal disagreement and
debate in *Ideology and Inquisition: The World of the Censors in Early Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2009).
terized by a local parliamentary power resistant to Castilian superimposition of repression. One can draw additional parallels from Kamen’s study of Catalonia and from a consideration of the legal traditions of the broader Spanish world. This tradition valued customary and adaptive rule; indeed, one might also argue for the Mexican case as an outgrowth of a broader distrust of inquisitional control, especially in places removed from Castile. The legislation of the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico, Sicily, and Catalonia was often ignored or overturned by a distrustful populace. The imposition of the 1559 Index, as with other legislation, was frequently met with resistance. Local authorities in both Spain and Mexico had long and often refused to implement broad legislation in order to avoid direct conflict with local political powers, so it was not out of character that they might refuse to implement the global aspirations of the Spanish order. Some historians of the Hispanic world have pointed to this tradition, which involved invoking the formula “obedezco pero no cumpló” (“I obey the letter of the law but I do not fulfill it”) as a kind of “mechanism for containing dissent and thus preventing disputes from turning into open confrontation.” This explanation is, however, not without its detractors. Legal historians of the Hispanic tradition have also suggested that the force of custom often undermined the potential of any one component of “the law”—whether codes, legislation, commentary, derecho común, or local fueros—to dominate the practical application of any kind of legal prohibition, and that this condition led to a particularly custom-driven and locally determined version of legal power in the Spanish world. I aim to show here that the case of Mexico follows similar patterns of negotiated political and theological truces between inquisitors, their agents, and members of the reading public.

The Mexican case in many ways represented the endgame of a centuries-long debate about the relative value of vernacular religious text. Even if we consider Mexico against the broader Hispanic context, we see in Mexico the strong pushback against the rules of the 1559 Index, the persistence of a strong pro-Erasmian faction within the Mexican Franciscans, and a coterie of

powerful royal officials in Mexico City who valued a kind of internal Erasmian devotion or who were avowed humanists. The specific issue was the vernacular translation of the Bible into indigenous languages like Nahuatl and Purépecha, to say nothing of Spanish, and it falls within a much broader and more polemical debate about the relationship between Latin and vernacular in the generation and preservation of knowledge. Yet not all those who could be identified as Erasmian or humanist supported the vernacular translation of Scripture. It was a long-established and accepted bit of epistemological theory in the Catholic world that intelligence and knowledge were selective and needed to be carefully guarded and controlled. The result was in its clearest form the development and preservation of a caste of holders of theological and spiritual knowledge—the priesthood—and the use of a specialized language—Latin.

Medieval churchmen and jurists were generally suspicious of vernacular Scripture and lay spiritual analysis. Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) took up the mantle of distrust of lay spiritualism without clerical oversight. He would decide that in this context only those who were properly ready to understand the more esoteric mysteries of the faith should be instructed in them, just as Augustine had argued in his *De cathechizandis rudibus*, relying on Paul’s message that “as infants in Christ I fed you with milk, not solid food” to begin the journey of doctrinal comprehension. Innocent warned that “the profundity of Holy Scripture is such that not only the simple and illiterate, but even the learned and prudent sometimes lack the intelligence to investigate it.” This summary by Innocent was not simply a papal reflection: it was incorporated into the Decretals and would thus possess the force of the law. In 1229 the Church Council of Toulouse would ban vernacular translations of Scripture not derived from the Psalter, Breviary, Divine Offices, or books of hours.

I do not suggest a rigidly dichotomous practice but find it necessary to recognize that on an ideological level, theological-juridical traditions argued for the

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ban on vernacular Bibles, even if in practice exemptions to such rules were common. Despite the prohibitions on and distrust of vernacular Scripture and lay interpretation thereof, there appear to be two Spanish traditions regarding scriptural translation in the medieval period leading up to the first printed vernacular Bibles in the late fifteenth century. Most of the medieval manuscript translations of the Bible into Castilian or Catalan from Christian translators or copyists were made from Jerome’s Latin edition (the Vulgate). There was a second, parallel tradition of Biblical scholarship in the aljamas: those translations, undertaken by Jewish scholars, were based on Hebrew versions. The variety of vernacular translations of the Bible prior to 1478 in Spain shows a wide stylistic and linguistic range. Much of this production actually came from royal patronage, as in the thirteenth-century General Estoria commissioned by Alfonso el Sabio. Likewise, Luis de Guzmán, the master of the Order of Calatrava, commissioned (or ordered) one of his Jewish subjects to provide a new translation of the Old Testament in 1422. Spain remained devoted to the authority and influence of Jerome’s version. This was as much out of deference to Jerome’s moral authority as to the widely appreciated stylistic beauty of Jerome’s Latin. Indeed, when the first polyglot Bible came off a European press—the Complutense Bible (1514–1517)—Jerome’s Latin text would be placed squarely in the center, symbolically demonstrating its central place in Spanish Biblical knowledge.

Vernacular scriptural rendition took four forms in the Spanish world from 1478 through the 1550s. First, although few in number, were complete vernacular translations of the Bible. Second, we find translations of parts of Scripture folded into other works or retitled as general spiritual histories. Third, there were complete translations into the vernacular of portions of the Bible, especially the Epístolas and Evangelios. Fourth, one finds partial translations of Scripture slipped into homiletic and exegetical works, into books of hours, and into sermons. It appears that the general impetus, at least in Spain, came out


of a desire for greater spiritual formation of the laity. While some have been quick to identify this as humanism or Erasmianism, we should probably withhold such a generalization, since many devout and sincere Catholics who shared no sympathy for humanists or Lutherans (later) would simply view works like the books of hours or *The Imitation of Christ* as ways to achieve a greater spirituality and everyday personal devotion. But it would be difficult to understand the fantastic success of books of hours coupled with the relatively minimal inroads Lutheranism made in Spain if vernacular scriptural translation were solely an expression of humanism.

Of the first category, there are virtually no extant copies. In 1478 a complete Spanish edition of the Bible was produced. It was likely based on Hebrew texts and was viewed as particularly literal in its translation. It was translated by Bonifacio Ferrer into Catalan and published in Valencia. Margherita Morreale argues that the virtually complete destruction of all copies of this Bible is evidence that “it was dangerous to own any such book” and that inquisitional oversight of Bibles, which began with the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, effectively eliminated this Bible from circulation. It is tempting to agree with this assessment, but it does not fully explain why other prohibited or suspect works, like those by Erasmus or the vernacular books of hours, continued to circulate. In any case all copies of this Catalan Bible have likely disappeared, and today only a single sheet, held at the New York Hispanic Society, is known. This erasure of vernacular Scripture would foreshadow the 1559 Index and later the 1572 purge in Mexico of Bibles and books of hours. Whole and complete translations of the Bible into the vernacular were clearly subject to strict controls and even as early as the 1480s were seen as suspicious, due to their close association with the Jewish scholarly tradition in Castile. Given the Inquisition’s original charge in the 1480s of rooting out and persecuting New Christians accused of returning to the Old Law, the possibility that vernacular Old Testaments were fostering Jewish leanings made such translations politically dangerous or even potentially fatal. In the Mexican case an analogous logic was applied to the translation not only of Scripture into indigenous vernacular languages, but to indigenous language *doctrinas* and historical works (like that of Sahagún): the fear that such works would facilitate a spiritual recidivism to the old deities like Tlaloc, Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, and Xolotl.

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32. Morreale, “Vernacular Scriptures.”
The second kind of translation, a partial one, became successful in Spain and would find an eager audience in Mexico. The best-known example came from the Franciscan Ambrosio Montesino. He translated Ludolph of Saxony’s fourteenth-century Latin work *Vita Christi*, publishing it in a large four-volume edition in Alcalá in 1502–1503. This text would be central in providing a template for later works, like the *Contemptus mundi*, which would launch the devotio moderna. Montesino’s edition was, in essence, a reworking of the four Gospels to form the life of Christ in vernacular for ordinary people to contemplate. It would become a great success, in that it went through numerous editions and would be the first user-friendly Spanish scriptural work aimed at a non-royal audience, even though it would not reach the “cobbler and bakers” whose reading of the Bible seemed the most threatening to those who held to a view of clerical monopoly on scriptural interpretation. Indeed, noted Franciscan theologian Alfonso de Castro viewed the access of vernacular devotional works and Scripture in similar terms, explaining that “anyone could learn to argue on the subject of predestination or God’s omniscience” though scriptural exegesis was beyond the mental capacity of the laity.34 Castro viewed Lutheranism as a heresy caused by the dual plagues of vernacular translation of the Bible and concomitant lay interpretation of it. Like Montesino’s translation into Spanish of the Saxon’s *Vita Christi*, other similar works would appear. Another Franciscan, Íñigo de Mendoza, published a *Vita Christi* in verse in 1482. Eventually, full translations of the liturgical parts of the New Testament would be translated into the vernacular. Again, Montesino was instrumental, publishing in 1512 a Spanish translation of the Epístolas y Evangelios. His edition was not without precedent: Micer Gonzalo de Santa María had published a similar edition in 1485, though Montesino’s version would eclipse it in popularity. In Montesino’s version the liturgical translation was intercalated with sermons on the relevant passages.

These editions would find their greatest success when they were folded into other kinds of works, especially books of hours. In fact, the latter would become the most widely distributed kind of book in the sixteenth century, along with Granada’s *Libro de oración* and the *Imitation of Christ*.35 But many other devotional works would include partial translations of Scripture embedded within. The *Contemptus mundi*, like Montesino’s works, would provide

34. Alfonso de Castro, *De justa haereticorum punitione* (Madrid: Ex typographia Blasii Roman, 1773), lib. 1, c. 19: “In materia de praedestinatione, et praescientia Dei, quilibet sutor, et sartor argumentari novit, et nervos adhibere argumentis; illis tamen vix poterit respondere doctissimus vir, qui cuique alteri viro erudito facile responderet.”

the template for an explosion in publishing devotional works and spiritual
guides. Although the expansion in availability of vernacular Scripture in vari-
ous forms—complete Bibles, summaries, partial translations, and snippets—
hardly came without opposition, it is clear that there was a genuine interest in
and market for these works. The emergence of Luther’s German Bible and the
political crackdown on Erasmus and Erasmians in 1520s Spain would change
the debate forever. The spectacular success of Luther’s best-selling German
Bible at long last afforded the conservatives and anti-humanists the chance
they were awaiting: “we told you so,” was their reaction. Centuries of collect-
ive skepticism about the ability of the laity to read and interpret the Bible
were, in their view, validated by the spectacular rise of Lutheranism. By the
time the Spanish Inquisition published its formal prohibition of vernacular
Scripture and various vernacular spiritual works in 1559, the Mexican Church
was already embroiled in what would become deeply partisan battles through
the 1560s. But although divisions and disagreements about the specific issue
of vernacularization—whether of Spanish Bibles, books of hours, or the trans-
lation of Scripture into Nahuatl—had been brewing since before 1559, they
would not come to a head until the 1570s.

Alfonso de Castro (1495–1558) was a respected Franciscan who would even-
tually be confessor to Charles V. He was a colleague of the theologian Fran-
cisco de Vitoria and master of the Franciscan friary of Salamanca. His two best-
selling inquisitional treatises, Adversus omnes haereses (1534) and De justa
haereticoum punitione (1547), were among the standard theoretical literature
for the inquisitors and censors of the Inquisition. Yet Castro was a complex
and often paradoxical thinker. Originally, he was an admirer of Erasmus. This
expressed admiration may be the reason that he was required to correct his first
1534 edition of Adversus omnes haereses so as to avoid having his own work
placed permanently on the Index. But such admiration of Erasmus was
common among humanists and among many Franciscans in Spain through the
1520s and into the 1540s; Mexican bishop Juan de Zumárraga openly pro-
fessed his admiration for Erasmus in his own Doctrina published in Mexico in
1543. Zumárraga had also promoted vernacular Scripture in his doctrina,
which was later banned by his successor, Alonso de Montúfar, in concert with
Ledesma, in 1559. Castro’s expressed admiration for Erasmus in the first edi-

36. For consideration of Castro and his career, see Santiago Castillo, Alfonso de Castro y el problema de
das leyes penales: o la obligatoriedad moral de las leyes humanes (Salamanca: N. Medrano, 1941); Teodoro
Olarte, Alfonso de Castro (1495–1558): su vida, su tiempo y sus ideas filosóficas-jurídicas (San José, Costa Rica:
Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, 1946); and Marcelino Rodríguez Molinero, Origen español de la ciencia
37. Juan de Zumárraga, La doctrina breve muy provechosa (Mexico: Cromberger, 1543). The review of
his work, and its ban, are in AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 4.
tion of *Adversus omnes haereses* later waned; by the 1550s Castro had become openly critical of Erasmus, in addition to Luther, for what he saw as a too-liberal promotion of lay spirituality and devotional practice, based in large part on personal reading of Scripture.38

At the heart of Castro’s body of work was his interpretation of the origin, cause, and “just punishment” of heresy and heretics. Castro offered many standard arguments for censorship and the censure of heresies, a principal source of which might well be the translation of the Bible into vernacular language. He looked no further than Germany and Luther for his proof: once the Bible was available in German, all manner of ordinary people—cobbler, bakers, brewers, barmas, and peasants—could have access to it, even if only as read aloud to them by the one literate person they may have known. Without the proper guidance of theologians ordinary laypersons would be left, as it were, to their own weak and fallible mental devices and easily devise all manner of heresy and dissent. Castro’s epistemology was not racially driven but based on the dichotomy between a Latinized clergy and a non-Latinized laity. In his defense of exclusive Latin translation of the Bible, he did not view intelligence in ethnic terms, the way many missionaries did. In 1543, he wrote a vigorous defense of indigenous education in the Americas, “Utrum indigenae novi orbis instruendi sint in mysteriis theologicis et artibus liberalibus” (“Whether the Native Peoples of the New World Should Be Instructed in Theological Mysteries and Liberal Arts”).39 In this brief work Castro argued that indigenous Americans, like Europeans, innately possessed a large body of stupid people who should not be educated, and a small segment of intelligent people who should be educated and trained in theology to form an indigenous clergy. Castro continued to argue for the ban on vernacular translations of Scripture while promoting the idea that a small segment of the Mexican population should be trained in Latin and theology so that they could interpret a Latin Bible for other indigenous Mexicans.40 As is well known, the Franciscans largely pursued such a program in Tlatelolco.41 While Castro does not name

40. For a general discussion of the issue, see Osorio Romero, *La enseñanza*.
41. The scholarly literature abounds. For an intriguing reconsideration of Tlatelolco and the role of indigenous writers, see Silver Moon, “The Imperial College of Tlatelolco and the Emergence of a New Nahua Intellectual Elite in New Spain (1500–1760)” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2007). Among excellent broad works are Bernardino Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, 13 vols., translated from the Aztec into English, with notes and illus., by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1950–1982); Luis Nicolau D’Oliver, *Fray Bernardino de Sahagún* 1499–1590),
Tlatelolco, it is clear that he had it in mind when he penned his defense of indigenous study of theology. Sahagún was, of course, Tlatelolco’s most famous resident and it was there that he compiled the knowledge and sources that would form and inform his *Historia general*.

Castro’s defense of the Tlatelolco project mixes the local debate in Mexico over language with the universal debate about language and knowledge. Castro explained his support for training indigenous clergy in historical terms by noting that if neophytes and former Jews in places like Antioch had been prohibited from becoming clergy, there would never have been a Christian Church. But Castro was nonetheless an opponent of vernacularization of the Bible—although he believed in the universality of intellectual elites across all ethnicities, he also opposed, indirectly, the policies of many of his fellow Franciscans, who believed in providing vernacular indigenous-language spiritual works as well as Nahuatl, Purépecha, and Zapotec translations of the Scriptures. While Castro’s Salamanca-based discussion foreshadowed the growing debate about indigenous education, the first full-fledged political battle over linguistic and religious politics would come in Michoacán.

**Maturino Gilberti and the Vernacular Spiritual Tradition in Mexico**

The Maturino Gilberti controversy was hardly the only one to embroil Montúfar and Michoacán’s first bishop, Vasco de Quiroga, beginning in 1559, but it is instructive for our discussion here. In fact, as with the attack on Zumárraga’s work by Montúfar and Ledesma, the question of language, evangelization, and Christianization was central. It is tempting to view these debates as ethnic in origin—as an attack on the intellectual capacity of indigenous Mexicans—but they were in fact repetitions of the same epistemological debates about vernacular spiritual works. The vicious partisan fight in Michoacán offers some background. Home to vibrant Franciscan and Augustinian missions from the 1530s, the diocese of Michoacán would also become the staging ground for a variety of jurisdictional battles between the diocesan clergy and bishops on the one hand, and the mendicants on the other. The question of the appropriateness of Purépecha as a language of catechesis was among the central concerns.

Maturino Gilberti was a Franciscan from Toulouse who came to Mexico in 1542. He was dispatched to the west in Michoacán, where he would spend several decades, primarily around Tzintzuntzan and Uruapan, as priest, missionary, and student of Purépecha language and culture. 42 Indeed, Gilberti was famed in his life for his mastery of Purépecha and was rumored to have been the best student of the language among the Franciscans in the region. 43 While certainly an exaggeration, the parish priest Francisco de Monjarrás Godínez claimed that Gilberti had learned Purépecha in a few days. 44 Gilberti became a well-known author of Purépecha books, though many have been lost or destroyed, due to the censure of his works. He was a prolific translator as well. Among his works are more than a dozen in Purépecha. 45 In addition to his famous Vocabulario and Diálogo in Purépecha he translated several popular spiritual works, including the Flossantorum and Dominican Felipe de Meneses’s work, as Luz del alma cristiana en lengua tarasca. 46 About 1552 or 1553 he may have been commissioned by his order to compose a small doctrina in Purépecha, which today is not found. Juan Pablos published his Arte de la lengua tarasca in 1558, and in 1559 his Devocionario, the Tesorero espiritual, the Vocabulario en lengua de Michoacán, and his Diálogo de Doctrina Cristiana, all in Purépecha. 47 In 1559 there was also published a now-lost “Cartilla para los niños en lengua tarasca,” which Ricardo León Alanís supposes formed part of Tesorero espiritual de pobres en lengua de Michoacán, printed by Antonio de Espinoza in 1575. 48 The contemporaneous discussions as well as modern-day scholarship have identified these works as Gilberti’s.

There is also evidence that Gilberti produced a Purépecha Epístolas y Evangelios. Around 1618 the Franciscan Ambrosio Carrillo, a long-time resident friar-priest of Michoacán and confidant of the inquisitional deputy Diego Muñoz, drew up an inventory of his personal library. 49 Among his books, he reported

43. See Alonso de la Rea, Chrónica de la órden de N. Seráphico P.S. Francisco, Prounicia de S. Pedro y S. Pablo de Michuacan en la Nueua España (Mexico: Viuda de Bernardo Calderón, 1643), pp. 57–59.
44. AGI México, 212 n24.
45. For good discussions of Gilberti’s work as a writer and Purépecha scholar, see Warren, “Introduction” and José Bravo Ugarte’s preface to Maturino Gilberti, Diccionario de la lengua tarasca o de Michoacán (Guadalajara: n.p., 1967).
46. The censorship trials of Gilberti’s works are found in AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6; vol. 43, exp. 20; and vol. 72, exp. 35. They have been transcribed in Libros y libreros en el siglo XVI, selección de documentos y paleografía de Francisco Fernández del Castillo (Mexico: AGN, 1914), pp. 4–44. His broader movements can be found in Ricardo León Alanís, Los orígenes del clero y la iglesia en Michoacán, 1525–1640 (Morelia: Universidad de San Nicolás de Hidalgo de Michoacán, 1997).
48. See León Alanís, Los orígenes, pp. 92–94.
49. The inventory is found in AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 13. The date is not exact but it can be firmly placed as no earlier than 1617, as that is the latest imprint date listed on the inventory. This was a response to
the *Diálogo* of Gilberti, noting that it was titled “Diálogo de la lengua de Mechoacán con los Evangelios y Epístolas de todo el año [my emphasis] y doctrina christiana en la misma lengua por fray Maturino Gilberti.” He added that the *Diálogo* was printed in 1559 but did not bear any imprint. The omission follows the formula of such works being semi-anonymous in an effort to avoid prosecution. I will return to this discussion later, but it is worth noting that this edition has not been identified in the available bibliographies: the reference by Muñoz may suggest a rare edition that was hounded into extinction by the general assault on vernacular Scripture.

Gilberti found himself squarely in the middle of the vicious partisan battle in Michoacán. The first bishop of Michoacán, Vasco de Quiroga, a former audiencia judge, was a staunch supporter of stricter control of the mendicants by the diocesan power structure; he distrusted the indigenous language efforts of Gilberti and chafed at the independence of both Gilberti and the mendicants in general, who refused to submit to the increasingly diocesan control of the Church in Mexico in the 1550s.50 Quiroga engaged in a legal battle to quash Gilberti’s Purépecha works, arguing before Montúfar’s Inquisition on December 3, 1559, that the Franciscan had broken ecclesiastical law for having printed his Purépecha works without diocesan license.51 Montúfar called on two secular priests of Michoacán, Diego Pérez Gordillo and cathedral canon Francisco de la Cerda, to review the Franciscan’s work; the same two men would later be involved in a string of violent attacks on mendicant friaries, including the destruction of the Augustinian monastery in Tlazalca.52 The issue revolved around the control of the building of friaries, and Montúfar and Quiroga were determined to reign in the mendicants, in their privileges as well as in their literary production.

*The usual activity following the publication of a new Index (in this case the 1613 Index) in which inquisitors and inquisitional deputies required individuals to report the holdings of their personal libraries to root out prohibited books.*

50. Other scholars have taken a more positive interpretation of Quiroga’s efforts, placing them within the well-known interpretation of “Tata” Quiroga of utopian designs. See James Krippner, *Rereading the Conquest: Power, Politics, and the History of Early Colonial Michoacán, Mexico, 1521–1565* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); and J. Benedict Warren, *Vasco de Quiroga y sus pueblos-hospitales de Santa Fe* (Morelia: Universidad de San Nicolás de Michoacán, 1997). The other side to this story, offered by Gilberti himself, can be seen in León Alanís, *Los orígenes,* and Rodrigo Martínez Baracs, *Caminos cruzados: Fray Maturino Gilberti en Perivan* (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán; INAH, 2005). The latter work portrays Quiroga as not especially interested in indigenous rights but rather motivated by desire for political power. Alberto Carrillo Cazares in *Vasco de Quiroga: la pasión por el derecho,* 2 vols. (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2003), shows the extent to which Quiroga was motivated by his legal training and his view of religious authority in which the old privileges of the mendicants needed to be controlled by the diocesan polity.

51. AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6.

52. The events of the Tlazalca rivalry and encounters are recounted in detail in Carrillo Cazares, *Vasco de Quiroga,* Vol. 1, pp. 125–166.
The issue went beyond simple petulance and a struggle for jurisdiction. Much of the conflict was indeed about power—the power of a bishop to regulate intellectual life in his diocese. But the issue was also specifically linguistic; it centered on a deep distrust of translating spiritual mysteries and theological debates into languages that indigenous peoples would understand. Gilberti had argued in his works that the Purépecha should be discouraged from worshipping images of Christ and the saints. As a result, in January 1560 Pérez Gordillo and De la Cerda recommended banning the works. Montúfar agreed and ordered the recall of the *Diálogo* from circulation in April 1560. The crown ultimately issued a formal confiscation of all copies of the *Diálogo* in 1560.53 To Gilberti, and many Franciscans, discouraging the promotion of the images of saints among the indigenous made perfect sense. Indeed, when, in January 1571, Gilberti was called before the inquisitor ordinary acting in Montúfar’s stead (the provisor Esteban Portillo), he admitted that he had written about discouraging the worship of images.54 In the *Diálogo*, a master and pupil discuss matters of the faith. The master says that one should not worship images because the image itself is not God, Jesus, Mary, or a saint, but only a reminder of the mercy of the divine. This was recognized as a potential iconoclastic heresy, but Gilberti argued that the problem was linguistic and that he had had a difficult time translating the fundamental concept of divine symbolism into Purépecha. Linguistics aside, he maintained that it would be best to encourage the Purépecha not to venerate images so as to avoid idolatry. Portillo did not recommend a judgment against Gilberti even though the *Diálogo* had been banned.55

Gilberti was both a thorn in Quiroga’s side and a staunch defender of the indigenous communities in the region. In 1564 he was the resident priest in Peribán, where he denounced the *encomendero* for his abusive treatment of his indigenous subjects.56 Gilberti also penned a vitriolic critique of Quiroga in 1563, in the form of a “*memoria*” of Quiroga’s juridical abuses.57 The “Memoria” was later entered into evidence in the growing criminal file that Gilberti’s enemies were building. Gilberti claimed that Quiroga was a fanatic, obsessed with his own fame, and that he placed onerous tribute burdens on the

53. The discussions have been transcribed in *Libros y libreros*, pp. 4–44.
54. AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6, f. 199 indicates the January 1571 date of Gilberti’s appearance before Portillo. There is some confusion because a later (likely nineteenth-century) hand reads “1561” at the top of the folio, and the notation hand of the original is inconclusive as to 1561 or 1571. However, f. 199v shows that Gilberti, in response to standard inquisitional questioning, stated he was 63 years old and had been in Mexico for 30 years. Because we know Gilberti was born in 1507 or 1508 and arrived in Mexico in 1542, the 1561 date must be discounted in favor of 1571. See Warren, “Introduction.”
55. AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6.
56. See Martínez Baracs, *Campos cruzados*.
57. AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6, f. 202–3.
Purépecha, to the extent that many died in forced service while building a monument to Quiroga’s ego: the cathedral church of Michoacán in Pátzcuaro. Gilberti also claimed that Quiroga exacted summary justice against indigenous peoples who refused press-gang service, by imprisoning them without food or clothing and obligating many to travel several miles, without food, to fulfill their duty to work on the cathedral construction. The diocesan authorities, especially Pérez Gordillo and Quiroga’s successor, were enraged.58

When Gilberti became ill with gout in the later 1560s, it is rumored that the Purépecha carried him in a litter so he could continue to minister and preach to them.59 Eventually though, Gilberti’s enemies would seek to have him exiled from New Spain as a nuisance and a danger to the colonial order. They succeeded in having the crown issue an order to Mexico’s archdiocese to conduct an investigation into Gilberti’s “life and customs,” and to determine whether his expulsion from New Spain was warranted. In November 1572 several clerics, including Antonio Freire, the vicar of the Guadalupe shrine in Tepeyac, rallied to Gilberti’s defense, arguing that his removal would be a terrible blow to the missionary effort in Michoacán, especially because he was viewed as Mexico’s greatest Purépecha scholar. Gilberti was allowed to remain in Mexico.60 The confrontation of Gilberti and Quiroga shows that the issues of vernacular spiritual works were both theological and political. Ideologically speaking, there was deep skepticism concerning the relative ability of the laity to interpret Scripture and spiritual mysteries on its own. This distrust was not purely ethnic; it was theological and based on the long tradition of viewing the laity as unprepared for deeper spiritual mysteries. Likewise, the independence the Franciscans had enjoyed since the 1520s was increasingly challenged by bishops who favored a centralized control of parish activity under the oversight of diocesan polities.

**THE INQUISITION IN MEXICO AND THE FIRST WIDESPREAD PURGE OF LIBRARIES**

The Gilberti case is merely one of many such clashes concerning the proper extent of indigenous language texts, but it, like many others, was restricted to the implications of the missionary project and the attempt to Christianize the indigenous population. Two events between 1568 and 1570 would change the local character of vernacularization debates in Mexico, bringing awareness to ecclesiastical politics that this debate was, in fact, global. First, the capture of

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58. Ibid.
60. AGI México, 212 n24.
the English slaver John Hawkins’s crew off the Gulf Coast would initiate a kind of “high alert” for presumed “Lutherans” on Mexican soil. At the same time, the Spanish crown reorganized its colonial system, ordering the creation of two centralized Holy Offices—in Mexico and Peru. In November 1571, the new inquisitor general, Pedro Moya de Contreras, would arrive in Mexico City, previously overseen by an archbishop (Montúfar) who had invested virtually all of his power for some years in Dominican Bartolomé de Ledesma.61 In central Mexico (primarily Mexico City) Ledesma had virtually ruled the archdiocese; Montúfar, in ill health, had appointed Ledesma as his governor for several years. But during those years, the 1559 Index had not been formally promulgated in Mexico. It was the ascension of Moya de Contreras to chief inquisitor in November 1571 that led to the first reading in Mexico of the 1559 Index and the beginning of a centralized apparatus for controlling the circulation of books in Mexico.62

The first instance of a general purge of books came in the winter of 1571-1572 and may have lasted through the following spring. Other purges would occur as ordered by the newly formed Inquisition in Mexico, and we have information on the books taken out of circulation (at least for inspection) from Zacatecas and the Yucatán in 1574.63 We know from the correspondence between inquisitors and their deputies (comisarios) that similar purges were ordered and undertaken in other dioceses in New Spain in the early 1570s, among them Michoacán, Guadalajara, and Puebla, but the reports on the books taken out of circulation for such regions do not appear to be extant.64 In any case, these investigations and those undertaken later in the wake of the 1583 Index, show that well into the 1570s there was a wide network of support for spiritual devotional works and for both vernacular Scripture and Latin Bibles from humanist presses, to say nothing of the persistence of the circulation of Erasmus’s works and other works broadly associated with the devotio moderna.

Sometime in November or December 1571 Ledesma was charged by the new inquisitor Moya de Contreras with a general inspection of private libraries in central Mexico.65 The result is a written list of the names of individuals and fri-

61. For a comprehensive and sympathetic discussion of Montúfar’s time as archbishop (and Ledesma’s role as his confidant), see Magnus Lundberg, Unificación y conflicto: la gestión episcopal de Alonso de Montúfar, OP, arzobispo de México, 1554–1572, Alberto Carrillo Cázares, trans. (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2009).
63. AGN Inq., vol. 77, exp. 43, Inq., vol. 78, exp. 20.
64. See Nesvig, Ideology and Inquisition, pp. 226–246.
65. The original appointment is not found but other documents attesting to his role as censor (AGN Inq., vol. 60, exp. 8) and as governor of the archdiocese (AGN Inq., vol. 86, exp. 1) speak to his role as the preferred agent of the new Inquisition in late 1571.
aries investigated, with the titles of books confiscated by the censor. The full extent of this investigation may never be fully known, as this document in its current form appears to be missing the first two folios. While the inventory does not bear a signature, it appears in Ledesma’s hand, which cannot be confused with the hand of Alonso Fernández de Bonilla, the inquisition’s prosecutor, nor the hand of Pedro de los Ríos, the inquisitional secretary. Francisco Fernández del Castillo produced a transcription of the Ledesma inspection in 1914, but does not cite the archival location for it. The copy I consulted, now found in the Jesuitas section of the Mexican National Archive, reflects a virtually verbatim copy of Fernández’s transcription. The copy we have today begins at folio three, but Fernández’s transcription includes what appears to be the first two folios of the same document. There are some minor but tantalizing differences between Fernández’s transcription and the extant copy. For example, following the entry for books found in the Huastepec Franciscan friary, the Fernández transcription lists books confiscated from doctor Pedro López. By contrast, in the extant copy, on folio 8v, the inspection follows the entry for Huastepec with books from two high-profile Dominicans: Juan Ramírez, censor of the Inquisition and future bishop of Guatemala; and Diego Durán, author of the treatise on indigenous religion and rites. In the extant manuscript the entries for Ramírez and Durán are symbolically crossed out but legible. This symbolic crossing-out may have indicated a desire, possibly by the inquisitor, to exempt the two Dominicans from the effects of the purge, even though they were clearly listed in the report. Fernández’s transcription seems to follow the recommendation of this striking-out, which has had the effect of erasing any record of Durán and Ramírez having been investigated for possessing suspect books. From that point, Fernández’s transcription follows seamlessly and verbatim the copy that exists today. Likewise, in the extant copy on folio 6v the report notes “el oidor Sedeño” as having a Bible, followed immediately by books owned by Alonso Martínez de Cayas, a name omitted in Fernández’s transcription. In the extant document, the books listed immediately after Sedeño’s purged Bible are the same as those in Fernández’s transcription (all presumably belonging to Sedeño): “Los Adagios de Erasmo, Epístolas y Evangelios en romance, y el Libro de los 40 cantos, y Horas.” This may be an error of paleography or

66. The report is in AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22. Examples of Ledesma’s hand can be found in AGN Inq., vol. 4, exp. 9; vol. 8, exp. 1; and vol. 8, exp. 3. Examples of Bonilla’s and De los Ríos’s hands are virtually innumerable and can be found throughout the Inquisition files from 1571 through 1579.


68. AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22, f. 6v; Libros y libreros, p. 488.
may indicate variant copies. Because the discrepancies are so minor, it is possible, though not provable, that the report from which Fernández worked was a longer version of the extant copy. Fernández also transcribed what seems to be a now-lost list of books recalled by then-inquisitor Bonilla (the former prosecutor and later archbishop of Mexico) in 1573.69

The works identified in the earliest widespread purge of the libraries of the upper crust of Spanish political society in Mexico demonstrate a vibrant community of Catholics, influenced by the devotio moderna and Erasmian principles. The purge in Mexico City in 1572 does not, however, reveal a cabal of alumbrados or secret Erasmians. In fact, one can look as far north as Zacatecas and as far south as the Yucatán (as noted above) and still find the diffusion of spiritual works, editions, and vernacular Scriptures associated with the devotio moderna. Such extensive reach suggests that, at least in Mexico, Erasmian trends toward examination of inner spirituality continued long after their decline in Spain. Indeed, Ledesma’s purge in the Valley of Mexico was by far the largest and widest-ranging of such library inspections undertaken in sixteenth-century Mexico. Combining data from the extant manuscript with Fernández’s transcription, we know that Ledesma confiscated at least 924 books from mostly private libraries, as well as from the libraries of Franciscan friaries. It is notable that Dominican and Augustinian friaries are absent from his report. Whether this is because the full report is today lost or because Ledesma deliberately targeted the Franciscans as suspicious and harboring Erasmian sympathies and therefore prohibited books they might hold, we cannot know. But the contents of his purge show the deep, widespread popularity of both vernacular Scripture in its various forms and the spiritual works written by Erasmus or prepared by editorial houses, printers, and authors associated with the devotio moderna. It also shows that even people associated with the archdiocesan polity (including the Cathedral treasurer), the missionary project (Durán), the royal court (Vasco de Puga), and the Inquisition (Esteban de Portillo, former inquisitor ordinary under Montúfar) had an eclectic taste in devotional works, including many works deemed unacceptable by the 1559 Index.

While the majority of works confiscated were spiritual guides, the single largest category of confiscated works was scriptural; Ledesma confiscated at least 243 scriptural editions explicitly identified as such. It is impossible to know just how many of these were vernacular versions, but we can hazard some estimates. At least 62 were specifically identified as Epístolas y Evangelios. Of these, 16 were explicitly listed as being “en romance” (that is, in Spanish, Cata-

69. Libros y libreros, pp. 471–473: again, no archival citation is given. One wonders if Fernández was keeping this information close to the vest, as his other transcriptions bear archival citations.
lan, or possibly Portuguese or Italian). Two were noted as being in Nahuatl. For the remaining 44 editions, no language was mentioned. However, it is improbable that all 60 editions of Epístolas y Evangelios were in Latin. First, the entire point of publishing separate Epístolas y Evangelios in singular editions was to facilitate lay scriptural study and to provide reliable vernacular renditions of the liturgical calendar. Such was the case with William of Paris’s Postilla and the attendant Spanish translation by Gonzalo de Santa María. Second, in the listing of these confiscated works, we see explicit clues to the presence of both the Santa María version of the Postilla and Montesino’s rendition. Santa María’s edition was titled “Evangelios y Epístolas con sus exposiciones,” and Montesino’s rendition reversed the order, titling it “Epístolas y Evangelios.” We find both formulations in the 60 confiscated copies in Ledesma’s purge; the two Nahuatl manuscripts are discussed below.

The Montesino version of 1512 was reprinted several times in the sixteenth century. Antonio Palau y Dulcet’s and Bataillon’s accounts differ, but we can deduce at least the following editions: Seville in 1526, Toledo in 1532 and 1535, Seville again in 1536 and 1540, Antwerp in 1544 and 1550, and Zaragoza in 1555. An edition explicitly ascribed to Montesino of the Epístolas y Evangelios and dated to 1555 (which would be the Zaragoza edition published by Bartolomé de Nágera) turned up in the Yucatán in 1574, as well. So there was wide diffusion of a book recommended by humanists as a principal source of spiritual guidance. We cannot be certain how many of these Epístolas y Evangelios were Montesino editions or González de Santa María versions of the Postilla, but we can assume that virtually all of them were one or the other, since these are the only known printed editions in Spanish. Those listed as “Evangelios y Epístolas” were probably the Santa María edition—the Spanish translation of William of Paris’s Postilla (originally printed in Zaragoza in 1484 and reprinted in Salamanca in 1498, again in Antwerp in 1543, and in Burgos in 1555). One edition in the Ledesma purge, that confiscated from the Franciscan friary in Calpa, is explicitly identified as a Montesino edition. An explicitly identified Spanish edition of Epístolas y Evangelios appeared in Zacatecas in a similar purge of libraries—almost certainly a Montesino edition. Though

73. AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22, f. 7v.
74. AGN Inq., vol. 78, exp. 20, f. 334.
suredly rare by the 1570s, an edition dated to 1497 of William of Paris’ Postilla was held in inventory by Tomás Pizaro in his bookshop in 1610. Yet even as late as 1610 there appears to have been some market for works of the devotio mod-erna, as Pizaro’s bookstore inventory also included a Latin edition of Ludolf of Saxony’s Vita Christi, published in Lyon in 1542. Pizaro also held what he claimed to be a heavily expurgated edition of the “Exposición de los euangeli-los en romance con sermones de el primero Domingo de aduento hasta el Domingo 25 después de la Trinidad” by Domingo de Valtanás, published by Martín de Montesdoca in 1558 in Seville. This is either a lost edition, or the report incorrectly listed the publication date. Valtanás was a Dominican aligned with the Carranza branch, associated with Felipe de Meneses, and would eventually be prosecuted by the Seville Inquisition in 1561 and con-demned to perpetual reclusion for his crimes of spiritualism.

It is telling, then, that there were so many of these vernacular Epístolas y Evangeli-los circulating in Mexico (the Montesino and Santa María versions), given in particular Montesino’s association with the tradition of internal spirituality and the devotio moderna. Granted, these were the only Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios editions available in Spain as well, but their widespread diffusion in Mexico, from as far north as Zacatecas to as far south as the Yucatán, is an impressive display of the influence and interest accorded to the devotio mod-erna in Mexico. Not only did Montesino’s Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios circulate, but so too did his Spanish version of the Vita Christi, as well as editions by Valtanás, Purépecha translations of Meneses, and Flossantorums in multiple forms, to say nothing of the thousands of books of hours—all contributing to a broad formulation of internal spiritual practice. In addition to what appears to be a high number (anywhere from 18 to 62) of vernacular Epístolas y Evangelios, Ledesma confiscated 40 New Testaments. Again, we cannot prove definitively that these were vernacular editions, but the same principle applies. Two Spanish versions of the New Testament appeared in the sixteenth century: Francisco de Enzin’s 1543 Antwerp edition and Juan Pérez de Pineda’s 1556 Geneva edition. The New Testaments confiscated in Mexico were probably the editions of Enzin and Pérez, but as the imprints were not specifically mentioned, this cannot be proven with certainty. But of those Latin Bibles specifically targeted by the 1559 Index as well as the 1554 general censure of sus-picious and therefore condemned Bibles, simple New Testaments do not

75. AGN Inq., vol. 1A, exp. s/n, fs. 457-458.
figure. The sheer volume of editions of vernacular Spanish Scripture circulating in Mexico prior to 1572 alone is indicative of sympathy for interior spiritual reflection. Indeed, there may have been as many as 100 such copies circulating, an impressive figure considering that the purge confiscated just 143 complete Bibles. But if we look a little closer at the patterns of ownership of vernacular Scripture and spiritual works, we see that the presumed Erasmianism that Bataillon saw as dying out or effectively quashed in Spain by the 1540s was alive and flourishing in Mexico, even among people presumably not associated with Erasmianism or who did not avow an adherence to it.

**A Portrait of Personal Libraries and Reading Habits**

Possession of editions of the Epístolas y Evangelios was accompanied without exception with possession of other spiritual books. In fact, when one examines the purge, relinquished copies of Epístolas y Evangelios were overwhelmingly owned by individuals who had multiple books confiscated, rather than those who might have had only one book, perhaps a Latin Bible, confiscated. In total, 48 people had Epístolas y Evangelios confiscated, and in every case the person owned at least one other prohibited book and usually several. In only two cases, both priests, did the person have just one other book (one was a Bible and the other a Canon Law) confiscated along with the vernacular Epístolas y Evangelios. Five Franciscan friaries were found to have Epístolas y Evangelios, again with a high coincidence of other suspicious works.

The unanimity of possession of Epístolas y Evangelios with other spiritual works demonstrates that owning such a volume was not a singular purchase. Instead, it is clear that anyone who owned vernacular Scripture did so with an interest in other devotional literature. Books of hours constituted the second largest category in this purge, and at least 165 of them were taken out of circulation in 1572. A vernacular Scripture was usually found in company with a book of hours (which also tended to include partial translations of the Bible). This finding gives the lie to the concerns of those who felt the need to target vernacular Scripture by placing it under a blanket prohibition. In fact, these people in Mexico seemed to present the reverse profile of the lone Lutheran, making a personal spiritual journey *sola fide*, based exclusively on a reading of the Bible. Quite to the contrary, these were model students of the devotio moderna, steeped in scriptural reading but bolstered as well by devotional guides and discussions.

If we consider the devotional works popular at the time along with the other books which were also confiscated by Ledesma, we can provide a sketch of the “model” library of these spiritual Catholics in Mexico City—those who had a
marked sympathy for the humanist methodology of spiritual introspection. For example, in the total purge, although Erasmus’s works accounted for just 5 percent of all the books confiscated (43 of 924), at least 10 percent, if not more, of the total libraries purged had copies of Erasmus. In the purge as a whole, about 4 percent of the volumes were of Johann Ferus (the German Franciscan exegete Johann Ferus (John Wild), who wrote Latin analyses of various Gospels, but whose sympathies for discussions on faith and justification by faith earned him the opprobrium of Salamanca Dominicans. In the libraries with vernacular Scripture, 10 percent (5 of 53) had copies of Ferus.79 Yet these Mexico City devotees seem to have rejected Erasmus’s disdain for formulaic prayer. For example, books of hours constituted nearly 20 percent (165 of the 924 various copies) collected in the overall purge, but they appear in close to 70 percent of the libraries of individuals who also owned vernacular Scripture (35 of 52 libraries). Owners of these libraries also seemed more disposed to read the Bible in the vernacular, again rejecting the humanist impulse to return to the sources of early Christianity like the Bible and patristic works. Only 20 percent of libraries (17 of 53) that had a vernacular Bible also had a generically titled (and presumably Latin) Bible. Adding yet more complexity to this portrait is the high level of legal education of readers of vernacular Scripture. In the overall purge, canon law editions account for about 6 percent of all books confiscated (57 of 924); among libraries where a vernacular Scripture was found, nearly 25 percent (13 of 53) also had an edition of canon law.

We are left with seeming paradoxes in these “model” libraries of readers of vernacular Scripture in Mexico. Such libraries were eclectic and ranged freely from spiritual to legalistic works, quite possibly including a Montesinos edition of Scripture, Luis de Granada’s Libro de meditación y oración, Latin and Spanish books of hours, John Ferus’ exegeses (in Latin) on the Gospel either of John or Matthew, a Flosantorum, and perhaps a Contemptus mundi. In more extensive libraries one might find a Latin Bible; the canon law; Aquinas; Augustine; Peter of Lombard; the Letters of Jerome, sometimes annotated by Erasmus or Melanchthon; Chrysostom; Cicero; a cancionero by Jorge Montemayor or another poet; spiritual works by Teresa of Ávila, Ignacio of Loyola, John of the Cross, or Juan de Zumárraga; works of popular literature like Amadís, Celestina, Orlando Furioso, or the Primaleón; and maybe even something

slightly scandalous yet still permitted, like a Latin edition of Ovid’s *Ars amandi* or Suetonius. Most of these works were explicitly mentioned as prohibited or suspicious, and were confiscated along with Epístolas y Evangelios from these 53 libraries. But the broad portrait revealed in the purge of 1572 shows that these were not people looking to exclude devotional or exegetical works, as many inquisitors worried. Instead, possessing a vernacular Scripture was seen as a positive step in a path toward greater spiritual redemption.

Beyond vernacular Scripture the purge shows that prohibited spiritual works, broadly defined, were popular. Erasmus’ works had a wide following in Mexico City, and many of his popular, banned works circulated, even at the highest levels of political society, through the 1560s. At least 43 copies of works by Erasmus were confiscated by Ledesma, the most popular being the *Adagia*. But we also see a high number of works by Ferus; the 1572 purge confiscated 35 copies of his works. Other spiritual works designed to teach the laity how to pray, how to think, or how to meditate were common. Central to this literature was the presumption that devotional works should accompany scriptural reading. Among the dizzying array of devotional literature circulating in Mexico City and turned up by Ledesma, one finds six libraries with cancioneros in one form or another; five libraries with some kind of spiritual exercises (though not explicitly authored by Loyola); four libraries with Zumárraga’s *Doctrina*; a 1558 *Flossantorum; Reglas de bien vivir con las Lectiones de Job; Regla de vida cristiana; Libro de verdad; Súbita del Monte Sión* (in two libraries); the *Abecedario espiritual* (in three libraries); *Instrucción y refugio del alma; Confesión de un pecador; Espejo de Religiosos, Tratado muy provechoso para todo fiel Cristiano;* and *Perla preciosa*. And the list goes on.

The sheer volume of vernacular Scripture and devotional literature is impressive, but if we take a moment to consider the sociopolitical profile of the owners of these books, their impact becomes clear. These were not secret clans of Erasmians or alumbrados, cowering in the dark and reading prohibited works to obtain some arcane spiritual knowledge. To the contrary, many of the vernacular Scripture, Erasmian works, and “suspect” devotional works were owned by high-profile and orthodox Spaniards. While there were cases of out-and-out Erasmians or convicted heretics and blasphemers among those who held such prohibited works, many of the highest-ranking members of royal and ecclesiastical justice were found in 1572 to own prohibited vernacular Scripture, Erasmus, and Latin Bibles produced by condemned presses. Two members of the illustrious Albornoz family had an affinity for such works. The regidor Bernardo de Albornoz, who had married into the Velázquez and Tapia family and was the grandfather of a future inquisitor of Mexico, had two pairs of Epístolas y Evangelios, an edition of Apocalypse, and seven or eight editions
of books of hours. The audiencia judge, inquisitional legal advisor, and one-time rector of the University of Mexico Mateo Arévalo Sedeño owned a Bible; his relative, the canon law professor Damián Sedeño, had Epístolas y Evangelios, explicitly noted as being in Spanish, as well as “four or five” copies of books of hours. Another audiencia judge, Vasco de Puga, who was responsible for the first major compilation of Laws of the Indies for the crown and had been an inquisitional legal expert in 1560, was forced to relinquish various books: a Bible, Epístolas y Evangelios “en romance,” a book of hours, Aleto y Phileno, and an edition of the canon law for examination. The one-time inquisitor ordinary and later 1573 archdiocesan representative to the inquisition, Esteban de Portillo, relinquished a copy of Erasmus’ Adagia along with a Bible and a copy of the canon law. In a supreme twist of irony, it was in fact Portillo who had acted as the judge in the investigation of Gilberti for Erasmianism and iconoclasm in 1561.

Like Latin Bibles, editions of the canon law were ordered scrutinized because various Lutheran heresies could be inserted into the margins. Inquisitors worried in particular about attacks on the efficacy and necessity of excommunication. Even Portillo and Sedeño, both professors of canon law, did not escape the scrutiny of their personal editions. Many Franciscan friaries were found to have editions of vernacular Scripture, as in the case of Calpa, and many individual friars were likewise forced to give up such editions. For example, the Franciscan Antonio de Salazar turned over a Bible, Epístolas y Evangelios en romance, a book of hours, and the Vocabulario of Molina. Even the chronicler

80. AGN III-26, exp. 22, f. 6v. For Mateo Arévalo Sedeño as audiencia judge and consultor, see AGN Inq., vol. 31, exp. 3.
81. AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22, f. 4v. For his role as holder of the chair of the Código, see Alberto María Carreño, La Real y Pontificia Universidad de México 1536–1865 (Mexico: UNAM, 1961); and Cristóbal Bernardo de la Plaza y Jaén, Crónica de la Real y Pontificia Universidad de México, Nicolás Rangel, ed. (Mexico: Talleres Gráficos del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, 1931).
82. Vasco de Puga, Prouisiones cédulas Instruciones de su Magestad: ordenanzas de difuntos y audiencia, para la Buena expedición de los negocios y administración de justicia: y gouernación desta nueva España: y para el buen tratamiento y observación de los yndios (Mexico: Pedro Ocharte, 1563). He is noted as audiencia judge and consultor for Montúfar’s inquisition in AGN Inq., vol. 3, exp. 2, and vol. 31, exp. 5.
83. AGN Jesuitas, III-26, exp. 22, f. 7v.
84. Ibid., f. 6r. Portillo’s activity as inquisitor ordinary is extensive. He began acting as inquisitor ordinary in 1565 (AGN Inq., vol. 29, exp. 10) and was still adjudicating as many as ten cases in 1571 as Montúfar’s inquisitor ordinary: AGN Inq., vol. 45, exp. 10; vol. 45, exp. 18; vol. 45, exp. 19; vol. 45, exp. 20; vol. 46, exp. 2; vol. 46, exp. 3; vol. 91, exp. 9; vol. 111, exp. 4; vol. 111, exp. 6; vol. 111, exp. 14; vol. 111, exp. 17; and vol. 113, exp. 1.
85. AGN Inq., vol. 43, exp. 6.
86. The issue was taken up at length by the influential jurist Diego de Covarrubias, In Bonificatii Octavi Constitutionum in Opera, vol. 1 of 2 (Antwerp: n.p., 1610–1614), esp. 1a pars, § 1.
Diego Durán was found to have a copy of Molina’s Nahuatl *Vocabulario*. The purge in Mexico City shows again that vernacular Scripture was distributed widely and that it was often held by highly-educated Spaniards who saw it as part of a broader set of spiritual tools. Moreover, the widespread availability of such banned vernacular Scripture demonstrates clearly that the apparatus for controlling its entry into Mexico and its continued circulation was weak during the diocesan inquisitional period. Readers and followers of Erasmus and the devotio moderna were willing to push back against the 1559 Index and the growing antihumanist sentiment expressed by the Inquisition.

1577 AND THE BAN ON NAHUATL BIBLES

It is fitting to end the discussion of the crackdown on Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios and books of hours with the kind of realization made by the Mexican inquisitors in 1577 and 1578. This realization was shot through with the awareness that simple bans on such popular works would not work. On more than one occasion inquisitors were obliged to send letters to their comisarios in various parts of New Spain, as far as the Yucatán, to plead with them not to burn confiscated Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios in public, for fear that doing so would anger the populace.88 The linguistic debate was, of course, not limited to the Spanish case. I have examined the Spanish case in detail because the indigenous language debates, as a whole, are better known in the field. But in essence, the debate over linguistic politics was similar in its epistemology. In both cases the issue was about knowledge and the relationship between an educated caste and the ordinary populace. It was precisely because friars and ecclesiastical politicians of sixteenth-century Mexico were familiar with the long debate about access to the Bible in Spanish, Italian, German, and other vernacular languages that the debate over translation of Scripture and spiritual works into Nahuatl, Zapotec, Purépecha and other Mesoamerican languages would find deep resonance.

Shortly after the 1572 purge, rumors began to circulate that a young Franciscan friar, Alonso Cabello, was engaged in a variety of heretical activities. He had penned Erasmian-style dialogues (in Latin) that were exceptionally critical of monasticism and the Franciscan order.89 He had argued (much like Erasmus, whom Cabello identified as his intellectual hero) that monasticism was

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88. AGN Inq., vol. 84, exp. 31, f. 161: “las Epístolas y euangelios en romançe y las oras en romançe las quemara en lugar secreto que nadie lo vea por el escándalo que se podría reçuir de ver quemar libros de que por tan tiempo usa la yglesía.”

useless and promoted sloth; that the privilege of some people (friars) living in relative luxury while others suffered was sinful; and that many customs of the order, like sleeping with the cowl on one’s head, were idiotic and superstitious. He was investigated after many Franciscans denounced him to the newly established Inquisition, and in the process of his investigation it was discovered that he had easy access to prohibited works of Erasmus in his cell. He was sentenced to lose his voting privileges in the order and to be prohibited from seeking higher orders. Yet this conviction did not stop Cabello from remaining active in what appears to be a network of friars who shared and circulated prohibited books, including many by Erasmus. Enter Rodrigo de Sequera, the Franciscan comisario general known for his role in prohibiting the work of Sahagún and the production of Nahuatl Bibles. It was in fact Sequera who led a second investigation of Cabello in 1576 and 1577. At issue were Cabello’s continued defiance of the ban on various works by Erasmus and the fact that Cabello was allowed to preach the Nativity sermon at Cholula in 1576. That Cabello, despite being a convicted heretic, was able to continue his intellectual activity demonstrates that there was a wing of the Franciscan order in Mexico that protected and supported him, even though Bataillon described him as “more Erasmian than Erasmus.”

Cabello found himself squarely at the center of several competing factions within the Franciscans in 1570s Mexico. Although Sequera laid Cabello out as a kind of sacrificial goat, the comisario general and others were clearly looking for bigger targets. Cabello was eventually ordered to Spain in 1579 after a second trial against him in 1577–1578, but it is not clear what became of him. He appears to have escaped inquisitional house arrest in the Franciscan friary in Tlatelolco on at least two occasions, further suggesting internal support for the symbol of the Erasmian wing of the Franciscans. Indeed, in 1580 the inquisitors wrote to the comisario of Veracruz to bring Cabello back to Mexico City for imprisonment. However, the second investigation of Cabello came at exactly the same moment that the antihumanists struck. By 1576 the news of various Nahuatl manuscripts of chapters of the Bible—Gospels, Letters, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs—would reach Madrid. When it was found that these chapters were circulating in Nahuatl and Purépecha, the Suprema ordered all Nahuatl translations of chapters of the Bible (and by implication such translations into any other indigenous language) banned sometime in May 1576.

90. AGN Inq., vol. 116, exp. 1.
91. For a discussion of Sequera, see Georges Baudot, “Fray Rodrigo de Sequera, abogado del diablo para una historia prohibida,” in La pugna fransicana, pp. 203–227.
92. AGN Inq., vol. 88, exp. 1.
94. AGN Inq., vol. 89, exp. 28.
From the Suprema came orders to Mexico City and to the inquisitor Bonilla to enforce this ban. It appears that in 1576 Sequera was entrusted by Pedro Oroz with the handling and confiscation of all such manuscripts circulating within the Franciscan order, in anticipation of enforcing the ban.95

For the most part, opposition to the ban on Epístolas y Evangelios in Nahuatl and other indigenous languages was strong. In fact, the opposition to the 1576 ban on the vernacular Epístolas y Evangelios in indigenous languages forced the Inquisition to relent in its prohibition on vernacular Scripture. This exception represented a conundrum. On the one hand the crown was moving more toward a forced Hispanicization of the missionary project, banning Sahagún’s works and promoting Spanish over Nahuatl in indigenous parishes. Likewise, the Inquisition was moving to enforce the bans on vernacular translations of Scripture. But the conditions of the missionary project and the vocal opposition of high-profile friars would force both crown and Inquisition to make exceptions to these rules, even as late as 1580.96 In fact, in an acknowledgment that a total forced Hispanicization would not work, the crown and the Mexican Church turned, instead, to a promotion of Nahuatl as a lingua franca.97 Likewise, despite the formal bans on ordination of ethnic non-Spaniards enacted in the 1555 and 1565 Councils of the Mexican Church, the crown would order exceptions so as to accommodate the Christianization efforts, appointing bilingual indigenous and mestizo priests to monolingual indigenous parishes.98

In 1577 the Mexican Inquisition asked four noted Nahuatlato friars to review the 1576 ban issued by Madrid; they were the Franciscans Molina and Sahagún and the Dominicans De la Cruz and De la Anunciación. In the questionnaire sent to the four friars, the first question asked which books of Scripture had been translated into indigenous languages. Molina said he had no knowledge of an Ecclesiastes manuscript in Nahuatl, but that fray Luis Rodríguez had translated the Proverbs into Nahuatl, praising its “polished” Nahuatl and elegant presentation. De la Cruz’s response was the most expansive and general. He said that it was common knowledge that manuscripts in indigenous languages (plural) of the Epístolas y Evangelios were available, and that there was

95. Baudot, “Fray Rodrigo de Sequera.”
a manuscript of parables that he thought was a mixture of sections of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, though he did not specify in which indigenous language it was written. Molina was the most specific, noting that fray Luis Rodríguez had produced an elegant (“polida”) Nahuatl translation of the Book of Proverbs, along with an exposition, which he viewed as excellent. Molina claimed that he knew of Nahuatl manuscripts of the Epístolas y Evangelios of the Roman Missal, as well as a Nahuatl manuscript of Hours of Our Lady. All these works, in Molina’s accounting, were anonymous, though contemporaneous reports from 1569 and 1570 suggest that it was Molina himself who penned the Nahuatl version of the Hours of Our Lady as well as the Epístolas y Evangelios.99 De la Anunciación noted anonymous manuscripts in Nahuatl of Ecclesiastes and of the Epístolas y Evangelios, but said he knew of no other languages into which Scripture had been translated. Sahagún’s response was the vaguest, claiming that he knew that the liturgical sections of the Epístolas y Evangelios had been translated (no language noted) and that Proverbs and Ecclesiastes had been translated into paraphrases.100

What can we know of the authorship or languages of scriptural editions? First, it is clear that many different Nahuatl and probably some Purépecha scriptural manuscripts were circulating. As noted above, the Franciscan Ambrosio Carrillo, in his 1618 report to comply with the requirements of the new 1613 Index, openly admitted that he had a Purépecha edition, written by Gilberti in 1559, of the Epístolas y Evangelios. Rodríguez is the likely candidate for authorship of the Nahuatl Proverbs, but we know that this kind of indigenous language translation was always a team effort, with friars working in concert with Nahuas and Purépechas. Mark Christensen has shown clearly the indigenous hand in producing this kind of translation, demonstrating that a Nahuatl sermon on the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to Paul reflects multidimensional Nahuatl cultural traits alien to Spanish Catholicism.101

99. Códice franciscano, siglo XVI: informe de la provincia del Santo Evangelio al visitador Lic. Juan de Ovando; informe de la provincia de Guadalajara al mismo (Mexico: Ed. S. Chávez Hayhoe, 1941), p. 60, identifies Molina as the author of the Nahuatl Hours. Also see Zulaica, Los franciscanos y la imprenta, p. 92.

100. Although there are extant Nahuatl manuscripts, such as the Nahuatl version of the Contemptus mundi studied by David Tavárez published in this journal (David Tavárez, “Nahu Intellectuals, Franciscan Scholars, and the Devotio Moderna in Colonial Mexico,” Americas 70:3 (October 2013)) there was no knowledge up to the present year (2013) of any extant manuscript of an indigenous translation of Scripture. In an archival discovery that is sure to offer a profound reassessment of that understanding, Tavárez has located (in the Hispanic Society’s collection) most of the Nahuatl translation by Luis Rodríguez of Proverbs (a fact to be noted in a research note in the journal Ethnohistory). To date we do not know who penned the Nahuatl Ecclesiastes manuscript, and we must rely on anecdotal mentions of authorship, since these manuscripts have probably vanished.

101. Christensen has discussed this in his dissertation, cited above, but fuller transcriptions and translations of the Nahuatl sermon as well as various other indigenous language religious manuscripts will be published as Translated Christianities: Nahuatl and Maya Religious Texts (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, in press [c. 2014]).
In the end we cannot know what these Nahuatl and Purépecha scriptural translations or renderings looked like. Louise Burkhart has shown how the translation of presumably universal Spanish Catholic concepts into Nahuatl often became “less orthodox,” prompting her apt metaphor of a slippage, a new rendering.102 Others, like Charles Dibble, speak of the Nahuatlization of Catholicism.103 As Christensen points out, Spanish clerics fretted over the inability to produce “genuine” Nahuatl translations of Scripture or sacramental concepts, given the concatenation of metaphorical usages common in elegant Nahuatl. This may be why they considered the parables, in the form of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, to be adaptable to Nahuatl. The election of the Book of Proverbs for translation to Nahuatl may also reflect an adaptation of the huehuetlatolli tradition in that language—a kind of moral aphorism that is delivered orally in a variety of circumstances, including religious (ritual supplication), home (parental advice or admonishment), court (elegant courtliness), school (in the Nahuatl calmeccac, or in the form of poetry), or collected in Catholic didactic works, especially those of Sahagún and fray Andrés de Olmos.104 But it is also clear, as I will conclude, that the Purépecha and Nahuatl translations of Epistles and Gospels were intended for everyday use in the Mass. This was to avoid the confusion of preaching sermons in Nahuatl only to rely on Latin versions of the liturgical passages of the New Testament on which the sermons were based. The same was the case with Spanish translations, and it was the principal reason they were so popular. Yet it was for their potential to promote variant individual interpretations of the Bible that inquisitors and censors feared and wanted to inhibit the widespread distribution of vernacular versions, whether Nahuatl or Spanish, especially because such editions might include sermons, discussions or other exegetical analysis.

The four friars called in to debate the 1576 ban on Nahuatl and other indigenous language Scripture were asked to determine the extent of the damage to


the Christianization efforts that would result if the ban were fully enforced. The Franciscans Sahagún and Molina, as well as the Dominican vicar De la Cruz, vigorously opposed the ban. They argued that prohibiting Nahuatl or other indigenous language translations of Scripture, whether or not they were explicitly banned from public circulation, would greatly hamper the Christianization effort. How were friars in monolingual communities to communicate the word of God to the infidel, they asked, if they did not have reliable translations of the Bible on which to base their sermons and through which to communicate exegetical understanding in situations like confession? They concluded that without indigenous-language Gospels and Epistles priests would be unable to offer the vernacular versions of the liturgical text.

De la Anunciación was the principal supporter of the ban, claiming that Nahuatl translations of the Bible were dangerous and would only lead to a kind of Tower of Babel, a confusion of tongues and a profusion of errant interpretations. In particular he said that Nahuatl was not conducive to scriptural language, given its metaphoric qualities. De la Anunciación also argued that translating Scripture was like playing with fire: the danger of exposing indigenous parishioners to false ideas through faulty translation was too great. In fact, archbishop Montúfar had first commissioned De la Anunciación, from the First Council of the Mexican Church in 1555, to compose a doctrina as the official primer of the faith for Mexico and translate it into “many native languages.” In the Second Council of the Mexican Church in 1565 indigenous peoples were forbidden from owning any doctrinal work in an indigenous language except for the translation of this doctrina.

Despite the 1576 ban on vernacular Scripture, it appears that in the face of mounting opposition the Mexican Inquisition was forced to relent in part, and that it provided exemptions to the ban on indigenous language Scripture. In 1579 the ban was partially eased, and in addition to the opposition registered by Molina, Sahagún, and De la Cruz, others, like Diego de Landa, may have been instrumental in lobbying against it. Acting as bishop of Yucatán, De Landa wrote to the inquisitors urging the relaxation of the ban, arguing in a letter of January 19, 1578, that “until now there has been no chapter of the Sacred Scripture translated into Indian language in this land [presumably Maya]” and that it would be vitally important for such translation in the missionary project. The

105. That the questionnaire was formulated in such a way suggests that the ban was yet to be placed in full effect and that the inquisitors general in Madrid may have been expecting pushback and resistance.
107. AGN Inq., vol. 90, exp. 42.
partial easing of the ban allowed parish priests to hold in their personal libraries indigenous language manuscripts of the liturgical sections of Scripture.

The easing of the ban was a partial victory for the proponents of vernacular Scripture. The provincials of the Dominicans (fray Gabriel de San Joseph) and Augustinians (fray Martín de Perea), and the Franciscan comisario general (Sequera) submitted a petition to inquisitor Bonilla in September 1579, in which they noted that the ban had been eased, but urged continued inquisitorial oversight over any indigenous language translations.108 The exemption granted to parish priests in indigenous pueblos was from the outset intended to be strictly controlled; it indicated that under no circumstances were indigenous peoples to have access to the vernacular translations. Moreover, the petition noted as one of the reasons for allowing parish priests access to such translations that indigenous Mexicans were especially fond of storytelling—absent a reliable indigenous language version, the Mexica would make up their own versions of Scripture and Christian saints, which the mendicant leaders viewed as more dangerous. Indeed, the variant version stories appeared in the Nahuatl sermon on the ministry of St. Sebastian analyzed by Mark Christensen.109 Like De la Anunciación, the petitioners supported continued strict oversight of indigenous language production. They also argued that Scripture was too subtle for translation: too few ministers had a comprehensive grasp of indigenous languages, and it was simply too dangerous to play fast and loose with eternal truths of the Bible if only for some indigenous peoples to receive a translation. Sahagún and Molina, representing a dissent from their colleague Sequera, argued the opposite: Christianization was too important to be left to Latin preaching and exegesis. Denying a reliable Nahuatl Bible was manifestly un-Christian.

Yet Ledesma’s 1572 purge shows that Nahuatl manuscript translations of Scripture were circulating in Franciscan friaries. In some ways this is not surprising, given the strong promotion of Nahuatl as a lingua franca by many friar-missionaries. But by 1577 the promotion of Nahuatl sermons and scriptural translations had become increasingly difficult and even illegal. The confiscation of Sahagún’s Historia general has long been understood as a major event in the course of Tlatelolco and the indigenous language project writ large. My own interpretation is that the Historia general case has been understood out of context. The increasing hostility to Erasmian and humanist ten-

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dependencies in the Mexican Church under Montúfar’s leadership paralleled similar attacks in Seville and against the Dominican reformers (Carranza and Menezes) spearheaded by Melchior Cano, who was ideologically aligned with Montúfar. At the same time the Franciscans have too often been misunderstood as monochromatically humanist and Erasmian. Instead, the Cabello investigation shows that there was a faction of anti-Erasmians clearly distrustful of the humanism of Cabello and his protectors. Alfonso de Castro, while a defender of indigenous clergy, viewed the vernacularization of Scripture as a path to heresy. Likewise, the activities of Oroz and Sequera reveal hostility to the Nahuatl translation of Scripture, even as it was being defended by Sahagún and Molina in the face of formal inquisitional prohibitions.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Spanish scriptural editions by Montesino, like the Nahuatl and Purépecha manuscripts of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Letters and Gospels, were condemned and forced underground. That there are no known extant copies of Nahuatl manuscripts of Gospels or Ecclesiastes suggests a fate similar to that of the 1478 Ferrer Catalan Bible: possession of such books simply became too dangerous. Similarly, many of Gilberti’s Purépecha books were hunted into extinction. But as I have shown here, contemporaneous sources corroborate the circulation of such works. The most obvious case is that of the Nahuatl Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, but other works circulated as well. For example, in 1601 the indigenous alguacil of Metepec, don Baltasar de San Juan, listed a Nahuatl Flosantorum among his book collection.110 And it appears that indigenous language efforts at Biblical exegesis also continued on some level. In 1616 the Mexican Inquisition prosecuted Antonio Chávez of Taxco for teaching the Bible to the indigenous inhabitants.111 We know that the Franciscan Carrillo was holding onto Gilberti’s Purépecha translation of Epístolas y Evangelios as late as 1618. Horacio Carochi had access to at least books 6 and 12 of the Historia general when he composed his Nahuatl grammar, published in 1645.112 Nonetheless, by 1577 it was clear that those who promoted and even penned Nahuatl editions of Biblical material were on the increasingly losing side of a deeply partisan political struggle for the soul of the Mexican Church.

111. AGN Inq., vol. 312, exp. 57.
Such bans were not always popular or enforceable, as the continual influx of Spanish-language books of hours into Veracruz would show, and as Ledesma’s 1572 purge showed when it found a high incidence of prohibited vernacular Bibles (Spanish and Nahuatl). There is perhaps no more fitting demonstration of the difficulty in enforcing unpopular censorship policy than the fact that time and again inquisitors in the 1570s, in the aftermath of the enforcement of the 1559 Index, were forced to write to their deputies to tell them not to burn Spanish books of hours in public, because such books were so popular and so ingrained in the traditional practice of lay Catholicism in the Spanish world. The Inquisition might ban Nahuatl biblical manuscripts in 1576 but enforcement was a different matter. It was, in fact, precisely in the charged atmosphere of 1577 that we find inquisitors sending out letters urging their deputies to avoid publicly burning Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios. For example, on November 8, 1577, inquisitors Bonilla and Dávalos wrote such a letter to their deputy in the Yucatán, because they understood the scandal that would result, given the considerable popularity of Spanish Epístolas y Evangelios.113

In the end, 1577 was a flash point for a divide between the humanists like Cabello and Gilberti in the Franciscan order who promoted an open Erasmianism, and the conservatives within the order, like Sequera, who along with the Dominicans expressed hostility to the expanded use of indigenous language primers and translations of Scripture. Ultimately, vernacularization, the possession of Spanish and Nahuatl Epístolas y Evangelios, and the reading of Erasmus would be curtailed. But the impetus in Mexico toward an interior and vernacular spiritualism survived well into the late sixteenth century, decades longer than any such expression of Erasmianism in Spain. The survival of this trend in Mexico was the result of a vigorous defense of this popularized spiritualism, seen in the indigenous language projects of doctrinal works, in the continued popularity of Spanish scriptural editions well into the 1570s, in the protection of Erasmians within the Franciscan order, and in the substantial pushback against the ban on Nahuatl scriptural production.

At its core the debate about translation of Scripture concerned a hierarchical epistemology. But this epistemology was complex both in its philosophical exegesis and in the attempt at everyday implementation. For example, Erasmianism and Erasmians may have promoted an inner spiritualism but many of them were quite opposed to a vernacular rendering of Scripture. On the other hand many of the greatest proponents of a vernacular scriptural tradition in Mexico were mission-
aries who viewed Scripture and biblical exegesis in practical terms, influenced by their experience of everyday interaction with indigenous communities.

But not all proponents of a vernacular Scripture demonstrated their defense of Spanish or Nahuatl Bibles in the rarefied atmosphere or university of inquisitional court debate. Instead, many readers of vernacular Scripture defended the translation by their purchase of Montesino’s editions or by their refusal to obey the admonition of the Index. In that sense it was difficult to effect the censure of vernacular Scripture precisely because such books were so popular among the educated reading public. The result was that inquisitional officials and royal edicts had to deal with the power of custom and the force of cultural inertia resisting the ban on vernacular Biblical tradition, leading to a hybrid Catholicism heavily indebted to the vernacular tradition.

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