



Biography of a **MEXICAN CRUCIFIX**

*Lived Religion and Local Faith from
the Conquest to the Present*

Jennifer Scheper Hughes

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JENNIFER SCHEPER HUGHES

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hughes, Jennifer Scheper.

Biography of a Mexican crucifix : lived religion and local faith
from the conquest to the present / Jennifer Scheper Hughes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-536706-5; 978-0-19-536707-2 (pbk.)

1. Mexico—Church history. 2. Catholic Church—Mexico—

History. 3. Mexico—Religious life and customs—History.

4. Crosses—Mexico—Morelos (State). 5. Jesus Christ—Crucifixion.

I.Title.

BX1428.3.H84 2010

282'.72—dc22 2009012196

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To You, Señor, as promised,

and to my own sweet saints:

Santos, Santiago, Salvador, and Raphael Benedito

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Preface

Behind the Curtain: A Manifesto for Popular Religion

The work that follows is an invitation to draw near to the Cristo Aparecido, the “Christ Appeared,” a sculpted image of the crucified Christ on the cross that is almost five centuries old. And likewise, through him, this study invites the reader to draw near to his loving devotees, in particular to the devout of Totolapan, today a small peasant community of indigenous and European origin, in the northernmost corner of the Mexican state of Morelos. For them, the Cristo Aparecido is not a statue but instead their beloved patron saint, a manifestation of the divine, around which their collective spiritual life is organized and finds its focus. Their faith in their Cristo is both the starting point for and the locus of this study.

But how is it possible for a scholarly project to accompany a people, even if only for a short while, on their journey of faith? Must an academic work such as this one necessarily distance itself from the faith of the people whom it takes as its object of study, lest the authority of the scholarship be diminished by the association? These questions are particularly poignant and pointed when local, popular, or “folk” religiosities are at the center of inquiry, as these have been subjected to many violences and violations, literal and figurative, of the military, missiological, political, theological, and scholarly sort, not least in Mexico. This is certainly the perception of the local devotees of Totolapan, many of whom feel that their faith has been vulnerable to offense and injury over the course of centuries, in the present moment most of all.

Popular devotion to images seems in many instances to have made poor and marginal communities even more vulnerable to damaging outside interventions. Consider, for example, the eighteenth-century adolescent mystic of Chiapas, Mexico, María de la Candelaria.¹ Inspired by visions and speaking as the mouthpiece for a miraculous image of Mary called the Virgen del Rosario, the young *india* galvanized an indigenous rebellion. Neither the girl nor the image itself was ever actually seen by the many pilgrims who came to pay homage; a makeshift curtain, a *petate*, shielded them from view in the small hermitage where they made their home.

Fray Simón de Lara, parish priest and *doctrinero* of the pueblo, led the charge against the faith of his flock in 1712. Certain that it was in fact a “pagan idol” that occupied the dark space behind the curtain, Lara sought to expose María de la Candelaria as a diabolic fraud and a hoax. In the wake of the government troops who had cleared the way, Fray Simón de Lara picked his way among the recently massacred bodies of those who had assembled to protect the Virgin and her spokeswoman, and reached the front of the *ermita*. There he stopped to preach a triumphant sermon: “yes, in this very *ermita*, behind the *petate*, you placed your idol. And it is here that you approached to pay it homage, to sell your soul to the Devil. You spilled out holy oils upon its monstrous face. . . . Remember now that I warned you of the great deception of María de la Candelaria, but you did not want to listen.”² With the *ermita* surrounded and the plaza of the pueblo overtaken, the soldiers inside pulled back the curtain to discover not María, who had fled, and not an “idol,” but only an a “much-adorned altar upon which had been placed the Virgen del Rosario with the infant Jesus in her arms.”³ Government troops and the local priests conspired together to violently eradicate this local expression of Roman Catholicism.

In his astute reflections on the cult, Mexican historian Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán admires both the faith and the courageous rebellion of the people of San Juan Evangelista Cancuc; but he also grapples with his own disbelief about what is really “behind the *petate*.”⁴ Here the modern scholar’s own doubts dimly echo the ultimately devastating apprehensions of Fray Simon de Lara. Inga Clendinnen was the first to caution the historian of colonial Latin America against treading the dangerous path of the missionary. As he attempted to isolate the native from the Christian practices of his neophyte charges, the colonial friar was “forced by the nature of his peculiar vocation to subject a lived faith to vivisection, carving it into transportable, stateable, teachable propositions: a disturbing, dispiriting, and finally effectively disabling business.”⁵ And indeed, it may be that the critical, questioning approach of the modern (and yes, even the postmodern) scholar, often puzzled before the faith of the poor, is exceeded in their skepticism only by that of the overly zealous cleric, himself plagued by doubts about the legitimacy of his flock’s “religion.”⁶

I have struggled here to avoid such an approach. Instead, assuming that their faith has an integrity of its own, I have tempered my own impulse to

distance myself from that which the people of Totolapan have taken up as their dearest belief. It is my earnest hope that nothing I write here has the potential to weaken or challenge them in their devotion to the Cristo Aparecido. For them, I hope this work adds to the treasury of knowledge about their Cristo.

Two distinct intellectual movements in the last third of the twentieth century offer me a way forward: the work of subaltern historians and that of liberation theologians. As they forged their field, subaltern studies historians of India looked for ways to shape their work so as to reflect the agency of subordinate social groups “as makers of their own destiny.”⁷ Acknowledging this agency obliged these historians to “stretch the category of the political [beyond] the logic of secular-rational calculations inherent in the modern conception of the political,” as Dipesh Chakrabarty so aptly puts it.⁸ This was particularly true because “the peasant-but-modern political sphere was not bereft of the agency of gods, spirits, and other supernatural beings.”⁹ Boldly stated, taking seriously the agency of the subaltern may also require taking seriously the agency of the divine, as for the subaltern so often the actions of God and the spirit are coeval with the human.¹⁰

This sentiment finds a powerful parallel in the work of Latin American liberation theologians writing in the 1970s and 1980s. After largely overcoming an initial and nearly disastrous skepticism about popular religious practice (an ambivalence that I will discuss at some length in chapter 6), liberation theologians and their intellectual heirs, Latino theologians, came to see their task, in part, as articulating the *sensus fidelium*, the theological legitimacy of popular ways of knowing. In their insistence on a “preferential option for the poor,” liberation theologians have asserted that the resources of the Church should be channeled into slums, shantytowns, and *favelas*. But they have also called scholars to reread history from the point of view of the “condemned of the earth”: in this new approach, it was “the Indian, the peasant, the African slave, the exploited classes, [who] would be the hermeneutic starting point for history.”¹¹

Here, then, I intend to venture with all respect behind the curtain. Not to “lift the veil” in order to expose fallacy and fraud (as did the soldiers at María de la Candelaria’s ermita, or Dorothy in the palace of the Wizard of Oz), but in order to take seriously a people’s faith on their own terms and for its own sake. This is because, as I will explain later, for believers themselves the drape is there neither to create an illusion nor to obscure, but rather to highlight the presence of the sacred within.

And so I have allowed the commitments and concerns of devotees to guide and shape my focus here. For example, several Mexican scholars before me have taken up the study of Fray Antonio de Roa, the sixteenth-century Spanish Augustinian friar to whom the Cristo Aparecido first appeared. Roa has been the periodic object of scholarly-clerical interest and fascination from the close of the sixteenth century. Here, however, though Roa appears as a protagonist in

the first and second chapters, he soon falls into the margins of the story, as he does for today's devotees. For one who accompanies them in their faith, the real protagonist of this narrative is the Cristo himself, and his journey over five centuries. So the invitation into his story will include, at times, asking the reader to avert their questioning, skeptical gaze, to pause for a moment as the devout humbly cast their own eyes downward in deference to the divine.

While I attempt to approximate the faith of the people of Totolapan in relation to their Cristo, this study is not confessional in nature. It does not represent a statement of my own faith and belief. Nor do I seek to represent solely the perspective of devotees. I offer here, to the best of my abilities, a synoptic narrative. That is, I labor to construct a comprehensive view of events pieced together from disparate and varied perspectives. I strive to allow multiple voices, including scholarly ones, to flesh out the story of the Cristo. However, I also try whenever possible to give the people of Totolapan the last word. The primacy of their relationship with the image makes them, as far as I am concerned, the ultimate authority on all matters pertaining to him. This is so not because in their spiritual practice they have access to a direct experience of the divine, unmediated by language, culture, and historical contingency. Rather it is this very contingency that makes theirs the privileged voice in this book.

This dual commitment to scholarly integrity and to the integrity of the Totolapans' faith and belief has shaped and defined the writing styles that I have employed. The writing, at times, is deliberately seductive; specifically intended to draw the reader in, to help him or her imagine, for example, what it might be like to join the friar on his knees before Christ, or to stand expectantly in the crowd among devotees as they wait for the procession of their Cristo to begin. But to those readers for whom such experiences remain inaccessible, I have offered other perspectives with which I hope they may be able to identify as an entry into this topic: the agnostics and skeptics that one occasionally encounters among the peasants of Totolapan, and the modern-minded priests and bishops that appear in the twentieth century. Some readers may find they identify most of all with the careful and respectful labors of the restorers and historians of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Mexican governmental body dedicated to historical preservation of art, who collectively create an opening for the secular world's rapprochement with religious folk art and popular piety.

Acknowledgments

Many communities, scholarly and religious, helped this project to come to fruition. Without the generosity and trust of the people of Totolapan, this work would not have been possible. In particular, I acknowledge the assistance and support of the Flores family, especially Maricela Flores, director of culture for

the municipality of Totolapan. Many offered of themselves, sharing personal recollections, providing on-the-spot explanations and clarifications, and granting me access to community records. Of these, I mention don Florentino Vergara by name: the shape of this book was revealed to me in the midst of a moving and illuminating conversation we shared that left us both with tears in our eyes. I hope that the profound respect that I have for the topic of this book is evident to the devotees of the Cristo Aparecido, and I offer my deepest apologies for anything that I have misrepresented or misunderstood.

In Tepoztlán, I was graced with many kindnesses. I thank Sarita and Shanti for their hospitality and Sebastian Belaustegui for his beautiful photographs. The women of the weekly prayer group to the Señor de Chalma, especially doña Clara, accepted my presence and even my stumbled prayers. I extend a particular note of thanks to Pamela Voekel and Bethany Moreton, for finding me in the first place and then supporting this project from beginning to its close. The community of scholars that they, with Elliot Young, unite annually at the Tepoztlán Institute for Transnational History of the Americas was a hospitable, helpful, and inspiring intellectual context in which to share the first drafted pages of this book.

At the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Teresa Loera, Luis Miguel Morayta Mendoza, and José Nao generously offered their time and expertise, as did Padre Baltasar Lopez, minister of sacred art at the Diocese of Cuernavaca. Padre Angel Sánchez Campos, at the Paroquia de Yau-tepec, allowed me access to his extensive personal archive of materials from the episcopacy of don Sergio Méndez Arceo. Staff and librarians at the Archivo General de la Nación and the Bancroft Library were patient and obliging.

The Episcopal Church Foundation, the Doctoral Council of the Graduate Theological Union, and the Academic Senate of the University of California, Riverside, helped to fund this project. María Lupita Hernández Alamilla and Harold Morales provided research assistance, and Jessica Delgado interrupted her own research and writing to puzzle over colonial documents with me. Paul Ramírez shared with me his brilliant unpublished work on epidemic disease in Mexico City. The profound and priestly Sara Miles generously read and commented an early draft of the manuscript. I also thank supportive colleagues from Mt. Holyoke College and the University of California, Riverside, but especially Andrew Jacobs and Catherine Allgor, midwives in many ways. Without the affection and care graciously provided for my children by Mrs. Willa Davis and the teachers of the UCR Child Development Center, this book might not have come so soon to completion.

I conclude with an expression of deepest gratitude to those who were present at the inception of this project. William B. Taylor first drew my attention to the inquisition case that interrogated the Cristo's origins, and then received and responded to my long and enthusiastic missives from the field. The scholar-visionary, Rosemary Radford Ruether, has been a most excellent

supporter, colleague, and friend. Eduardo Fernández, S.J., allowed himself to be persuaded to make the rigorous pilgrimage on foot from Tepoztlán to Chalma in my stead. David Sweet has engaged with me in a twenty-year-long conversation about the faith and struggles of the people of Latin America.

I also recognize Brother M. Thomas Shaw, beloved mentor and guide. With regret he released me from other responsibilities so that I might finish this book.

No small offer of thanksgiving is due to the poets, writers, observers, interpreters and artists of my extended family: to my parents, Nancy and Michael; my siblings, Sarah and Nathanael; and to George Scheper and Diane Ganz, Jeanne Scheper and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, and David Scheper—not just kin, but kindred spirits.

Whatever depth and accuracy this work possesses are largely due to those that I have acknowledged here; its foibles are all my own.

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Note on Translations

All translations from Spanish texts, colonial or modern, are my own unless otherwise noted. In many instances I provide the original Spanish in the corresponding notes. In my transcription of colonial materials, I have left original inconsistencies in spelling and grammar largely intact.

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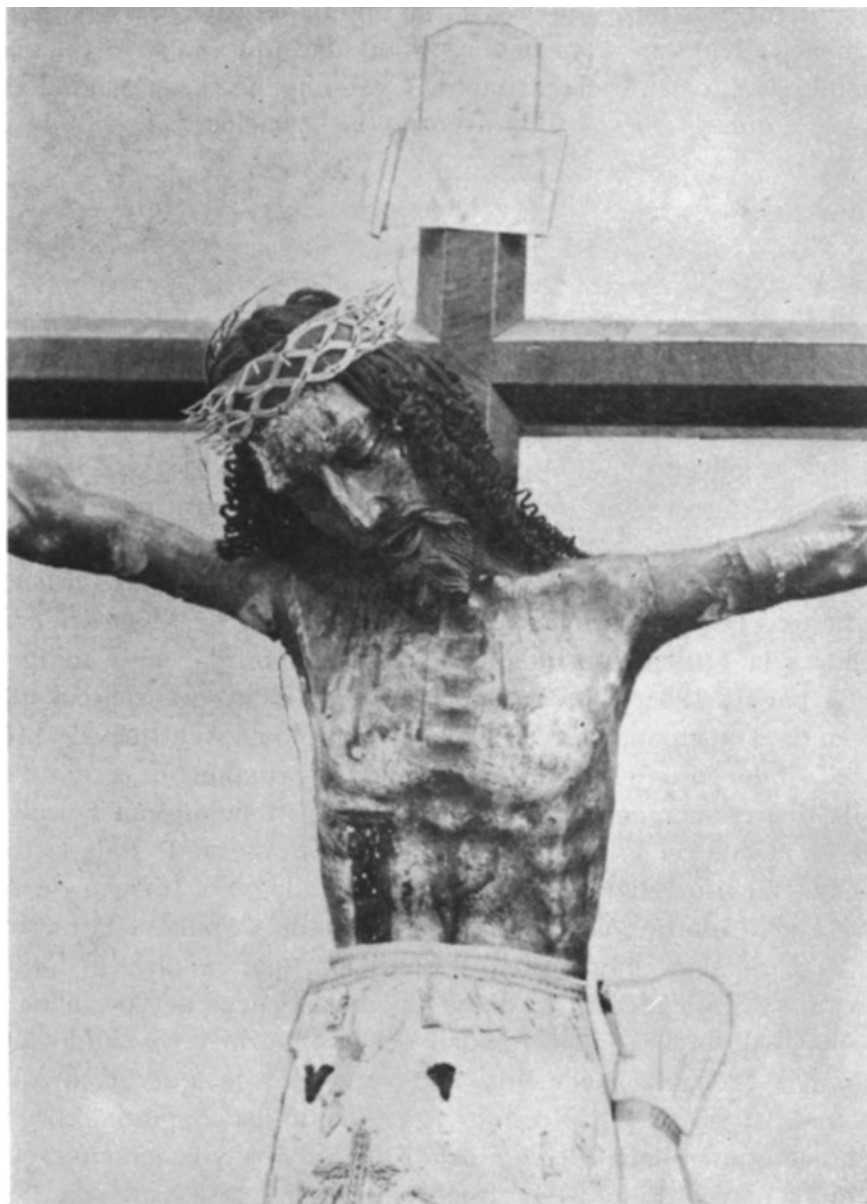
Introduction

The Iconography of Suffering

The Mexican venerates a bleeding and humiliated Christ, a Christ who has been beaten by the soldiers and condemned by the judges, because he sees in him a transfigured image of his own identity. And this brings to mind Cuauhtémoc, the young Aztec emperor who was dethroned, tortured and murdered by Cortés.

—Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*

This book is a history of popular devotion to a single, carved image of Christ crucified, known by his devotees as the Cristo Aparecido, or the Christ Appeared, spanning five centuries of Mexican history. The three-foot-tall crucifix, sculpted from maguey, a plant native to the New World, depicts the bloody and tortured Jesus at the very moment of his death. The missionary friars who first discovered the image in the mid-sixteenth century declared it to be the most poignantly beautiful and graphic depiction of Christ's suffering on the cross they had ever seen. It quickly became one of the most celebrated religious images in New Spain, widely revered for its miraculous healings, and a model, a prototype, for subsequent devotions to other miraculous images of Christ on the cross. Today the Cristo Aparecido is, above all, the beloved patron saint of the people of Totolapan (also known as Totolapa, or Totolapam), a small, rural community of some seven thousand mestizo peasants of indigenous Nahuatl and Spanish origin, located in the *altos de Morelos*, the mountainous northernmost corner of the state of Morelos. Because of its documented early-colonial origins, in the twentieth century the government declared the image to be part of the national patrimony of Mexico. It is among the oldest extant New World crucifixes, and it has been the object of uninterrupted, continuous devotion since its origins (see figure 1.1).



Un acercamiento de la milagrosa imagen del Cristo de Totolapan, para apreciar mejor su belleza.

FIGURE I.I. The Cristo *Aparecido*. Mexico, circa 1969. Photograph by Lauro López Beltrán. From *Fray Antonio de Roa, Taumaturgo penitente*, 2nd ed. Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1969. Reproduced by permission of Editorial Jus.

Simultaneously a diachronic study of local religion, a work of cultural history, and a creative study of material culture, this history of the Totolapan Cristo is, most of all, a biography. The suggestion that the history of an image might be recounted as the story of a life highlights devotees' own relationship to their *santo*; they attribute to him *animus*—existence, being, and agency.¹ This biography, or object history if you prefer, is made possible by the miraculous, or exceptional, or at the very least unlikely survival of this material object through crisis and calamity as well as through more than four hundred and fifty years of active devotional use.

The story told here is a chronological but not exhaustive account of the life of the Cristo Aparecido. The constellation of events that constitute this loosely bound set of “recollections” has been determined as much by the sources available for recuperating the image's nearly five-hundred-year history as by the devotees' estimation of what events really mattered and, finally, by my own perception of what might be a rich vein of human experience for exploration. Perhaps for this reason, the narrative strays away from the orderliness and seamlessness suggested by the biographic form, offering in its place a rough assemblage of moments rife with meaning: pain, joy, loss, beauty, and danger. I guide the reader through several critical moments of the Cristo's history: its miraculous appearance to a community of newly converted indigenous Christians and their friars in the Indian pueblo of Totolapan in 1543;² the covert removal of the image to Mexico City in 1583; the conditions of the Cristo's celebrated return to its community of origin over two hundred and fifty years later, in 1863; and, in the twentieth century, its encounter with modernizing reforms coming from within the Roman Catholic Church, including efforts to reframe the Cristo's significance within the politically radical theology of liberation. Each instance is an opportunity to explore key motifs and problems in the religious history of Mexico. Thus, the biography of the Cristo becomes, to some degree, a microcosm of this varied and variegated religious landscape. Through him we observe the way in which national crises and global movements play upon local contexts and influence a diminutive object. In a complimentary fashion, history as refracted through the Cristo Aparecido reveals an almost prismatic local diversity, which makes any effort at generalization difficult if not impossible.

The Cristo of Totolapan has found its deepest resonance and most persistent devotion among indigenous and indigenous-descended communities. For this reason, underlying this entire book is the following proposition: at all points in history indigenous Christianity is complex, diverse, dynamic, contested, but generally of indigenous making and design; at once authentically indigenous and fully Christian. That is, in the cult to the Cristo Aparecido I find a profound local experience of Christian gospel. At the same time I regard the *santo* as a work of Native American sacred art and the religious complex that surrounds him as an expression of indigenous religion. These conclusions

emerge precisely from the exercise of remaining “close” to devotees in my interpretation and analysis, as I describe in the preface to this book.

In making this set of claims, I am arguing against a variety of established conventions for viewing popular religiosity. Latin American Christianity is stunningly plastic. Perhaps owing to the very ambiguity of its colonial origins, it is characterized by an intense valuing of tradition and, simultaneously and paradoxically, by a tremendous capacity to absorb new ideas and practices. Although in theory Roman Catholicism is an exclusive religion (and the Christian god a jealous god) in practice and on the ground in Latin America and in other colonial settings it has proven to be surprisingly expansive, inclusive, and accommodating; not only able to encompass and absorb religious practices external to the tradition but also relatively pliant and available for religious innovation from within. There are many labels and metaphors that have been applied in the effort to describe this complex reality. The term “syncretism” is the one that has dominated; indeed, even many of the residents of Totolapan, where the Cristo today makes his home, understand theirs to be a “syncretic” religion (they use the technical term), derived from both indigenous and European religious traditions. The popular, “syncretic” faith of Latin America has been derided by critics from many camps: colonial priests saw in the “excesses” of popular religion a lingering idolatry and diabolism.³ In the twentieth century, social scientists of a Marxist persuasion have labeled the corresponding worldview a politically paralyzing “false consciousness.” Most recently, politicized indigenous communities asserting a pure indigeneity have renounced Indian Christian practice as nothing more than a necessary (and temporary) compromise with colonialism, bereft of authenticity. “Syncretic” religion is therefore a bastard religion; by all counts “an unholy mixture of paganism, peasant magic and half-baked Christian doctrine.”⁴ Recently, more sympathetic scholars, hoping to avoid the simplistic and reductionist interpretations that often accompanied use of this descriptor, have preferred the scientific label “hybridity” and the racial term *mestizaje* to describe the complexity of Latin American Christian practice and belief.

Though they might have willed it to be otherwise, the history of the Cristo Aparecido does not just involve the lay believers of Totolapan and other humble devotees of the region. That is, local religion never functions in a vacuum, independently of larger religious and secular institutions. The fate of the Cristo is also determined by, and connected to, bodies and individuals acting within the “institutional” Church: the Inquisition, the religious orders and their friars, bishops and parish priests. Throughout this history, many friars emerge as protagonists; these frequently worked to insure the preservation of the Cristo and his illustrious history, even as they have periodically been at odds with his community of local believers in Totolapan. The Cristo’s fate is also wedded to the history of the various *conventos* and *iglesias* (monasteries and churches) where he has made his home. Consequently his biography also becomes a story

about the rise and fall of the conventos and the religious orders in Mexico. Finally, in addition to these ecclesial institutions and actors, the history of the Cristo Aparecido is influenced by secular forces, most of all by the institutions of a revolutionary state that has long struggled to negotiate the meaning and place of the Church and its religious objects, like the Cristo Aparecido, within a nationalist and secular framework.

What I have to say in the pages that follow about the meaning and nature of Mexican devotion to the crucified Christ is in some ways utterly specific to the singular Cristo Aparecido. At the same time, though the focus of this study is on the life of one particular crucifix, it is also a story of his *cristos hermanos*. These “kindred christs” are the other crucifixes that devotees understand to be “siblings” of the Cristo Aparecido, either because they seem to bear a resemblance to theirs in history or appearance or because they are images from neighboring communities included in the same fiesta cycle. I have appropriated the term to include the entire panoply of Mexican cristos. Therefore, in some respects, my conclusions about this particular image and his devotees apply to crucifixes in active devotional use in other communities throughout Mexico and Latin America.

The Indigenous Body and the Body of Christ: Crucifixes as Narratives of Indigenous Suffering

The tremendous power of Mexican christs is that they express the pain of an oppressed people.

—Enrique Dussel, *Historia general de la Iglesia en América Latina*

Perhaps the single most salient feature of Mexican Christianity in the first three centuries of its history was the development of a deep and multifaceted relationship between the Indians of the New World and the religious images of the Christian pantheon, crucifixes most of all. This book explores the complexities, paradoxes, and poignancies of this relationship in detail and with specificity. The intimacy of the relationship between indigenous Mexicans and their many cristos has led modern observers to conclude that the crucified God was inevitably a potent religious symbol for the people of Mexico: an afflicted deity for a profoundly afflicted people. At some points in the history of Mexico, an interpretation based on the conflation of the indigenous body with the body of Christ has, indeed, emerged as meaningful in local engagement with crucifixion imagery. However, at least as frequently, this theological association has been of little consequence for local belief and practice.

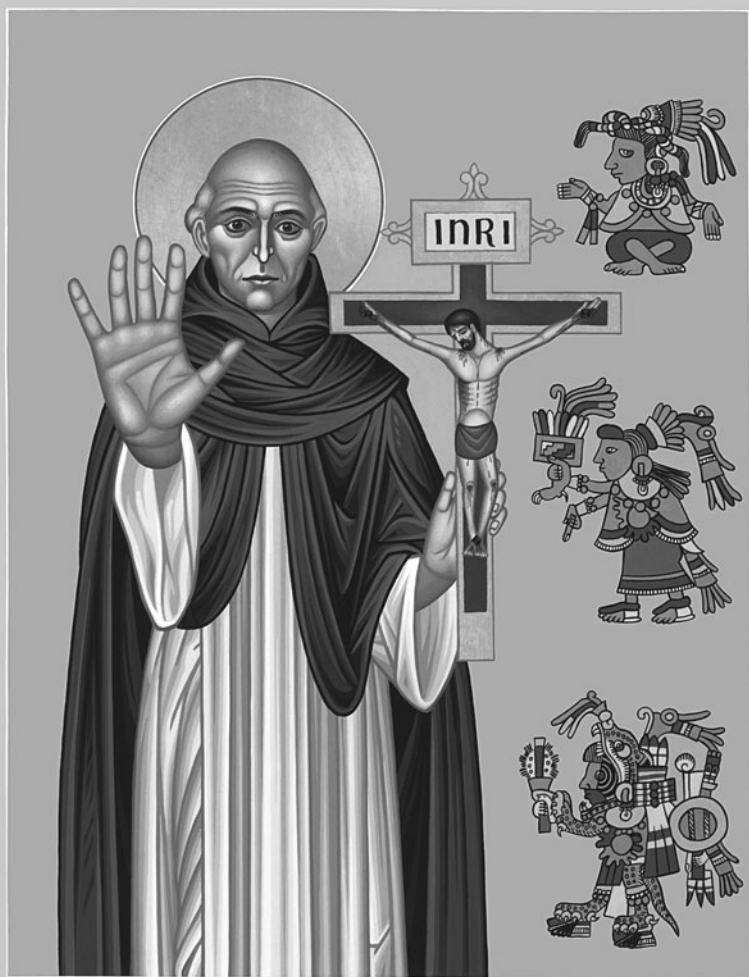
Images of Christ crucified have been at the center of indigenous devotion in Latin America from the very beginnings of Christianity in the New World,

achieving a lasting vibrancy within indigenous Christianity through the present. Shrines to various manifestations of Jesus' suffering flourished in larger percentage in the colonies than in Spain itself. This was by design: the Franciscan missionaries in particular, and the mendicant orders in general, intended that the New World would be the stage for a purer and truer Church, one grounded in a Christ-centered faith. Today, this continues to be the case, as local devotions to artistic images depicting the suffering of Jesus are more common and numerous than those honoring images of the Virgin Mary, including the Virgin of Guadalupe, in much of Mexico.⁵

Nevertheless, in the last decade, it is Guadalupe, the Mexican mother of God, who has captured the imagination and the affections, it would appear, of historians, anthropologists, and theologians. At least a dozen recent books and literally countless articles from many disciplines engage the topic.⁶ Meanwhile, in spite of and utterly indifferent to this scholarly neglect, local devotions to images of Christ's suffering continue to rival (and often surpass) those to the Virgin Mary.⁷ While Guadalupe herself has come to symbolize, among other things, the incorporation of an indigenous past into a secular, nationalist identity, crucifixes have proven largely resistant and inaccessible to a nationalist project. For the most part, the images themselves and the devotions surrounding them have been regarded with ambivalence (and sometimes outright suspicion) by secular and theological scholars alike. These have tended to give the subject wide berth, perhaps because they find the crucifixes embarrassingly baroque or even artless, or perhaps because they perceive the meanings of these crucifixes to be more obscure or more problematic than the less troubling—and since the eighteenth century politically momentous—Virgin of Guadalupe.

This is not to say that the overwhelming presence of crucifixes in the religious life of Mexico has not on occasion garnered the attention of artists and intellectuals. The unchallenged consensus explaining both the original reception of the images in the colonial period and the lasting vibrancy of these Christ devotions is the one summarized so jarringly by Octavio Paz in the epigraph that opens this introduction: that for the descendents of Nahuaspeaking Indians, the symbol of the crucifix rehearses unceasingly the story of the conquest of Mexico. Enrique Dussel rephrases the same sentiment: the power and longevity of the crucifix in the Catholicism of mestizo Mexico has its origins in an immediate and unmediated indigenous identification with Christ's suffering in which they have seen mirrored their own. Appealing to a notion of psychological catharsis, art historian Pál Kelemen concludes that "the Indians, now degraded to the lowest caste in their own land, might well have found release for their emotional tension by embracing the realistic agonizing Christ."⁸ This explanation for the theological and cultural significance of Mexican cristos is widely accepted and circulated today by outside observers.⁹

It is to the famed sixteenth-century “Protector of the Indians,” the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, that we can attribute this original interpretation. Las Casas not only catalogued and decried the violent destruction of the indigenous people of the New World but he also argued tirelessly for the return of their political sovereignty. The Indians were fully human, Las Casas reasoned before the Spanish court, and authentic Christian conversion could not be achieved by conquest and violent imposition. There was “one way” to



BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

FIGURE I.2. *Bartolomé de las Casas*, by Br. Robert Lentz, OFM. Icon, United States, 1992. By permission of Trinity Stores.



FIGURE 1.3. *Our Lord of Charitable Works*. Guaman Poma de Ayala. Adapted from a drawing dating from Peru, 1615, in the collection of the Royal Library of Denmark; used by permission.

convert the Indians of the New World, and that was that they must have political sovereignty and complete freedom to accept or reject the religion as a set of propositions and doctrines, without compulsion or coercion.¹⁰ But this was not the reality of New Spain, the tireless advocate inveighed, where the Indians

were so violated and abused that they had become themselves “scourged Christs”: “For I leave in the Indies Jesus Christ, our God, scourged and afflicted and buffeted and crucified, not once but millions of times, on the part of all the Spaniards who ruin and destroy these people and deprive them of the space they require for their conversion and repentance, depriving them of life before their time.”¹¹ The representation of Las Casas by the modern iconographer Robert Lentz captures this theme: the friar demands a halt to the oppression of the suffering Indians in the name of the suffering Christ (figure 1.2).

The Andean Indian chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala most likely adopted this powerful association from Las Casas, who he much admired. His 1615 manuscript depicts a fiesta procession in honor of “Our Lord of Charitable Works” in which the profile of the crucified Christ is mirrored in the profile of the Indian who carries the processional image: sad, head bowed, defeated yet faithful still; the resemblance between the face of the Indian and the face of Christ is transparent (figure 1.3).¹²

Twentieth-century artists have echoed this colonial interpretation. The Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco draws the analogy most starkly in his painting that adorns the walls of the National Preparatory School in Mexico. A subsequent lithograph based on the mural, “The Franciscan” (1929), shows a Spanish friar protectively and lovingly cradling the naked, wasted body of an Indian (figure 1.4). Clemente Orozco’s image is, in essence, a *pietà* in which the friar stands in the place of the grieving Mary, and the Indian for the deceased body of Jesus, limp and lifeless in his mother’s arms. The association of the suffering of Christ with the affliction of a colonized indigenous population also captured the artistic imagination of Mexican artist Francisco Goitia, as expressed in his provocatively titled painting “Tata Jesucristo” or “Papa Jesus Christ” (1927) (figure 1.5). In spite of the title, the familiar figure of Jesus himself is utterly absent from Goitia’s rendering. Instead, the painting depicts two indigenous women in mourning; their bodies almost disappear into the dark and shadowed background of his canvas. Of one of his subjects all that is visible are her hands (which completely obscure her face), her feet, and the long, dark hair that shrouds her body. In an interview Goitia explained how he posed his models:

I tried my models sitting this way and that, but no, I didn’t feel it exactly right. At last I investigated everything I could about them. I then made them come and sit for me on the Day of the Dead, when of their own accord they would be dwelling on sorrow, and little by little I uncovered their sorrow and the revolution and their dead. And they writhed, and one turned her foot up in pain. Then I knew I had it! Those hands and feet gave their grief [its] genuine form. I would never have thought of it myself, but of course that is the way grief is, and so I was satisfied at last. They weep tears of our race, pain and tears our own and different from others. All the sorrow of Mexico is there.¹³

In Goitia's painting the suffering of Christ and the suffering of his indigenous models are collapsed together; it is the contorted, grieving Indian women who stand for Christ, and who carry the suffering of Mexico, much as Christ himself is said to bear the suffering of the world.

Beyond their passing acceptance of this centuries-long conflation of indigenous suffering with the suffering of Christ, modern scholars have been reluctant to offer sustained study and interpretation of the history, meaning, and significance of images of Christ for the faith of the Mexican people. For the most part, they have tended to concur that in the Latin American context



FIGURE 1.4. *Franciscan [San Francisco e indio]*. Lithograph, Mexico, 1929. José Clemente Orozco. By permission of Fundación José Clemente Orozco.



FIGURE 1.5. *Tata Jesucristo*. Francisco Goitia. Oil on canvas, Mexico, 1926. By permission of Museo Nacional de Arte.

crucifixes are irretrievably linked to a narrative of suffering, violent subjugation, resignation, and passivity. Liberation theologians in particular have been scathing in their criticism of the destructive power these images hold over oppressed populations. However, these rhetorical statements are rarely backed by substantive ethnographic, historical, or documentary evidence. This unchallenged interpretation obscures a five-centuries-long process of contestation and meaning-making in which clergy and Indians (and later mestizos) alike struggled to shape and define the parameters of appropriate understanding of the crucifix.

Persuaded and intrigued by these artistic interpretations, I began researching the topic of crucifix devotion in order to ground a broader inquiry into the motif of suffering in Mesoamerican popular religion. I thought that a study focusing on the meaning devotees made of these graphic representations of human affliction would serve as a lens to understand indigenous efforts to negotiate, categorize, interpret, and survive their own experience of unprecedented suffering under conquest and colonial rule. Throughout the Cristo Aparecido's biography the themes of suffering, violence, and vulnerability are indeed rehearsed and reinvented. One of the salient dynamics that emerged in my study is clerical preoccupation with the theme of the suffering of Jesus in

the face of alternate indigenous engagements. Throughout many centuries, including the most recent one, friars and priests have persisted in asserting an interpretation of the crucifix that dwells on torture, pain, the broken body, and death. More often than not, for the many friars, priests, and clerics to whom I will introduce the reader along the way, the Cristo Aparecido is embedded within a narrative of Christ's earthly passion, in light of which every inch, every surface, of the image can be understood, explained, and interpreted.

At the same time, there are many occasions on which these themes are muted or absent in devotion. In spite of the copious blood, torn skin, and exposed bones of the Cristo's gaunt and distorted corpse, the motif of suffering, whether human or divine, does not encompass all that his devotees have found meaningful, potent, or sacred within their image. For the believers of Totolapan today, for example, the narrative in which their Cristo comfortably rests is only very secondarily one of Christ's passion as remembered in the Gospels. Rather, the primary story they recount concerns how and where the image appeared, where it has traveled, what blessings it has poured out upon them, and what signs of life and *animus* it has shown. Today the theme of beauty often emerges more strongly in devotions than the theme of suffering, and affection for the Cristo is a more prevalent emotion than pity. Mexican cristos, in general, have often proven surprisingly resistant to an association with suffering both historically and in the present.

The theme of indigenous suffering is, in fact, one of the persistent undercurrents in the biography of the Cristo, but this is not because the Indians, generally speaking, have seen Christ's affliction as somehow analogous to their own. Rather, among many other meanings and uses, Christians images, including crucifixes, have been for the Indians a protection, buffer, and "shield of arms" against the most damaging consequences of colonization. That is, the process of colonization and its legacy left these communities, in some instances, utterly dependent on the efficacy of these same images for their health, well-being, and even survival. Indigenous devotees in the colonial period and the present have perceived that their collective fate and the fate of their cristos are profoundly linked.

Lived Religion and Local Faith

Inasmuch as this work is biographical in nature, it is just as importantly an exploration of collective engagement with the Cristo Aparecido over time, and of the negotiated interpretation of religious experience. That is, it is a spiritual history of the Cristo's devotees and of their religious practice and belief: namely, a study of "lived religion." Harvard Divinity School scholars Robert Orsi and David Hall were the first to identify and schematize the "lived religions" approach within the field of religious studies, intentionally adopting methods

and interpretive paradigms from the discipline of anthropology. Orsi's most famous work, and the text that best exemplifies the methods and commitments of this approach, is *The Madonna of 115th Street*, which documents a faith community's relationship to an image of the Virgin Mary in Italian Harlem. The book recounts shifts in the collective celebration of the Madonna to trace the changing status of Italian-American Catholics in New York throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴ Orsi's study is a project with obvious similarities to my own. Thomas Tweed's *Our Lady of the Exile*, about a Cuban shrine in Miami, and Timothy Matovina's *Guadalupe and Her Faithful* about Latino Catholics in San Antonio, Texas, are more recent works in this vein.

At the same time that some religious studies scholars have begun to engage religion as a cultural phenomenon, historians have recently made what I see as a parallel move in their growing interest in the study of "local religion." William Christian's highly praised book, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-century Spain*, in which he uncovers the faith and practice of ordinary Spanish Christians, is foundational for the field.¹⁵ The emerging fields of "lived" and "local" religion represent a search for increasingly nuanced theoretical models and more satisfying interpretive frameworks for understanding what is traditionally termed, derided, and even disregarded as "popular religion"—the faith, beliefs, and practices of poor, colonized, and marginalized people.

I share this scholarly commitment, and thus the biography of the Cristo rests at the nexus of these two methodologies. I have given privileged place to the experiential, exploring what people feel in their encounter with the image, not in order to isolate some "unmediated" experience of the divine or to discern a set of types or archetypes, as religious studies scholars have traditionally been wont to do.¹⁶ Rather, because the Cristo is a locus around which collective and individual interpretation has taken place for almost five centuries, he provides the opportunity for a phenomenological exploration of the variety of religious meanings that accrue to a specific local, cultural context over time. Over the broken body of the Cristo, sacred meanings are made, broken, and made again. Whereas scholars of religion have historically distanced themselves from the embodied faith and everyday religious practice of poor and marginalized people, the biography of the Cristo draws the reader close to local devotees and believers, offering an intimate portrait of their practices of faith.

A work of this broad historical scope must necessarily be interdisciplinary in nature. Thus I employ the methods of archival research, oral history, and ethnographic study to interpret the local significance of popular practices in order, ultimately, to explain the crucified Christ's enduring vitality for the faith of the Mexican people. A large part of this project involved many hours in libraries and archives, where I consulted and studied the colonial sources that allowed me to uncover the Cristo's origins and his history in the first four hundred years. My family and I also spent six months, in 2003–2004, engaged in field research in the pueblo of Totolapan. There I studied current devotion to

the image, interviewing devotees and participating in the religious life of the people. I returned later in 2004 to attend the annual fiesta and have continued to be in touch with local government officials and lay leaders. In 2008, I engaged in a smaller-scale research project among migrants of Totolapan to the California coastal community and mission town San Juan Capistrano. And so my research was directed and sustained by both a forward and backward movement: beginning with the origins of the Cristo I have followed the image forward through history, just as I have sought to trace the faith of modern-day devotees backward through time.

The form that this book takes cannot be solely attributed to the theoretical twists and turns and shifting intellectual commitments of contemporary U.S. scholars. Its shape has also been necessarily influenced by the very colonial Latin American texts that I rely upon as sources. Only at the conclusion of the writing did I realize that in some respects I have perhaps unwittingly emulated the friar Alonso Ramos Gavilán's sweeping seventeenth-century history of the shrine of the Virgin of Copacabana in the Andes, *Historia de Nuestra Señora de Copacabana* (1621). In similar fashion, though I do not regard them uncritically, I must acknowledge the influence of the magisterial colonial *crónicas* and *historias* that painstakingly record the indigenous culture that the missionaries encountered in the New World at the same time that they celebrate the work of the religious orders in bringing about indigenous conversion to Christianity.¹⁷ Like these authors, I grapple with finding a way to explain, understand, and even celebrate the complex phenomenon of indigenous Christianity. Native Indian efforts to categorize the same set of experiences have also shaped my understanding. The drawings of the indigenous Peruvian noble Guamán Poma de Ayala capture the vitality of indigenous Christianity in Latin America along with the abuses suffered by the Indians of Peru at the hands of priests and secular authorities alike. These sketches have left their indelible mark on my mind and no doubt a discernable imprint upon my interpretation.¹⁸ Two contemporary works also bear mention here, as they strive, like mine, toward a comprehensive history and complex interpretation of a single Mexican image: David Brading's historical treatment of the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (2003), and the interdisciplinary volume about a Mexican black Christ, edited by José Velasco Toro, *Santuario y región: Imágenes del Cristo Negro de Otatitlán* (1997).

On the surface, this book takes the form of an "object history," tracing the journey and survival of the physical image itself across time and space.¹⁹ Each chapter is woven around a single, chronological moment in the encounter between believers and the image. The first two substantive chapters are concerned with the sixteenth century. Chapter 2 takes as its starting point the miraculous appearance of the Cristo to the community of newly converted indigenous Christians of Totolapan and their friars in 1543. It introduces the