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## Walden Browne, Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity

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*Sahagún and the Transition to Modernity*. By Walden Browne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. xii + 260 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.)

Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1500-1590) is best known for his general history on things of New Spain. This work, says Walden Brown, should be entitled *Historia universal de las cosas de la Nueva España*. The basis for this assertion is a badly mutilated title page of the Tolosa manuscript, a copy made of the book after it arrived in Spain. However, his contemporary and friend, Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, wrote that Sahagún called the treatise a *calepino* (calepin), which would minutely analyze the Náhuatl language now being corrupted by its mixture with Spanish and the Spanish "barbarisms" adopted by the Indians.

Browne's lively and provocative book will undoubtedly be questioned by Sahagún scholars. In the first part of his study he plays the devil's advocate and challenges the recognition given Sahagún as the "father of modern anthropology," as "Renaissance humanist," and as a practitioner of a modern "ethnographic methodology." He also qualifies the confiscation of Sahagún's magnum opus. As concerns the last question, Alonso de Zorta wrote in 1585 that he had been told that a written copy of the treatise was in the library of San Francisco de México.

Granted that Sahagún was not a modern-day scholar, he still seems more "modern" than Lewis Henry Morgan or C.S. Coon, who more recently believed in subspecies. Moreover, while one can agree with Browne that it is "nonsensical to associate Renaissance humanism with any coherent (and

superior) sense of moral redemption" (p. 77), the term "Christian humanist" or "social humanist" is useful in distinguishing Bartolomé de Las Casas and others from classical humanists like Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who defended Indian slavery in his debate with Las Casas.

In the second part of his study, Browne's central thesis is that "the majority of Sahagún's writings must be interpreted as a symptom (or as symptoms) of the disintegration of the medieval worldview" (p. 8). Ordered in 1558 by his provincial to compile in Náhuatl information to help the missionaries "extirpate idolatrous practices more efficiently," Sahagún by 1585 was convinced "that everything about their conversion was false" (pp. 113, 105).

In contrasting Sahagún's views with the millennial mind-set of the Franciscans in the 1520s, Browne notes that Sahagún gave a new twist to the idea of a peregrinating church moving from east to west. The church in New Spain and Peru, said Sahagún, "has done nothing more than pass by on its way and even to make a way in order to converse with those people of the regions of China" (p. 118). This may be a new notion, but as early as 1545 Fray Juan de Zumárraga, at the age of seventy, tried to give up his bishopric to go to preach the Gospel in the Philippines and go on from there to China.

In summary, Browne has made good use of the studies of Benjamin Keen, Georges Baudot, and Robert Ricard. However, he neglects Jacques Lafaye's comments on the incipient Creole nationalism apparent as early as the 1550s, and the insufficient attention paid by Franciscans like Sahagún to the changed world of the Aztecs. The native accounts have considerable value, especially those recorded by Sahagún and Fray Diego Durán, but were set down long after the conquest and in a world turned upside down. In this world, says Lafaye, "degraded forms of the old polytheism combined with popular superstitions" and strange reinterpretations of Christian traditions passed themselves off "as the spiritual heritage of the past." This condition makes Browne's last chapter on Sahagún, the Devil, and the disintegration of a medieval conceptualization of knowledge most interesting. Views on Aztec civilization and Indian policy were related, and Sahagún, like others of his Order, occupied an uneasy middle-of-the-road position. Hence, "Europe's demons were used as an interpretive response to a dilemma that grew out of, and was shaped by the unique missionary situation of New Spain" (p. 186).

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