Perhaps some of the best examples of the migration of the sacred from pre-modern religions into the new religions of modernity can be found in the rituals of nationalism as they developed in the early modern period. In this chapter, I investigate the origins and processes that led to the development of nationalist pilgrimages by comparing four pilgrimages that arose in the colonial periods of Mexico and the United States. As we shall see, the transformation of a pilgrimage into a stable nationalist ritual was not a simple or straightforward process, and many elements had to mesh precisely if such a transformation were to occur successfully. Of the four colonial pilgrimages discussed below, only three became the object of nationalist sentiment and of the three, only two have survived as nationalist pilgrimages to the present day. Although necessarily elliptical given restraints on space, I will endeavor in the following to explain some of the chief reasons why the migration of the sacred was successful in some cases, but not in others. I will conclude by discussing some of the key similarities and differences between nationalist pilgrimage in Mexico and the U.S.
Two Pilgrimages in Colonial Mexico

One of the most popular pilgrimages in New Spain during the sixteenth century centered on the image of the Virgin Mary venerated near Mexico City on the hill of Tepeyac. The origins of this pilgrimage site were ancient, as it was already a pilgrimage destination for the Indians before the conquest. There, it was said that the Indians venerated an image of Tonantzin, of whom the famous Franciscan ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún wrote, “The first of these goddesses was called Cihuacóatl, which means wife of the Serpent; they also call her Tonantzin, which means ‘our mother’” (Lafaye 1987:211). The shrine at Tepeyac attracted people from points beyond the valley of Mexico and was well known before the conquest (Marin 1972:166–168).

The association of Tepeyac with the Virgin Mary went back to the first days of the conquest. We are told by Bernal Díaz de Castillo in his history of 1568 that during the siege of Tenochtitlan, one of Cortés’ lieutenants, the infamous Gonzalo de Sandoval, made his headquarters at Tepeyac, and it is supposed that he erected a shrine to the Virgin Mary there. After the conquest was completed, a statue of the Virgin Mary, copied from the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura in Spain, was installed at the site (Lafaye 1987:232–233). Following church precedent, the Franciscans encouraged investing pagan sites with Christian symbols, and for a time the friars even seem to have encouraged the continuation of Indian pilgrimages to what was now called the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac (Lafaye 1987:215). Later, in the 1550’s, this statue was replaced by the Indian painting, which can be seen there to this day. Late in the sixteenth century, pious legends began to grow up around the sanctuary and the painting, the earliest concerning healing miracles, with later legends recounting an apparition of the Virgin Mary to an Indian shepherd, identified as Juan Diego (Johnson 1981:25–48; Turner 1978:82–85). By this time, however, the pilgrimage site had long since passed out of the hands of the Franciscans and into the firm grip of their arch-rivals, the secular clergy.

Despite their initial promotion of the Tepeyac pilgrimage, the Franciscans ultimately became its most vigorous opponents. Since idolatry persisted in the valley of Mexico well until the second half of the sixteenth century, the Franciscans became paranoid about any practice that – however remotely – preserved pagan belief and practice. Thus Sahagún, for example, in his Historia general (1576), denounced the cult of the Virgin Mary of Tepeyac since the Indians who frequented it referred to the image there as the Aztec god-