Mystical practice arrived to the New World earlier than one might have expected. I refer here not only to the monastic life practiced by the religious orders—Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians—who by the 1530s were well established in the Americas. Instead, I refer to the devotional, ascetic and mystical practices introduced by these orders not only in the Spanish communities (a well-studied topic) but in the converted native communities. This theme deserves attention since it provides an opportunity to approach the study of intercultural dialogue within a field almost unexplored up to now. This is the subject of this chapter: namely, to explore the Franciscan contribution to a dialogue on ascetic and mystical practices with the 16th-century Nahuas of central Mexico. The participants in this dialogue were singular representatives of two strong currents of religious practice: medieval and Mesoamerican. The well known 16th-century Franciscan ethnographer, Bernardino de Sahagún, writing on the ancient Mexicans, says:

In regard to the religion and worship of their gods I do not believe that in the world there have been idolaters more worshipful toward their gods, nor so submissive to them, than these [peoples] of this New Spain; neither the Jews nor any other nation had such a heavy yoke and with so many ceremonies as this native people had for so many years, as may be seen in this work.¹

The unavoidable question is: was it possible that two strong religious systems (the medieval Christian Franciscan and the Mesoamerican Nahua), with such different concepts about the Divinity, could open

¹ “En lo que toca a la religión y cultura de sus dioses no creo ha habido en el mundo idólatras más reverenciadores de sus dioses, ni tan a su costa, como éstos de esta Nueva España; ni los judíos, ni ninguna otra nación tuvo yugo tan pesado y de tantas ceremonias como le han tomado estos naturales por espacio de muchos años, como parece por esta obra” (Bernardino de Sahagún, Prologue to Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España [Mexico, 2000], 1: 64). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
a dialogue in a matter so delimited by religious views as the mystic’s? Some scholars maintain that this dialogue was impossible. My opinion is that, reading the 16th-century Franciscan literature, both Spanish and Nahua, one will be able to find enough evidence to maintain that the Franciscans and Nahuas were open to a religious intercultural dialogue which permitted them an exchange of religious symbols, concepts and practices. The purpose of this dialogue was to motivate the Franciscans to draw up different projects to introduce the Nahua communities into the practice of Franciscan mysticism. The result was a religious venture which might be considered one of the most daring attempts in western Christianity to approach the Other’s culture. As I mentioned, my principal sources will be the well-known 16th-century Franciscan literature, most of it, unfortunately, still waiting for English translation. I will juxtapose with this literature various unpublished materials, most of them from the Archivo General de Indias in Seville (Spain). My hope is that this chapter will open the opportunity for further research in a field so important for intercultural dialogue.

**Francis of Assisi and Medieval Mysticism**

It would be impossible to deal with Franciscan mystical practice in 16th-century New Spain without a brief reference to the founder of the order and the spiritual movements he originated. These movements nourished the medieval mysticism in which the Franciscans who came to Mexico were formed. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) is rightly considered one of the greatest innovators of medieval spirituality. His spiritual project, against the trends of medieval monasticism, opted for a way of living (forma vitae) based on the “vita evangelii”, emphasizing evangelical poverty as one of the distinctive elements of his order. The social reality of the 12th and 13th centuries, in which political power and money were signs of a person’s value, provided

---


3 Two exceptions: Toribio Motolinía’s *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España*, has been translated by Francis Borgia Steck as *Motolinía’s History of the Indians of New Spain* (Washington, D.C., 1951); and Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* has a translation from the Nahua text by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, titled *General History of the Things of New Spain: The Florentine Codex* (Santa Fe, 1950).