PART TWO

SPECIFIC FIGURES
The turn of the 16th century was a time of great turmoil in religious life on the Iberian Peninsula. The last decades of the 15th century not only included such well-known events as the origins of the Inquisition, the end of the Reconquest, and the expulsion of the Jews, but also the equally influential Cisnerian reform of the religious orders and the clergy. In addition to formalizing theological instruction at the University of Alcalá and introducing humanistic methods of biblical exegesis, Archbishop Cisneros’s promotion of visionary activity and vernacular mysticism led to a half-century of extraordinary openness throughout the peninsula to a variety of forms of spirituality.1 This openness, although terminated abruptly by the publication of the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559, paved the way for the later well-known flowering of Spanish mysticism in the Discalced Carmelite and Jesuit Orders.

One direct beneficiary of Cisneros’s respect for local mystics was a regular Franciscan tertiary by the name of Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534), a nun and abbess of the convent of Santa María de Cubas in Castille. While rapt in contemplation, Juana experienced numerous visions of figuras, or allegorical pageants which transpired in heaven. The festivals and various biblical scenes were narrated to her (and through her, to the world) by the Holy Spirit, speaking in the first person as Jesus Christ.2 Her visions were in fact public experiences,