
This book traces the story of the Cristo Aparecido (“Christ Appeared”), a sculpture of Jesus Christ on the cross, through four and a half centuries of Mexican history. Hughes calls her book a “biography,” acknowledging the image’s status as a living being in the eyes of his devotees. She emphasizes the emotional experiences that arise out of devotional engagement with the image. I here follow the author in referring to the image as “he,” rather than “it.”

The Cristo was carved in the sixteenth century from a local material, the wooden shaft of the maguey plant. He resides in Totolapan, a formerly Nahuatl-speaking community of about 7,000 people in the state of Morelos, where he remains the principal focus of the town’s religious life. Hughes bases the book on library and archival research and on fieldwork carried out in Mexico and among migrants from Totolapan who live in California but continue to participate in the devotion.

The image enters the historical record in 1583, when Augustinian friars claiming the statue worked miracles drew the attention of the Mexican Inquisition. Friars and witnesses from Totolapan testified that in 1543 an Indian man from Mexico City brought the statue to fray Antonio de Roa, a zealous Augustinian missionary residing at Totolapan. The stranger vanished before he could be questioned or paid. This mysterious appearance led to the Cristo’s appellation of “aparecido”; the strange Indian was labeled an angel. I am more skeptical than Hughes regarding details presented before the Inquisition four decades after the fact, but it seems possible that the image came into the community during Roa’s brief residence there.

The Cristo aroused the inquisitors’ suspicions only because the friars had taken him from Totolapan to Mexico City. Later, rescued from a 1676 church fire, the Cristo received his own side chapel in the Augustinians’ new church. Little documentation survives from the later colonial period, but the Cristo was one of the images called upon for help during the 1736–1737 typhus epidemic. The origin story given in the 1583 testimony faded from use until the mid-1700s, when an Augustinian, opposing the rationalizing reforms of the Bourbon era, sought to revive interest in the fervid Roa’s saintliness.

In another narrow escape, the Cristo was apparently removed from the church before soldiers stripped it in 1861, as President Benito Juárez seized property from the religious orders. At this time the Cristo returned to Totolapan. Hughes envisions an unbroken local devotion to an image remembered as
unjustly taken away, but her evidence indicates only that the image’s wooden cross, left behind in 1583, was an object of devotion as of 1743. That Totolapan had a confraternity devoted to the Holy Cross is not evidence, as these were commonplace in colonial Nahua communities. The idea that for nearly three centuries the people of Totolapan continued to consider the Cristo their own, removed without their consent, could be an invented tradition articulated in response to the image’s return. It is not documented until decades later. The tradition is salient today: people in Totolapan see the Cristo’s sojourn in Mexico City as a time when he was lost and inaccessible to them (even though he could have been visited in his chapel). Unwilling to contemplate life without their Cristo, they naturally assume their ancestors would never have agreed to part with him.

Hughes’s discussions of colonial-era religion present several inaccuracies and over-generalizations. For example, the Passion of Christ was not the dominant topic of friars’ sermons, nor did friars feel much need to distinguish the Passion from Aztec human sacrifice. She asserts that “affection and tenderness for objects of the natural world” is “the single most important aspect of indigenous Christianity” to have survived from pre-Columbian religion (p. 112), and that this attitude endures to the present as “the single most important spiritual posture in Mesoamerican local religion” (p. 113). While the tender affection the people of Totolapan feel toward their Cristo is compellingly described, to project this attitude back over several centuries and elevate it to such centrality demands more evidence than the meager bits she supplies. Her proposition merits exploration in colonial native-language sources; at present, however, other links between indigenous Christianity and pre-Columbian religion can be documented much more thoroughly.

More convincing is a related argument: Hughes criticizes the assumption that indigenous and other lower-class Mexicans identify with a tortured or dead Christ as an embodiment of their own suffering and beaten-down condition, and that this attitude fosters fatalism and passivity. The people of Totolapan see life and beauty, not pain and death, in their Cristo, and celebrate his festivals with much joy. Far from passive, they actively defend their devotion to him. Caution is needed in making any generalizations about people’s emotional lives.

In the book’s later chapters, Hughes engages absorbingly with living memory and current practice. During the era of liberation theology, the Cristo succeeded in winning over churchmen disinclined to embrace a popular devotion to a “dead” Jesus. The bishop (noted liberationist Sergio Méndez Arceo) and local priests from this time are fondly remembered in Totolapan. Hughes also