

On the Indigenismo of American Religion: Toward a Postcolonial Pedagogy, by Paul Rodriguez

This paper attempts to show that a study of the history of Mexican religion can help to explain the present state of the study of Mexican-American religion within the U.S. educational system. I contend that there is an historical link between the destruction of the Aztec sacred books of knowledge by the Spanish Conquistadors and the current ban on Mexican-American studies under Arizona House Bill 2281, as well as the limited status of the study of Latino religion within southern California community colleges (and elsewhere). The suppression of Mexican-American history within the broader framework of the American educational system leads to a weakened ability for Mexican-Americans to thrive as historico-political communities.

Introduction: The Mexican and American History

The beginnings of American history are reduced all too often to the arrival of the British settlers on the Eastern coast of the North American continent during the first few decades of the seventeenth century, as well as the subsequent expansion of these colonies westward. This reductionist myth is deeply entrenched within our American educational system. The effects of this short-sightedness manifest in various ways. Let me briefly share two personal examples. A few years ago, I was involved in a friendly discussion with some graduate students of religion who casually mentioned that America is a Protestant country – or at least that its foundations were Protestant. They took this for granted to such a degree, that I found my brief attempt at some disagreement to be quite useless. Again, the former child actor turned conservative evangelical, Kirk Cameron—speaking in a live television interview from the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC)—commented that America began with the pilgrims who created this nation “out of a wilderness, from scratch.”¹ This was not the main point of the argument Mr. Cameron was then making, but it does underscore the main point of the present essay: inaccurate historical claims within the American educational system impede our understanding of cultural and religious heritages, and in this way weaken our ability to discern as political communities.

The study of Mexican-American religion exists somewhere in the borderland between (what is normally called) the study of U.S./American religion and the study of Latino religion. While I do not mean to confuse the singular study of Mexican-American religion with the broader study of either U.S./American or Latino religion, I do argue that the study of Mexican-American religion is an essential component of the greater complex that is American religion; by which I mean the diverse religiosity of all the Americas (North, Central, and South) and the Caribbean. Taken in this broader sense, it can be said that American religion itself exists in a borderland between the three continents that comprise the Old World: Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the field of religious studies, especially with regard to classes on American/U.S. religion, comparative religion, or (so-called) world religions, the model that centers its attention on the

Old World remains dominant (except that less attention is generally given to African religions). What this means is that, unfortunately, many undergraduate and graduate level religious studies programs do not tend to offer courses on Latino religion. Moreover, no understanding of American religion can be complete without paying a good deal of attention to the religiosity that is situated near the middle of an expansive geographical area: from Alaska to Argentina, Brazil to Maine, and the Caribbean to San Diego. Approximately in the middle of this broad American landscape are the people whose historical homeland stretches from Mesoamerica to the southwestern portion of the U.S.: the Mexican and Mexican-American people.

The U.S. Census & Mexican-American *Indigenismo* (Indigenosity)

As is the case with the majority of Latinos, the timbre of Mexican-American religion is highly indigenous. One might not guess this, however, by looking at the complicated history that the U.S. Census has with regard to how it categorizes Latinos. Unfortunately, this convoluted history of the U.S. Census reinforces an oversimplification of American history that excludes the complex and ancient Mexican historical experience. The problem, as I see it, is that the U.S. Census does not count Latinos and Mexican-Americans as native or indigenous, but instead categorizes them as Caucasian or white. As Roberto Rodriguez points out, this can be traced back to the Mexican-American War and the subsequent cession of the two Mexican states of Alto California and Nuevo Mexico in 1848. At that time, “the Mexican government attempted to protect its former citizens by insisting that the U.S. government treat them legally as white,” so that these former Mexicans (now Mexican-Americans) might not be “enslaved or subjected to legal segregation.”² This attempt to protect its former citizens was not entirely successful, as many Mexican-Americans not only had their land and property taken away from them (only sometimes by legal means), but also suffered a great deal of violence at the hands of the incoming Anglo colonizers of the West.³ Since 1970, the Census has included a question—one that is separate from the question on race—that asks whether the respondent is either of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin. According to Rodriguez, since Census 1980, about half of Latinos have checked the ‘some other race’ option, and “are virtually the only group that chooses this category.”⁴

The Indigenous Cultures Institute in Texas, a Census 2010 partner, has argued for the inclusion of Mexican-Americans and Latinos in the category “American Indian.” After answering the question on whether one is Spanish/Hispanic/Latino, the institute suggested that “If you are a descendant of native people, you can identify yourself as an American Indian in the 2010 Census,” and that if “you don’t know your tribe, enter ‘unknown’ or ‘detrribalized native’.”⁵ If this more expansive view were embraced, it would result in an increase from about 5 million American Indians to perhaps 30 or 40 million.⁶ This is a conservative estimate, because not all U.S. Latinos could legitimately or would voluntarily claim indigenous ancestry. Nevertheless, these expanded figures reflect the *indigenismo* of Latinos in general and especially people who claim Mexican heritage, i.e. Mexican-Americans. In Mexico, for example, the overall population is 80% *Mestizo*, i.e. a person of mixed race (usually Native American and European).⁷ A recent study on the genetic diversity that involved 300 self-identified *Mestizos* from six geographically

diverse states in Mexico found that their mean ancestries were: 55.2% American Indian, 41.8% European, 1.8% African, and 1.2% East Asian.⁸ Moreover, according to the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples), 11% of the total population of Mexico claim only American Indian ancestry.

Additionally, the *indigenismo* of the U.S. population is increasing exponentially. Whereas Census 2000 recorded 35.3 million Latinos in the U.S., Census 2012 recorded 50.5 million, which equals roughly 16% of the total population, or 1 in 6 Americans.⁹ This means that from 2000 to 2010 Latinos represented 56% of the growth of the entire nation. As of 2006, about half of all public school students in California, for example, were Latino.¹⁰ About two out of three Latinos in the U.S. are of Mexican-American heritage, and the proportion is even greater in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California.¹¹ Increasingly, the lack of Mexican-American (and Latino) studies is all the more striking. Yet our national system of higher education on the whole, particularly when it comes to religious studies programs, fails to fully include Mexican-American and Latino studies. Like the U.S. Census, the broader national educational system falls behind in recognizing that *indigenismo* is a permanent fixture within the American citizenry.

Education in Pre-Conquest Mesoamerica

Despite the common view, modern American history—if that is to be defined by European colonization of the Americas—does not begin with the English (and Dutch) settlements on the Eastern coast of North America. Nevertheless, religious studies programs tend to ignore this fact, and, as a result, the history of Latin American religion tends to be neglected. Within the context of studying American religion, it is important to stress that it was over a century before the English colonization of America began that Christopher Columbus landed on an unknown island in the Bahamas. Not long thereafter, in 1519, Hernán Cortés along with a few hundred Spaniards and several hundred natives—especially those who had been oppressed by the Mexica Empire—entered Tenochtitlan and met with the Mexica ruler Moctezuma. At this time the Mexica Empire was at its height, and its capital Tenochtitlan, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants, was one of the largest cities in the world.¹² The Mexica were one of the last migrations of a Nahua people into the Valley of Mexico, and they dominated the political system that held together the Aztec Empire, i.e. the Triple Alliance among the three major cities Tenochtitlan, Tetzaco, and Tlacopan. In 1521, Tenochtitlan fell, with nearly one thousand Spaniards and tens of thousands of Indians having lost their lives.¹³ Under Spanish colonial rule there were many ways for the native Mesoamericans to meet their end: work in the mines, famine, random torture and slaughter by the Conquistadors, and, most devastating, the various plagues that recurred on and off for centuries. But this colonial destruction was not only of the physical kind; indeed, it was matched by the destruction of the Mexica culture and religion.

The Spaniards destroyed the *Huey Teocalli* (Great Temple) in Tenochtitlan, along with almost all statues and reliefs that depicted the gods and myths of the Mexica. Importantly, the process of conquest and colonization depends upon a destruction of the Mexica educational system. Probably the most essential element of the conquest and imperial colonization of the Mexica was the systematic burning of the sacred books that held the histories, myths, scientific knowledge, and ancient wisdom of the Mesoamerican peoples. Only a handful of these pre-Conquest codices survived the Conquest. Most of what we know about pre-Conquest Mesoamerica can be found in codices that were composed by devoted Spanish priests, with the help of Aztec scribes (Nahuatl: *tlacuilo*), many of whom became students at the first European university in the Americas, the Real Colegio de Santa Cruz (founded 1533). Indeed, the first academic work done by Europeans in the Americas was Mexican studies. For example, Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan chronicler, has been called “the first anthropologist” for his treatises on the Mexica and other Nahua people of Mesoamerica.¹⁴ Importantly, many of these codices include reproductions of portions of pre-Conquest codices, which contained records of famines, wars, prosperity and adversity, as well as detailed observations of astronomy and the biodiversity of animals, especially birds from distant lands. The education of the youth carried something like a sacred mandate for the ancient Mexica, and the sacred books were also used in a practical function within the various local schools of Tenochtitlan. There were over 30 distinct classes of priests, and each neighborhood of Tenochtitlan was required to have a temple-school (Nahuatl: *calmecac*) where both men and women were trained to become priests that would serve in one of the many *teocalli* (deity house).¹⁵

In Aztec society, a *tlacuilo* (pl. *tlacuiloque*) was by definition “a painter of the red and black.” Trained since childhood to speak to their heart, the *tlacuiloque* were expected to take into their heart the divine, thus becoming a *yohteotl* (“a heart rooted in god”) who could put divinity into things (e.g., the sacred books). The *tlacuiloque* were not alone in their work, for they worked in tandem with the poet-philosophers known as *tlamatinime*.¹⁶ The *tlamatinime* (sing. *tlamatini*) were masters of the oral transmission of sacred word, narrative, and symbols, especially those in the sacred books. A *tlamatini* is literally “a knower of things.”¹⁷ The *tlamatinime* were guardians of the red and black ink—the sacred books of the Mexica—because they searched for the deeper meanings of the codices through a process of systematic inner questioning and interpersonal dialogue.

The exegetical method of the *tlamatinime* might come in the form of prayers, riddles, jokes, soliloquy, or songs and poetry. The *tlamatinime* held up the traditional wisdom of the community like a mirror, and in this way, they helped to forge the *rostro y corazón* (heart and face) of the community. The *tlamatinime* were concerned with developing the face (personality) of the individual within the community, including their moral and aesthetic sensibility. In fact, at the time of the conquest, the *tlamatinime* were just beginning to construct an ethico-political alternative to the spiritual crisis caused by the dominant Aztec cosmovision of greed, conflict, and warfare—especially as fueled by the Wars of the Flowers (1450-1519), whose dual purpose was to acquire sacrificial victims and create political intimidation.¹⁸

For example, the following is a portion of a poem composed by a *tlamatinime* that is clearly critical of the Imperial Mexica cosmivision as promoted by the warrior classes and much of the nobility:

Arrogant stand the warriors, those who snatch whatever is precious, gold, splendidous feathers, turquoises ... Those intoxicated with the liquor of death ... Let us spend our lives in peace and pleasure ... Fury and wrath are not for man, the earth is vast indeed!¹⁹

And again:

To invoke Him [the Giver of Life] with the strength of the eagle and the jaguar, with the force of the warriors, will lead only to the speaking of false words on earth.²⁰

The newly forming vision of the *tlamatinime* came as a result of the great sensitivity that they had for the ephemeral quality of all that exists on earth. For Ana Maria Pineda, an important Latina scholar, present day theologians are like modern *tlamatinime*.²¹

I extend Pineda's analogy by reading it within the context of the present status of most religious studies programs across the nation, which generally fail to incorporate the study of Mexican-American religion fully. When present day American students do not have the sorts of educational opportunities that can lead them to recognize historical connections such as the one Pineda makes, i.e. the one between some present day Latino theologians and the ancient *tlamatinime*, the educational system has failed them. This failure is a reflection of the colonial legacies that are woven into the fabric of modern American and Mexican-American experience. Inaccurate historical narratives, especially ones that fail to incorporate the *indigenismo* of American history, inhibit our society's ability to realize the plurality that is required in the American experiment with democracy. Two examples of the failure I am speaking of are the subject of the concluding two sections of this essay.

Arizona HB 2281

On May 11, 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law HB 2281, which effectively banned the teaching of ethnic studies at Arizona's publicly-funded schools. It is no secret that the major target of this bill was Tucson's Mexican-American studies program, despite the fact that Latino students account for almost half of the students in Arizona's public schools, and the Tucson Mexican-American studies program was reportedly graduating nearly 100% of its students, with over 70% enrolling in a college program.²² The bill originated with the then-Arizona State Superintendent for Public Instruction Tom Horne. Horne defended his actions by arguing: "Traditionally, the American public school system has brought together students from different backgrounds and taught them to be Americans and to treat each other as individuals, and not on the basis of their ethnic backgrounds."²³ From my perspective, this supposed failure to recognize the ethnic make-up of Arizona's student population, which is marked by a high

degree of *indigenismo*, amounts to a failure to address the needs of these students. Horne went on to argue that HB 2281 is “consistent with the fundamental American value that we are all individuals, not exemplars of whatever ethnic groups we were born into,” and that ethnic studies programs “teach the opposite, and are designed to promote ethnic chauvinism.”²⁴

Contra Mr. Horne, I argue that ethnic studies programs are a uniquely American endeavor precisely because they promote collective democratic values. The Mexican-American studies programs in Arizona were designed to excite a broader love of learning among Tucson’s high school students. It is not as though those engaged in Mexican-American studies study an abstract thing called “Mexican-American” that exists at an infinite distance from U.S. American history. The Mexican-American studies programs in Arizona highlighted the role of Mexican-Americans in the broader U.S. American context; for example, in the Vietnam War, or in twentieth century literature. Specifically, the bill prohibits of programs of instruction that (1) “promote the overthrow of the U.S. government;” (2) “promote resentment toward a race or class of people;” (3) “are designed primarily for students of a particular ethnic group;” and (4) “advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.” With regard to Horne’s comments (which are quoted above), it is apparently upon (3) that he rests his arguments. However, what about (4)?

In the American educational context, the notion that the study of one particular ethnic group advocates ethnic solidarity or ethnic chauvinism only makes sense if it is first assumed that only those of that particular ethnic group might enroll in or benefit from such classes. In other words, the reasoning behind HB 2281 rests on the belief that African-American studies, for example, is only for African-American students. In this way, the Arizona law is itself based on a dangerously undemocratic presumption of ethnic chauvinism. Moreover, this sort of legislative intervention into the classroom threatens other fields of study. For example, a similar argument could be used to ban the academic study of religion under the equally erroneous assumption that religious studies classes are primarily designed for religious adherents, or to ban a course on Christianity because it is “only designed for Christians.” Likewise, according to the logic of HB 2281, Women’s Studies should be banned, because, assumedly, such classes only benefit women, breed resentment among women, and promote civil insurrection in women.

In other words, the study of any subject that inherently deals with collectivities (e.g., Mexican-Americans, women, Christians, etc.) is, in the name of individualism, threatened by bills like HB 2281.²⁵ Most importantly, however, Mr. Horne fails to understand that ethnic studies programs exist as a result of the failure of the American educational system to incorporate fully the histories and experiences of certain collectivities into the national curriculum. HB 2281 is an expression of the latent consciousness of modern European imperialism, which has always attempted to de-historicize and de-contextualize those that it seeks to subjugate and assimilate. HB 2281 comes as the result of (and now is also the cause of) the reductionist myth mentioned at the outset of this essay, which is a myth of Becoming that is abstractly based on the dialectic of radical individualism (solipsism) and market capitalism (system), with the concrete result being the existential covering over of the Being of indigenous collectivities, if not also the conceptual appreciation of collectivity itself. This imperialistic

cultural conquest is reinforced by the mythic imagery of the solitary explorer /warrior/ priest/pilgrim/businessman, who can only truly become himself by conquering this New Wilderness/Eden. This imperial myth leads to a reductionist re-centering of history in which the vast majority of time that humans have populated the Americas is ignored. Mexican-American studies, then, is ἀνακαλύπτω (to unveil/uncover)²⁶ America as a collective singularity, which can only be done after recognizing the *indigenismo* of America.

Yet is it always the case that ethnic solidarity is inherently antithetical to the construction of critical, thinking individuals? I argue that ethnic solidarity can be conducive to the social cohesion of our country. I can have ethnic solidarity with those of other ethnic backgrounds than myself, and vice versa. Ethnic solidarity can be a multi-cultural affair, and this is precisely the logic behind any ethnic studies class. Ethnic studies courses aim at dispelling what is already an unspoken ethnic chauvinism at all levels of education in this country that favors one particular historical myth above all others. Think of our friend Kirk Cameron, who was mentioned at the outset of this essay. Think how our educational system has let him, and perhaps even Mr. Horne, down. Nevertheless, Horne is inestimably useful, albeit unwittingly, in making explicit the logic that links HB 2281 to the destruction of the ancient Aztec sacred books. Specifically, I am referring to the first point in the bill that blames ethnic studies for promoting the overthrow of the U.S. government. It is this aspect of HB 2281 that most clearly points toward the imperial history that informs the reasoning behind the legislative ban of Mexican-American studies in Arizona.

Southern California Community Colleges

I end this paper by sharing what I found out about sixty-six community colleges in southern California—an area I defined as the counties of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Kern, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, San Diego, and Imperial—that taken together account for nearly 60% of all California community colleges. The aim of my research was to compare the number of classes offered on Latino religion with the number of classes offered on non-religion Latino related matters by departments other than Religious Studies or Philosophy (since Religious Studies classes are often offered through Philosophy departments). My research was limited to classes offered during the 2012 spring semester. What I found was that courses on Latino or Mexican-American studies were offered at 80% of community colleges in southern California. Typically, these colleges offered two or three Latino or Mexican-American Studies classes, for example, History of Mexico, Latin-American Literature, Sociology of Latinos, Mexican Art History, Latino Politics, etc. A handful of these colleges, mostly in Los Angeles County, have entire departments devoted to Latino or Mexican-American/Chicano Studies, not to mention the many community colleges that have Ethnic Studies departments. The Chicano Studies department at East Los Angeles College, for example, topped the list by offering 19 classes. However, while these Latino and Mexican-American/Chicano Studies courses were offered through Anthropology, Art, English, History, Political Science, Sociology,

and Spanish departments, there were none offered through Religious Studies or Philosophy departments.

Obviously, this does not equate to conclusive proof that the study of Latino religion is systematically excluded from 100% of southern California community colleges, but it is not a good sign. Given the success of Latino studies classes outside of religious studies, it is safe to assume that the absence of classes on Latino religion or Mexican-American religion is not due to a lack of student interest. I suggest the reason for this is that far too many graduate level religious studies programs (whether public or private, secular or religious) across our country continue in their failure to produce scholars who are capable of or willing to teach classes on Mexican-American religion. In my own experience, while enrolled at three different institutions of higher learning with religious studies programs—one public university, one private theological school, and one private/secular graduate school—there was only one professor who offered one course on Latino religion. While this lagging behind within the academic study of religion is tragic, it is certainly one that can be solved, but only if we include the fullness of the American dream, for example, by bringing attention to the courage of vision that Arizona high school students have shown in their struggle to repeal Arizona House Bill 2281, and if we remember the sacred role that education played in the newly forming vision that was just beginning to be birthed by the ancient Mexican artists, philosophers, and theologians, the *tlamatinime* and the *tlacuiloque*, and their empire-critical cosmovision of peace.

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¹ Kirk Cameron, interview by Martin Bashir, *Martin Bashir Show*, MSNBC, February 9, 2012, <http://video.app.msn.com/watch/video/kirk-cameron-from-growing-pains-to-cpac-star/6rccquh>. It should be noted that Mr. Cameron was recently involved with the making of a film that promoted this idea. See *Monumental*, film, directed by Duane Barnhart (2012; Pyro Pictures).

² Roberto Rodriguez, "Census: Masking Identities or Counting the Indigenous among us?" *New American Media*, last modified March 4, 2010, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=1207ef2c27b88e64e432f9fbb18bc6d1.

³ See Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York, NY: Viking, 2000), 96-107.

⁴ Roberto Rodriguez, "Census: Masking Identities or Counting the Indigenous among us?"

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Irma Silva-Zolezzi, Alfredo Hidalgo-Miranda, Jesus Estrada-Gil, Juan Carlos Fernandez-Lopez, Laura Uribe-Figueroa, Alejandra Contreras, Eros Balam-Ortiz, et al., "Analysis of Genomic Diversity in Mexican Mestizo Populations to Develop Genomic Medicine in Mexico," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106, no. 21 (May 11, 2009): 8611-8616, doi: 10.1073/pnas.0903045106, last modified March 4, 2010,

<http://www.pnas.org/content/106/21/8611.full.pdf+html?sid=98c24466-b9bc-4c97-870c-3a6c99664527>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert, "The Hispanic Population: 2010, 2010 Census Briefs," *United States Census Bureau*, last modified May 2011, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>.

¹⁰ Richard Fry and Felisa Gonzales, "A Profile of Hispanic Public School Students," *Pew Hispanic Center*, last modified August 26, 2008, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2008/08/26/one-in-five-and-growing-fast-a-profile-of-hispanic-public-school-students/>.

¹¹ Seth Motel and Eileen Patten, "Hispanic Origin Profiles," *Pew Hispanic Center*, last modified June 27, 2012, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/05/26/country-of-origin-profiles/>.

¹² David Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 66.

¹³ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴ See Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún: First Anthropologist*, trans. Mauricio J. Mixco (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Carrasco, 264.

¹⁶ For information on the *tlamatinime* and the *tlacuilo* see Carrasco, 162-169.

¹⁷ Ibid., 270.

¹⁸ Miguel León-Portilla, ed., *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quiche-Maya and Other Sacred Traditions*, trans. Miguel León-Portilla, J. O. Arthur Anderson, Charles E. Dibble, and Mundro S. Edmonson (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ana María Pineda, "The Oral Tradition of a People: *Forjadora De Rostro y Corazón*," in *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*, (eds.) Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996): 104-116, here 115.

²² Roberto Rodriguez, "Democracy Failure in Arizona," *CounterPunch*, last modified October 31, 2011, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/10/31/democracy-failure-in-arizona/>.

²³ Jessica Calefati, "Arizona Bans Ethnic Studies," *Mother Jones*, last modified May 12, 2010, <http://motherjones.com/mojo/2010/05/ethnic-studies-banned-arizona>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ In this paragraph I borrow terms from the revolutionary modern day philosopher of being Antonio Negri, especially as can be found in *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations*, ed. Timothy S. Murphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

²⁶ For this covering/uncovering motif in the New Testament, see 2 Corinthians 4:3 and 23:30; Matthew 10:26; Luke 8:16; 1 Peter 4:8.