

'Enlightened' Evangelization: Colonial Education in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Loa to the Divine Narcissus*

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Background

Historical Context: Catholicism played an integral role in the colonization of the Americas, specifically Mexico (New Spain). It served as the principal ideology in constructing spiritual, intellectual, racial and cultural hierarchy. From the 16th to 18th centuries, religion and government relied on each other in dictating colonial policy. [1] This reliance was also present in viceregal administrations. Notably, from administration to administration, the approach to colonization differed.



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y Ramírez de Santillana by Miguel Cabrera

Missions were a pillar of colonial society and the education system in Mexico. They focused on literacy to maintain Spanish power and convert indigenous people to Catholicism. [2] Within these institutions were disagreements regarding the language of conversion (Nahuatl or Castilian Spanish) and other pedagogical strategies. Views of indigenous people differed as well: they were either noble savages or possessed by the devil. [3] The starkest cultural difference between the Spaniards and natives was monotheism versus polytheism. All this occurring behind a backdrop of the Counter-Reformation and the rise of the Enlightenment, educational discourse grew increasingly prominent. Scholar and nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (~1648-1695) was a participant in this discourse and a critic of the current educational policies.

- ❖ **Why education?** Historically, education has been the vehicle through which societies transmit and receive knowledge and information. It is easily subject to **political manipulation**, making it a key tool for imperialism, colonization and other forms of oppression. **Education is also a living artifact**, shaped by values of the past and present. Its **sociopolitical agenda** is of prime interest when studying history, anthropology and law.
- ❖ **Why this author?** Sor Juana was a creole nun and academic in 17th century Mexico. During her lifetime, she was a controversial figure, as she was a proto-feminist and wrote numerous works that challenged the Spanish Catholic Church, one of which was *Loa to the Divine Narcissus*. She seemed to advocate for better indigenous treatment under the Crown, but still defended colonization and its structures.
- ❖ **Why this text?** One of her most famous lines in the play, "Oh, most powerful Occident, beautiful, rich America, who live impoverished amid these prodigal bounties of wealth: put aside this blasphemous cult incited by Satan himself. Open your eyes! And now follow my true belief, the one true faith, persuaded by my Christian love," [4] gives insight into her ideas of educational reform within the Church and introduces the **inseparability of evangelization and educational dynamics**.

Research Questions

1. How does Sor Juana display the creole mentality in New Spain in her discussions of sociopolitical and religious hierarchy?
2. How does Sor Juana showcase the concept of religious syncretism during cultural colonization?
3. How does Sor Juana express her points of view towards education, considering her perspectives towards evangelization and religious conversion? How is she in dialogue with other contemporary institutions?

Methods and Investigation

Overview: Investigation with a particular focus on historical significance took place using literary analysis through close reading. Close reading occurred in two parts: a thematic/theoretical evaluation and a historical examination in order to contextualize Sor Juana's belief system.

Theoretical Approach: The following theories guided analyses of character traits and plot development. These theories were also utilized to conceptualize imperialism and cultural colonization during the review of New Spain in the 17th century and the years that followed.

Nationalism

- ❖ Usage of **religion as a unification tool**
- ❖ Classical nationalism: the creation of a universal culture and **collective consciousness**
- ❖ Linguistic nationalism: Language as an instrument of empire (Antonio de Nebrija), *labii unius*

Neoliberalism

- ❖ **Cultural filter:** Spanish Catholicism
- ❖ The Eurochristian worldview

Religious Syncretism [5]

- ❖ **The meeting and blending of different religions to form one system**
- ❖ Expressions of **Otherness**

Neoplatonism [6]

- ❖ Philosophy of **absolute unity:** one "true" divine being connects the universe
- ❖ Origin of consciousness
- ❖ The perpetual development of the soul

New Spanish Baroque

- ❖ Expressions of **criollo identity**
- ❖ Grand aesthetics to show the **glory of God** in New Spain

Extrinsic Approach: Considerations of a text's social and historical context involve taking an extrinsic approach to analysis. Factors such as her gender, religion and status as a subject of the Crown must be at the forefront of close reading. Research involved reviewing the works of Sor Juana's religious contemporaries, the systematic connection between the Church and the Spanish Crown, social structures in the colony and accounts of the missions in theory and practice. Using **catechisms, indigenous accounts and second-hand historical accounts**, this project included comparisons of ecclesiastical accounts and decisions with Sor Juana's perspectives.

Selected References

- [1] Liu, Peggy K. "Toward a Contribution to the History of Spanish Empire in Mexico: Part I. The Spanish Imperial Ideology and the Establishment of the Junta within Mexican Society."
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- [3] Jiménez, Robert T. "The History of Reading and the Uses of Literacy in Colonial Mexico."
- [4] Gáratea, Verónica A. "Other: Indigenous Disruption, Racial, Resistance, and Resistance among the Nahuas in Seventeenth-Century Mexico."
- [5] Cruz, Sor Juana de la "Loa para el auto sacramental de 'El Divino Narciso'."
- [6] Ortega y Gasset, "The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Catholic Church, Indigenous Theology and Cultural Autonomy in Mexico, Mexico."
- [7] Wilberg, Christian. "Neoplatonism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta.
- [8] Hartman, Sandra. "Venus in Two Acts."
- [9] Holsinger, Ronald, and Todd Ely. "Chapter 4: Creating and Addressing Unequal Power Relationships in Classrooms." *Culture Counts: Changing Power Relations in Education*.

Full Bibliography, Research Publication, and More Information:
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Theological and Intellectual Intersections

The Neoplatonic Roots of Colonial Thought

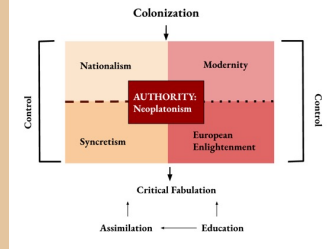


Figure 1. Neoplatonism informs thought on nationalism, syncretism, modernity and the Enlightenment. This philosophy demands an absolute unity and narrative to which society had to actively adhere.

The Colonial Neoplatonic Journey

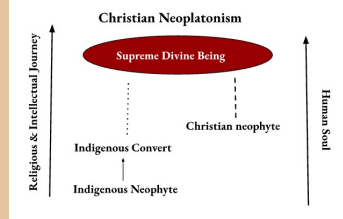


Figure 2. Neoplatonism is the idea that the soul is on a journey to religious and intellectual enlightenment. After conversion, individuals embarked on this journey of self-development. Colonizers used this notion of development to justify that the indigenous people needed guidance in achieving enlightenment.

Discussion

The *Criollo* Mentality in expressing sociopolitical and religious hierarchy

- ❖ Connections with the Viceroyalty of New Spain
 - The viceroy as the representative of the monarch in the New World and "spokes" of the Church → the general *Criollo* duty to uphold the **Crown and Church**
- ❖ Monotheism and Monarchy
 - The **ideological leadership of the Catholic Church** in building the Spanish Empire
- ❖ Education and the State
 - Evangelization**, the educational system in the colonial period, was oriented to **fit the needs of the religiously imbued State**.
- ❖ Savior Complex and Ideas of Purity
 - The **savage slot** and perceptions of ideological barbarity/purity
 - Sanctity of Catholicism: Conversion and Baptism

Religious Syncretism in Constructing Cultural Hierarchy

- ❖ Spanish governance over syncretism
 - Imposition of a Eurochristian worldview
 - Cultural misunderstandings** during syncretic attempts
 - Sor Juana's conception of **blowd**, nature and heaven
 - Lack of genuine and equitable religious/cultural mix
- ❖ Neoplatonism as a philosophy for assimilation
 - Forced assimilation** due to the acknowledgement of a "universal" figure and truth
 - Creation of **Otherness**
- ❖ Neoplatonism as the ideology behind Sor Juana's religious syncretism
 - Sor Juana's idea of **indigenous protochristianity**: Catholic potential → neoplatonic guidance
 - False equivalencies**: perceived common traits of the "God of Seeds" and the Abrahamic God

The Process of Evangelization as the "Enlightened" Educational Method

- ❖ The **Institution of Modernity** to legitimize colonization
 - Indigenous neophyte status**: literary motifs of vision and blindness
 - Colonial establishment of Spaniards being the bearers of "legitimate" knowledge
- ❖ **Enfance and psychagogia: unilateral questioning and "guidance"**
 - Infantilization and paternalism**: view that indigenous people were wards of the Crown
- ❖ An "intellectual" faith: colonization through reason
 - Enlightenment values of **empiricism to promote Catholic legitimacy**
 - Belief that God provided tools for intellectual and spiritual enlightenment

Conclusion and Next Steps

Conclusions:

- ❖ Evangelization to promote conformity and unity → **education's political agenda**
- ❖ Collective memory and the erasure of indigenous cultures/narratives during colonization → **Critical fabulation in education** [7]
- ❖ **Power differentials in pedagogy** [8] → **hierarchical transmission and communication of information**
- ❖ Educational legitimacy and its legacy

Next Steps:

- ❖ Exploration into the interconnected nature of translation-evangelization-education in the development of colonial curricula
- ❖ Examination of inherent biases in syncretism historically and currently
- ❖ **Broader questions:** How can we imagine a decolonized educational system in which value genuinely resides in open discourse? Are we able to achieve this? Is the notion of enlightened education possible?

I would like to sincerely thank professors Orlando Bentancor, Francisca Aguilar-Mora and Efra Uchida not only for their generous support during the academic year, but also during the research endeavor. I would also like to thank the Laidlaw Foundation and Barnard College for this opportunity.