

CONCULCADORES DE CRISTO: SACRILEGIOUS ACTS AGAINST RELIGIOUS IMAGES DURING THE VICEROYALTY OF NEW SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

During the colonial era in New Spain, a broad number of cases of sacrilege against sacred images were registered. In a society with entrenched Catholic values, these cases were notorious. Moreover, the relationship with Catholic images was subject to strict regulations established by the Council of Trent. Idol veneration had been assimilated by colonial society; however, this relationship became so personal that the appropriation of images developed unique methods, some of them anomalous, as was the case of violence against religious images for a variety of reasons. Many of these cases were denounced before the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico, resulting in files of the Inquisition that have preserved information about a rare variety of forms of desecration of sacred images.

This article aims to analyze the forms of violence some people showed toward images of Jesus Christ, despite the church's and society's levels of control over the people.

Keywords: Desecration, violence against sacred images, sacrilege, Viceroyalty of New Spain, Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico

INTRODUCTION

During the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico nowadays), the dominant ideology was Catholicism, which was introduced during the Spanish conquest and had been imposed on indigenous peoples during the Evangelization. Religious groups introduced the new regime through different methods, including the use of sacred images. This practice was considered adequate to impact the consciousness of parishioners. As González (2001) mentions:

To attain educational efficiency and fight Protestantism, Catholicism imposed the usage of aesthetic and figurative elements in the spiritual training and orientation of society to directly affect the emotions and memories (of people) and contribute to the promotion of religion, its dogmas, and practices (p. 148).

Images were present in every aspect of religion. They served as decoration of Catholic temples. They were used in catechisms, books, stamps, Christian crosses, and all sorts of objects and prayer beads designed to promote Catholicism and maintain the faith of believers in the Church.

The Catholic church included sacred images in all its temples, as commanded by the Council of Trent, which in its twenty-fifth session in 1563 established that “the images of Jesus Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God and of the other saints are to be placed and preserved especially in the churches” (p. 330).

Sacred images began to appear exclusively in temples, but eventually they became accessible to the inhabitants of New Spain in their daily surroundings. They also became wearable,

leading to a level of assimilation that made sacred images part of the social imaginary in every class during this era. This meant the entire population, be it mestizos, indigenous people, or other groups were surrounded by these images constantly. Moreover, an infinite number of celebrations were imbued by religion, leading to an atmosphere that established the presence of Catholic religion in every single aspect of life. It was the only official religion, so the interaction with the Church and its representatives was permanent. Besides, weekly masses enabled priests to remind their parishioners their obligations toward the Church. As commanded by the Council of Trent, all the bishops and people in charge of spreading Catholic teachings had to handle the task with precision and place special emphasis on:

the intercession and invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the legitimate use of images, based on the customs of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, received from the primitive times of the Christian religion and with the teaching of the holy Fathers and the decrees of sacred councils (pp. 328-329).

This mandate shows how the “legitimate use of images” was already established. This information came with specific instructions. Therefore, society in New Spain was induced into a relationship with sacred images under specific guidelines decreed by the Council, unlike other religious orientations in which the use of images is expressly forbidden.

In fact, the Council of Trent ratified what had been stipulated in the Second Council of Nicaea (787), which reasserted:

solemnly the traditional distinction between “full adoration (*latreia*), which, in accordance with our faith, is properly paid only to the divine nature,” and “honorary veneration” (*timetiké proskynesis*) of images; for “those who prostrate themselves before an image, are prostrating themselves before the person (hypostasis) represented by the image” (Pope John Paul II, 1987, section III).

As time passed, the way people interacted with these images started evolving, to the extent that some practices went against the precepts of the Council. We know about the evolution of the relationship between the people of New Spain and sacred images thanks to denouncements made by people who deemed certain practices to be improper. These people would recur to the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Some of these practices are exemplified in this study, with an emphasis on sacrilegious acts against the image of Christ.

Objective of Study

This article aims to analyze some cases of different people who were accused before the Holy Office of the Inquisition for desecrating images of Jesus Christ to find the reason behind their violent emotional responses within a society taught to venerate sacred images under very specific guidelines, and in which the image of Jesus Christ represented the most powerful figure of the Catholic church.

Questions of the Study

- 1) Why would Catholic parishioners in New Spain desecrate sacred images in the 13th century?
- 2) Why would Catholic parishioners desecrate images of the Christian cross and of the crucifixion in particular?

Delimitations of the Study

From the wide variety of methods of desecration of sacred images, the focus here will be only on three cases involving images of Jesus Christ and the causes behind such acts.

Definitions of Terms

Since the study is based on behavioral analysis of people in New Spain who carried out acts of desecration that were classified under the term *conculcar* in Spanish (a verb no longer in use),¹ it is important to define it:

In Martín Alonso's (1982) historical dictionary, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the verb *conculcar* meant 1) to tread, trample on, damage, 2) to infringe, or violate. Between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, it meant to oppress, or to exert pressure on a thing; additionally, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries it meant to plow through, and to navigate (vol. 1, p. 1163).

Another definition from a legal glossary explains how the term was used:

The word *conculcar* [...] comes from Latin *conculcāre*, made up of the prefix *con-* (with), and the term *calcis* (heel). It literally means to trample or stamp on with the feet, but its use soon referred to any act that broke or violated ethical or legal norms, or to when governors, citizens or even other norms would go against fundamental principles (Deconceptos.com).

Based on its usage in files of the Inquisition in New Spain, the term refers to the desecration of sacred images in any form, rather than exclusively with the feet. It also describes any violation of the stipulations of the Catholic church in the Council of Trent concerning how people should relate to images.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature on the topic provides key information. The book *Inquisición y sociedad en México 1571-1700 (The Inquisition and Society in Mexico 1571-1700)* by Solange Alberro (1988) includes two chapters on the behavior of Jewish people, who were called *marranos* (pigs), in New Spain. The book mentions the strong reaction of the Inquisition that led to some of them being burned at the stake, as well as several trials. The author points out that Judeo-Christians would flow between tolerance and assimilation, and that this polarization would “tear down insidiously the foundations of Jewish identity” (p. 433), and that “the mimetic pressure of dominant Christianity would lead to these unanimously condemned practices, which were revealing of interiorized rage and complete powerlessness” (p. 439). From these acts deemed “aberrant,” there is the case of the Riveras, a Jewish family whose every member was taken before the Inquisition. Their case became one of the most prominent in the Holy Office in Mexico:

During mass, [the Rivera and the Henríquez families] spit when the priest lifts the host for Communion; they make obscene gestures to the Blessed Sacrament under their cloaks; they desecrate hosts; and the Riveras slam the crucifix when they are overwhelmed by money problems [...] Agustín de Rojas and his wife Leonor get up at night to drag a figure of Jesus Christ by the hair in the patio of their home in front of their terrified slaves who watched and then denounced them before the Inquisition (Alberro, 1988, p. 439).

¹ *Conculcar*: to desecrate; *conculcador*: the person who desecrates; *conculcación*: the act of desecration.

The article “Imagen e identidad en los judaizantes de la Nueva España, siglo XVII” (“Image and identity of *judaizantes*² in New Spain, 17th century”) by Silvia Hamui Sutton (2018) analyzes the development of rejection toward sacred Christian images by Jewish people who had been converted into Catholicism after the religious imposition by the Church and the State in New Spain in the seventeenth century (p. 137). This rejection chiefly involved slamming figures of Jesus Christ. This was an important precedent that guided the accusations against people, Jewish or otherwise, for carrying out such violent acts.

Another article on the same topic, “Judaizantes e imágenes ultrajadas en la Nueva España” (“*Judaizantes* and desecrated images in New Spain”) by Guillermo Arce Valdez (2018) also mentions the desecration of images on the part of indigenous people from the north of Mexico. As he mentions, “the north of New Spain saw the birth and development of a new category of image desecrators: the apostate indigenous people or Gentiles” (p. 153). He adds that these people never reached the relevance of the larger groups of desecrators of sacred images, because they were not considered enemies of the Catholic church. Instead, they were forgiven due to the belief that they had been persuaded “by the demon,” which meant they couldn’t help it (p. 153). He compares these cases against the levels of aggression displayed by Jewish people in Spain. As both he and Hamui Sutton describe, violence against sacred images on the part of Jewish people was extreme with highly insulting forms of desecration of the image of Jesus Christ during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when they arrived in New Spain. However, as we will soon learn, there are documented cases of extreme violence against the image of Jesus Christ in the eighteenth century on the part of Catholic people as well.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

Sources of information used for this study are documents preserved in the Inquisition section of the General Archive of the Nation of Mexico, specifically, files of the Holy Office of the Inquisition detailing legal processes against denounced or accused people. For this study, we selected specifically three processes involving accusations against desecrators of images of Jesus Christ or of the Christian cross documented during the eighteenth century. Some of these sources only include the accusations, while others describe the processes, albeit not completely.

These materials bring to light the original voices of the denouncers, the witnesses, and in some cases, those who were accused during the eighteenth century of desecration (*conculcar*) and allow us to analyze the causes behind the desecration of sacred images with such violence.

Methods

This study uses the concept of “emotional and psychological responses” proposed by David Freedberg (1989) in *The Power of Images*.

When using the term “response,” Freedberg refers “broadly, to the symptoms of the relationship between image and beholder” (p. xxii) when it comes to external images, and to the beliefs “that motivate them to specific actions and behavior” (p. xxii). In sum:

We must consider not only the beholders’ symptoms and behavior, but also the

² The term in this context refers to Catholic converts who practiced Judaism in secret.

effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as a result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expect [the] imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all (p. xxii).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of desecration (*conculcación*)

There is plenty of information on violence against images coming all the way back from Ancient Egypt, where there is evidence of “widespread campaigns of targeted destruction driven by political and religious motivations” (Pulitzer Art Foundation, 2019, paragraph 1), which is evidenced by the statues of pharaohs Hatshepsut and Akhenaten that the Pulitzer Art Foundation displayed in its museum in 2019 during the exhibition *Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt* (Pulitzerarts.org).

Violence against images has been present across civilizations, even today. As González Zarandona (2018) mentions, the desecration of sacred images was intensified during iconoclastic periods:

Iconoclasm has ceased to be simply the phenomenon of destruction or prohibition of religious images. It is now defined as a violent act against images in general (not only religious) driven by political and religious motivations (p. 6).

The first cases of desecration of sacred images in New Spain are linked to the Jewish people that had been exiled there in different moments between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mainly.

Arce Valdez (2018) says Jewish immigrants would “practice their religion secretly [...] The Jews were, under the collective mentality of the viceroyalty, the great desecrators of sacred images” (p. 156). He adds: “The *judaizantes* became the prototype of a desecrator of images within vice royal society,” for they “gave a face to the closest enemy of Catholicism, hidden within it, which unlike other types of ‘heretics,’ spoke the same language—Castilian—and pretended to practice Catholicism” (p. 169).³ As previously mentioned, this determined the denomination that would be attached to desecrators (*conculcadores*): *judaizantes*, regardless of their actual religion.

During the sixteenth century, the recently conquered America was under the rule of the Council of Trent not only when it came to veneration of images, but also to a Catholic’s good behavior. The Council had an impact on every level of Catholicism. As Tanacs (2002) affirms:

[The Council of Trent] by redefining the concepts of Catholicism and its visual and auditory representations, assisted in rebuilding the sacred community, in creating a new reality as imagined by council members applicable to entire Catholic community (p. 130).

³ Original quote: “Los judaizantes fueron el prototipo de profanador de imágenes dentro de la sociedad virreinal” ya que “encarnaron al enemigo del catolicismo cercano y a la vez oculto mimetizados dentro de ella, que a diferencia de otras categorías de “herejes” hablaba la misma lengua –el castellano– y simulaba practicar el catolicismo.”

During the eighteenth century, the decrees of the Council were still in place. With such a legislation on the topics of image veneration, the likelihood of committing a transgression was evident, and they were regulated upon knowledge of the offenses.

Based on these orders, priests played an important role in the intense religious environment. They promoted the use of images among their parishioners during mass. Moreover, inquisition decrees were spread across all temples, including detailed descriptions of proper practices so the entire population was aware of them.

Therefore, interaction between devotees and images during the Viceroyalty was highly complex. The Church promoted the use of images intensely, and these images represented not only Jesus Christ, or Virgin Mary, but also a series of saints with stories of miracles and amazing acts.

Religious images became objects with a strong symbolic power and were an efficient medium for the Church to spread its ideas, to maintain the faithfulness of parishioners, and to impact everyone's consciousness deeply. As González Sánchez (2011) says:

The goal [...] of the Church's hierarchy was no other than controlling religion and the general life of parishioners by attacking their senses and pushing their emotions to obtain desired reactions: repentance, compassion, humility, charity, fear, obedience, patience, mercy, satisfaction (p. 176).

Clear examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the type of relations that some members of society in New Spain established with images, which was so varied that they often went against the prohibitions of the Council, leading to sanctions from the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

Some of the cases located in the General Archive of the Nation showcase this:

THE CONCULCADORES

Expectation, frustration, and violence

Despite the atmosphere of devotion to images bolstered daily by the Church, there were cases of deviations from what had been determined by the Council. In this section, we will present three cases of desecration denounced before the Holy Office of the Inquisition in New Spain.

One of the causes behind desecration was expectations surrounding the power of sacred images based on what the Church would say about Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and the saints.

The following is a case of extreme violence against what seems to be a representation of *Christ at the Column* by a woman called María Benitúa, who was denounced before the Holy Office (1773) by several people. They claimed the following:

[She would put the sculpture] on top of a box, beat it with a stick, sometimes with a whip, other times with a shoe. She would pull his hair, as would someone trying to tie it, and say: 'You'll give me money, or I'll beat you. I'll beat you because you don't give me money' (p. 285r).

Accusers declared she would do this "every night and every morning before waking up and taking the statue to her bed because, as Benitúa explained, [Jesus Christ] wouldn't give her any money" (p. 281).

One witness, called Manuela Reitete, claimed María Benitúa would say "This man gives me nothing," which was backed by Ana Portillo, who added "She grabs the Lord from the ear and the hair" (p. 308r).

Another witness, called Faustina, who also described the actions, gave her assessment that Benitúa should have simply accepted her economic troubles: “She should take it and suffer, for I also suffer” (p. 282).

The three accusers described María Benitúa as someone showing “great arrogance and constant anger,” and added that she was the niece of Mr. Benitúa, “the Priest who was the Tabernacle (*sic.*) of this city” (p. 308r).

Evidently, the psychological and emotional response of María Benitúa goes against the orders of the Council of Trent for image veneration, which posits the following about sacred images:

Due honor and veneration is to be given to them; not, however, due to any beliefs of these images having divinity or virtue that merits veneration, or that something should be asked of them, or that trust is to be placed in images, as the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols did [...]; but because the honor which is shown to them is referred to the prototypes which they represent, so that by means of the images which we kiss and before which we uncover the head and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ and venerate the saints whose likeness they bear. That is what was defined by the decrees of the councils, especially of the Second Council of Nicaea, against the opponents of images (p. 330).

The level of closeness with sacred images, and their complete integration in daily life, as well as their meaning—because they represented very powerful, supernatural beings like God, Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, and the saints in the eyes of believers—led people to orient their devotion and expectations toward the possibility that these sacred images could solve all types of daily concerns. People began to develop incredibly high expectations regarding the power of those images, so when their demands weren’t fulfilled, they would commit transgressions including aggressive acts, like those of María Benitúa with the figure of *Christ at the Column*. Her relationship with it was one of rage and demand, because the image was perceived as an actual being. In other words, Benitúa was humanizing the figure of Jesus Christ and perceiving him as a man who was to satisfy her monetary needs, based on the things she would say. The way she treated this image shows she did not consider at any moment that behind the image of the man she sensed and attacked was a representation of the Son of God, and therefore a divine being. María Benitúa’s behavior shows she saw him as a living being with feelings, deserving of mistreatment after failing to fulfill her financial needs. After receiving nothing, she would treat the image with extreme physical and verbal violence.

It is important to point out that the sculpture of *Christ at the Column* that Benitúa had chosen to attack historically focuses on the topic of flagellation, since it shows Jesus Christ being whipped in Jerusalem under orders of Pontius Pilate. The image shows how he suffers degradation, ridicule, is subjected to whipping, and is forced to wear a crown of thorns placed by soldiers before the crucifixion. In this way, it seemed María Benitúa was replicating this act through her desecration.

Lust, rage, frustration, and violence

Another instance of desecration is that of priest Vicente de Velasco. According to several of his accusers before the Holy Office of the Inquisition (1779), he would flog images of Jesus Christ. His conduct was frequent, an outburst of anger after women who were placed in his home would reject his lustful advances. The account of a witness says:

She saw the priest being lustful toward one of the women placed in his home, as he would often do scandalously, but the woman showed strength and resistance, rendering him unable to fulfill his depraved wishes, so he took a stamp from that book and held it furiously. He would say “cursed be the milk she suckles” and throw and slap the stamp over the table on several occasions. (p. 317r)

This case is complex because of the reasons driving the priest to desecrate the image of Jesus Christ, which are related to his lustful acts toward women placed in his house. He also abused young people working for him, carried the mass rite incorrectly, had a strange conduct around his parishioners, and had a history of violence and aggression against other priests, including a case of attempted poisoning.

This was a person with severe conduct problems, where rage after being unable to fulfill immediate desires would lead him to the acts of desecration. He had an extreme emotional response toward the image of Jesus Christ, perhaps the image of greatest power for the Catholic church. This was something the priest knew very well due to his status within the Church.

It seems as if this priest was completely enraged out of frustration, which led to excessive outbursts of violence against the image of the crucifixion, which condenses what Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1999) describe as:

The visual epitome of the Savior’s passion and redemption. The Cross symbolizes the Crucified, Christ, the Savior, the Word, the second person of the Trinity. The Cross is more than a representation of Jesus Christ. It is identified with his life on Earth and even with his physical body [...] Christian iconography has used the Cross to express both the suffering of the Messiah, and his presence: for where the Cross is, there is the Crucified. (p. 363)

The priest Vicente de Velasco had to know this very well. He would have been aware of the divine essence represented by the image of Jesus Christ, for as Chevalier and Gheerbrant mention, the different figures of the Cross “express one of the aspects of Christ’s unnamable figure. No image exhausts the richness of the Incarnate Word, like no man can translate the infinity of the divine” (p. 364).

It is remarkable that this act of desecration of the image of Jesus Christ took place repeatedly and that no one dared to stop the priest, though the people did dare to accuse him. However, even though the file describes the accusation, there is no information regarding how the case was handled.

Violence-guilt or regret-self accusation

Lastly, we focus on a case of self-accusation which shows a different angle of the experiences that desecrators could have after carrying out the act against a sacred image. This was the case of Joseph Antonio Oropeza, who confessed before the Holy Office of the Inquisition (1772) the following:

He grabbed a cross and punched it twice, throwing it to the ground (he later picked it up and put it back in its place), but he had desecrated it because it was five [pm] already and he hadn’t had any breakfast. (p. 315r)

He was questioned whether during the act of desecration he had a negative belief of the crosses’ virtue and of its representation of Jesus Christ. (p. 316r)

He said he was so irritated for not having anything to eat that day that he felt compelled to throw the cross and trample it, for he thought it was pointless to reflect on its virtues and on the death of Jesus Christ the Redeemer, which he had always believed. Every morning and before going out to the streets he would cross himself. (pp. 315-316r)

This act of self-accusation shows the reaction some desecrators had after grievously going against the rules of the Church. Likely, feelings of guilt would overwhelm them, leading to repentance, and to come clean, hoping to wash away the guilt. Joseph Antonio Oropeza was sorry for the acts previously mentioned and was willing to pay with whatever punishment the Inquisition deemed adequate, for he was well aware of the crime he had committed. He felt the need to be punished. It is worth noting that the desecrator had first spoken to another religious person who suggested he went to the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The important thing is that he actually did it.

In this case, as in the previous ones, the transgression was due to a loss of control provoked by hunger, and because the woman who provided for Oropeza had not returned. Moreover, he had ingested alcohol. Unlike the other cases, though, he took responsibility for his actions to eliminate the feeling of guilt; he realized he had done an illicit act because he couldn't help it.

CONCLUSIONS

As one may notice from the interaction between parishioners and the images—which were transmitted, fostered, and promoted by the Catholic church as special images imbued with sacred power—, the relationship was very close but highly variable. These images were part of the private lives of parishioners who developed countless ways to appropriate the images in highly intimate ways.

Following the narrative created by the representatives of the Church, each person developed their own beliefs about those images, which were also linked to a series of illusions and expectations. They were certain that these powerful images would fulfill their desires.

After failing to receive what they wanted or needed, they would soon develop a violent conduct toward the images, as in the examples shown in this article.

The three cases are the result of frustration due to expectations about the power of images, leading to extreme losses of self-control and to going against all the rules that people were supposed to follow. The forms of violence against the image of Jesus Christ show the high level of false expectations they had, leading to completely forgetting about the sacredness of the figure represented by the images, and to a lack of awareness of the acts of desecration they were committing, which is shown clearly in the cases in which the acts took place multiple times. This of course, excludes cases like the one of Oropeza, in which the element of regret and awareness of faults committed would lead subjects to the possibility of returning to the proper path established for followers of the Catholic Church under ecclesiastic rules.

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