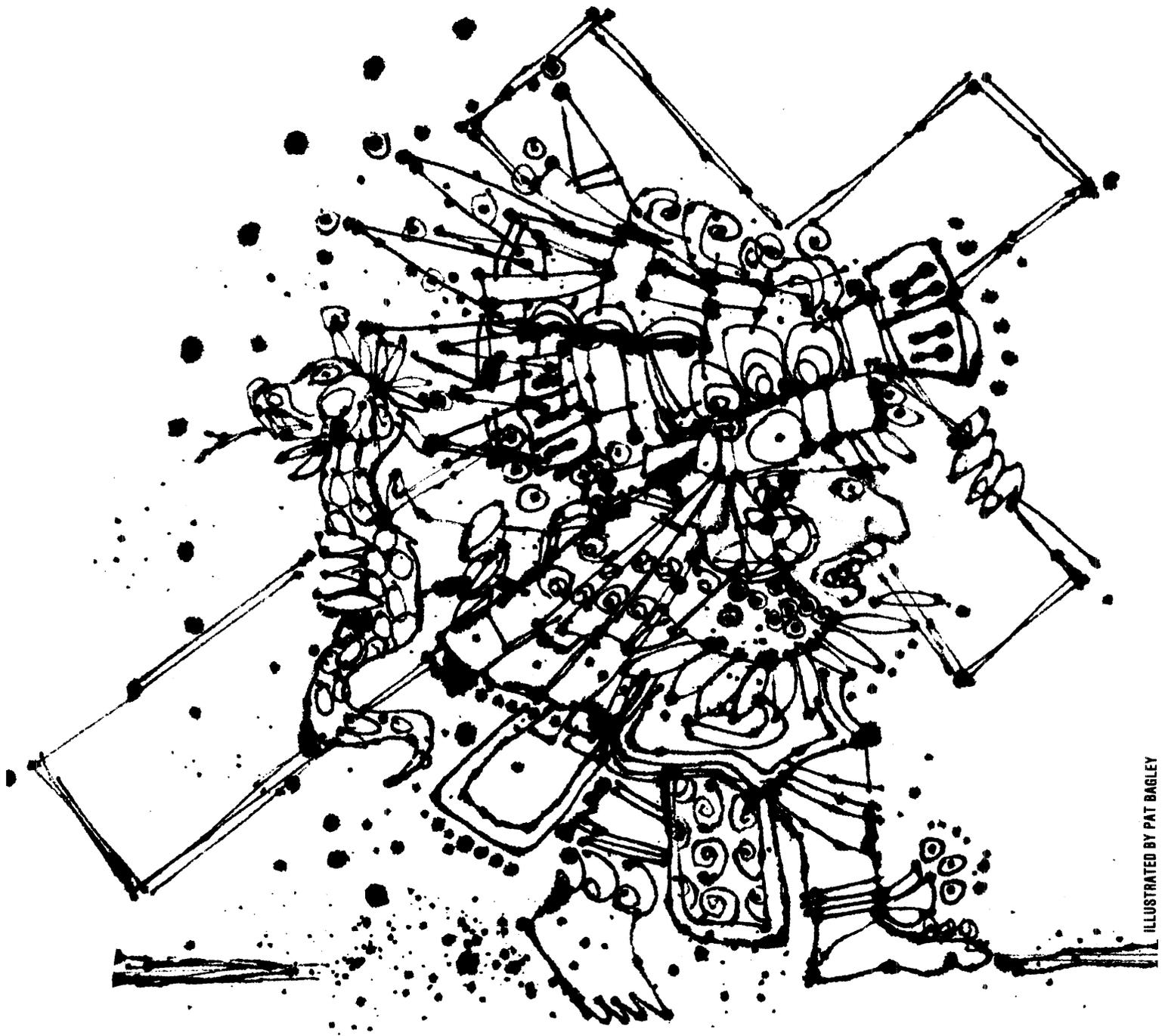


# The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl

A History of the Metamorphosis

By Brant Gardner



**A**ztec religion on the eve of the Conquest was a vibrant mosaic of interwoven deities and practices, yet of the whole pantheon only one native god is well known to the world: Quetzalcoatl. From the time Cortez was hailed as the returning Quetzalcoatl, the Western world has been fascinated with this enigmatic Aztec deity. The anomaly of a white, bearded lawgiver who taught culture and kindness has been so intriguing that many have thought him to have been a foreigner who brought a new message to the natives. Within two decades of the Conquest, Quetzalcoatl was identified with St. Thomas, the wandering apostle. Since that time Quetzalcoatl has been described as a Viking, a Chinese Explorer, an extraterrestrial, Moses, and Jesus Christ. Similarly, most Mormons assume that the legends of Quetzalcoatl were simply distorted reminiscences of the visit of Christ to the New World as detailed in the Book of Mormon.

The identification of Quetzalcoatl with Christ or any other non-Indian figure depends upon a series of traits which appear in native sources. Quetzalcoatl is said to have been a benevolent lawgiver who provided the moral basis for the society; he was a white, bearded man wearing a long white robe, and he left with a promise to return and rule again. While all of these traits have roots in the native legend, each one has been altered by the pressures of the Conquest. The most striking aspects of these traits—those which suggest that the legends referred to an appearance of Christ—are all Spanish elaborations on native legends. The original tales, as far as I can reconstruct them, do not support the identification of Quetzalcoatl with any foreign visitor.

Marcelino Penuelas has vividly described the process which has Christianized Quetzalcoatl: "Rather than explain the myth, the more or less solid explanations of those who may be called mythophiles, mythophobes, and mythomaniacs add fuel to the fire which produces the halo of [his] mystery" (*Cuadernos Americanos*, 133:89). In this case, the original observations of native beliefs were only slightly distorted, but each subsequent writer has, in his own way, altered the legend to suit his particular interests.

The best example of this process in action comes from the comparison of three texts concerning Quetzalcoatl. The Florentine Codex is a major collection of cultural information taken directly from native informants. Compiled under the direction of Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, it contains this indigenous description of Quetzalcoatl: "There, it is said, he lay; he lay covered; and he lay with only his face covered. And, it is said, he was monstrous. His face was like a huge, battered stone, a great fallen rock; it [was] not made like that of men, and his beard was long." (*Florentine Codex*, ed and trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 3:13)

The second passage is Sahagun's own Spanish version: "And he was always lying down and covered with blankets, and his face was very ugly, his head large and bearded" (*Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva Espana*, p. 196). The first distortion of the original is very subtle as it comes from context rather than text. The native account of Quetzalcoatl's appearance comes in a passage concerning the priest-king of Tula, but Sahagun's account follows a description of Quetzalcoatl's temple in Tenochtitlan. This sug-



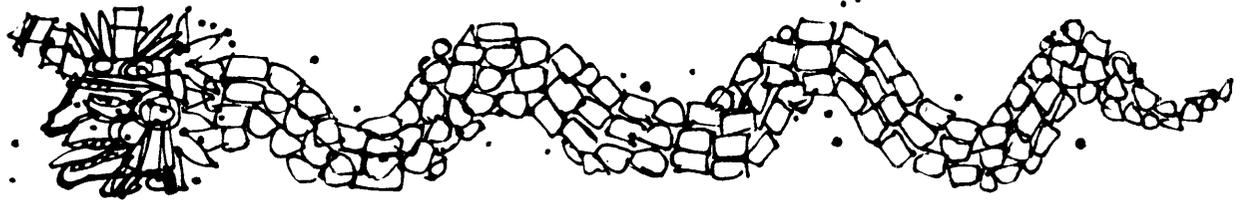
gests that Sahagun's passage describes the idol rather than the person.

The second slight shift occurs when Quetzalcoatl is described as ugly rather than monstrous. *Ugly* is an aesthetic value judgment; *monstrous* is an essential description of his nonhuman nature. The native text explicitly states that his face was not like that of men. Quetzalcoatl's monstrous characteristics were important signals to the native mind which classified him as extrahuman, a demigod; but Sahagun's account fails to convey this message.

This text was further compromised by Juan de Torquemada. He is relatively faithful to the Spanish account, but he includes a further interpretation which does not exist in Sahagun:

*[Quetzalcoatl's] image had a very ugly face, and a large head, and was very bearded: he was lying down, and not standing, covered with blankets, and it is said that they did it in memory that in another time he was to return to rule, and in reverence of his great majesty they should keep his figure covered and lying down, which must signify his absence, as one who sleeps, who lies down to sleep, and when awakening from that dream of absence, will rise, to rule. (Monarquia Indiana, 2:52.)*

Torquemada makes explicit Sahagun's inference that the description refers to the idol rather than the man. As in Sahagun's version, Quetzalcoatl is still ugly, but he is not monstrous. In this passage, however, Quetzalcoatl undergoes



**Commentators on the Quetzalcoatl myth have interpreted the material to support their own beliefs.**

another quiet transformation. Where the original implies that the face is covered due to its monstrosity, in Torquemada, Quetzalcoatl is covered in deference to his majesty. The suggestion that the prone position is a symbol for his sleep of absence might be a plausible native category, but it is not corroborated by Sahagun's text nor by any other source on the Quetzalcoatl legend.

Thus a single piece of native information about Quetzalcoatl was successively shaped until the native deity appeared as only a shadow behind a more Christian definition. The Christianizing process evident in the progression of these passages was no accident. Very subtle influences were at work which predisposed certain Spaniards to see biblical influences in the customs of the natives.

In *The Aztec Image in Western Thought*, Benjamin Keen has surveyed the literature on Aztec themes and found "a link between the positions of the Spanish writers on Indian policy and their attitudes toward Aztec civilization" (p.77). In other words, their politics influenced their vision of Aztec society. Those political attitudes have direct relevance to the history of Quetzalcoatl after the Conquest.

While the New World was embroiled in the pragmatic aspects of the Conquest, the courts of Spain rang with an intellectual and moral controversy over the proper relationship between Spain and the inhabitants of the New World. At question was the very humanity of the indigenous populations of the New World. If the Indians were seen as subhuman, they could be exploited. If they were indeed human, however, the obligation was to treat them as such and to enlighten them.

The most vocal advocates of the Indian cause were the priests, and parallels to biblical religion in native custom were a hallmark of their writing. They speculated in print that these survivals indicated that the Indians had once been true believers, but had fallen from grace. The unstated thesis was that their previous acceptance of the true religion was *prima facie* proof that the natives were human.

This undercurrent in the literature on the Aztecs highlights an important division in the way in which the early chroniclers report on the legends of Quetzalcoatl. The anti-Indian writers limit themselves to the physical idol and the sacrifices made in his honor. Except for Cervantes de Salazar, none of them mention the culture hero whose legends have become so famous. Those legends are found only in the pro-Indian authors,

who had a vested interest in a Christianized native. This underlying motivation colors the tale of Quetzalcoatl. In the end, the changes so transformed the original that a new deity was created and a new tale begun.

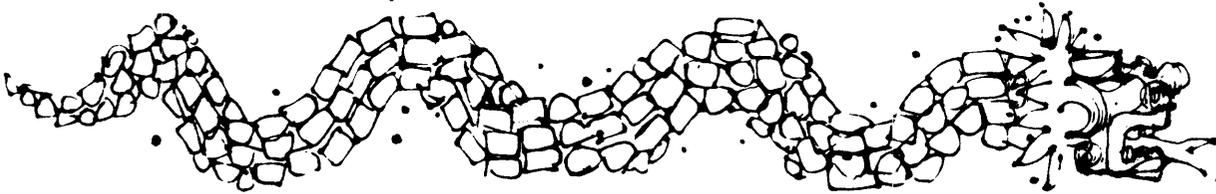
The subconscious drive to Christianize Quetzalcoatl is evident in the alterations in his clothing. Quetzalcoatl is usually described as wearing a white robe which reached his ankles. While this is indeed striking in contrast to the common loincloth worn by most natives, it is not a foreign element of clothing. In addition to the loincloth, native male dress allowed a sort of cape called a *tlilmatli*, which was a piece of cloth worn under the right arm and tied in a knot over the left shoulder. The most common style reached to just below the shin, but custom dictated longer lengths for those of higher social rank. Only the most important men could wear a *tlilmatli* which reached the ankles. Quetzalcoatl clearly qualified for that privilege.

When this *tlilmatli* entered Spanish literature, it was labeled *ropa* or robe. From that point on the connection to the native garment was lost. Once the descriptive word was principally Spanish, the connotation of the garment followed the Spanish rather than the Aztec conventions. It easily followed that the garment should change from a square of cloth which was tied over the shoulder to a more standard European garment with sleeves. So completely did Quetzalcoatl's apparel lose its original shape that the "Relacio de Genealogia," a document from around 1532 could state that his clothes were "like the dress of Spain" (*Nueva Coleccion de Documentos para la Historia de Mexico*, 3:243). The climax in the Christianizing process came when Torquemada in 1615 reports that Quetzalcoatl was dressed in a friar's habit (1:254-55).

If it was politically expedient for the Spanish to relate native practice to Christianity, it was even more pragmatic for the natives to play the same game. The Christianizing process soon became a two-way street, where the Spanish not only shaped native legend into Christian molds, but the natives adapted those Christian molds to their own legends and fed them back to the Spanish.

Father Diego de Duran received the following report from one native:

*Asking another old Indian what information he had of the departure of Topiltzin [another name for Quetzalcoatl], he began to relate to me the fourteenth chapter of Exodus, saying that the Papa [Quetzalcoatl] had arrived at the sea with many people and that he continued and had struck the sea with a staff and it had dried up and become a road*



through which he entered, both he and his people. Also that his persecutors had entered after him and the waters had returned to their place and nothing more was known of them. And as I saw that he had read the same as I and I knew where he was going with the story, I didn't ask him more so that he would not relate the Exodus to me, of which I felt he had received notice, yet he went as far as to mention the punishment which the children of Israel had with the serpents because of their murmurings against God and Moses. (*Historia de las Indias de Nueva Espana e islas de la tierra firme*, 1:12.)

Duran is unquestionably correct in assuming that this tale repeats the Exodus story, but it is also interestingly parallel to the native legend of Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl does take a number of people with him in some versions, he does come to a sea, and miraculous things occur. Quetzalcoatl is also linked with serpents. All of these points seem to have allowed the informant to correlate that particular biblical story with Quetzalcoatl. The important point is, however, that the native related the tale as part of Quetzalcoatl's story. The same forces which led Spaniards to select Christianlike aspects from native customs also led the Indians to reshape their own lore in a more Christian cast.

The benevolent nature of Quetzalcoatl's religion is one facet of the myth which was transformed as much by the Indians as by the Spaniards. Sahagun's native informants were men knowledgeable in their own culture, but schooled by the Spanish and well-versed in Catholicism. They emphasize the point that the Toltecs, the people of Quetzalcoatl, worshipped only one god. Few lessons taught by the Spanish were more strident than their insistence on a one and only god. Native idols had been obliterated and the force of Spanish culture pressed home the tremendous importance of this Christian principle. Even so, the native assertion of a former worship of one god might not be so suspect if it did not follow a list of the gods worshipped by the Toltecs, a list compiled by those same informants.

Another early native text, the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, is more explicit about the relationship of Quetzalcoatl to other gods. Speaking of Quetzalcoatl himself, "it is told that, idolatrizing, he prayed in the heavens and that he invoked Citlalyncue, Citlallatonac, Tonacacihuatl, Tonacatecutli, Tecolliquenqui, Yeztlaquenqui, Tlallamanac, and Tlallichcatl" (*Codice Chimalpopoca*, p. 8).

Of even greater importance is the claim that Quetzalcoatl never participated in human sacrifice. Andres de Olmos was one of the original twelve priests sent to Mexico, and one of the

great early ethnographers. A passage ascribed to him contains this description of Quetzalcoatl's religion:

*He never admitted sacrifices of the blood of humans nor of animals, but rather only of bread and roses, flowers and perfumes, and of odors. [Also] he watched and prohibited with much efficacy wars, thefts, murders, and other harms which they did to each other. Whenever wars were mentioned before him, or other evils concerning the wrongs of men, he would turn his face and cover his ears so that he would neither see nor hear them. (Bartolome de las Casas, *Apologetica Historia Sumaria*, 1:644.)*

Such a Christian man could never permit human sacrifice, and the native writers of the *Anales* indicate that it was a conflict over that practice which led to Quetzalcoatl's exodus from Tula.

In spite of these early and important sources, it appears that this part of the legend also underwent a cosmetic shift which eliminated the association with human sacrifice.

Two very early and important sources are the *Histoyre du Mechique* and the *Leyend de los Soles*. Each of them gives different accounts of an episode in the life of Quetzalcoatl. In the *Histoyre's* account Quetzalcoatl's brothers . . .

*returned to look for Quetzalcoatl and they made him believe that his father had been changed into a rock, persuading him also that he sacrifice and offer something to this rock, such as lions, tigers, eagles, little animals, butterflies, for he would not be able to find these animals. And as he did not wish to obey them, they wanted to kill him, but he escaped from among them and climbed a tree, or something like it, on top of that same rock and shot arrows at them and killed them all. Having done this, others came seeking him with honors and they took the heads of his brothers and emptied the skulls to make drinking cups. (Pp. 113-14.)*

This is a far cry from the Quetzalcoatl of the friars who covered his eyes and ears so as not to be reminded of death. Even more important is the account of the *Leyenda*:

*His uncles were greatly angered, and shortly they left, going before Apanecatl who came out quickly. Ce Acatl [another name for Quetzalcoatl] rose and split open [Apanecatl's] head with a smooth and deep cut, from which blow he fell to the ground below. Immediately [Quetzalcoatl] caught hold of Solton and Cuiltron. The beasts blew on the fire and he killed them quickly. They gathered them together, cut a little of their flesh, and . . . they cut open their chests. (Teogonia e Historia de los Mexicanos, p. 125.)*

While human sacrifice is not explicitly stated, the indications are overwhelming. Not only were the chests opened, presumably to remove the hearts, but the fire is also reminiscent of a form

**The Christianizing of native legends became a two-way street, with the Spaniards and natives both contributing to the process.**

**Many factors encouraged some Spaniards to see biblical influences in native customs.**

of Aztec human sacrifice. Against the backdrop of these tales, it is not surprising to find that the quintessential city of Quetzalcoatl among the Maya, Chichen Itza, is permeated with the iconography of human sacrifice.

The best hypothesis to explain the early accounts of Quetzalcoatl's abhorrence of human sacrifice is that the native legends were consciously shaped by the Indians to improve their standing with the Spanish overlords. In Central Mexico this influence took the form of Christianizing the religion of Quetzalcoatl. The same pattern was repeated outside of the Central Mexican region, but with an interesting twist. Among the Maya Quetzalcoatl becomes the scapegoat rather than the hero. According to a native informant in Merida, Yucatan in 1581:

*It is said of the first inhabitants of Chichen Itza that they were not idolaters until Kukulcan [the Maya name for Quetzalcoatl] the Mexican captain entered these parts. This one taught them idolatry. . . . [Before] they had heard of a creator of all things, of the creation of the heaven and of the earth, and of the fall of Lucifer, of the immortality of the soul, of heaven and of hell and of the universal flood. (Cristobal Sanchez in Coleccion de documentos ineditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista, y organization de las antiguas posesiones Espanoles de Ultramar, series 2, 11:121.)*

Leaving out the names, the tale is parallel to many from Central Mexico. The earlier people knew of the Christian religion and were exactly the kind of people the priests were looking for. Sadly, some devil came and forced them to change. It is clear that this is a tale told under the painful dictates of the Conquest, and that the actors in the drama were changed to accommodate regional interests.

Perhaps the most confusing aspect of the myth is the reference to a white Quetzalcoatl. The idol of the god was always painted black, and I know of no native or even early Spanish text which specifically mentions a white skin. I have been unable to find the point at which this concept enters the legend, but it is clearly not a part of the important information which described Quetzalcoatl at the time of the Conquest.

I can offer only one possible source for the theme. Quetzalcoatl is associated with the west, which in the Aztec symbol system was white. Thus Quetzalcoatl is white as an indication of the west, just as other deities were red, blue, and black when associated with other compass directions.

It could be argued that the elevation of Cortez to the status of the returning Quetzalcoatl was

based on the color of Cortez's skin, but the earliest evidence does not support this conclusion. The Spaniards were revered as gods, but according to Sahagun the black slaves which shipped with them were also specifically called gods. Clearly a white skin was not a requisite of deification. The Spanish were gods by virtue of their miraculous ships which appeared to be floating temples and their sticks which spit thunder and fire and caused trees to fall down. It was the miracle of who they were rather than their color which fired the native imagination.

In *Visions de los Vencidos*, Miguel Leon-Portilla reports one of the rare Aztec comments on the Spanish skin color, which simply states, "Their skin is very white, more so than ours" (p. 12). All of the references to Quetzalcoatl as the white-skinned god seem to be traceable to our own cultural inclinations to link white with skin color.

Stripping away the influence of the Spanish, Quetzalcoatl becomes once again a very Aztec god, complete with the duality of good and bad which characterizes the Aztec pantheon. The moral and political climate of the Conquest generated pressures which selected certain facets of the native tradition and so presented them as to appear Christian. The early Spanish fathers found such evidences behind every tree, but no bough was more fruitful than Quetzalcoatl.

The centuries which have passed have expanded those themes to the point that our popular conceptions of the deity have replaced the native understanding of their own god. Personally, I am satisfied that a reconstruction of the native Quetzalcoatl leaves no room for an identification with any of the popular suggestions.

On the other hand, it would be erroneous to assume that the disqualification of the Quetzalcoatl legends as recollections of Christ's appearance in the Americas in any way impinges on the historicity of that appearance. It merely stands as a further caution against our lack of caution and sophistication in relating pre-Columbian legends or artifacts to the Book of Mormon.

While I mourn the passing of a popular figure of Western folklore, I find the native Quetzalcoatl to be equally fascinating and challenging. The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl is merely the closing chapter in the very long story of one of the most important native religious traditions of the Western hemisphere. When we no longer ask him to be who he is not, perhaps his own story can be told.

BRANT GARDNER is seeking a Ph.D. in anthropology from the State University of New York at Albany.

