“To Lose One’s Soul”:
Blasphemy and Slavery in New Spain,
1596–1669

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Any Christian [would be] in great danger
of renouncing God and His just faith.
—Slave Nicolás Bazán at the Holy Office (1661)

On 28 April 1598, Juan Bautista, slave of Regidor Cristóbal Jiménez, denounced himself to the commissary of the Inquisition in Puebla, Bartolomé Márquez de Amarilla.1 In his testimony, Juan recounted the events of the previous day: Around 4 PM, his master harshly beat him in the stable of his textile workshop (obraje) because Juan had not finished the work he had been assigned. Unhappy with his slave’s pace, the master applied hot pitch to Juan’s wounds and continued to beat him while two other men firmly held Juan down. In an attempt to appease Jiménez, Bautista begged him to stop “for the sake of the love of God and Holy Mary.” His torturer replied, “I beat you for the sake of

This article is based on 105 Inquisitorial cases (trials and denunciations included) against Afro-Mexican slaves from 1596 to 1669. These materials were obtained from the following archives and libraries: Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Inquisición, Mexico City; Archivo del Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Colección Antigua, Mexico City; and The Huntington Library. Research for this essay was made possible by the support of the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, UCMexus, The John Carter Brown Library, The Huntington Library, The Newberry Library, and The Department of History of the University of California, San Diego. Many thanks to Eric Van Young, Paul Vanderwood, Dain Borges, John Kickza, Robert Patch, Carlos Aguirre, R. Douglas Cope, Andrew Fisher, Christopher Boyer, Susan Fitzpatrick, Christina Jiménez María Eugenia de la Torre, and HAHR’s anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and insights on previous drafts.

1. Commissaries were the Inquisition’s representatives in the major towns.
God and Holy Mary!” and forced a firebrand into his mouth. Seeing himself so afflicted, Juan shouted, “I renounce God!” (reniego de Dios) twice, and was beaten again by his master. The next day, “after recovering consciousness (volviendo en sí),” Juan asked the Inquisition’s official for mercy, insisting he was a Christian and begged for a transfer to another location so that his soul would not be damned.2

More than 60 years later, in 1661, the black slave Nicolás Bazán rendered to the Inquisitor Francisco Estrada a terrible account of the violent work regime that reigned in the Coyoacán textile mill of his master Melchor Díaz de Posadas. As an example of the cruelty of Melchor Díaz, Bazán described the gargantón, an instrument that was a combination of collar and handcuffs used to immobilize slaves for days at a time. The chastisement it inflicted was so rigorous, Nicolás assured the Inquisitor, that “any Christian [would be] in great danger of renouncing God and His just faith”—something he actually did, according to other witnesses. He implored the Inquisitor Francisco de Estrada on his knees not to send him back to the textile mill of his master in Coyoacán, lest he be forced to despair and “lose his soul” on account of the cruel punishment that was awaiting him. He concluded that the suffering in Coyoacán by “Christians redeemed by Christ’s blood at the hands of fellow Christians” was so painful that “not even among Turks and Moors was a comparable martyrdom endured.”3

The cases of Juan Bautista and Nicolás Bazán are good examples of the circumstances under which more than one hundred slaves were held accountable for blasphemy in colonial Mexico, between 1596 and 1669. As victims of cruelty and mistreatment, black slaves renounced God and His saints to provoke the intervention of the Inquisition as a way to be freed, at least for a moment, from the harsh working conditions they endured. Sometimes they even succeeded in using their religious transgression to obtain a transfer to another location and a new master. In some of these instances, they deployed an ingenious rhetoric that transformed the “legitimate” punishment of slaves by masters into torture, chastisement into martyrdom, and their own blasphemies into painful reactions of persecuted Christians. Moreover, by claiming to “lose their souls” at the hands of the owners of their bodies, black slaves also undertook an inversion of the colonial discourse that justified slavery by

2. Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico City), Ramo Inquisición (hereafter cited as AGN, Inq.), vol. 165, exp. 3 (hereafter 165.3) (unfoliated).

predicating the Christian salvation of African souls upon the servitude of their bodies. As both property and human beings, Afro-Mexican slaves learned quickly that they could be Christians and still remain in human bondage. This could not be clearer than at the moment of punishment. While slaves asked their owners to stop beating them for the sake of a God who commanded charity and fraternity to believers, masters put it clearly that in a hierarchical society in which slaves were at the bottom, the same God sanctioned that their bodies be answerable for all their crimes; indeed, some masters justified their cruelty by saying, “I beat you for the sake of God and Saint Mary.” Corporal punishment represented the currency in which black slaves, mulattoes, and other people of “low” caste had to pay for any legal transgression. Nominal fines as punishments for similar misdeeds were normally reserved to the transgressing Spaniards. In light of this conspicuous contradiction between mar-

4. In Spain, the paradoxical nature of this “liberating” servitude garnered little criticism until the mid-sixteenth century, when theologians and jurists began to pay some attention to the Portuguese slave trade. Even then, the isolated protests were mostly directed at the process by which slaves were acquired, not at the legitimacy of slavery itself for, as Francisco de Vitoria wrote in 1546, it was better for Africans “to be slaves among Christians than free in their own lands.” Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar famously challenged this position in a letter written to the Spanish crown in 1560 in which he asked the king to terminate the slave trade arguing that the benefits of Christianization did not offset the terrible injustices that Africans endured. Similarly, Jurist Bartolomé de Albornoz forcefully denounced in his Arte de contratos the extended conviction “that the freedom of the soul should be paid by the servitude of the body.” These protests notwithstanding, the court at Madrid did not modify its royal policy and solidly embraced the doctrine of salvation as the main argument for the enslavement of African pagans. For a discussion of the tendency of the Spanish crown to disclaim any responsibility in the slave trade, see Anthony Pagden, The Fall of the Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology (1982; reprinted, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), 33; Vitoria’s remarks are included in his Political Writings, ed. Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 335; Montúfar’s letter is cited in Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, ed., Epistolario de Nueva España, 1505–1818, 16 vols. (Mexico City: Antigua Lib. Robredo, de J. Porrúa e hijos, 1939–1942), 9:55; Albornoz elaborates his position in “De la esclavitud,” in Biblioteca de autores españoles, desde la formación del lenguaje hasta nuestros días, 305 vols. (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1873), 65:232–33. For a detailed discussion of the moral qualms and rationalizations involved in the Atlantic slave trade, see David B. Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1966), esp. chap. 6.

5. Equality before the law was an unknown concept in colonial courts. Reflecting the hierarchical order in which they were embedded, tribunals distributed sentences according to the race, social status, occupation, and even gender of the defendants: “judicial procedures may have been impartial, [but] the ultimate disposition of offenders often was
ginality and integration, it would be reasonable to argue that the use of blas-
phemy by Afro-Mexicans was both a rejection of the Christian moral order 
that legitimized slavery and an attempt to survive a violent regime by claiming 
a Christian identity.

In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson offered a poignant analysis 
of the painful dialectics of inclusion and exclusion endured by slaves in soci-
eties that embraced the Christian doctrine of salvation: “The slave, in the city 
of the Christian God, was declared an insider, an integral part of the brother-
hood of man in the service of God; but the slave, in the city of man, remained 
the archetypical outsider, the eternal enemy within, in a formalized state of 
marginality.” As Patterson argues, slaves were never assigned to the status of out-
casts, but instead they were pushed (not without anxiety) to the margins of 
society. With slaves in this state of secular excommunication, slaveholders 
drew their authority from their control of symbolic instruments such as the 
“symbolic whip” of religion. This control persuaded slaves to believe, Patterson 
contends, “that the master was the only mediator between the living com-
miunity to which he belonged and the living death that his slave experienced.”

Several blasphemy trials, however, show that Afro-Mexicans were some-
times able to turn this “symbolic whip” against their own masters and hold 
them accountable for the possible condemnation of their souls. Stemming 
from unbearable chastisement in the city of man, blasphemy extended a bridge 
to the city of God, where slaves could occasionally find leverage against their 
masters with the help of the Inquisition. In general, the Mexican Holy Office 
was very lenient towards violent slaveholders, normally condemning slaves to 
severe beatings for alleged religious transgressions. Part of the reason for the 
Inquisition’s biased attitude undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that the Holy 
Office, and the church in general, were also major slave owners. More impor-
tant was the determination of the Holy Tribunal to curb any sign of slave 
rebellion in New Spain, where Afro-Mexicans were feared and repudiated

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affected by their position within the social order.” See Michael Scardaville, “*(Habpsburg)* 
Law and *(Bourbon)* Order: State Authority, Popular Unrest, and the Criminal Justice 
System in Bourbon Mexico City,” in *Reconstructing Criminality in Latin America*, ed. Carlos 
A. Aguirre and Robert Buffington (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 11.

On black slaves as defendants, see William H. Dusenberry, "Discriminatory Aspects of 

6. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: 
Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 72.

7. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 8.
from the beginning of the colonial enterprise and especially during the period covered by this essay.

Indeed, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries serious concerns over the presence of too many slaves in the colony and the possibility of slave rebellions frequently transpired in letters and reports written by royal administrators. As early as 1537, New Spain experienced the first of several attempts of slave rebellion. On the roads of New Galicia, Guanajuato, Pénjamo, San Miguel, and the highway between Puebla and Veracruz and along the Pacific Coast, active bands of *cimarrones* (runaway slaves) robbed and killed Indians and Spaniards throughout this period. In the mountains near Orizaba, a Congolese chief called Yanga established an almost impenetrable palisade, raiding the neighboring pueblos and haciendas with impunity for more than 30 years until the settlement was subdued in 1609. By the second decade of the seventeenth century the importation of slaves, now in the hands of Portuguese traders, reached its highpoint, further fueling the already strong fear of an urban slave uprising. After an aborted rebellion in 1608 in Mexico City, the colonists faced a new threat in 1611, when an angry crowd of 1,500 blacks belonging to the Cofradía de Nuestra Señora filed past the viceregal palace and the Palace of the Inquisition, carrying the corpse of a female slave who had been flogged to death by her master. The rebellion was quickly repressed, with 36 blacks, 7 women included, publicly hanged in the *plaza mayor* of the city, and their heads were placed on pikes. Numerous minor revolts were registered in the following years in the ranching regions of the northern New Spain and in the vicinity of Veracruz, while Mexico City itself experienced a new scare in 1665. Working as an important instrument of colonial vigilance, the Inquisition had detected in that year new signs of unrest among the Afro-Mexicans of the capital. In the end, the alleged conspiracy never materialized.

8. During the fusion of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns (1580–1640), the importation of black slaves to America increased enormously. Between 1595 and 1640, the average annual importation was 2,880, totaling 132,600 for the whole period. As might be expected, the mining economies of Mexico and Peru absorbed the bulk of the increase. See Frederick P. Bowser, “Africans in Spanish American Colonial Society,” in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell, 12 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), 7:361. For a detailed discussion of the slave trade to the Indies during these years, based on the study of monopoly contracts granted by the crown (known as *asientos*), see Jean-Pierre Tardieu, “Les principales structures administratives espagnoles de la traite des Noirs vers les Indes Occidentales,” *Caravelle* 37 (1981); and Enriqueta Vila Vilar, *Hispanoamérica y el comercio de esclavos* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1977).
but the ensuing constant patrols by the Spanish infantry and militia were a clear proof of the racial tension existing in the colony.9

While one may not assert that black-white relations were always abrasive, it is clear that Afro-Mexicans tended to arouse feelings of fear rather than sympathy or even compassion in Spaniards. The obvious difficulty of meeting Spanish standards of civil security, and of fulfilling economic needs at the same time, produced harsh legal measures meant to control the increasing black population and forestall slave revolts. This only made slavery more unpalatable, at times leading to new rebellions, which, in turn, confirmed the need for vigorous suppression. In this circular process of fear and repression, colonial authorities tended to tolerate the brutality of the masters. Indeed, the lash, the stock, the pillory, the use of gags and leg irons, and the practices of branding, burning, and even mutilating slaves evidenced the de facto power held by the slaveholders in New Spain.

Although it was assumed that violence had a key role in maintaining and creating slavery as a relation of dominance, it was not settled how far a master was allowed to go in his disciplinary actions. Where was the line between “legitimate punishment” and sadistic mistreatment? In colonial Mexico slaves struggled constantly to set limits to this brutality both through institutional and noninstitutional avenues. Under Spanish law, mistreated slaves could ask for protection of civil courts, but in practice few slaves benefited from this

legal instance during the first two centuries of Spanish domination. For the
great majority of bondsmen, work slowdowns, maroonage, banditry, occa-
sional outburst of rioting violence, and blasphemy were among the most
recurrent strategies of resistance to abusive masters. Of these types of social
contention, only blasphemy gave them access to the Mexican Holy Office
where they could fight the vast range of impunity enjoyed by their masters by
appealing to moral leverage as members of the Christian community. This
strategy of verbal resistance was well known in old Spain, especially in centers
of great concentration of slaves such as Seville. Hoping to spare masters the
economic loss incurred when their slaves were taken to prison where they
were fed and clothed at the slaveholder’s expense, the Catholic kings had
issued a decree in 1502 allowing the master to punish the transgressor by pub-
licly administering 50 lashes. The Inquisitorial zeal soon diluted this “respite”
for the master, however, for the Holy Tribunal insisted on its jurisdiction to
try the blasphemers. In New Spain, the Inquisition’s interest in repressing

10. In contrast to the litigious reputation earned by Indians in Spanish America early
in the colonial period, slaves seemed to have experienced a true “juridical wake-up” by the
second half of the seventeenth century. See Carlos A. Aguirre, “Working the System: Black
Slaves and the Courts in Lima, Peru, 1821–1854,” in Crossing Boundaries: Comparative
History of Black People in Diaspora, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod
(Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), 205; and idem, Agentes de su propia libertad: Los
esclavos de Lima y la desintegración de la esclavitud, 1821–1854 (Lima: Pontificia Univ.
Católica del Peru, 1993), 184. For a discussion of the uses of law by Indians, see, among
Social Significance of Judicial Institutions in an Exploitative Society: Huamanga, Peru,
1570–1640,” in The Inca and Aztec States, 1400–1800: Anthropology and History, ed. George
A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo, and John D. Wirth (New York: Academic Press, 1982);
Ronald Spores, “Spanish Penetration and Cultural Change in Early Colonial Mexico,” in
The Indian in Latin American History: Resistance, Resilience and Acculturation, ed. John E. Kicza
(Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1993); Ward Stavig, “Ambiguous Visions: Nature,
Law, and Culture in Indigenous-Spanish Land Relations in Colonial Peru,” HAHR 80,
no. 1 (2000); and Susan Kellogg, Law and the Transformation of Aztec Culture, 1500–1700

11. Las pragmáticas del Reyno (Valladolid: Juan de Villaquiron, 1540), 11. On blasphemy
by Sevillian slaves, see Jean–Pierre Dedieu, “Le modèle religieux: Les disciplines du
(Paris: Hachette, 1979), 240–50; Ruth Pike discusses the characteristics of Sevillian slaves,
by far the “largest slave community in Spain,” in her Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society

12. In 1534 the Cortes of Madrid requested that all trials of blasphemy cases be
conducted by secular courts. The Inquisition, however, continued to intervene in these
blasphemy at these times of slave rebellion occasionally worked against the very masters it was intended to protect. Forced to intervene by the slave blasphemers, the Holy Office not only undermined the disciplinary authority of the slaveholders but also permitted it to be transformed, by apt manipulation, from a coercive colonial institution into a protective shield against the masters. Undoubtedly, the stakes wagered by slaves in resorting to the Inquisition were always high.

The Meanings of Blasphemy Among Afro-Mexican Slaves

Throughout the colonial period, blasphemy constituted the most common crime for which Afro-Mexicans faced the Inquisition. In contrast to Spaniards, who frequently resorted to blasphemy as a strategy of masculine self-fashioning, a
means of establishing one’s autonomy after humiliating defeats in gambling
games, and a verbal resource to make strong statements in honor disputes,
Afro-Mexicans generally used blasphemous speech as a strategy of resistance
and survival under unbearable working and living conditions as bondsmen.13
Indeed, although many of the defendants were free blacks, slaves seem to have
represented the overwhelming majority, which suggests a direct relationship
between this state of human bondage and the uttering of expletives judged to
be sinful (only 3 cases out of 105 involved free mulattos). In most cases, the
accused was a young male slave, while their female counterparts faced the
Inquisition with less frequency (18 cases).14 Although this information is not
always provided, the available evidence suggests that the majority of Afro-
Mexican slaves tried by the Holy Office between 1596 and 1669 tended to be
either creole (acculturated) black slaves (20), or mulatto slaves (21). While boza-
les (nonacculturated Africans) were rarely tried for blasphemy in this period (1),
ladinos (Hispanicized Africans) were better represented in blasphemy trials (3).15
Most of the defendants inhabited urban settings, particularly Mexico City (35),
and Los Angeles, Puebla (18), although Veracruz (1), Jalapa (1), and Celaya
(1) were also indicated as places of residence. In the countryside, Coyoačán
(4) and Amilpas (2), registered the highest number of cases, while Cholula,
Tlanepantla, the mines of Zacatecas, and Misquigungua presented only one case
each for the whole period. Although many of the slaves were employed as
domestic servants, a significant number of all cases involving Afro-Mexican

13. I discuss these different uses of blasphemy in “Defending God’s Honor:
Blasphemy and the Social Construction of Reverence in New Spain, 1520–1700” (Ph.D.
diss., Univ. of California, San Diego, 2001).

14. For a recent discussion of blasphemy from the perspective of gender, see Kathryn
Joy McKnight, “Blasphemy as Resistance: An African Slave Woman before the Mexican
Inquisition,” in Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World, ed. Mary E. Giles
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999).

15. A similar trend is perceived in Lima, where bozales were never tried for
blasphemy during the period under study here. See Jean-Pierre Tardieu, L’Église et les noirs
writers of the time such as Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval, the fact that creoles and ladinos had
previous contact with the religion and language of their often blasphemous masters made
them less valuable among Spaniards because they were thought to offer minimal service
and have mañas (bad habits). An additional reason for preferring bozales over creole blacks
and ladinos concerned the assumption that the latter peoples “were usually much less
submissive than those who had been transported from Africa.” See Israel, Race, Class, and
Politics in Colonial Mexico, 68; and Alonso de Sandoval, Un tratado sobre la esclavitud, trans.
slaves took place in obrajes (21) in Mexico City, Los Angeles, Coyoacán, and other urban areas.16 Both in urban and rural zones, blasphemy was the result of excessive punishment meted out by masters for their slaves’ putatively delinquent behavior. Failure to finish work assigned, pilfering, and flight constituted the most common grounds on which slaveholders harshly thumped Afro-Mexicans. Typically tied to a step-ladder (Ley de Bayona), firmly held down by other slaves, or even hanged in the air by both hands, slaves faced their masters’ anger; often times, in their attempts to stop physical punishment, slaves blurted out expressions of blasphemy and rejected God, which early modern writers on the criminal law of the church and theologians (such as Domingo de Soto y Francisco de Suárez) considered to be a clear manifestation of infidelity that warranted prosecution by the Inquisition.17


17. See Cesare Carena, _Tractatus de officio Santissimae Inquisitionis et modo procedendi in causis fidei_ (Leida: Symptibus Laurentii Anisson, 1669); Juan Alberghini, _Manuale Qualificatorum Sanctorum Inquisitionis_ (Zaragoza: Agustin Verges, 1671), chap. 16, no. 3, 44;
For Spanish moralists, however, renouncing God was also an unbearable expression of ingratitude by a Christian. Indeed, through the Son, the Father had set men and women free from the slavery of sin, hence making of them, as one modern scholar of Philippine colonization has remarked, “recipients of a gift so enormous as to defy equal return.” As a result of this divine manumission, Christians agreed to a new slavery for, as Saint Paul wrote to the Romans, true freedom only exists in enslavement to God. Yet, for those who were real

Domingo de Soto, De iustitia et iure/De la justicia y del derecho, trans. P. Marcelino González Ordóñez (1556; reprinted, Madrid: Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 1967–1968), bk. 8, question 2, 753; Diego Covarrurias y Leyva, Relectio cap. quarnuis pactum, de pactis, regvi. possesor malaefidei, libro sexto, & clementinæ si furiousus, de bomicidio (Salmanticae: Andreas a Portonariis, 1557), chap. 7, no. 8, 52v; Francisco de Suárez, Operis de virtute et statv religionis tomtz primus (Lygduni: Symptibus Horati Cardon, 1613), bk. 1, chap. 6, 295. The expression reniego de Dios constituted by far the most common one not only in New Spain but also in Peru, Cartagena de Indias (New Granada), Brazil, and Seville. For Seville, see Jean–Pierre Dedieu, “Les disciplines du langage et de l’action,” in Benassar, L’inquisition espagnole, 250; and for Peru, José Toribio Medina, Historia del Tribunal de la Inquisición de Lima, 1569–1820, 2 vols. (Santiago: Imp. Gutenberg, 1887), 32; Paulino Castañeda Delgado and Pilar Hernández Aparicio, La inquisición en Lima, 3 vols. (Madrid: Deimos, 1989), 1:286–87; and Jean–Pierre Tardieu, L’eglise et les noirs au Perou, 643–60; for Cartagena de Indias, José Toribio Medina, Historia del tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición de Cartagena de las Indias (Santiago de Chile: Imp. Elzeviriana, 1899), 118–19; and for Brazil, Laura de Mello e Souza, El diablo en la tierra de Santa Cruz: Hechicheria y religiosidad popular en el Brasil colonial, trans. Teresa Rodríguez Martínez (Madrid: Alianza, 1993), 119, 122.

18. Domingo de Soto, De como se a de evitar el abuso de juramentos (Antwerp: Viuda y herederos de Juan Stelfio, 1569), 82; and Nicolás de Avila, Suma de los mandamientos, y maremagnum del segundo, que enseña para el confesionario y persuade para el púlpito (Alcala: En casa de Juan Gracian, 1610), 493.


slaves, renouncing God entailed more than a denial of otherworldly indebtedness; it also implied a refusal of the Christian ideology that justified their subjection as slaves under the promise of future redemption in the Afterlife, and a rejection of the God who failed to perform as a “true Master” protecting His slave under unbearable circumstances of chastisement. “What is the purpose of believing in God, if He doesn’t help or favor me in these tribulations?” asked Gerónimo, the slave of Juan de Isla, in 1611. Slapped in the face for this pronouncement by the steward of the Cholula obraje in which he worked, Gerónimo knelt facing an altar and roared, “May the devil take with him our Lord and our Lady! I renounce God and all His saints because I’ve been taken to this obraje.” A parallel case was offered in 1616 by the slave Isabel (Mexico City?), who asked in despair when she was cruelly battered by her master, “Oh my Jesus, why did you allow this to happen? . . . You’re not God!”

As the pain and exasperation of slaves grew under the whip of their masters, the rejection of the God who did not manifest concern about the tribula-


22. Although after the Council of Trent the church encouraged the identification of the Christian God with the figure of the father, it is unlikely that slaves found paternal metaphors as compelling as free men did. Indeed, incapable of making natal claims upon a father, they also had no claims to pass on their children. Under these circumstances, fathers represented rather weak figures to slaves. Consequently, the Christian God was cast in the image of the earthly master himself, the only one capable of offering an image of power and authority. On the tendency of slaves to see the Christian God as a divine master, see Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 167; and Colin A. Palmer, “Religion and Magic in Mexican Slave Society, 1570–1650,” in Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies, ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), 318. On the church’s stress on the image of God as a father after the Council of Trent, see Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 152; and O. Robert, “Porter le nom de Dieu,” in Histoire des pères et de la paternité, ed. Jean Delumeau and Daniel Roche (Paris: Larousse, 1990), 131–54.

23. AGN, Inq. 480-3, fol. 83r.

24. AGN, Inq. 421.1 (unfoliated). Even Inquisitors acknowledged that slaves might have renounced God because of His perceived failure to preserve them from the masters’ brutality. For instance, when Isabel denounced herself in 1576 for having said, “I am beaten without blame! I renounce God! I don’t believe in God!” she was asked by the Inquisitor Licenciado Bonilla: “Did you say that blasphemy out of anger against God because He allowed you to be treated in this way?” See AGN, Inq. 48.7, fol. 273r.
tions of His believers acquired increasingly existential proportions. A descriptive approach to the verbal repertoire used by slaves while being beaten shows that there was a clear tendency to couple the renunciation of God and the Christian community (symbolized by the baptismal chrism) with the rejection of the slaves’ own parents, especially their mother and her nurturing milk. While in Mexico City Francisco uttered, some eight times in 1601, “I renounce the [baptismal] chrism I received and the milk I suckled!” Pedro, slave of merchant Amado Pinto of Mexico City, in 1617 renounced the father who “made” him, the mother who bore him, and the Holy Mother. In Cholula, Ambrosio Gutiérrez, in 1611, renounced the mother who bore him four times after he was slapped in the face by the steward of the obraje. Most noteworthy of all, however, was the case of Felipa, slave of Valeriano de Negrón in Mexico City, who was sentenced to 200 lashes after she confessed in 1607 to having renounced “God our Lord and His saints,” as well as “the mother who bore her and the father who engendered her, and the milk she sucked and the swaddling clothes (pañales) in which she was wrapped when newly born.” Under the dubious protection of a god who allowed his people to be beaten, it seems evident that Afro-Mexicans repudiated having entered this world as Christians and slaves or, more strikingly, to have been born at all if birth meant being a slave.

Blasphemy was not a mere expression of anger stemming from pain or despair among Afro-Mexican bondsmen. It often had another purpose, “more subtle and material,” which Jean-Pierre Tardieu has defined as “moral bribery” and Mexican Inquisitors understood as “forcing a pact” (forzar un pacto). Indeed, facing the imminence of physical punishment, Afro-Mexicans threatened their masters with renouncing God. For the slaveholder this created an impasse; if he decided to proceed with the chastisement, he was morally responsible for the resulting blasphemies. Yet if he dropped the whip, he confirmed the efficacy of this strategy for escaping castigation and risked its repetition among other slaves. Although some masters suspended punishment and took their slaves in continenti to the Holy Office, the majority tended to react with increased anger to the dilemma set before them. Therefore, when on 3 June 1598, Antón threatened his master, Juan Ortíz, with renouncing God at the sombrero obraje in Tlanepantla, he was harshly whipped, and Ortíz explained,
“so this wouldn’t set a precedent among slaves as a way to avoid punishment.”

In the same vein, in 1598, Gabriel de Castro, owner of an obraje in Los Angeles, Puebla, yelled at his slave in a similar situation: “Dog! Do you think you can escape punishment in this way? I’ll kill you for this reason!”

For Inquisitors, the slaves’ “conditional” utterance involved a great deal of premeditation, and was thus considered especially reprehensible as a sign of “trickery and deceit” (malicia y afectación) on the part of the slave.

In their attempt to thwart the strategy of their slaves, masters often imposed silence on them through a vast array of instruments that included not only gags, but also candles, firebrands, sticks, cords, hot oil, and the master’s own feet, fists, and fingers. The incredible brutality displayed against the slaves’ organs of speech seems to suggest, as Ranajit Guha has argued in a different context, that masters attempted not only to control the spoken word, but also to produce “a significant absence” of speech; that is, to force a prescriptive silence on the bodies of slaves by marking them brutally as an example and warning to other bondsmen.

Exhibiting the cruel traces of their masters’ fury, Afro-Mexicans frequently faced the Inquisitors with swollen cheeks, broken or missing teeth, black eyes, burned skin, and bleeding wounds. Sometimes, slaves were in such bad physical condition that the Holy Tribunal ordered a cirujano to examine them. In such cases, it was not uncommon for Inquisitors to spare a slave physical punishment because the accused had already been beaten “extremely” (muy açotado).

Often enough, masters crowned their extreme physical chastisement with verbal abuse. The term most commonly used was “dog,” which slaveholders often employed as a prelude to a severe beating. To use an animal name as an imprecation indicates, as Edmund Leach has argued, that the animal category itself is “credited with potency,” that it is considered in some way taboo and sacred. Dogs derived their “potency” from the fact that, as “pets” and domesticated animals, they occupied an intermediate category between “human” and

28. AGN, Inq. 147.4 (unfoliated).
29. AGN, Inq. 147.2 (unfoliated).
30. See, for example, the accusation of Commissary Antonio de Cervantes Carvajal against Juan de Jeréz on 3 Sept. 1631 (Puebla), in AGN Inq. 375.5 (unfoliated).
32. See, for example, the case of Nicolás de la Cruz in 1658, AGN, Inq. 572.13, fols. 187–214v.
33. This was the case of Juan de Luyba, slave of Francisca de Peralta in 1625, see AGN, Inq. 421.1. (unfoliated).
This social limbo inhabited by dogs was similar to the status of social excommunication, or “social death,” that according to Orlando Patterson slaves experienced as nonpersons in the master’s world. Indeed, incorporated at the margins of society, the slave was “neither human nor inhuman, neither man nor beast, neither dead nor alive, the enemy within who was neither a member nor true alien.” Francisco del Rosal, a sixteenth-century Spanish scholar, clearly saw the similarity between these two states. He explained that slaves were called dogs because, like domesticated canids, they were part of the family, though they constituted the vilest members of it. Yet, however marginalized slaves were in their masters’ society, they were expected to honor the Christian God as any other “member” of a slaveholder’s family. This explains why slaveholders expressed a strong feeling of betrayal, ingratitude, and outrage when the slave renounced God and became not only a “dog” but also a “heretical other”: “Dog, you’re a Christian! Do you know what you just said?” “What did you just say, ‘dog enemy of God’?” “dog of the devil!” “Lutheran dog!” “rabbi dog!” What seems to be implied in the use of _perro_, the most faithful of animals, to insult and debase slaves, is a situation in which slaves were perceived to have symbolically “changed loyalties”; hence the resulting indignation. Tellingly, slaves were often ordered, and even obliged, to confirm their membership in Christianity by renouncing the anti-God par excellence, the Devil, and his works: “Dog! It is the Devil who you should renounce!”

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35. Patterson, _Slavery and Social Death_, 48.
In spite of the masters’ horrendous punishment and the Inquisition’s condemnation, there is evidence that blasphemy was taught and transmitted among Afro-Mexican slaves as a strategy to prevent bodily harm. For instance, in 1599, Joaquín de Santa Ana told his master Don Carlos de Sámano in Jalapa that he blasphemed because a fellow slave, whom he had met in a prison in Tlaxcala, told Joaquín he could stop punishment by renouncing, as he himself had done. In fact, Doña Luisa de Valdés, the wife of Don Carlos de Sámano, related to the commissary of the Holy Office that in the nearly 14 years she had possessed Joaquín, he had run away and committed robbery several times, but that she had never heard him “go against the [Catholic] religion.”38 In another case, mulatta Gertrudis de Escobar assured the sadistic nun for whom she worked in 1658—shortly before being sold as a slave by her own relatives—that she learned to renounce from a slave called “Scorpion,” who was later whipped on the streets of Mexico City for renouncing God. As might be expected, prosecutor Andrés de Çabalça was outraged to hear that a ritual of public punishment designed to deter spectators from committing this religious offense would produce its repetition.39 Çabalça’s irritation stemmed from the fact that public retribution for blasphemy was not only supposed to manifest the outrageousness of the crime committed but also the fearful power of the justice that punished the blasphemers. Following traditional procedure, the delinquent was first required to dissociate himself from the offense by means of a public disavowal (abjuración) of his/her crime. Like other sorts of public apologies, this ritual was not only meant to smooth the reincorporation of the individual to the body of the faithful but also to restore symbolically power relations by showing that the culprit publicly accepted “the judgment of . . .


38. AGN, Inq. 48.6. (unfoliated).

39. In opinion of prosecutor Andrés de Çabalça Gertrudis had abused “del fin porque este santo offo. castiga a los reos en publico que es para exemplo de los que lo ven y se abstengan por el temor de la pena de cometer otros tales ni algunos otros delitos.” See AGN, Inq. 446 (unnumbered), fols. 180v.
[the Holy Office] that this is an offense and thus, implicitly, the censure of punishment that follows from it."40 Next, the now “infamous individuals,” regardless of their gender, were conducted on a beast of burden through the “customary streets,” naked to the waist and bearing a gag and a rope, while a crier announced their transgression. They were then administered between 100 and 200 lashes. It truly was a moment in which, “social values [were] not so much inculcated into the subject as etched upon the subject’s body.”41 However spectacular this event might have been, there was always the possibility that the audience could subvert the original message and transform the intended pedagogy of repression into a pedagogy of resistance.42 Yet slaves did not need to attend to those special occasions to “learn to curse.” As an utterance normally stemming from unbearable chastisement, renouncing God was part of life under slavery, and its frequency must have reminded black slaves of the terrible living and working conditions they endured. In this sense, renouncing God bore a “legacy of voices,” a polyphony in each utterance, and by repeating this kind of speech, black slaves transmitted and reenacted a specific practice of resistance among fellow slaves.43 Contrary to what Inquisitors wanted to believe, it was not the particular utterer on trial who was “the origin” of the condemned expletives, but a shared and long history of mistreatment and exploitation.

**Denunciation**

Renouncing God did not immediately provide Afro-Mexican bondsmen respite from the master’s hand. Like any other crime, one had to be first denounced


42. According to the sixteenth-century canonist Francisco Peña, the fear of offering the audience encouragement instead of deterrence from committing the crime in question was always present. But “is there anything that wicked men cannot pervert?” he reasoned. “There’s no doubt that teaching and terrifying people with the proclamation of sentences, the imposition of *sambenitos*, and so forth, is a good action.” See Nicolau Eimeric and Francisco Peña, *El manual de los inquisidores*, trans. Francisco Martín (Barcelona: Muchnik, 1996), 199.

for blasphemy in order to be prosecuted. In this sense, the social alchemy that allowed slave blasphemers “to do things with words,” as philosopher John L. Austin put it, rested not upon the slaves but upon their audience, who in denouncing them endowed the forbidden expletives with the necessary social force to warrant intervention by the Holy Office. Appealing to their own “religious competence” (generally their concern with the “honor of God”) to interpret and then report what was said to the Inquisition, denouncers constituted the real triggering force behind “blasphemy affairs.” Of course, the Inquisitors reserved to themselves the power to define speech violation, and to ponder the circumstances under which the crime was committed. As a consequence, there was always a gap between denunciations and prosecutions. Denouncers seem to have understood that their competence was in reality subordinated to that of the Inquisition, for they tended to use terms such as *disparates* (nonsense, absurdities), and *disonancias* (literally, discords, dissonances), instead of the more doctrinal term *blasfemias*, to report the verbal infractions of the slaves. Moreover, it was not unusual to consult with priests and confessors, the “specialists” on religious matters, before deciding to go to the Holy Office.

The slaves’ chances to be brought before the Inquisition were improved, of course, if beyond appealing to the master’s Christian conscience, they drew

the attention of a wider audience. This strategy, however, represented a double-edged sword, because by renouncing publicly, slaves incurred the ancillary sin of “scandal.” In moral theology this offense was not “likely to cause a reaction of indignation and outrage, but something that provided occasion and incitement to the sin of another,” or as Aquinas put it, “something less rightly done or said, that occasions another’s spiritual downfall.” What censors most feared was the negative “pedagogical” effect renouncing could have on the “faithful ears” of the audience. In 1660, for instance, Nicolás Ramos, slave of Francisco López in Mexico City, was severely scolded: it was not only a crime for a Catholic to renounce God but also because a public renunciation was scandalous. This severe reprimand notwithstanding, it was obvious for slaves like Nicolás that public renunciation was sometimes a necessary risk to take in order to secure a denunciation.

Surprisingly, a significant number of cases concerning slaves who expressed reniegos were initiated by the masters themselves, or by people related to the masters, such as relatives, friends, and employees (37 cases). This fact becomes striking because there were multiple disadvantages for the owner in doing so: spending time and money taking his slave to the Holy Office, paying for the stay of his slave in prison, losing his/her labor power during the time in jail and, if it was so ordered by the Inquisition, selling their own slave. In addition, since sellers were obliged to declare their bondsmen’s conduct, an unruly slave with a criminal record, a drunkard, runaway, thief, fornicator, blasphemer, or at the audiencia or the Holy Office could decrease in market value, thus representing a source of economic loss for the slaveholder. Pending a lengthy trial, the costs of keeping a slave in prison could be indeed exorbitant. At a time when the price of a young male slave ranged between 300 and 500 pesos, for example, silversmith Juan de Padilla of Mexico City had to pay 158 pesos in


48. AGN, Inq. 578. 10, fol. 425.

49. Peter Boyd-Bowman offers examples of such transactions in notarial records, see his “Negro Slaves in Early Colonial Mexico,” The Americas 26, no. 2 (1969): 137. See also Chávez-Hita, Esclavos negros, 32; Rolando Mellafe, Negro Slavery in Latin America, trans. J. W. S. Judge (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), 84; and Aguirre Beltrán, El negro esclavo en la Nueva España, 45–7.
1658 for the year his slave Juan de la Cruz spent in prison.\textsuperscript{50} Similarly, Juan de Campos, owner of a textile obraje in Coyoacán, paid 73 pesos in 1656 for an eleven-month stay in prison by his slave Marcos Bautista.\textsuperscript{51} Nicolás de la Cruz’s imprisonment for five months cost 46 pesos in 1658, and Licenciado Gerónimo Morón had to pay 48 pesos in 1662 for 166 days spent in prison by his slave Antonio.\textsuperscript{52} The amounts charged masters included not only feeding their slaves, but also for buying them clothes, giving them occasional medical attention, cutting their hair and beards, and getting them some tobacco. Since most of the denunciations came from the master’s circle of influence, and he stood to lose the most by bringing his slave before the Holy Office, there had to be tremendous pressure on the holder to denounce the blasphemer.

Besides the obvious fear of the Inquisition, one can never overestimate in these cases the influence exerted on masters by neighbors, bystanders, and witnesses of all kinds, who often expressed concern over the dangers awaiting the Christian community if blasphemers were not punished, denounced the slaves themselves (9 cases), or manifested apprehension for the fact that slaves lost their soul at the hands of their masters. Sometimes the reactions of the witnesses were also reported to the Holy Office, which had a particular interest in knowing the effects of blasphemous speech on those who heard it. Francisca de Vargas stated in 1602 in Los Angeles, Puebla, for example that she cried and trembled (\textit{le temblaron las carnes}) upon listening to Pedro Juárez, slave of her neighbor, renouncing God.\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, in 1609 the workers of the obraje of Diego Caro in Mexico City crossed (blessed) themselves out of fear when the slave Diego blasphemed.\textsuperscript{54} In contrast to these rather peaceful reactions, in 1571 the outraged neighbors of Pedro de Munguía in Mexico City repeatedly

\begin{itemize}
  \item 51. AGN, Inq. 566.1, fols. 1–30v.
  \item 52. AGN, Inq. 586.6, fols. 373–410.
  \item 53. AGN, Inq. 452.6, fol. 98.
  \item 54. AHMNAH, CA, 366.5, fol. 240r.
\end{itemize}
struck his slave Tomás de Contreras across his mouth and cheeks as a means of
beating him into silence.\textsuperscript{55} Other neighbors, however, harbored feelings of
horror and indignation upon hearing the familiar sounds of a cracking whip
and the slaves’ painful outcries and blamed the masters for the sinful utter-
ances. Drawn by the screams of a slave of Francisco de Urriola, owner of a
warehouse on the street of El Relox in Mexico City, a group of women com-
mented on 22 August 1669, that the wretched bondsman had been forced to
blaspheme by his torturers because they had poured hot sugar on his skin.\textsuperscript{56}
Almost 70 years earlier, on 16 May 1598, the commissary Bartolomé Márquez
de Amarilla had reported to the Inquisition that the continuous mistreatment
inflicted upon the slaves of the obraje owner Gabriel de Castro in Los Angeles,
Puebla, was a motive of constant scandal in the neighborhood, for God was
daily blasphemed because of the cruelty with which they were chastised.\textsuperscript{57}
Reporting on a black slave who renounced in an obraje in Los Angeles,
Puebla, in 1632, the commissary Antonio Cervantes expressed a similar opin-
ion by stating that although slaves frequently incurred in blasphemy to escape
punishment in that mill, this was often caused by the cruel treatment of the
masters.\textsuperscript{58} Given the great anxiety and distress caused by sinful outcries of
Afro-Mexicans, it is understandable that masters would feel strongly obliged
to denounce their slaves, lest they would also risk a reprimand from the
Inquisitors themselves.

It was possible, however, for slaveholders to take steps to keep their slaves
from going to trial. Some cases suggest, in fact, that when masters prevented
their slaves from denouncing themselves—probably by means of threats and
close surveillance—and occasionally dared to defy the Inquisition. Undoub-
etedly, urban slaves who enjoyed more physical mobility such as domestic ser-
vants were more likely to circumvent the vigilance of their masters and have
direct access to commissaries in their hometowns or to the Inquisition’s head-
quarters in Mexico City. This was, however, not always the case.\textsuperscript{59} For
instance, Pascual Francisco, a black slave in the Hospital del Amor de Dios in

\textsuperscript{55}. AGN, Inq. 47.1, fols. 2–42.
\textsuperscript{56}. Emphasis mine. AGN, Inq. 514.4, fols. 12–15.
\textsuperscript{57}. AGN, Inq. 147.2 (unfoliated).
\textsuperscript{58}. AGN, Inq. 375.5 (unfoliated).
\textsuperscript{59}. For examples in which domestic slaves succeeded in denouncing themselves, see
the cases of Juan (Mexico City, 1600), Isabel de la Cruz (Mexico City, 1625), Catalina (Los
Angeles, Puebla, 1606), Pascuala (Mexico City, 1602), Juana de los Reyes (Mexico City,
1613), in AGN, Inq. 471.101, fols. 343–345v; 421.1 (unfoliated); 279.1, fols. 1–17; 421.1
(unfoliated); 421.1 (unfoliated), respectively.
Mexico City, euphemistically stated to the Inquisition in July 1606, one month after he had blasphemed, that he did not denounce himself earlier because his master kept him “very busy.” For those living in the countryside, having access to the Holy Office could be a more challenging venture. This was the case of black slave Antón de Cartagena in Tlanepantla, who could not denounce himself until 1598, two years after the blasphemous utterance was committed. Even then, his self-denunciation occurred only because he shouted to Constable Ochoa to bring him to the Inquisition, on his way to Mass and escorted by the steward of the textile mill. A more dramatic example occurred in Los Angeles, in 1603, when the black ladino slave Baltazar denounced himself before the commissary Alonso Hernández de Santiago. On 22 April, around 3 PM, Baltazar was being beaten tied to a step-ladder in the obraje of his master, Alonso Gómez, who was also a regidor in Los Angeles. Remembering that a black woman had been recently whipped to death in the same obraje, and seeing that the steward of the mill was about to pour pork fat on his skin, Baltazar renounced God and all His saints. Several black slaves heard him blaspheme, but the steward ordered them not to denounce Baltazar and to declare—if summoned by the Holy Office—that he was drunk. Seven days later, Baltazar managed to denounce himself to the commissary. His master, however, fiercely resisted the competence of the Holy Office to try his slave, refusing to take Baltazar to the Inquisition. Gómez asserted that he himself would punish his servant “according to the laws.” Irritated, the Inquisitors told the regidor to “stay out of this business and do not meddle with the jurisdiction of the Inquisition,” or he would be tried for conspiracy against the Holy Tribunal. Initially brought to the public jail of Los Angeles, Baltazar was later returned to his master, but the Holy Office ordered Alonso Gómez to have Baltazar imprisoned in the obraje and prohibited him from selling his servant until the matter was settled.

60. AGN, Inq. 279.10, fols. 114–137v.
61. AGN, Inq. 147.4. (unfoliated). In a similar case Francisco, a mulatto slave of Tomás de Baeza, secured a denunciation in 1603 by telling a passerby that he renounced God, and that he was not a baptized Christian while being escorted by his master on the street in Mexico City. See AGN, Inq. 271.16 (unfoliated).
62. AGN, Inq. 271.18 (unfoliated). Obstructing the free exercise of the Inquisition constituted a grave offense; the “impeders of the Holy Office” were heavily fined and, in extreme cases, prosecuted as heretics. In 1635, for instance, Spaniard Francisco de la Torre was sentenced to pay two thousand golden pesos as an impeder of the Tribunal. See José Toribio Medina, Historia del tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en México (1905; reprinted, Mexico City: Conaculta, 1991), 194; and Stephen Haliczer, Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia, 1478–1834 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 19.
As the slaveholder clearly knew, once the trial started, it could take some time before everything was over.

**Afro-Mexicans on Trial**

Blasphemy trials could be rather lengthy. After receiving the denunciation of the slave’s crime, the Inquisition undertook a detailed investigation of the charges involved. The investigators summoned witnesses of all social classes not only to render an account of the exact words used and the circumstances under which the slave blasphemed but also to express their opinion about the infractor as a Christian. Furthermore, witnesses were asked if the accused was sober and in the right state of mind (*en su juicio*) at the time of renunciation, and if the slave had made a habit of blaspheming (*costumbre de renegar*). Before an arrest took place, a number of theologians who served as consultants (*calificadores*) determined whether or not the case warranted prosecution. If the evidence gathered was judged sufficient, an order of arrest was issued at the request of the prosecuting attorney or *fiscal*. Brought to jail in Mexico City by the *alguacil mayor* (constable) or the master himself, the slave would then spend months (sometimes more than a year) imprisoned before a verdict was announced. Occasionally, the slaveholder would be allowed to keep the slave at his service pending the trial, a phenomenon which, according to the available evidence, occurred in only seven cases, but is likely to have occurred in many other instances;\(^\text{63}\) the slaveholder was obliged, however, to present the defendant before the Tribunal whenever he or she was needed. In addition, the master would be clearly instructed not to sell his slave.

During the first meeting with the prisoner, the Inquisitors elicited information concerning the slave’s age, marital status, genealogy, and personal history (*discurso de la vida*). It was not unusual, however, for a slave to be ignorant of such details. Sometimes the defendants tried to summarize their genealogy by stating, as Marco Bautista did in 1656, that he descended “from good, not from bad people.”\(^\text{64}\) The slave was then asked if (s)he had been previously tried

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\(^{63}\) See the cases of Joaquín de Santa Ana (Xalapa, Ver., 1599), AGN, Inq. 145.7, fols. 80–132; Francisco (Mexico City, 1601), AHMNAH, CA, 366.1, fols. 1–27; Sebastián (Mexico City, 1603), AGN 271.14 (unfoliated); Pascual Francisco (Mexico City, 1606), AGN, Inq. 279.10, fols. 114–137v; Pedro (Mexico City, 1607), AHMNAH, CA, 366.2, fols. 168–190; Felipa (Mexico City, 1607), AHMNAH, CA, 366.4, fols. 191–236; and Pedro (Mexico City, 1608), AGN, Inq. 483.2, fols. 16–42.

\(^{64}\) AGN, Inq. 566.1, fols. 1–30v
by the Holy Office; if (s)he was a Christian, baptized and confirmed; and if (s)he received the Holy Communion on the days designated by the church. Then, as a means of testing his/her basic knowledge of Christian doctrine and ritual, the slave was requested to make the sign of the cross, and repeat the “four prayers” (Pater Noster, Ave Maria, Salve Regina, and Credo) and the Ten Commandments.

In accordance with the traditional procedure, neither the names of the denouncer nor the charges were disclosed to the defendant. When asked if (s)he knew the reason for the trial, the slave sometimes even confessed to crimes unknown to the Inquisitors. Aside from those who denounced themselves, however, most slaves claimed to know the nature of the charges against them and promptly offered their own version of the events. Rendering as many lurid details as possible, slaves depicted the horrific conditions under which they blasphemed. Given the fact that intent was the most important aspect in committing this crime and sin, slaves had to prove beyond doubt that they had no real intention to renounce God. Hence, in order to present their blasphemies as a result of their master’s brutality, they made an effort to depict before the Holy Tribunal the vast and cruel array of disciplinary inscriptions practiced on their bodies.

In an effort to limit their responsibility and present themselves as pious Christians before the Tribunal, slaves resorted to several different strategies of self-representation. First, it was necessary to stress that, as fellow Christians they asked their masters to stop the chastisement either for the sake of Christ, the Holy Sacrament, or the Holy Virgin. Then, the slaves stated, “lacking the [necessary] strength” (faltándole el vigor) to withstand the beating, “forced by the unbearable pain,” or “urged” (oprimido) by the rigorous punishment, they were compelled to renounce God in order to put an end to their suffering. In contrast to their use of the active voice to reject the divinity under those circumstances (“I renounce God”), however, slaves often used the passive voice to disclaim responsibility for the sinful utterances. Couching their confessions in a variety of self-exculpatory expressions, slaves attempted to establish before the Holy Tribunal that they were not in control of their faculties under such duress: “I didn’t know what was said” (no supe lo que se dijo), “I was out of control” (estaba fuera de mí), “I was out of my mind” (fuera de mi juicio natural). Having lost command over themselves, they only learned what they had said through surrounding witnesses. When they came back to their senses, they claimed to have shown remorse and regret.65 In addition, Afro-Mexicans drew

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65. In contrast to Jean–Pierre Tardieu’s findings for Peru, Afro–Mexicans rarely used
a distinction between renouncing from the *mouth*—a sort of automatic reaction to intolerable castigation—and renouncing from the *heart*, where true intention apparently resided. In 1621 Diego, the young slave of barber Manuel Roberto, stated that he renounced from his mouth, not from his heart, because he was a baptized Christian.\textsuperscript{66} Slaves often declared to have renounced *only once*, and claimed to have repented either by uttering a particular formula (“May Jesus be with me!”), by asking forgiveness in front of an altar, or recanting the sinful utterances. The number of renouncements was important, for it was established that repetition as a sign of contumacy (stubborn rebelliousness) warranted a harsher punishment from the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{67} In a final statement, defendants kneeled and begged for mercy and promised not to blaspheme again even if it meant death (*aunque le quiten la vida*) or being shredded into pieces (*lo/la bahan pedazos*); slaves often requested that they be sold to another master in order to avoid blasphemy. The slave was usually admonished to offer a full confession, but having nothing more to say, the Tribunal would put an end to the first hearing and order the accused to be returned to prison.

During the second judicial session, the defendant was admonished once again to render a complete confession of his crimes. Since slaves rarely added anything else to their previous statements, the Inquisitors would immediately ask the prosecutor to proceed with a formal accusation. The *fiscal*, in his turn, would stress that the fact that slaves claimed a Christian identity only aggravated their cases, for it was inadmissible for a Christian to blaspheme his own God. Based on the testimony of the witnesses, the prosecutor summarized the events and almost invariably emphasized that the beating slaves received was “moderate,” “well deserved,” and “with no cruelty whatsoever” (*sin género de crueldad*). The fiscal’s position mirrored that of the slaveholders, who often declared themselves to have punished their slaves mercifully and “in the name of drunkenness as an exculpatory argument for their blasphemies. For exceptions, see AGN, Inq. 16.14, fols. 464–472, versus Juan Sevilla, Antequera, 1560; AGN, Inq. 46.5, fols. 23–37, versus Domingo, Mexico City, 1572; AGN, Inq. 421.1, versus Juan García, Mexico City, 1616. See also, Tardieu, *L’église et les noirs au Perou*, 656.

\textsuperscript{66} AGN, Inq. 421.1 (unfoliated).

\textsuperscript{67} See Arnaldo Albertino, *De agnoscedis assertionibus Catholicis et haereticis tractatus* (Rome: In Aedibus Populi Romani, 1572), question 28, no. 18, 145v; and Antonio de Sousa, *Aphorismi inquisitorum in quattor libros Distribvti* (Olissipone apud Petrum Craesbeeck, 1630), bk. 1, chap. 19, no. 18, 53.
of God.” If slaves blasphemed God under these circumstances, the prosecutor would argue, it was only because of their bad disposition. In 1659 in the case against Gertrudis de Escobar, Prosecutor Andrés de Cabalca stated, “neither the instrument, nor the oppression nor the rigor of the punishment could justify such a terrible and dreadful audacity, but only her natural evil and vicious penchant.” To regard blasphemy as a consequence of the “bad nature” of the slave transgressors, obviously, only manifested a constant disavowal of the history of violence involved in these cases and, for that matter, the violence perpetrated in slavery in general. To conclude his accusation, the prosecutor would assert that the defendant had committed other offenses, and would charge him/her with perjury, alleging the prisoner falsely stated to have no more crimes to declare. In replying to the charges, the slave generally adhered to his/her previous statements and denied having committed more crimes. The Tribunal would then appoint a defense attorney for the slave and terminate the hearing.

As in the previous meeting, the third session started with a new admonition from the Inquisitors to the slave to declare in full his/her crimes. Next, the defendant and his/her attorney appeared before the Holy Tribunal. This minor official of the court, however, could do no more than advise the defendant to confess and ask for mercy. As Stephen Haliczer has emphasized, defense attorneys found themselves in an ambiguous, even dangerous, position before the court. Wanting the approval and respect of the Holy Tribunal, these officials feared to offer a vigorous defense that would place their jobs at risk and possibly even raise the suspicion that they were protectors of heretics and blasphemers. Notwithstanding this, defense attorneys frequently offered

68. For instance, in his testimony against his slave Pedro Juárez, in 1602 the priest of the Cathedral of Tlaxcala claimed before the commissary of Puebla Bartolomé Marqués de Amarilla to have reproached Pedro: “Dog! what reason [did] you have to renounce God and His saints? The punishment I give you is moderate and merciful because you’re a baptized Christian and you must mend yourself . . . Treacherous traitor to God and the Holy Trinity! In the name of God and the Holy Trinity in which I believe and I adore, and as an expression of reverence to them I punish you!” See AGN, Inq. 452.6, fol. 94.

69. AGN, Inq. 446 (unnumbered), fol. 180.

70. Both Davidson and Palmer stated in the same way that, in general, “the slaves were tried for their crimes, while the violence which provoked them was ignored.” See Davidson, “Negro Slave,” 241; and Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 118.

71. See Haliczer, Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom, 74–75. Similarly, for the influential sixteenth-century canonist Francisco Peña, the main role of the defense attorney was “to press the defendant to confess and repent, and request penitence for the crime committed.” See Eimeric and Peña, Manual de los inquisidores, 168.
slaves some coaching when it came to asking for forgiveness. While conferring with their attorney, slaves were often advised to make a final attempt to establish their innocence by mentioning Spanish prejudices against people of African blood. In doing so, Afro-Mexicans often begged for the Inquisition’s “accustomed mercy,” claiming to be “wretched” and “ignorant” negroes, with “little judgment” and understanding.72

At some point after the last audience, the Inquisitors voted and pronounced the sentence. Slaves normally heard the Inquisitors’ decision at the Holy Office quarters, but a good number of sentences were also announced before a vast crowd in an auto de fe, a theater of punishment in which Afro-Mexicans were routinely included as penitents.73 Penance varied from case to case, but the Tribunal generally condemned the offenders to public abjuration de levi (reserved for minor offenses), scourging (usually between 100 and 200 lashes), public disgrace by being paraded on the streets, and spiritual pence (attending a mass and undergoing a course of religious instruction). Temporary incarceration, and/or work in obrajes (which functioned as labor prisons) for one or two years were also possible, though less common, penalties.74

72. See, for instance, AGN, Inq. 147.2 (unfoliated), vs. Domingo, Puebla, 1598; AGN, Inq. 48.6 (unfoliated), vs. Joaquín de Santa Ana, Jalapa, 1599; AMNAH, CA 366.1, fols. 1–27, vs. Francisco, Mexico City, 1601; AGN, Inq. 269.1 (unfoliated), vs. Juan (Jhao), Los Angeles, 1603.


74. For cases in which slaves were sentenced to prison, see Juan Criollo (Mexico City, 1596), 6 months, AGN, Inq. 161.5 (unfoliated); Juan Montes (Mexico City, 1596), 6 months, AGN, Inq. 145.10, fols. 168–193v; Domingo (Los Angeles, 1598), 6 months, AGN, Inq. 147.2 (unfoliated); Baltazar de los Reyes (Los Angeles, 1603), 4 months, AGN, Inq. 271.18 (unfoliated); Ambrosio (Mexico City, 1603), one year in prison, AGN, Inq. 271.17 (unfoliate); Pascual Francisco (Mexico City, 1606), 6 months, AGN, Inq. 279.10, fols. 114–137v; Pedro (Mexico City, 1608), 4 months, AGN, Inq. 483.2, fols. 16–42; and María de la Cruz (Mexico City, 1658), 6 years in prison, AGN, Inq. 576.5, fols. 518–570. On obrajes as prisons, consult Samuel Kagan, “The Labor of Prisoners in the Obrajes of Coyoacán, 1660–1693,” in El trabajo y los trabajadores, 201–214; idem, “Penal Servitude in New Spain: The Colonial Textile Industry” (Ph.D. diss., City Univ. of New York, 1977), 73–84. See also, Gonzalo A. Beltrán, “La esclavitud en los obrajes novoespañoles,” in La Heterodoxia Recuperada: En torno a Angel Palerm, ed. Susana Glantz (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987). In Peru, bakeries played a similar role since colonial times. See Christine Hünefeldt, Paying the Price of Freedom: Family and Labor among Lima’s Slaves, 1800–1854 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 187–94; and Carlos A. Aguirre, “Violencia, castigo y control social: Esclavos y panaderías en Lima, siglo XIX,” RTSado y Presente 1 (1988).

79. For instance, AGN, Inq. 147.2 (unfoliated), vs. Domingo, Puebla, 1598; AGN, Inq. 48.6 (unfoliated), vs. Joaquín de Santa Ana, Jalapa, 1599; AMNAH, CA 366.1, fols. 1–27, vs. Francisco, Mexico City, 1601; AGN, Inq. 269.1 (unfoliated), vs. Juan (Jhao), Los Angeles, 1603.
Although it is difficult to establish a clear correspondence between crimes and punishments, it seems that Inquisitors reserved lighter penances for those slaves who offered a prompt confession, manifested immediate repentance and signs of submission, and promised not to blaspheme again. Apparently, a particularly effective way for slaves to avoid punishment was to show profound contrition and to vow not to renounce God anew, even if masters were beating them to death. Inquisitors found this act of repentance especially satisfactory because by asserting their willingness to endure the master’s violence to the point of risking death, slaves accepted the slaveholder’s right to chastise and discipline their bodies, while also depicting themselves, the victims, as law-abiding, obedient, and faithful Christians. This was probably seen as a dramatic statement, for both Inquisitors and slaves knew that the possibility of dying at the master’s hands was indeed a real one.\(^{75}\) In general, the accused slaves who resorted to this strategy at the Holy Office received only a severe reprimand.\(^{76}\)

It seems, however, that the sentences were frequently considered to be too harsh by the Supreme Holy Tribunal in Spain. Due to the institutional subordination of all colonial tribunals to the Council of the Inquisition (\textit{La Suprema}) headed by the Inquisitor General, the Mexican Inquisition regularly sent summaries of all cases (\textit{relaciones de causas}) to Madrid. This practice allowed the Suprema to supervise the trials and to ponder the fairness of the sentences imposed. A letter written by the Supreme Council to the Mexican Inquisitors in 1610 shows that Madrid frequently found excessive the decisions against Afro-Mexicans: “[G]enerally these sentences seem too rigorous,” stated the Suprema, “considering that they [the slaves] blasphemed on account of the rigor of the punishment.” Showing greater tolerance than its counterpart in New Spain, the Suprema instructed the Mexican Inquisitors to warn masters who exhibited cruelty against their slaves “not to give them [the slaves] occasion to blaspheme against God our Lord, but to treat them well.”\(^{77}\) As a result of this injunction, the Holy Office apparently tended to reduce the harshness

\(^{75}\) Some cases never reached conclusion because of the defendant’s death, possibly as a result of mistreatment in the master’s house pending the trial. For examples, see the cases of Thomas de Contreras (Mexico City, 1572), and Antón de Cartagena (Tlanepantla, 1598) in, respectively, AGN, Inq. 47.1, fols. 2–41, and 147.4 (unfoliated).

\(^{76}\) For examples consult the cases of Juana (Mexico City, 1629), María (Mexico City, 1630), and Gabriel (Mexico City, 1629), in AGN, Inq. 421.1. See also the case of Marcos Bautista (Coyoacán, 1636), in AGN, Inq. 566.1 (unfoliated).

\(^{77}\) AGN, Inq. 502 (unnumbered), fol. 385, quoted in Alberro, “Negros y mulatos,” 160.
of its sentences to a strong admonition and a beating consisting of 12 to 50 lashes between 1611 and 1640, but later increased the severity of the punishment to its usual levels in the 1650s. Although the Suprema generally tended in the direction of greater leniency in modifying sentences handed out in the Iberian provinces, the disagreement between Madrid and its colonial dependency regarding the punishment of slaves was also a result of the different social conditions faced by the two tribunals. As emphasized by Colin Palmer and Solange Alberro, tensions deriving from the pre-1650 numerical inferiority of Spaniards to blacks, the constant fear of rebellion, and the Spaniards’ need of self-preservation worked powerfully against any kind of liberalism in the slave system in New Spain.80

78. For several instances in which a milder punishment was ordered, see AGN, Inq 421.1 (unfoliated).

79. After constituting a participant in the slave trade as important as to purchase almost half of all Africans sent to America between 1595 and 1622 (a period in which the capital of the colony alone registered more than 10,000 slaves as well as 3,500 black freemen, mulattoes and mestizos), Mexico imported decreasing numbers of slaves in the 1630s. By the 1670s the trade had virtually stopped in important centers of slave acquisition such as Jalapa. This trend reflected the general withdrawal of New Spain from participation in the Atlantic slave trade after the dissolution of the Spanish–Portuguese union in 1640 and the consequent lack of supply of Africans. As a result of these changes, whites came to outnumber blacks in Mexico after the 1650s. For an estimate of the population of Mexico at the end of the sixteenth century, see Georges Baudot, “La population des villes du Mexique en 1595 selon une enquête de l’Inquisition,” Cahiers du monde hispanique et luso-brésilien (Caravelle) 37 (1981): 17. For discussions of the decline in the importation of slaves to New Spain, see Carrol, Blacks in Colonial Veracruz, 31, 145, 146; Gilberto Bermúdez Gorruchotegui, Historia de Jalapa, siglo XVII (Xalapa, Mexico: Univ. Veracruzana, 1995), 317–19; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, La población negra de México: Estudio etnobiográfico, 2d ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 165–75; Cheryl E. Martin, Rural Society in Colonial Morelos (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1985), esp. chap. 6; Vila Vilar, Hispanoamérica y el comercio de esclavos, 207; and Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 6. An important exception to the generalized decrease in slave importation was Córdoba, which augmented its acquisition of Africans at the end of the seventeenth century, see Chávez–Hita, Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras; and idem, “Trabajadores esclavos en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba, Veracruz, 1714–1763,” in El trabajo y los trabajadores, 163.

80. See Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 88; and Alberro, “Negros y mulatos,” 159. On the Suprema’s pattern of greater leniency in relation to the provinces, see Haliczer, Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom, 90–91.
**The Decline**

The Holy Office clearly enjoyed a reputation among slaves as a possible way out of the stern conditions in which they lived. In the absence of effective civil courts where they could lodge a complaint for mistreatment, Afro-Mexicans saw the Inquisition as an avenue to alleviate their miserable condition. Although most slaves only obtained a momentary respite before the Tribunal, they longed for the possibility of changing masters. Spanish law and its colonial variants required brutally treated slaves to be sold to another master, but such disposition was rarely practiced. Even when the Inquisition took this measure in several cases of extreme cruelty, the action was clearly “more a mild punishment of the master than a ‘right’ of the slave.” Still this alternative gave slaves some hope of having a better life through the intervention of the Holy Office. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Tribunal’s reputation as a possible way of changing masters was so clearly established among slaves that Inquisitors felt in need of admonishing slave Juan de Morga in 1650 that “The Holy Office never takes away the slaves from their masters, nor forces [the owners] to sell them because its only business is to deal with cases related to the Catholic faith.” Nevertheless, the court did not always follow through with such rhetoric. Morgan’s fate was a case in point. The Inquisitors ordered a thorough investigation to establish whether his master Diego de Arratia was practicing the cruelties alleged by Morga at his mines in Zacatecas, and if such

81. According to Palmer, there were two main methods of offering judicial protection to the slave in New Spain. The first one was preventive, and consisted of an unannounced and sporadic visit to an obraje to register if abuses were committed against the labor force, of which slaves formed a significant part. The second one was punitive in character, and was triggered when witnesses or the slaves themselves denounced a slaveholder for mistreatment before the Holy Office or audiencia. Unfortunately, protection cases were rare throughout the colonial period. In this context, intervention of the Holy Office could be only secured by Afro-Mexicans through criminal deeds such as blasphemy. See Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 90–2; and Davidson, “Negro Slave,” 240–41.

82. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 202. Changing of masters was a triumph for slaves, but a small one. As R. Douglas Cope asserts, “a slave’s welfare depended in large part on establishing a rapport with his master,” that could reduce the coercive element in social control and be translated into “a movement along the spectrum toward paternalism and clientage.” See Cope, *The Limits Racial Domination*, 96. For examples of slaves who succeeded in changing masters, see the cases of Juan (Puebla, 1603), Nicolás de la Cruz (Mexico City, 1658), and Salvador (Mexico City, 1707). In these three instances, the masters were ordered to sell them. See, respectively, AGN, Inq. 269.1. (unfoliated); 572.13, fols. 187r–214v; and 544.19, fols. 375–387v.

83. AGN, Inq. 253 (unnumbered), fol. 270.
was the case, they ordered Morga to be sold “since the salvation of this mulatto [was] in danger.”

However, as the seventeenth century neared its end, slaves found it increasingly difficult to draw the attention of the Holy Office, for the Inquisitors were losing interest in blasphemy among Afro-Mexicans. Part of the reason for this decline was undoubtedly related to the general decline of blasphemy as a transgression capable of calling down the wrath of the celestial powers that be, a change associated with the deterioration of the image of a retaliating God, and its replacement with the more loving, but more distant God of the New Testament. More important for our discussion, however, was the increasing resistance of the Tribunal to work as an institutional avenue to free slaves from their master’s authority, and to spend its time and resources in these often-burdensome trials. The weary prosecutor Andrés de Cañalca, in a letter written to the Holy Office in 1663, offered a good example of this change of attitude. Complaining about the way Mexican bondsmen precipitated the intervention of the Inquisition by renouncing God, the officer stated that slaves simply “intend to evade their master’s service and escape his dominion . . . [as a result,] they have represented a lot of work for this Holy Office, which is repeatedly overburdened with these kinds of cases.”

Some late-century cases indicate, on the other hand, that the Inquisition was increasingly willing to castigate slaves at the place of their supposed infraction, instead of transferring the defendants to Mexico City. There were some petitions to reduce time and distance between crime and punishment. On 3 September 1631, the commissary of the Inquisition in Puebla, Don Antonio de Cervantes Carvajal, denounced Francisco Sánchez, a mulatto awaiting punishment in the public jail for several different crimes. In an attempt to escape punishment by the secular authorities, Sánchez renounced God and His saints several times so he would be taken out of his prison and conducted before the Holy Office. Cervantes asked orders to proceed against Sánchez, but also reminded the Inquisitor Francisco Bazán de Albornoz that in a recent similar case he had ordered the infractor “to be given 40 lashes in front of those who heard him, and it caused such a good effect that his master will not sell him for any money, because he made such a big change from bad to good.”

84. AGN, Inq. 253, fol. 273.
85. I discuss in detail these changes in the perception of blasphemy in the colonial Mexican context in “Defending God’s Honor.”
86. AGN, Inq. 502.385 (unfoliated), quoted in Alberro, “Negros y mulatos,” 158.
87. AGN, Inq. 374.4, fols. 40r
Similarly, Licenciado Joseph Ramírez de Arellano, writing from a sugarmill near Pantitlán, requested in 1663 that slaves be punished at the place of the infraction so that the punishment might serve as a lesson to others: “punishment is better imprinted for the purposes of amendment when they see it in front of their eyes, than when they hear about it.” Although both requests seem to make sense in terms of economy of punishment, the Inquisition insisted on maintaining its expensive centralist tradition and ordered the accused to be transferred to Mexico City. It seems, however, that the Holy Office gradually honored those petitions. In 1670, for example, Inquisitors condemned the mulatto Miguel de la Cruz to be whipped in the same Puebla obraje where he had renounced God. If this new tendency in punishment affected those slaves who lived in the urban obrajes, it probably devastated slaves inhabiting harsher and more distant places in the countryside, such as sugarmills (ingenios) or mines. The distant voices of these unfortunates were rarely heard at the Holy Office, for they were beyond the Inquisitorial range. The increasing indifference of the Holy Office regarding the slaves’ blasphemy only made it more difficult for them to use their time-tested strategy to escape, even temporarily, the living hell to which they were consigned by their often sadistic masters.

**Conclusion**

Crimes, it has been argued, open multiple windows to the societies of the past. Intimately related to the classificatory systems and moral taxonomies by which

88. Quoted in Alberro, “Negros y mulatos,” 159.
89. Even Spaniards took advantage of this tradition of judicial centralism. Knowing they could not be tried in the Philippines, Spanish soldiers blasphemed with the hope of being sent to Mexico, and thereby escape military service in the Pacific islands. See José Toribio Medina, *El tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en las islas Filipinas* (Santiago de Chile: Imp. Elzeviriana, 1899), 63.
90. AGN, Inq. 666.6, fols. 417–442v.
91. Like its counterpart in Spain, the activity of the Mexican Holy Office was mostly restricted to the capital city and surrounding areas. In the countryside, the degree of social control it could enforce seems to have been negligible. On the other hand, slaves in urban areas apparently had a higher rate of survival, not only in Mexico but also in Iberian America in general. See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 180. For a rich portrait of the working and living conditions in mines and sugarmills, see Solange Alberro, “Juan de Morga y Gertrudis de Escobar: Esclavos rebeldes (Nueva España, siglo XVII)” in *Lucha por la supervivencia en la América colonial*, ed. David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash, trans. David Huerta and Juan José Utrilla (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).
a human conglomerate orders itself, crimes test and measure the social and
cultural values that hold human beings together.92 In a society articulated
around the Christian notion of equality before God, blasphemy among black
slaves made evident the contradictions Afro-Mexicans experienced in living
“under the yoke of the Christian faith.” Redeemed like their masters through
an uncommitted bondage to God, slaves were also enmeshed in a social order
in which they only had a place in a state of physical bondage. Equality was a
spiritual matter, and no master ever thought of abdicating his authority
because the slave was his fellow Christian. And, yet, it was no small matter to
have recognized that the “tool with a voice” (instrumentum vocale), as Romans
called the slave, was also a Christian.93 Endowed with a soul to be saved, bonds-
men were often able to draw the attention of the Holy Office to obtain the
protection that judicial courts rarely conceded them. Such relief only occurred,
however, to the extent that slaves could place the responsibility for the crime
committed on their masters, and establish their own good faith. Claiming to
possess a Christian identity, black slaves engaged in a careful exercise of
impression management to put on a successful performance in the recurring
drama that took place between authorities and defendants at the Holy Office.
In a way, they used Christian religion as a “language of contention”—that is,
as a “common ground” shared with the Inquisitors upon which they could
establish their innocence and hold their masters—the true “bad” Christians
and God’s enemies—responsible for provoking their blasphemies and putting
at risk the salvation of their souls.94

The “common ground” shared by slaves and Inquisitors was, of course,
only apparent. While the Holy Office, as did all colonial authorities, utilized
Christianity as a means to exact conformity and submission from bondsmen
under the promise of future redemption, Afro-Mexicans sought leverage
against their masters by sharing their masters’ faith. In this sense, slaves used
their “integration” into the Christian community to fight the abuses deriving

92. On crimes as “windows to the past,” see Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero,
introduction to History from Crime: Selections from Quaderni Storici, ed. Edward Muir and
Guido Ruggiero, trans. Corrada Biazzo Curry, Margaret A. Gallucci, and Mary M.
Gallucci (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994).
93. Marc Bloch, “How and Why Ancient Slavery Came to an End,” in Slavery and
Serfdom in the Middle Ages: Selected Essays, trans. William R. Beer (Berkeley: Univ. of
94. I draw here on William Roseberry’s “Hegemony and the Language of
Contention,” in Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in
Modern Mexico, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke Univ. Press,
1994).
from their marginality in a slaveholders’ society. It is true, however, that in fac-
ing the Inquisition slaves tried for blasphemy struggled to influence the Holy
Tribunal in their favor but never challenged slavery per se. In this sense, as the
historian of slavery Eugene D. Genovese has asserted in a different context,
for the great majority of Afro-Mexican blasphemers “the practical question . . .
was not whether slavery itself was a proper relation but how to survive it with
the greatest degree of self-determination.”

As an act of defiance, renouncing reassembled those acts of “blind fury,”
which James Scott associates with individuals not only subjected to indignities
they cannot respond, but also atomized by the process of domination. Since in
these conditions there is not a rich “hidden transcript”—a critique of power
spoken behind the back of the dominant”—it would be expected that defiance
would assume an improvised or unstructured form. I have argued, however,
that far from being an improvised utterance, renouncing God and the Christ-
ian pantheon was a socially patterned verbal act of resistance that carried
within itself a legacy of usage, and a heritage of voices among Afro-Mexican
slaves. Far from exhibiting a blind confidence in the “magical power” of blas-
phemous words, slaves made use of blasphemy based on their knowledge of
the colonial institutions, practices of punishment and denunciation, and dis-
courses of Christian salvation that gave social force to their expletives. In
the end, by using and appropriating the Christian moral standards and injunctions
of their oppressors to further their own interests, slaves also evidenced and
often subverted the painful politics of inclusion and exclusion that permeated
their daily lives.

95. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll, 125.

96. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, xii. Scott discusses the concept of
“blind fury” on p. 217.

97. It is unlikely in this sense that the use of blasphemy among Afro-Mexican slaves
stemmed from a primitive and “naive confidence that one is in a possession of a verbal
formula which is bound to produce the desired effect.” See R. Harris, “Mentioning the
Unmentionable,” International Journal of Moral and Social Studies 2 (1987): 185. There is a
vast literature, which associates blasphemy with the purported magical power of “taboo
words.” See, for example, James G. Frazer, “Tabooed Words,” in Taboo and the Perils of the
1955), 318, 418; Ernest Crawley, “The Oaths, the Curse and the Blessing,” in Studies of
Savages and Sex, ed. Theodore Besterman (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929); and
Sheldon H. Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” Hebrew Union College