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Review / Reseña

Taylor, William B. *Marvels and Miracles in Late Colonial Mexico: Three Texts in Context*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011.

Marvels, Miracles, and the Praxis of Popular Religion in Late Colonial Mexico

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Miracles hold a hallowed place in Catholic tradition. Because they signify the presence of the divine in the temporal realm, they form a mystical connection between the believer and God and provide crucial justification for faith. In late colonial Mexico, as elsewhere in the contemporary Catholic world, a miracle most often expressed divine intervention to thwart a calamity such as grave illness, blindness, or injury, providing the faithful with a psychic hedge against everyday uncertainties. Catholic shrines associated with miracles credited to saints or an apparition of the Virgin Mary functioned as sites of devotional practice where pilgrims seeking protection or offering thanks left tokens in the form of candles, flowers, *milagritos* (wax or metal figures, usually of body parts), or, if they could afford to pay an artist, ex-voto paintings. Yet miracles also existed

within a theological context founded on the idea that the church mediated the interaction between God and the laity. The church held that miracles were possible, but altogether rare. It regarded reports of miracles with a skepticism driven by dedication to defend true religion from superstition and heresy, that is, to preserve the Holy Catholic Faith from unsanctioned beliefs borne out of unmediated religious experience. Therefore only a church court could authenticate a miracle. People from all walks of life submitted evidence of miracles to church officials, making the documentation generated by the investigation of their claims into a valuable source of insight into the social, cultural, and political dimension of religious practice.

This premise underlies William Taylor's *Marvels and Miracles in Late Colonial Mexico*. The book is divided into three parts, each of which consists of an introductory essay and Taylor's translation of documents, providing an example from the late eighteenth century, of miracles attributed to the Virgin Mary in one or another of her various guises. Those familiar with Taylor's work will recognize the texts, given that he has published them elsewhere before bringing them together to supplement his monograph *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico Before the Reforma*. Even so, he prepared this sourcebook to stand on its own. It is thus an anthology that coheres as a study in its own right.

The book presents three distinct cases of miracles that contribute to our understanding of the politics of popular devotion in colonial Mexico. All involved a fervent claim that the church hierarchy ultimately either denied or refused to confirm. The first part concerns the travails of María Francisca Larralde, a member of an elite family in what was then the northern outpost of Monterrey. In 1757 she contracted a mysterious illness that left her near death. After weeks suffering, attended by church dignitaries and her family, she rallied, they all suspected, thanks to the intercession of Our Lady of the Walnut Tree (now known as Our Lady of the Oak Tree), patroness of Monterrey. Part II shifts to the village of Santa María de la Asunción Tlamacazapa, in southern Mexico, where in 1774 an Indian woman discovered, just moments before giving birth, a kernel of corn bearing an image of the Virgin. Part III reprints a lengthy account by

a Franciscan friar, Francisco Antonio de la Rosa, of his activities in the 1740s as the parish priest of Nativitas Tepetlatcingo on the outskirts of Mexico City. He threw himself into raising money to refurbish the parish church by restoring its wooden statue of Mary, and promoting its veneration as Our Lady of the Intercession. Father de la Rosa initially succeeded, his efforts culminating in the statue being carried in a procession through the center of Mexico City in 1743, only to have his superiors later bar him from removing the statue from Nativitas, and then reassigning him to the archive and library of his home monastery in Mexico City. Thirty years later, determined that Our Lady of the Intercession not be forgotten, he penned a detailed narrative of his time in Nativitas that describes the many miracles wrought by the Virgin to reward his pious works.

These cases occurred at time when the Bourbon Reforms were gradually altering the role of the church and religion in Spanish America, a topic on which Taylor has already established himself as an authority. Nevertheless, readers seeking a fresh perspective on the Bourbon Reforms will need to look elsewhere, because the documents in *Marvels and Miracles* bear no discernible imprint of the structural changes then under way. That may derive from the fact that the cases transpired in peripheral settings (the northern frontier, a rural village in the southern highlands, an outlying town in the Valley of Mexico) where, and at times when, the reformist project had yet to alter traditional arrangements. Thus, the primary value of this collection lies not in what it tells us about the Bourbon reforms, but rather in the way it enables a comparative analysis of religious practice in three very different settings. Collectively they offer a nuanced vision of everyday life in the Bourbon era, reminding us of the cultural continuities that defined a period otherwise synonymous with institutional change.

A notable feature of this book is the way the sources capture an array of voices and places. Individually, each part allows us to peer into the inner workings of families and communities as revealed through the lens of popular religious devotion. The case of María Francisca Larralde conveys little as to the realities of life on the northern frontier, but it does provide a

snapshot of a family crisis that brought women to the fore, with María Francisca and her mother being the primary protagonists. Anna María, the Indian woman who found Our Lady in the kernel of corn, is a vibrant presence in depositions otherwise given by men. Moreover, Part II sheds light on the domestic world of indigenous villagers, as well as the relations between parents and children, men and women, and Indians and non-Indians in the community. The same is true of Part III, though Father de la Rosa was clearly preoccupied with using his association with Our Lady of the Intercession to gain entry into social and religious establishment of the colonial capital. His detailed recording of financial transactions illustrates the economic dimensions of religious devotion in his day. Likewise his attention to pecuniary detail reveals the social networks that tied Mexico City to one of its outlying communities. In all these ways the documents render a fragmentary but nevertheless inclusive vision of society and culture in late colonial Mexico.

Equally important is the way this book presents an eminent scholar's meditations on the craft of history. The documents themselves are currently housed in three different repositories in the United States and Mexico that mark waypoints on Taylor's search for miracle stories from the colonial period. To date he has collected eight hundred such stories. He describes himself drawn to the miracle stories "for what they meant to those who told and heard of them, and how they circulated and changed" (11). The introductory essay that accompanies each document recount Taylor's discovery of it and his struggles to interpret it. He shies away from conclusions in favor of reconstructing the context of the sources and mapping their epistemological implications. The individual parts, albeit united by a common theme, offer a selective and fragmentary vision of the past. Taylor admonishes the reader to remember that, "they are exemplary stories, preselected for us, not case histories" (5). His way of dealing with their particularity involves posing questions. Such self-conscious attention to the research process, and to the challenges inherent to analyzing manuscript sources, makes this book useful for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses on historical method.

By that same token, introductory essays “give away” the content of the documents. College educators may find that this closes off opportunities for students to gain a first-hand understanding of what the documents reveal. Thankfully, Taylor supplies an antidote in the introduction to the book, by way of a series of questions addressing how the documents were produced, used, and remembered, for which there is little or nothing in the documents themselves to suggest an answer. Taylor acknowledges that, “the silences in these miracle stories stand out more than the information in them” (5). His observation enunciates a truism of historical research. The aforementioned antidote, then, lies in the way the book opens a conversation on the value of those silences.

This slim volume presents an accessible treatment of two abstract subjects. Readers interested in the cultural history of popular religion in colonial Spanish America will find the book richly informative. Those interested in methodology will be rewarded with a glimpse of how a masterful scholar engages his sources. Finally, the book is an exemplary work of translation. Taylor transforms the colloquial prose of his sources into a readable translation that preserves distinctive voices. He furthermore employs discursive footnotes to comment on the texts and to provide definitions for specialized terms that defy simple translation. In sum, *Marvels and Miracles* amounts to a valedictory contribution to the scholarship on religion in late colonial Spanish America, by a historian who has done much over last two decades to define the field.