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Review/Reseña

Martin Austin Nesvig, ed. *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*
(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

The Many Catholicisms of Colonial Mexico

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Martin Nesvig has made an important new contribution to our knowledge of the Catholic Church in New Spain with this high quality anthology. The emphasis of its ten substantial articles rests on people of various kinds and conditions and nature and their encounters with the institution and its belief system, with their lived faiths and local religions. Nesvig writes that the present volume began as a response to the conceptual challenge thrown down by William Christian, Jr. in his path-breaking *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (1981); Christian contributes in Chapter 10 a kind of afterword to this

present volume, in fact. As such, the chapters assembled in *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* are intended to encourage the emergence of a more accurate understanding of the nature and practice of Catholicism in colonial New Spain. Much of the scholarship presented in this volume is informed not only by the analytical model developed by William Christian, Jr., but also by the approach now known as cultural history (as pioneered by people such as Clifford Geertz). As such, the anthology challenges the premise that the early post-invasion process of evangelization and Christian instruction carried out by the Franciscans and other orders and members of the Catholic clergy can be viewed as a uniformly triumphant process of “Spiritual Conquest,” and that over the course of time some kind of homogenous Catholic observance emerged in the colony.

All of these ideas are set out in the editor’s lucid introduction to the volume, which also includes a brief historiographical study of the subject under examination here. They are carried forward in Nesvig’s other contribution to the book, “The ‘Indian Question’ and the Case of Tlaltelolco” (Chapter 3), which provides an accessible analysis of the Franciscans controversial experiment at Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco to teach Nahua youths theology with the expectation that at least some of them might become ordained priests. Of particular note is what might be called Nesvig’s resurrection of a forgotten Franciscan scholar and theologian, Alfonso de Castro, who is convincingly positioned here as the creator of the most effective and learned defense of the education and ordination of indigenous men. Nesvig argues that Castro believed that one’s race or ethnicity was unimportant here; rather, one’s intellect and religious constancy was what counted. Such views obviously were radical for the sixteenth century, and more negative assessments by other clergy in both Spain and New Spain led to official bans on indigenous ordination issued by the first two Mexican councils (1555, 1565; Archbishop

Montúfar, for example, vehemently argued that indigenous people could never be more than perpetual children, particularly in terms of what might be called “spiritual maturity”).

The book’s first full chapter, “The Concept of Popular Religion,” by Carlos M.N. Eire aptly contributes a probing investigation of the precise meanings of “popular religion,” by tracing the dawning realization among some within the early Church that the faith as practiced by large numbers of people was distinct—perhaps not fully Christian—from that of the clergy and the educated. This is coupled with a historiographical examination of the ways in which scholars of the later 20th century grappled with the same concept. Eire argues that however they are precisely labeled, most approaches have ended up being binary in some way, exploring dichotomies between “official” and “lay” religion without always carefully defining what such terms mean. This binary approach has tended to reduce complexities to simple, opposed analytical categories.

Eire’s argument is a fitting one for this volume, which encapsulates a number of different ideas about the nature of “popular religion,” a characteristic that is one of the strengths of *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico*. The book is not just about a generic “local religion” that emerged in the colony; it does not simply look at the ways in which indigenous people like the Nahuas created a new kind of “indigenous Catholicism.” Rather, a whole range of “local religions” are explored here. Nonetheless, as prefigured in Nesvig’s introduction, the “indigenous question” is a significant one and is thus the subject of several of the present studies. Antonio Rubial García’s “Icons of Devotion: The Appropriation and Use of Saints in New Spain” (Chapter Two) is a convincing disquisition on the implantation of saint veneration in central Mexico after the Spanish invasion. The author recounts the relatively quick acceptance of saints by the indigenous people. He suggests that the reasons for this rapidity are linked to their previous polytheistic

beliefs, which included patron deities with specific control over natural forces. In this way, the attributes of indigenous divine patrons were not dissimilar to the special patronage attributed among Catholics to saintly intercessors who could be invoked for protection or succor in the face of floods, earthquakes, and the like. Rubial posits a process in which some form of dialog between indigenous people living in specific localities and the clergy was behind the emergence of specific saintly patrons. He demonstrates how the spread of saint veneration was linked to the activities and goals of various orders, and explains the ways in which creoles later appropriated certain saints as they sought to define themselves and New Spain in what might be called “protonationalistic” ways. Rubial sees this development at work in the increasing celebration of creole saints (even those who had not actually been canonized at the time), such as Felipe de Jesús, who had been born in Mexico City, and the Peruvian Santa Rosa de Lima, who also became popular in Mexico.

The significance of saints in terms of a much more localized and gendered kind of identity is the theme of Chapter Six, “Carriers of Saints: Traveling Alms Collectors and Nahua Gender Roles.” Author Edward W. Osowski studies the ways in which indigenous people—men and women who seem to have been from the highest indigenous social stratum—took local saints’ images and images of Christ on journeys around central Mexico in an effort to collect alms for the support of their “cults” in other indigenous communities. These efforts usually had the support of local *curas*, but in the later eighteenth century increasingly ran afoul of the Juzgado General de Indios because among other things this body was pressuring for an end to the participation of women as traveling alms collectors. Along the way, Osowski presents two major case studies, the first one centered around the activities of Doña Ana Ventura Gómez, a *cacica* of Mexico City, who wanted to coordinate the activities of traveling alms collectors for Our Lady of Loreto, an image housed in the

former Jesuit Colegio of San Gregorio; her efforts in 1791 to get a renewal of a license permitting her to do so was ultimately denied by the Juzgado. In the second case, an indigenous man named Gregorio Aparicio, of the pueblo of Ecatepec, found his collection activities complicated by a local dispute between several area communities over the true “ownership” of an image and therefore about the right to collect alms for it. All of this helps us grasp the importance of saints and their images in terms of indigenous cultural beliefs and practices. The article also gives good insights into the ways in which Bourbon-era officialdom tried to control that same indigenous world by maintaining or imposing social, physical, and even patriarchal-style gender constraints on their communities.

David Tavárez provides a preliminary look at issues of “Autonomy, Honor, and the Ancestors: Native Local Religion in Seventeenth-Century Oaxaca” (Chapter Five) through the lens of investigations of three alleged idolatrous outbreaks—or clandestine religious practices based on indigenous traditions—in as many Oaxacan communities of Villa Alta from the 1660s through the early eighteenth century. This project, which unlike some of the others presented in the present volume is in the beginning stages of its development, is based in part on potentially rich records of extirpation investigations. Tavárez highlights events in the pueblo of Cajonos, and particularly a “Cajonos revolt” of 1700; two local indigenous men who denounced supposed idolaters in the community and became victims of rioters in this *tumulto* were later cast by a priest in the nineteenth century as martyrs, and beatified in 2001 by Pope John Paul II. The chapter thus highlights the discontinuity and conflict that could ensue in the complex (rather than simply dichotomous) dialogue between Spanish clergy and indigenous Christians, between one kind of Catholic faith that existed in colonial Mexico and another kind of observance.

The focus of subsequent chapters begins to move away from indigenous Catholics in William Taylor's elegantly written story of the career of Franciscan and pastor of Nativitas Tepetlatcingo, a Nahuatl pueblo south of the center of Mexico City (Chapter Four, "Between Nativitas and Mexico City: An Eighteenth-Century Pastor's Local Religion"). The Franciscan Francisco Antonio de la Rosa Figueroa became the champion of an image of the Virgin found in Nativitas, an image that became so important to him that he had it refurbished by an indigenous artist from Tlaltelolco. Renaming the image *Nuestra Señora del Patrocinio* (Our Lady of the Intercession), De la Rosa pushed for a more universal veneration of this Virgin and eventually attributed thirty-five miracles to the image or to paper representations of it. Like William Christian, Jr., Taylor recognizes the clergy not just as enforcers of official orthodoxy, but rather as human beings with their own "local religion" formed by their particular life experiences. De la Rosa's efforts to spread his personal "local religion" to his parishioners and throughout central New Spain failed, probably because the Church did not support them and because he too obviously held the beliefs of his indigenous flock in contempt; they continued to refer to the Virgin's image as Our Lady of Nativitas, her persona even today.

Chapters Seven and Eight shift the anthology's gaze to confraternities. In "Confraternities and Community: The Decline of the Communal Quest for Salvation in Eighteenth-Century Mexico City," Brian Larkin crafts an intriguing investigation of confraternities and their Spanish members in late eighteenth-century Mexico City. These organizations were dedicated to the proper celebration and monetary support of funeral processions and burials of the members, as well as of masses dedicated to intercessor saints venerated by the confraternity celebrated on behalf of deceased members' souls. For Larkin this is another form of local religion, a local religion that did not just rest upon the kind of devotion to saints

and shrines examined by William Christian, Jr., but one which also incorporated regular participation—often very active and colorful—in the official liturgy of the church. Nicole von Germeten (Chapter Eight, “Routes to Respectability: Confraternities and Men of African Descent in New Spain”) contributes a fascinating compilation of two case studies of Afro-Mexican men who were active in confraternities of Mexico City and Valladolid (Morelia): Juan Roque, a free man of Zape origin of seventeenth-century Mexico City (d. 1629), and a mulatto named Diego Durán, who was a master architect of eighteenth-century Valladolid (d. 1795). Von Germeten believes that the Zape *cofradía* of the Limpia Concepción gave free Africans such as Roque at least a modicum of social mobility or recognition. This was certainly true of Durán, who by the 1770s had achieved the post of *mayordomo* of the *cofradía* of Our Lady of the Rosary “of the mulattoes,” a post he held until his death. The “local religion” of these confraternities, the sincere Catholic beliefs of their members, their pious works, devotions, and comradeship could enhance the social stature of those involved.

Larkin sees a decline in Spanish confraternity membership and activism over the course of the eighteenth century. He attributes this decline to both a rise in a “modern” sense of individuality among this group and a concomitant lessening of their need to belong to communal organizations, as well as to efforts by ecclesiastical authorities to reign in the sometimes lavish public displays put on the by brotherhoods. However, the history of the mulatto confraternity of Valladolid, which remained a strong group well into the nineteenth century, suggests that this decline may not have been uniform or universal. Instead, region, social class, and ethnicity may have had a significant impact on the ways in which Larkin’s model late colonial decline actually played out. It could be that while those in advantaged positions such as the Spanish members of Mexico City’s *cofradías* may not have needed the continued support of the

soldalities, less advantaged groups, such as the mulattoes of Valladolid, may have needed to maintain their participation in these same kind of corporate “routes to respectability.”

A thoroughly gripping tale of the ways in which African and mulatto slaves attempted to manipulate their own religiosity and the sensibilities of those wielding power in the seventeenth century is found in Chapter Nine, “Voices from a Living Hell: Slavery, Death, and Salvation in a Mexican *Obraje*,” by Javier Villa-Flores. The author documents the ways in which these bound workers attempted to use declarations of Christian faith, or sometimes blasphemous denunciations of that same faith, its saints, Christ, and God to lighten or escape their torment. As a plus, the fine article provides a succinct, sometimes horrifying window into the brutality of the colonial *obraje* system, run on the backs of enslaved and mistreated workers, a system obviously deserving the vile reputation that has echoed down the years. The author makes skillful use of Inquisitional records and other sources to follow the benighted careers of several slaves held in the workshop of the Díaz de Posadas family. The testimony of the slaves, the counter claims made by the owner, his family, and his overseers, tales of corruption in both high and low places, and a trail of violence provide us with a rich field of evidence for the ways in which the “local religion” of slaves was consciously called upon by them to ameliorate their horrendous conditions. While the strategy seems to have worked for some of those slaves who managed to get their cases heard by the Inquisition and who earned a kind of redress (however minor: resale to another owner deemed less violent than the present one), the story lacks a happy ending. In the long run, during the eighteenth century thanks to growing official indifference and persistent racism, it became harder and harder for *obraje* slaves to use their own “local religion” to win even this stingy form of legal succor.

There are some caveats to be made here, however. As with any anthology, the challenge is to maintain a general level of quality as well as fidelity to an organizing theme. The editor and contributors are generally successful here, in that the scholarly stature of the work is collectively impressive. Yet some chapters are more closely in keeping with the premise of “local religion” than others. “Voices from a Living Hell,” a very good piece in its own right, is a bit of a stretch, for instance. The Tavárez piece, the product of an early stage of a larger research project, is thus somewhat more “preliminary” than other contributions. Nesvig does not consider the groundbreaking work of Louise Burkhart (above all her monograph *The Slippery Earth*) in either the introduction to the volume or his essay in Chapter 3, nor does he mention or cite the efforts of other ethnohistorians and historical philologists who have translated and pondered the implications of indigenous-language religious materials. This body of scholarship has helped us achieve a more profound understanding of the ways in which the “conquered” peoples found agency in the process through which Christianity entered their pre-existing sacred consciousness, or in other words how they engaged in a cultural dialog with the clergy and in so doing participated in the emergence of new forms of “indigenous local religion.” This omission diminishes the effectiveness of the editor’s historiographical overview. A less important issue, though a nagging one in a book positioned as a revisionist study, is connected with the repetition here of the enduring idea that the “defender of the Indians” Bartolomé de las Casas had a less savory side in the shape of his justification of African slavery. In fact, recent research by scholars of Las Casas’s life, work, and thought argues that the Dominican had a change of heart about African slavery in the late 1540s, and disavowed his earlier support for the institution (see for instance, Isacio Pérez Fernández, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, O.P., de defensor de los indios a defensor de los negros* [1995]). Finally, it is

a pity that *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* lacks a unified bibliography, particularly since the volume seems to be intended for classroom use (among other things). There is an index, though, which is a welcome and useful feature, one not always to be expected in anthologies such as this.

It is all too easy to allow a few lapses to overshadow the basic strength and value of any work of scholarship. That is certainly not my intention. The editor's introduction and every other article in the book make numerous and important conceptual and empirical contributions on many different levels of comprehension. *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* will provide research scholars with much new food for thought, and can be employed effectively in the upper-division and graduate classroom (I will certainly assign the anthology next time I teach my own "Spiritual Conquest" course). Perhaps the best strategy here is to give the last word to William Christian, Jr., just as *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* does itself (Chapter 10, "Catholicisms"). Christian reminds us that in reality the Catholic Church has historically harbored many different (though related) "Catholicisms" rather than just one generic brand of Christian faith. *Local usos y costumbres* meant that the same liturgy, the veneration of the same saints, the beliefs about the nature and powers of saintly and Marian intercessors, could be expressed in subtly (or not so subtly) myriad ways. Christian's final chapter is a fitting coda to this excellent anthology, which so effectively instructs us about the many different Catholicisms of colonial New Spain. The book leads us to form new insights into the diverse nature of "local religions" as they evolved among Mexico's equally diverse human population.