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## **Review/Reseña**

Juan Javier Pescador, *Crossing Borders with the Santo Niño de Atocha*.  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009.

## **Popular Saints and Everyday Religion in Trans-National Context**

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Accompanied with personal memories and anecdotes, Juan Javier Pescador relates in this book the history of how a cult of the Santo Niño de Atocha evolved from a medieval Castilian devotion to the Virgin of Atocha, to a royally sponsored chapel in seventeenth-century Madrid, and to a trans-national Mexican and Mexican-American popular phenomenon in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The telling of the story is engaging, at turns scholarly and colloquial, even heart-wrenching in the tales of supplication for the child-saint's help.

The book adds to a growing literature on “popular” or practiced religion and the social history of religion in Mexico and the Borderlands. In the last fifteen years the field has seen a veritable boom in studies seeking to demystify Mexican and Mexican-American religious sensibility, practice, and context within politics and culture. For decades relegated to somewhat marginal status, especially in a field dominated by political and then political-cultural history and studies of the Mexican Revolution, subtle analyses of Mexican religion have come into their own in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Part of the relative lack of good, complex studies of religion in Mexico prior to the last decade or so was the tendency of scholars to view religion in Mexico through the lens of competing liberal-conservative forces dating to the period of Mora and the Reforma and because many Church archives were off-limits to investigators, often because Church officials worried that analysis of religion would re-open the wounds of Jacobin-conservative battles.

There had always been excellent studies of religion in modern Mexico, however, as evidenced by the work by Jean Meyer and Brian Connaughton, among many. But unlike the field of colonial Mexico, which has had a lengthy and dense scholarship on the social history of religion, the field of modern Mexico had been dominated by studies of the Revolution and social and economic history. The field of Mexican-American history and Chicano studies had a rich and complex literature on labor, ethnicity, migration and civil rights, but had shied away, as a whole, from discussions of religion. This has changed markedly since the late 1990s. One now finds finely grained studies of religious millenarian movements in Paul Vanderwood’s *The Power of God against the Guns of Government*, and of folk saints in his study *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint*. Terry Rugeley offers one of the more sophisticated recent discussions of practiced religion in southeast Mexico, in his *Of Wonders and Wise Men: Religion and Popular Cultures in Southeast Mexico*. Adrian Bantjes has given the field subtle examinations of Tabasco’s iconoclasm campaigns and religious mentalities during Cardenismo. Jennie Purnell unravels the complicated nature of *cardenista* and *cristero* tension in Michoacán in *Popular Movements and State*

*Formation in Revolutionary Mexico*. Mark Overmyer-Velázquez's work on the intersection of religious politics, culture and labor history in Oaxaca culminated in his book *Visions of the Emerald City*. Edward Right-Rios, Kristin Norget, and Daniela Traffano have added further complexity to the study of everyday religion in Oaxaca for both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chicano Studies has likewise seen a renewed interest in the social history of religion. One finds, for example, Luis Urrea's epic, *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, and Stephen Pitti's social history, *The Devil in Silicon Valley*. There are dozens of other excellent studies as well, too many to list or mention in this short space, which have likewise added depth to our understanding of religion as practiced in modern Mexico and among Mexican Americans. The collective impact of this newer scholarship has been to steer the field away from various facile generalities of Mexican society and religion: of cheesy and predatory voyeurism, too often originating in essentializations of places like Oaxaca and Chiapas for their "authenticity" (read: quaint poverty); of characterizations of religion and the Church as inseparable from right-wing politics; of religion as backward looking and static; and of a persistent belief in the dualism of liberal-conservative politics of Mexican religion.

Pescador is firmly rooted in a sensibility about the changing directions of the field of religious studies of Mexico and the borderlands. He notes that Chicano studies have recently begun to expand beyond "traditional boundaries of labor history, political activism and civil rights" (xvi). Likewise, the old presumptions about religion and especially religion as practiced by Mexicans were rooted in a traditional sociological belief that "religious beliefs [among Mexican Americans] represented at best a reminiscence of rural traditions in Old Mexico and at worst, a formidable obstacle in the process of cultural assimilation and economic prosperity" (xvi). Of course, that assessment is not unique to Anglo sociologists, but was also at the core of the ideology of two of Mexico's most famous *políticos indios*: Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and Benito Juárez, both of whom viewed Catholic practices—the spending of lavish amounts of money on candle wax, saint day fireworks, and processions, and the institution of

*mayordomía*—as atavistic. Pescador's point, however, is that this newer scholarship has gone beyond functional social assumptions and aims to consider religious practice among Mexicans and Mexican Americans on its own terms. Pescador's book makes a strong case that religious devotions—in this case to the Niño de Atocha—represent a positive re-affirmation of cultural identity and offers social cohesion in immigrant and Mexican-American communities in the United States.

Chapter One examines the early foundations of the Niño de Atocha cult, which derived from devotion to his mother, the Virgin of Atocha. The early origins of the cult to Our Lady of Atocha are vague and apocryphal. It is clear, however, that the saint began as a kind of protectress and evolved by the sixteenth century into a saint with specifically royal patronage. Her devotion was first recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Cantigas de Santa María* and later histories of her cult in 1604 told of her origins. According to these sources the origins of the devotion to the Virgin of Atocha date to 720 when, in a field (*atocha*) near Madrid, her image was abandoned because of a Muslim invasion. Her image was discovered by a devout Catholic Spaniard who established a shrine for her where he found the abandoned image. He was attacked by Muslims and in order to prevent what he thought was the certain death (and perhaps defilement, in this, Spanish, telling of the story) of his wife and daughters, he killed them. Christians, however, repelled the Muslim assault. To the man's astonishment, when he returned to the chapel he discovered his wife and daughters resurrected, with thin red lines across their necks where they had been decapitated, and praying to the Virgin of Atocha. As a result the Virgin of Atocha came to be associated with protection, especially against predation and plagues. By the sixteenth century the shrine was rebuilt and came under the control of the Dominicans. Given its strategic location in the outskirts of Madrid, the Dominicans engineered her patronage as part of a "ritualized geography of grace between the monastery and the royal palace" (21).

By 1602 the Virgin of Atocha came under explicitly royal patronage and would come to be associated with the protection of Spanish royal and imperial interests. Various Dominican chroniclers were instrumental in promoting the cult of the Virgin of Atocha. Fray Juan de Escajedo brought

an image of the saint to Mexico in the early seventeenth century and in 1608 in Mexico City published *Historia de la imagen milagrosa de Nuestra Señora de Atocha, Patrona de la Real Villa de Madrid*. In 1670 fray Gabriel de Cepeda published in Spain the *Historia de la milagrosa y venerable imagen de Nuestra Señora de Atocha*. By this time her devotion was clearly linked to Spanish imperial interests and she was viewed by many as the patroness of Madrid.

How the Virgin of Atocha was exported to Mexico and how her cult was gradually altered to a cult of her baby Jesus, the Niño de Atocha, in a remote town, Plateros, in Zacatecas, is the subject of Chapter Two. This transformation also saw the change of a devotion to a saint associated with royal favor and imperial projects to a saint associated with the “religious and social concerns of people” (75) of the *altiplano* of northern Mexico and Zacatecas, especially miners and their families, and the Royal Interior Road (*Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*) which wound its way from Mexico City to New Mexico. It is not entirely clear when the devotion began but, in 1704, Bizente de Medina, a resident of Fresnillo, petitioned the bishop of Guadalajara to build a shrine to the Christ of Plateros. Along with this Christ, the chapel was to house an image of the Virgin of Atocha, who was likely introduced to the region by the Dominican Escajedo. The devotion to the Christ of Plateros was strongest among the peninsular Spanish population of the region, especially among migrants from Cantabria, in northern Spain. The saint was deeply associated with Spanish confraternal social connections and offered a kind of social glue for peninsular Spaniards of the mining region.

By the end of the colonial period the devotion to the Christ of Plateros began to be overshadowed by a new developing cult to the Niño de Atocha. This study does not make clear why this was the case. Pescador suggests that the criollos and mestizos who supported independence in the 1810s had no real affinity for the Christ of Plateros, but this does not explain why castas and criollos had not developed an affinity for the Holy Child before Independence. Likewise, the study argues that the devotion to the Niño de Atocha really began to take off in the 1830s when Zacatecas increasingly came under the control of the liberals associated with

opposition to Santa Ana. Why was this the case? The reason, ostensibly, is that in the context of increasing hostility to peninsular Spaniards, who were eventually expelled from Mexico, and skepticism about Catholicism, the Church and populace turned to “more adaptable symbols” (70). But we now know that even though liberals were opposed to clerical privilege, Church controlled government and ultramontane policies, liberals were not always anti-Catholic. Prominent liberals like Altamirano clearly distinguished between religion and clerical power and it was the latter the liberals attacked. But even if liberalism was a genuine threat to popular devotion, this chapter does not resolve the mystery of why the devotion to the Niño de Atocha emerged at this juncture of place and time.

As the devotion to the Niño de Atocha apparently grew in the 1820s and 1830s, in the nascent national period in Mexico, the cult’s growth and popularity are given fuller treatment in Chapter Three. This chapter outlines the “consolidation of the Holy Child as a completely separate and autonomous religious icon in the Borderlands” (80) in the period from 1848 to 1880. In 1848 the pamphlet *Nueva Novena dedicada al milagrosísimo Niño de Nuest[r]a Señora de Atocha*, by Calixto Aguirre, was published in Guanajuato. By all appearances it was quite popular and was printed throughout Mexico as well as in New Mexico and Central America. Pescador shows that the saint increasingly became associated with protection against accidents, ailments, assaults, and injuries. But the claim that the cult spread in the “Chihuahuan desert at a vertiginous speed” (92) goes unsubstantiated. As with discussions in the earlier chapters, conclusions are based on anecdote or singular chronicle sources. This devotion could have been subjected to quantitative archival research in parish or notary registers, based on wills, testaments and bequests. There are studies of popular devotion, like Martina Will de Chaparro’s study of death rituals in New Mexico, *Death and Dying in New Mexico*, which have done this and given quantitative examples of the extent of popular religious practices. Nor are compelling reasons given for why the popularity of the Niño de Atocha was especially strong in Chihuahua, the border areas, and New Mexico, as would be the case in the later nineteenth century. The author alludes to the importance of the Camino Real as a force that helped

cultural values to travel between places like Zacatecas up through the Chihuahuan desert and into Texas and New Mexico.

The other claims of the chapter are more compelling and seem to follow a more organized explanatory logic. For example, the author shows that the Jesuits in New Mexico reprinted Aguirre's *Novena* in 1886 in New Mexico, demonstrating sustained interest in the devotion. Likewise, the Plateros shrine to the Niño de Atocha continued to be popular and had come under diocesan control and patronage. These were both clear validations of the devotion from the formal Church.

If the reasons for the devotion remain to this point in the book somewhat vaguely connected, Chapter Four shows that the cult to the Niño de Atocha became particularly strong along the border and among Mexican-Americans in the United States. This chapter, which I found to be the most compelling and liveliest of the book, tells of the denouement of the Niño de Atocha as a deeply personal and familial saint among Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. The cult of Niño de Atocha ultimately "came to represent the Mexican and Chicano experience in the United States" (118). The Holy Child was memorialized by Ernesto Galarza in *Barrio Boy* and would draw thousands of pilgrims to the shrine in Plateros, not only from within Mexico but also from the United States. Novenas to the Niño de Atocha became standard fare in Mexican-American communities in Texas and New Mexico. In Zacatecas the Church began organizing formal scheduled pilgrimages to the shrine by town and parish on a rotating basis. By 1961, "sixty-six different churches and parishes had been assigned a specific date to travel to Plateros for an official pilgrimage" (133).

In the United States, devotion to the Holy Child grew and many began to make pilgrimages to Plateros from the United States or to send letters to the shrine, addressing the saint in supplication. Among the various miracles and forms of aid the saint became known for were, in particular, help for prisoners and convicts, mothers asking for help with alcoholic or abusive spouses or sons, health problems, financial difficulties, lawsuits, accidents, and immigration issues. But these appeals and purposes seem somewhat random and eclectic and it is not clear why this saint in particular appealed to such a wide and unconnected range of

supplication. Many saints have specific functions and address certain concerns. San Judas de Tadeo, for instance, addresses lost causes, especially difficult problems and job searches. Saint Anthony serves to attract a boyfriend or girlfriend. Saint Ignatius of Loyola keeps the Devil out of one's house. Saint John the Baptist has long been associated with rain, having replaced the Mexica rain god Tlaloc. So the question arises: why does the Niño de Atocha serve such eclectic needs and hopes? It seems to me that his appeal is more about being a saint associated, through migration, with the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, and in particular through connections on the border, with Mexican identity or certain regional associations (Zacatecas, Chihuahua, New Mexico) than with any particular function.

This leads to a broader question about the explanatory force of the book's discussion about the Niño de Atocha's role as a quintessential and central cultural phenomenon for all Mexican Americans. The Niño de Atocha is a liminal saint, a border-crossing saint, a saint in-between, a saint who protects soldiers, aggrieved wives, alcoholics, lawsuit defendants, prisoners, convicts, soldiers, mothers, migrants, and cancer sufferers. What is the unifying thread or logic in that? Catholicism offers a near limitless pantheon of saints. Why this one and why for these particular reasons and issues? Is it not possible that he is particular to immigrants whose families are from Zacatecas or Chihuahua? The Christ of Chalma, whose pilgrimage site in Mexico is the second most visited in the country after Tepeyac, draws millions of devotees and his cult is deeply imbedded with very old, pre-Hispanic traditions tied to Ahuehuete (both the site and the tree) and the mystical qualities of the Chalma-Malinalco region as well as to the belief that both the Christ of Chalma and the waters of Ahuehuete have special curative qualities. And his devotion is particularly strong among Mexico City residents. Many *capitalinos* scoff at the possibility that the Niño de Atocha surpasses the Christ of Chalma in prowess or that the Holy Child is somehow particularly representative of Mexican identity.

San Juan de los Lagos de Jalisco, the Virgin of Solitude of Oaxaca, the beato Padre Pro, Jesús Malverde, the Black Christs of Michoacán and Guanajuato, the Lord of the Wounds of the Tehuacán Valley, the Virgin of



Ixpantepec, the Christ of Chalma—saints are often deeply local, and local identity remains heavy among Mexican immigrants, especially in the first generation. But Pescador's claim that the favors of the Niño de Atocha are "recalled...anywhere there is a Mexican *altarista* in the United States" (p. xxiv) outruns the evidence. Rather, is it possible that a border saint like the Niño de Atocha has particular appeal to the border regions or to communities that have second, third and fourth generation Mexican communities, where localism has been subsumed to a greater sense of Mexicanness as opposed to local identities? There must be some reason he appeals to some people and not to others, but this book does not explain it. The proofs given are anecdotal, personal, and familial, which is fine. In fact, those personal touches in the book offered the most vibrant narratives. The stories of growing up as a child where the Niño de Atocha was the one to whom one asked for good presents and to whom the author's mother asked for help with his alcoholic father and his brother who was dying of AIDS were deeply moving. But then why not write a kind of memoir of family and personal devotion? *Crossing Borders* occasionally indulges in mildly romantic exaggerations about the role of the Niño de Atocha. But in the end it is a likeable book, enjoyable to read, and offers a nice, crisp story about the development of the cult of the Niño de Atocha. It offers a valuable addition to our understanding of Mexican and Mexican-American religion and in doing so shies away from overly dualist interpretations of religious sensibilities. It should have broad appeal beyond the academy given its clear, approachable style.