



Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2012, 602-609

www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Larkin, Brian. *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

How the Very Nature of God Began to Change

Karen Melvin

Bates College

How should we characterize the nature of change in the eighteenth century? This question has intrigued a wide range of scholars, including those who study the Spanish Americas. Such interest should not be surprising given that this region was experiencing significant transformations, including Bourbon reforms, Andean revolts, demographic growth, and the influx of new and Enlightenment ideas. In fact, the idea of the eighteenth century as a watershed has been compelling enough that some scholars of Latin America have even come to prefer periodizations that use it instead of the more traditional break of Independence as their

starting point.¹ Brian Larkin's book, *The Very Nature of God*, which examines the nature of religious beliefs and practices in eighteenth-century Mexico City, is a very welcome addition to the scholarship of this period. It stands out for two contributions in particular to these historiographical trends: its in-depth study of changes in Catholic beliefs and practices and its attention to the strength of continuity, as well as change, in this era. Larkin's primary interest is explaining the place of baroque and reformed piety. Scholars have been using the terms baroque and reformed to delineate particular approaches to Catholicism with what are, by now, well-established lists of adjectives or practices. Baroque piety was exuberant, communal, and emotional; reformed piety was sedate, individual, and directed inward. Baroque piety featured penitential processions and emotionally charged sermons; reformed piety centered on quiet prayer and individual meditation. Until now, however, we did not have a clear sense of the ideas that underpinned each approach or what gave those approaches coherence. Larkin provides an explanation, and is it quite elegant. Key is the idea of immanence. Baroque Catholicism was based on the belief that "the sacred could inhere within the physical world and thus was proximate and palpable" (4). Reformed Catholicism took as its premise the idea that "God was eminently spiritual and thus largely incapable of being confined within the physical world" (7). The two sets of beliefs thus relied upon fundamentally different ideas about the very nature of God's presence in this world. The book tracks how these two competing views of Catholicism were put into practice. Larkin argues that baroque Catholicism, which dominated religious practices at the beginning of the century, came to face new competition from reformed piety during the second half of the century. Even so, baroque Catholicism remained popular so that, by the end of the eighteenth century, two competing views of religion co-existed in Mexico City. As Larkin explains:

¹ For example: Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Matthew D. O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Silvia Arrom, *Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Deborah Kanter, *Hijos del Pueblo: Gender, Family, and Community in Rural Mexico, 1730-1850* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, baroque Catholicism with its exuberant ornamentation of sacred space and lavish rituals dominated both ecclesiastical and lay religious practice in New Spain. During the second half of the eighteenth century, a group of reforming bishops attempted to remake religious culture, to move the faithful away from baroque Catholicism to a simpler and, in their minds, more interior piety.... I also contend that religious reform coincided with secular reforming projects, all of which participated within and influenced new forms of epistemology and subjectivity that arose in Mexico over the eighteenth century. Religious reform, however, proved only partially successful by the end of the colonial period, for the baroque faithful and reformers continually contested proper forms of worship. (3)

In making this argument, Larkin is careful to separate his conclusions from those of Pamela Voekel, who sees a more rapid and more substantial transition to reformed Catholicism in the eighteenth century.²

Larkin's book is organized into two parts that highlight the characteristics and practices associated with each set of beliefs. Part I focuses on baroque Catholicism; Part II addresses reformed Catholicism and the nature of change in the eighteenth century. To track what people were thinking and doing, Larkin uses devotional literature, ecclesiastical writings, and especially wills. He sampled wills from seven years across a long eighteenth century (including four plague years for a broader cross section of testators): 1696, 1717, 1737, 1758, 1779, 1796, and 1813. He frames his story with statistical analysis of these 1,722 documents and illustrates it with examples from individual wills.

After a brief introduction to Mexico City, Part I opens with a chapter examining the concept of sacred immanence. The idea that the sacred could inhere within the world was already well in place by the late medieval period and established deep roots in colonial Mexico. As Larkin explains, immanence meant there was no sharp distinction between sign and signified. An image of a saint, for example, was not merely a piece of canvas but an object that shared the very essence of the saint, was charged with the sacred, and deserved to be adored. In the case of the Eucharist, the distinction was erased completely as the wafer, once consecrated, became the actual body of Christ. Such objects were therefore deserving of the same

² Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

reverence as the holy figures themselves. Larkin finds evidence in wills of widespread devotion to holy objects, as people left substantial sums to provide for their care and adornment. Specifically, people supplied images with clothing, jewelry, and candles, and many testators requested burial in closely proximity to a beloved image.

Immanence also explains much about the “largely performative religious culture” (52) with its physical and emotional elements. When people went on processions, touched and kissed images, and participated in “liturgical gesture” (symbolic actions recalling the life and death of Christ and the saints, such as Mass), they were not simply calling to mind their subjects, they were interacting with them. Larkin sees evidence of liturgical gestures in wills when people elaborated orchestrated their own funerals or purchased masses for their souls in symbolic ways, such as using numbers like 3, 7, or 12 that recalled important aspects of Christianity.

In baroque views, church interiors and their lavish decorations were not optional accessories but essential elements for worship. Churches weren’t just buildings any more than images were just canvas; they were microcosms of heaven. This was because:

Splendor was intended to trigger pious sentiments and thoughts among spectators, to alter the consciousness and elevate it toward the sacred. But more than a mere catalyst for devotional musings, magnificent ornamentation of church interiors recalled and mystically situated Catholics within the heavenly kingdom. Ornate church interiors represented the divine kingdom and symbolically located the faithful among the choirs of angels and the celestial court of saints (76).

To achieve these effects, testators avidly supported projects to fill churches with objects like elaborately carved and often gilded altar screens, finely worked silver monstrances, and all kinds of paintings and statues.

Part I’s final chapter centers on community and the related closely topics of charity and confraternities. Larkin argues the case that communal elements of baroque piety were based on a particular concept of the self. “Baroque Catholic community rested upon a subjectivity, or sense of personhood, in which the self was not a bounded, impermeable entity. On the contrary, the baroque sense of self was porous, open to outside influence, and subsumed under a larger collective identity” (96). This

collective sense of self required collective piety. When people collectively celebrated saints' feast days, attended a mass, or joined a confraternity, they linked themselves to each other through Christ in a community. This community also mediated an individual's relationship with God so that, for example, neighbors could assist each other's souls with prayers or masses—common designations in wills.

Ideas of charity flowed out of ideas about community. Rather than being strictly defined as an act of beneficence toward the poor, charity “referred to a state of amicable relations among Christians and between Christians and God” (98). (Reality, Larkin realizes, was far more ambiguous given the realities of a society marked by significant social, racial, and interpersonal divides. So, too, were ideas about poverty highly ambivalent, with the poor being classified into deserving or undeserving poor.) Larkin argues that testators sought to establish horizontal bonds through their bequests, especially through three types of donations: the care and rearing of orphans, alms to the poor, and charitable institutions, particularly hospitals. He also argues that people understood confraternity membership in much the same way, joining as a way of forming horizontal bonds and exchanging spiritual benefits with one another.

The book's second half opens with a short contextual chapter on the Bourbon reforms in mid- and late-eighteenth century Mexico City and how they undermined (even if unintentionally) baroque piety. Larkin then turns to ecclesiastical reformers and their ideas. This chapter focuses on the ideas of New Spain's 'big three' of reform-minded prelates, archbishop of Mexico Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, archbishop of Mexico Alonso Núñez de Haro y Peralta, and bishop of Puebla Francisco Fabián y Fuero. For reformers, the sacred was less immanent and more transcendent, and sign and signified were no longer so closely associated. God was much less likely to reside in physical objects or able to be reached through performative and gestural piety. Reformers therefore believed that baroque practices were secondary and should be discouraged as distracting from the more important goals of knowing and understanding God. Indeed, ritual piety in itself was, according to Núñez de Haro, “absolutely worthless” (129, 134). Larkin adds some important nuance to our understanding of reformers'

views by pointing out that even though reformers sought to remake religious culture, they did not propose a radical break with baroque religious practices. However much they downplayed or even lampooned “the immanential and somatic tendencies of baroque Catholicism,” they “almost never rejected them outright” (126).

What did all of this mean in practice? Far less than the reformers undoubtedly hoped. Larkin found that although new ideas had an impact in the late colonial period, “religious reform was more shallow and restricted than once thought and that religious change was far from straightforward” (156). To track the nature of this change, Larkin examines, in two chapters, changes in splendor and liturgical piety and in charity and confraternities.

To gauge testators’ beliefs regarding the role of splendor and liturgical piety, Larkin looked at five types of directives in wills: gifts to images or the eucharist; requests for burial by an image, altar, or special site; use of numeric or temporal symbolism; gifts to ornament sacred space; and gifts for feast-day liturgical celebrations. The percentage of testators whose will contained at least one of these directives remained steady across the eighteenth century, ranging between 23% and 32%, leading Larkin to conclude that baroque pious beliefs remained strong. His explanation for why reformers did not have the impact they hoped is that they were unable to replace the baroque messages that people were receiving. Although some devotional tracts and parish priests espoused the new ideas, others continued to promote baroque ones. Essentially, the two forms of practice came to co-exist in late eighteenth century Mexico City.

To what degree reformed piety made inroads is a tougher question. Here Larkin’s primary evidence is an increase in the percentage of testators who requested less ornate funerals. While 7.3 percent (n=25) of testators in 1696 requested simple funerals without referencing their own poverty, that percentage grew to 15.3 (n=31) in 1796 and 27 (n=73) in 1813. Larkin, however, is careful to qualify what this increase indicated. Was it being done because the person believed the pomp of dozens of pallbearers, hundreds of candles, and printed invitations was inappropriate excess? Was it being done out of financial necessity? Or was it a baroque attempt to imitate the poverty and humility of Christ? He concludes that although the

simple funeral took on “anti-baroque overtones” by the end of the colonial period, it was not a mass movement but “the vanguard of reformed Catholicism.” This vanguard was more likely to belong to particular social groups. Although baroque religious practice was equally prominent among all social groups (artisans, bureaucrats, clergy, merchants, professionals, rural landowners, and soldiers), only two groups demonstrated an inclination toward reformed piety: bureaucrats and professionals (administrators, lawyers, notaries, physicians, and professors). Men were more likely to abandon baroque practices and adopt reformed ones than women.

Larkin found more evidence of pronounced change in forms of charity and confraternity membership than he did of change in liturgical practice, which he attributes to changing ideas about community. Although charitable giving in wills remained steady in the aggregate, the forms it took changed over the eighteenth century, as charitable giving to orphans declined and donations to the poor in general increased. Larkin explains the shift as reflecting concern with Mexico City’s growing number of anonymous poor as well as a shift from baroque ideas of self toward “a more individually oriented sense of personhood” (190). As a result, testators began “to shun the personal horizontal bonds of charity that linked them with their more unfortunate neighbors in the mystical body of Christ and replaced them, if not with a vertically structured community, then with one based on relations mediated through impersonal institutions” (201). These new attitudes toward community also rendered confraternities less important and changed how people viewed them, transforming them from “structured pacts of reciprocal spiritual obligations” to “financial mutual aid societies” (202).

Part II’s story of change and continuity relies on wills, which raises questions about them as a source. Leaving aside questions about how representative the will generating population was of the population as a whole (a question which Larkin addresses), challenges of interpretation remain. How much can or should we read into testators’ directives? For example, is a donation to construct a new altar screen in a local church necessarily representative of baroque interest in recreating a microcosm of

heaven? Also, how meaningful are small increases or decreases in percentages within small sample sizes? For example, how significant is the increase in testators who gave gifts to hospitals from 2.9% (n=10) in 1696 to 5.5% (n=15) in 1813? This is not to suggest wills lack value for studying beliefs nor that Larkin fails make an effective case for his arguments. The different types of individual directives when considered as a whole and in conjunction with other sources like sermons and devotional literature generate some clear patterns, including the strong continuity of baroque practices and the limited, selective inroads of reformed piety.

The Very Nature of God makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of Catholicism in the early modern world. Although Larkin's accounts of practices are restricted to Mexico City, his discussion of theology and beliefs widens to connect to Europe, and the book's messages should be relevant to scholars of early modern religion beyond Latin Americanists. Readers come away from this book with a strong sense of baroque practices, the beliefs underpinning them, and why reformers sought to replace them with a different set of practices. Larkin is also convincing in his change over time story where change occurred not as a seismic shift but as a gradual morph so that by the end of the eighteenth century we can see the origins of changing Catholic practices.