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Review/Reseña

Melvin, Karen. *Building Colonial Cities of God: Mendicant Orders and Urban Culture in New Spain*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Taking Up Where Ricard Left Off

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With this important monograph, Karen Melvin seeks to remedy what she presents as a mischaracterization in the historiography of colonial Mexico. She argues that after the post-Tridentine attack on mendicant dominance in New Spain, male religious orders did not simply enter into a period of decline, as the “conventional” historiography conveys (2). Rather, she correctly points to the regular clergy’s stepped-up efforts in Mexican cities and towns, and how they shaped the spiritual cultures of urban centers through the foundation of convents and schools and through the promotion of religious practices particular to their respective orders.

While she focuses on the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians, or those mendicants who essentially led the evangelization campaigns among New Spain's indigenous peoples, she chooses not to focus on the Jesuits, who she believes have been given a disproportionately important role in the viceroyalty's religious history and who were not "mendicants" in the strictest sense of the word (6). Since Robert Ricard first published his *La "Conquête Spirituelle" du Mexique* in 1933, historians have demonstrated a keen interest in the role of the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians in the conversion of Mexico's indigenous population.¹ However, while there are now a wealth of studies examining the role of these orders in the "spiritual conquest," less attention has been given to their contribution to what Melvin cleverly terms the "spiritual consolidation" of Mexico, while significantly less consideration has been given to those mendicants who arrived after the euphoric heyday of evangelization (267). Significantly, Melvin includes the orders that arrived after the so-called "golden age" of evangelization in her analysis; specifically, she examines the role of the Discalced Carmelites and Mercedarians in shaping urban communities, as well as the Discalced and Missionary College Franciscans who established an institutional presence in New Spain long after their Observant brothers.

By the end of the sixteenth century, mendicant predominance over the evangelization process had come under attack. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) championed the supervisory role of bishops and committed the Church to a more rigorous instruction of its secular clergy; from here on, the Crown began curbing the expansion of the mendicant orders into indigenous territory. Church and Crown engaged in two major waves of secularization: one in the 1640s and the other in the mid eighteenth century. The Crown, moreover, sought to curb the expansion of the more successful Observant branch of the Franciscans, while the Mercedarians, Discalced Carmelites, and Discalced Franciscans were allowed to entrench themselves in cities and towns throughout the viceroyalty. Part 1 of *Building Colonial Cities of God* tracks the orders' expansion throughout urban centers in terms of foundations of convents and numbers of friars,

¹ Robert Ricard, *La "Conquête Spirituelle" du Mexique. Essai sur l'apostolat et les méthodes missionnaires des Ordres mendiants en Nouvelle-Espagne de 1523-24 à 1572* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1933).

examines how the orders defined themselves collectively as mendicants, looks at how they maintained distinct corporate identities, and provides an overview of the types of services they provided across time and place. In the significantly slimmer Part 2, Melvin takes a closer look at mendicant interactions at the local level, examining a number of dividing-line issues that pitted the religious orders against each other or bounded them together against the Crown and/or secular clergy.

The work is ambitious in scope, as Melvin does not limit her examination to a discrete time period, but rather follows the orders from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. She also does not focus on the work of the orders in one locality, but discusses their activities in various cities and towns like Puebla, Valladolid, Celaya, San Luis Potosí, and Toluca, among others. In its breadth it almost reads like an attempt to take up where Ricard left off. As most scholars of colonial Mexico know, Ricard focused primarily on the activities of the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian orders in indigenous communities throughout New Spain through the arrival of the Jesuit order in 1572. Melvin's study, however, does not examine mendicant activities in indigenous communities at all, but instead looks at their activities in *lugares de españoles*. It also represents the first in-depth treatment of the male religious orders in urban communities after the Third Mexican Provincial Council (1585) brought the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Council of Trent to New Spain. Melvin illustrates that after the early missionary push into indigenous pueblos, the orders redirected their efforts to influence religious practice in Spain's "empire of towns" (2).

By shifting the focus from the countryside to towns and cities without indigenous *doctrinas*, the mendicant orders actually returned to their more traditional roles first established in the thirteenth century, which included preaching, teaching by example, and administering to the faithful in urban settings. The Discalced Carmelites, moreover, recommitted themselves to their more eremitic tradition, marked by communal prayer and a more reclusive lifestyle. Between 1570 and 1730, the orders established 107 urban convents, with most being founded between 1570 and 1630. By the early eighteenth century, however, the

fiscally cautious Crown ceased subsidizing the mendicant orders and eventually stopped issuing licenses for the foundation of new convents (45). Bourbon reformers and so-called “enlightened bishops” soon started to view the mendicant orders, which were less subject to Episcopal control, with suspicion, and became alarmed by the large number of friars working in New Spain, regarding them as a potential drain on society (66-75). By 1753, the mendicants had been ordered to turn over almost all of their *doctrinas* to secular clergy, and in 1769, the Crown implemented state-sponsored inspections of mendicant provinces (57). Melvin, however, shows that despite the Crown’s increasing disapproval of their expansion, colonial subjects continued to seek out the services of the regular orders. While concerned with their institutional power and the large number of seemingly aimless friars following the secularization of *doctrinas*, the Crown continued to recognize that the orders provided needed spiritual services, and even allowed the Franciscans to continue in their foundation of missionary colleges in towns and cities throughout New Spain. In late eighteenth-century Mexico City, the city council asked the Mercedarians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Discalced Carmelites to found grammar schools for the urban poor. These schools then became so successful they functioned as models for other mendicant-run schools throughout New Spain (155).

By highlighting mendicant expansion at the turn of the seventeenth century and the importance of friars in urban areas throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Melvin provides a needed, if modest, corrective to the established historiography. Specialists, of course, know that the mendicant orders took an active role in shaping urban communities, but with the expansion of the secular clergy in the late sixteenth century there is still the notion, first introduced by Ricard, that the mendicant orders began a period of relative decline. Furthermore, Melvin provides an illuminating counterpoint to Ricard, who despite arguing that the mendicants were united in a common task, devoted a large segment of his work to sensational accounts of mendicant competition over indigenous *doctrinas*. While acknowledging that the orders often argued over doctrinal issues and alms-collection (especially in Part 2), Melvin

provides a plethora of examples that illuminate the varied ways that the religious orders cooperated in urban settings. She illustrates how in Mexico City, Puebla, and Querétaro, Dominicans and Franciscans sometimes gave the commemorative sermons for the annual festivities of the other order's patriarch (222). When traveling to areas where there was no home convent about, friars often stayed in the convents of other orders to avoid staying in private homes, and in Querétaro, the Dominicans and Franciscans even had a formal agreement to attend the funerals of each order's friars as a form of mutual correspondence (225, 221).

But while enjoying close ties, the orders maintained their own individual identities. Melvin illustrates how friars shaped the physical landscapes of cities and promoted the singular qualities of their orders by, for example, proudly featuring their blazons, "similar to a secular family's coat of arms," on the facades of their buildings. These blazons depicted defining moments in each order's history (like Francis's stigmata or Augustine's conversion) and illustrate how each sought to establish a "brand" and promote a carefully crafted collective history (90-92); Melvin emphasizes the patriarchal nature of the orders' collective histories, and how each conceived of itself as a distinguished family with a clearly articulated "origin myth" which it advertised through symbols, sermons, and chronicles. The orders, moreover, did not only promote accounts of their European origins, but displayed a marked concern with New-World origins, or each group's contribution to the sixteenth-century evangelization campaign. In a fascinating discussion, Melvin illustrates how the Mercedarians contested Franciscan claims to having arrived in New Spain first, noting that their brother Bartolomé Olmedo, who was part of the Cortés expedition, was in fact the first friar to arrive. Franciscans, in turn, disputed the claim by characterizing the Cortés expedition exclusively as a military conquest, while at least one Dominican chronicler emphasized how the Dominicans and Franciscans departed Spain at the same time; he noted that the Franciscans stepped foot in Mexico first only because the Dominican contingent tarried in Santo Domingo (188-189).

Competitiveness over origins aside, the orders distinguished themselves most clearly through their institutes, or the "particular ends to

which the orders were devoted.” These were not the more formal Rules, but a “set of defining characteristics” that were “malleable to local situations” (93-94). While the Discalced Carmelites and Discalced Franciscans embraced a more ascetic and contemplative lifestyle, the Observant Franciscans, Augustinians, Dominicans and even the Mercedarians (who were most involved in alms-collecting) saw evangelical work among Indians as central to their mission. The goals of the orders, or even the differing objectives of subsets within the same order, could put them at odds. The Discalced Carmelites came into conflict most often with their fellow mendicants, with the most dramatic example occurring during the tenure of Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza of Puebla. In the 1640s, Palafox began confiscating the *doctrinas* of the diocese’s mendicant orders, leading the Franciscans, who held the bulk of the Indian missions, to protest vigorously. Dominicans, Augustinians, and Mercedarians supported the Franciscans, and when Palafox tried to force all the orders to pay the tithe on their landholdings, the Jesuits led efforts to resist the bishop’s reforms. The ascetic Carmelite Order, which did not involve itself with missionary work among the Indians, stayed off Palafox’s radar and eventually became the bishops’ strongest supporter. In the late eighteenth century, the archbishop of Mexico and the bishop of Michoacán placed the Carmelites in charge of collecting alms for Palafox’s beatification. As Melvin notes, the Carmelite’s relationship with the bishop reveals how their institute’s focus on communal life distinguished them from their mendicant counterparts (198-205).

Despite the many strengths of the work, Melvin has a tendency to mischaracterize her contribution to the historiography, concluding that “Friars, it turns out, did not meekly retire to their convents after their golden age of missions but took on new endeavors” (268). This, however, is not a revelation. Although there have been no comprehensive studies of the role of male religious orders following the height of evangelization, historians have long recognized that male religious convents had strong ties to urban communities by providing schools for children, hubs for confraternities, and strong ties to patron-elites. Melvin also does not really illustrate how the regular clergy influenced the *civitas*, or the people,

institutions, and cultural practices of cities—something she set out to do (1). She does succeed at illustrating how the orders established some core devotional practices, like the Franciscan's promotion of the *via crucis*, or the Dominican's Marian advocacy of Our Lady of the Rosary, but she really does not succeed in exploring these "corporate bodies as they interacted with society" or, for that matter, what they meant to each society and how they influenced religious practice in each locality (3). She comes closest to doing this in the last chapter on eighteenth-century Toluca, where she explores the rivalry between the city's Franciscan convent (which was established shortly after "the Twelve's" initial arrival in 1524) and the Carmelite church (established in 1698). Melvin explains that despite enjoying a bustling economy and a growing population (leading to its upgrade from *villa* to *ciudad* in 1675), Toluca did not benefit from a secular parish, giving the Franciscans a veritable monopoly over the city's spiritual life. At the end of the seventeenth century, 100 leading citizens came together to request the establishment of a Carmelite church, and its foundation would ignite a long stretch of contentious competition over, among other things, public ceremonies, third-order membership, and even over a contender for sanctity promoted by the Carmelites. While Melvin illustrates convincingly that the arrival of the Carmelites in Toluca threatened the Franciscan order and that this had implications for the city's faithful, it is not an in-depth discussion of the role of the orders in its urban culture or what the orders meant to Toluca's population. She provides no discussion of why leading citizens supported the arrival of the Carmelites or why when forced to choose between staying members of the Franciscan third order or joining the Carmelites, most chose to renounce their Franciscan membership (232-265).

The stark disconnect between what Melvin set out to accomplish and what she managed to do illustrates the dangers inherent in this type of broad approach. The only reliable way to uncover how the male religious orders influenced urbanization, the collective identity of an urban population, and the religious sensibilities of its members is by going deeply into the history of one or two localities. We can see the success of a more focused analysis in Kathryn Burn's *Colonial Habits* which disentangles the

familial, economic, and spiritual ties that bound the *cuzqueño* elite to their city's female convents. In Puebla, Rosalva Loreto López has illustrated how the aspirations of early seventeenth-century political elites to place daughters in the soon-to-be inaugurated Convento de la Limpia Concepción inspired the city council to begin holding an annual feast-day celebration for the Immaculate Conception. In another study, Loreto López illustrates how the establishment of convents with access to water and with public fountains outside their gates led to increased, geographically-concentrated pockets of urban growth.² In *Building Colonial Cities of God*, we do not get a sense of the specific ways each religious order shaped the *civitas* of a particular locality, so future studies will likely need to look at urbanization patterns surrounding convents, the relationship between the city council and mendicant convents, and how and why particular families patronized specific orders. Research might also focus on where elites chose to have their funerals using not only archival sources, but also printed *exequias* or funerary honors. Obviously, studies should also look at the endowments of *obras pías* and the types of confraternities housed in each convent and their membership lists. The importance of particular relics in each convent should also be placed within the context of each locality, as well as the way the individual orders and convents were depicted in urban chronicles. Only through a focused approach on one or two localities can future scholars uncover the complex role of male religious orders in shaping urban life. Nevertheless, *Building Colonial Cities of God* provides a useful overview of the activities of the male religious orders in urban settings and will undoubtedly facilitate the work of future scholars interested in pursuing more localized analyses.

Although *Building Colonial Cities of God* falls short in some of Melvin's stated goals, this should not detract from what it accomplishes. She describes the variegated activities of male religious orders in urban

² Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Rosalva Loreto López, "La fiesta de la Concepción y las identidades colectivas, Puebla (1619-1636)," in *Manifestaciones religiosas en el mundo colonial americano*, ed. Clara García Ayuardo and Manuel Ramos Medina, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1997), 233-252; Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Ángeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2000).

centers and their religious and aesthetic sensibilities. She describes in great detail their waves of expansion and convincingly illustrates how and why they survived the reformist tendencies of the mid eighteenth century. She succeeds at uncovering their important, multi-layered role in not just the “spiritual conquest of Mexico” but also in its “spiritual consolidation.” This is an important work that will be required reading for anyone interested in the religious and urban history of New Spain.