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Review/Reseña

Taylor, William B. *Shrines and Miraculous Images: Religious Life in Mexico before the Reforma*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

Drawing Closer to Indigenous Lives and Minds

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William Taylor has written a wonderful new volume exploring how a careful and creative focus on religious shrines and images can bring us closer to the lives and minds of native peoples. He adds significantly to an already exceptionally innovative and productive career as a scholar of New Spain and Mexico. In a reflective Introduction, Taylor insists that his first role always has been as a teacher. Still, his towering contributions to the scholarly understanding of colonial New Spain are matched by few, exceeded by none. That is probably because he sees himself as a teaching learner in dialogue with a community of learners. *Shrines and Miraculous*

Images confirms Taylor's salience as a scholar-teacher. As a long-engaged student, I have again learned much from his text-classroom.

Through four decades, Taylor has shared new insights on indigenous peoples in New Spain. In 1972, his *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* brought us to regions where indigenous communities remained dominant landholders, commercial estates were few and modest, and labor relations were not a simple imposition of the powerful on the conquered.¹ That book led a generation of regionally focused land, labor, and community studies, with Eric Van Young's *Hacienda and Market in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* among the notable sequels.² Taylor followed *Landlord and Peasant* with a seminal essay on "Landed Society in New Spain: A View from the South," emphasizing the limited presence of Spanish power and production across Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatán, opening a path that would be followed, widened, and deepened by scholars from Nancy Farriss to Karen Caplan.³

In 1979, Taylor gave us *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages*, engaging three ways of native peoples' behavior discouraged by the colonial regime. He continued to explore Oaxacan communities while adding a strong comparative perspective on regions around Mexico City.⁴ That book pioneered an emphasis on indigenous agency before the concept was popular. It brought women and gender relations to the foreground, documenting women's dominance of local markets and regular leadership in village protests. His focus on the colonial courts as mediators between native communities, colonial entrepreneurs, and the regime also opened new understandings. Woodrow

¹ William B. Taylor, *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

² Eric Van Young, *Hacienda and Market in Eighteenth-Century Mexico: The Rural Economy of the Guadalajara Region, 1675-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

³ William B. Taylor, "Landed Society in New Spain: A View from the South," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 54:3 (1974): 387-413; Nancy Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The collective enterprise of Survival* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Karen Caplan, *Indigenous Citizens: Local Liberalism in Early National Oaxaca and Yucatán* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴ William B. Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979).

Borah and Brian Owensby would follow with studies of the indigenous courts during earlier centuries, confirming that the Spanish regime in the Americas' richest colony was at base a judicial mediator, not an authoritarian behemoth.⁵ Steve Stern built on Taylor's lead in *The Secret History of Gender*, plumbing judicial records from regions of Oaxaca and the Cuernavaca basin just south of Mexico City to deepen our understanding of gender relations in native communities.⁶ Felipe Castro Gutiérrez advanced the analysis of indigenous agency and judicial mediation in his two fundamental studies: *Nueva ley y nuevo rey* and *Los tarascos bajo el dominio español*.⁷ Indigenous agency became the guiding vision of a generation of studies of New Spain, Mexico, and Latin America, notably exemplified by Laura Lewis' *Hall of Mirrors*.⁸ My *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico* aimed to follow and fuse the insights and approaches of *Landlord and Peasant* and *Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion*—attempting to link land and labor, region and rebellion in Mexico from the late colonial era to revolutionary times.⁹

While many of us were building upon Taylor's first books, he moved in another pioneering direction. He recognized (before the cultural studies wave) that everything indigenous peoples (and most others) did in New Spain was understood in religious ways—and that religious understandings shaped everything people did. He set off on a massive investigation of priests, parishioners, their religious practices, and their debates in the Archbishopric of Mexico and the Bishopric of Guadalajara—now setting Oaxaca and the South aside, keeping the Center in focus, and moving to

⁵ Woodrow Borah, *Justice by Insurance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Brian Owensby, *Empire of law and Indigenous Justice in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

⁶ Steve Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). Taylor's student Deborah Kanter advanced gender analysis in *Hijos del Pueblo: Gender, Family, and Community in Rural Mexico, 1730-1850* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

⁷ Felipe Castro Gutiérrez, *Nueva ley y nuevo rey* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996) and *Los tarascos bajo el dominio español, 1600-1740* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004).

⁸ Laura Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁹ John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

engage the Northwest. The result was *Magistrates of the Sacred*, published in 1993, the massive and essential analysis of priestly lives and parish religious life in eighteenth-century New Spain.¹⁰ There, Taylor made it unmistakably clear that the clergy did not—could not—impose religious ways on native peoples and communities. Rather, religious understandings and practices were promoted by clergy and negotiated by parishioners through diverse combinations of adoption, adaptation, rejection—and creation. In *Magistrates*, the clergy emerge not as power holders but as mediators between a church of limited power and communities with entrenched (if limited) political and cultural autonomies. Again, a generation of scholars followed Taylor's leads, developing new analyses of Church and clergy, religion and community. Dorothy Tanck de Estrada's *Pueblos de indios y educación en México colonial* soon followed, adding teachers to Taylor's focus on the clergy and native communities in the late eighteenth century.¹¹ Her equally massive and detailed work needs to be read as a companion volume to *Magistrates*. Other studies flowed; note Pamela Voekel and Brian Connaughton on the Church and clergy and Gerardo Lara Cisneros and Juan Carlos Ruíz Guadalajara on religious life in key communities¹²

In each of his pioneering studies, William Taylor brought us closer to indigenous lives: first to land and labor; next to dissonance and the courts; then to the roles of the clergy, the Church, and religion in rural communities. Most scholars would be ready to step back at that point. But Taylor is both a modest and a dedicated teacher-scholar. In every work he recognized that while he had found and shared important new understandings of indigenous peoples, the sources had left his access and

¹⁰ William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Dorothy Tanck de Estrada, *Pueblos de indios y educación en México colonial, 1750-1821* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1999).

¹² Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Brian Connaughton, *Clerical Ideology in a Revolutionary Age: The Guadalajara Church and the Idea of the Mexican Nation, 1788-1853* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003); Gerardo Lara Cisneros, *El cristianismo en el espejo indígena: Religiosidad en el occidente de la Sierra Gorda, siglo XVIII* (Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación, 2002); and Juan Carlos Ruíz Guadalajara, *Dolores antes de la independencia*, 2 Vols. (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2004).

insights limited. As in the work of his mentor Charles Gibson, Taylor's studies of indigenous peoples (through *Magistrates*) relied on Spanish institutional sources.¹³ Recognizing that, Taylor carefully emphasized that while he had learned much about indigenous behavior and relations with landlords, courts, and clergy—the challenge of plumbing the indigenous mind remains.

Understanding the indigenous mind has been the holy grail of the history of Mesoamerica, New Spain, and Mexico. Spaniards and their Mexican heirs have left proud records of their activities in conquest, colonialism, and nation making—all built upon indigenous communities. Powerful historical actors have generated documents and texts on indigenous responses, adaptations, and resistance. Gaining the perspective of the indigenous has remained a difficult yet essential challenge. Taylor was not alone in that quest. While he was producing *Magistrates*, James Lockhart led a contingent of scholars who learned indigenous languages, excavated colonial texts and documents in those tongues, and offered new understandings of indigenous participations in New Spain, mostly among the Nahuas in the regions around Mexico City, the Mixtecs in Oaxaca's uplands, and the Yucatecan Maya. The innovative contributions of these works, notably Lockhart's *The Nahuas Under Colonial Rule*, Matthew Restall's *The Maya World*, and Kevin Terraciano's *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca*—are transforming and essential.¹⁴ They also are limited.

The vast majority of indigenous language texts were generated by literate, native notables who carried on under colonial rule. Understanding their roles and visions is important; understanding their perspective as indigenous elites, pivotal intermediaries in the colonial order, is equally important. Most indigenous language documents were kept to facilitate the workings of indigenous political units as they evolved from *altepetl* to

¹³ This reliance and its limits are evident in Charles Gibson's pioneering *Tlaxcala in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); and in his magisterial *Aztecs under Spanish Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

¹⁴ James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Matthew Restall, *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and society, 1550-1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

repúblicas de indios. Such records are essential to understanding those institutions, their pivotal roles in colonial society (different in different regions), the perceptions of the men who ruled locally, and their relations with both neighboring polities and the colonial regime. But decades of careful research and analysis has confirmed that the native language texts are, in most cases, sources produced by the (locally) powerful and shaped by their interests in exercising of power. They reveal much about power and mediation—and the culture of native power holders and intermediaries. They deal with the native majority—the men, women, and children who worked the land, kept households, traded in markets, and generally sought to adapt bearable lives and meaningful religious cultures—as records of power. In that they parallel the records of the Spanish regime. Both must be read as reflections of power—different powers of course—dealing with people they claimed to lead and hoped to rule.¹⁵

The histories grounded in indigenous language sources have brought great advances in helping us understand native elites and indigenous republics in New Spain; they have brought us a step closer to the lives and minds of native majorities. Taylor's *Shrines and Miraculous Images* is an important and innovative contribution to the continuing pursuit of such understanding. Recognizing that textual sources, Spanish and indigenous, reveal most about the relatively powerful and literate few, Taylor has turned to sources constantly in front of us, yet long marginalized: painted and sculpted religious images. Most people in New Spain and early Mexico, including the great majority of the indigenous, were not literate (or powerful); in that context, visual images focused much of religious life. Many of those images have survived and Taylor shows us that close analysis can reveal much about community devotions.

The foundation of his approach is that the scholar has direct (and often unmediated) access to images that centered the religious understandings of indigenous families and communities. He (and we) can see what they saw. Images—even if painted or sculpted by a clergyman or

¹⁵ In *The Art of Being In-Between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, and Local Rule in Colonial Oaxaca* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), Yanna Yannakakis offers a powerful study that explicitly recognizes and the rules of native notables as elites and intermediaries.

other “benefactor”—only became and remained central to popular devolutions if they gained meaning and legitimacy among the populace. Images and shrines that did not resonate with a community could be, and often were, ignored. A shrine or image that became an enduring focus of community devotion by definition had meaning for that community. The challenge is to find that meaning.

Careful as always, Taylor knows that what he sees is not necessarily what colonial and early national villagers saw (and felt). Thus, he approaches key images by combining direct visual analysis with explorations of texts that chronicle devotion and/or document disputes over construction, control, and participation at a shrine. It is the direct analysis of an image combined with critical readings of texts related to devotion or to disputes linked to the image that leads him to new insights. Taylor thus underlines another key point we have long known, yet too often ignore: a single kind of source on anything is inevitably incomplete. Any attempt to approach something as elusive as the indigenous mind using a single type of source is very limited. Multiple sources, textual and visual, critically considered, are best. Taylor thus mixes analysis of the images, chronicles, judicial contests in *Shrines and Miraculous Images*. In the process, he confirms the importance of direct analysis of shrines and images—not as illustrations, but key sources allowing us to engage popular religious culture, sources demanding critical engagement like any other key source.

With that methodological contribution, *Shrines and Miraculous Images* brings us closer to diverse communities in New Spain as they negotiated difficult times. Taylor notes the long history of crafting and worshipping images in pre-contact times, and the mix of continuities and transformations that came with the conquest. He reminds that the most important images among indigenous peoples in the conquest era were crosses—offered by newcomers as evidence of Spanish-Christian eminence and often claimed by natives as signs of their enduring humanity and emerging Christianity. He emphasizes that the seventeenth century was the great era of shrines and images, foundations almost evenly focused on Christ and the Virgin. Equally important, the shrines and images that

emerged to gain enduring importance in diverse regions and communities then (certainly not a “century of depression” in religious creativity) were deeply tied to those places. They served their people—and if they served well, they often drew devotees from wider districts. Perhaps most important for historians, no shrine or image, no devotion, dominated indigenous New Spain. Localism ruled, a clear sign that native peoples ruled the creation of indigenous Christianity—better, indigenous Christianities.¹⁶

Taylor demonstrates the importance of locally grounded diversity first with a detailed analysis of the complex and contested history of devotion to the *Cristo Renovado*, a devotion played out in Ixmiquilpan and other Otomí communities in the Mezquital basin north of Mexico City, while linked in common commitments and disputed control to religious institutions in the colonial capital. He devotes three chapters to Our Lady of Guadalupe, not to repeat excessive claims of her colonial centrality, but to emphasize that hers was one of many devotions to the Virgin in the colonial era, always in competition (and collaboration) with other portrayals of Christ’s mother, and with devotions to Christ. Such locally grounded and regionally contested devotions continued through the independence era, when a weakening of Church and state power gave communities greater autonomy in religious ways, even as liberals imagined lessening the power of the Church in Mexican life.

Throughout, Taylor details how villagers worked persistently and often successfully—yet not without internal conflicts—to keep control of shrines, images, and devotions. After this study, any who still imagine New Spain as a place where Spaniards and clergy “imposed” belief on indigenous peoples persist in “beliefs” not sustained by evidence and argument.

Another result of *Shrines and Miraculous Images* is to emphasize that the religious culture and geography of modern Mexico is much a result of transformations during the independence era and after. The widening

¹⁶ This emphasis on localism in regional context dovetails nicely with Eric Van Young’s key conclusions in *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

devotion to Guadalupe began then, still debated and contested. Equally important, Taylor emphasizes that independence bought a weakening of the Church and clergy, suggesting that changing devotions across the new nation did not result from political or clerical power—but from communities working within the weakness of Church and state to reclaim and reconstruct their own ways of worship. While nation builders struggled to build a new state and liberals increasingly turned against the Church, communities continued to forge and debate their own religious cultures. Thanks to María Eugenia García Ugarte's massive *Poder político y religioso: México siglo XIX*, we have a deep exploration of the politics of church and state in the contested formation of the Mexican nation.¹⁷ Now it is time to seek out the ways diverse communities rebuilt their own lives and religious ways during that tumultuous era, a process begun in recent works by Claudia Guarisco and Matthew O'Hara.¹⁸ Much remains to be done given the localism of the process and the fragmentation of sources. Still, if the archives are in disarray, the shrines and images of the nineteenth century often remain.

Once again, William Taylor has brought us new perspectives on Mexico's peoples. Once again, I expect that many will follow to develop his leads. This is a book to read closely, pondering its meanings for Mexico and for history. And for all its analytical innovation, *Shrines and Miraculous Images* is a book written to be read—including by undergraduates. William Taylor remains a master teacher; his scholarship is a way of teaching. I hope that his fourth major book will soon appear in paperback (along with its companion volume of texts¹⁹) so that I can again share his latest teaching with my students.

¹⁷ María Eugenia García Ugarte, *Poder político y religioso: México siglo XIX*, 2 Vols. (Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2010)

¹⁸ Claudia Guarisco, *Los indios del Valle de México y la construcción de una nueva sociabilidad política, 1770-1835* (Zinacatepec: El Colegio Mexiquense, 2003); Matthew O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religión, and Politics in Mexico, 1759-1847* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ William B. Taylor, *Marvels and Miracles in Late Colonial Mexico: Three Texts in Context* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011).