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Review/Reseña

Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole, eds., *Religion in New Spain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

The Mundane as Sacred, the Sacred as Mundane: New Spain's Pervasive Religious Culture

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The Mexican historian and philosopher Edmundo O'Gorman once characterized New Spain as a society where the news of price hikes, taxes, or even perilous expeditions to distant lands paled in significance compared to "a nun's spiritual flight, a terminally ill person's miraculous cure, [or] a sinner's repentance." "The historian who ignored this hierarchy of period values," O'Gorman averred, "might offer us an exhaustive and

well-documented narrative of the historical events, but he [sic] will never penetrate the secret interior of the most significant events."[1]

Originating as a conference in honor of Richard Greenleaf, Schroeder and Poole's *Religion in New Spain* takes O'Gorman's admonition to heart by highlighting the diverse and far-reaching nature of the viceroyalty's religious culture. The participants—drawn from the disciplines of history, anthropology, literature and art history—pay a fitting tribute to Greenleaf's pioneering career and showcase the intellectual vibrancy that characterizes the field today. Indeed, there is a certain irony in the decision to market this book as revisionist history, for so many of a past era's "sacred cows"—such as Robert Ricard's thesis concerning the efficacy of the early mendicant spiritual conquest, or the total power of the Inquisition—have been largely debunked, or at least significantly qualified, thanks in no small measure to the past efforts of some of the volume's contributors. What was once considered revisionist is, for all intents and purposes, today's orthodoxy. Still, *Religion in New Spain* brings together some of the most important work in the field today, and suggests the kind of approaches and questions that will drive research agendas for years to come.

The volume's sixteen chapters include several prominent themes, many of which have concerned scholars of religion for quite some time. Perhaps most prominent is the collision between indigenous worldviews and those of the proselytizing Iberian newcomers. Much ink has been spilt regarding how historians ought to conceptualize indigenous responses to Christianity (e.g., overt resistance, accommodation, ambivalence, etc.) and the religious systems that emerged as a result (e.g., syncretism or hybridism). To differing degrees, at least seven authors deal with these sets of questions and their relationship to power.

Drawing from his recent book, Kevin Terraciano offers the opening salvo by detailing the efforts of the early mendicant Inquisition (in this case, manned by Dominicans) to counter what they considered to be a

[1] Cited in Kathleen Ann Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4.

conscious effort by some Mixtec lords to reject the Christian message and to retain their pagan traditions. Mixtec responses to the initial evangelical campaigns of the 1530s and 1540s ranged from ambivalence, indecision or doubt to deliberate subterfuge that entailed everything from ridiculing converts to pressuring others to participate in secret rites of the threatened old ways. The extirpation campaign, Terraciano finds, was driven as much by in-group power struggles among Spaniards and Mixtecs as it was by purely religious motivations. Like so many others, it netted few conclusive results –with those rounded up learning quickly to admit to nothing to avoid "burn[ing] for their own ambivalent beliefs" (29). At the same time, it was quite successful as a means of consolidating Dominican authority throughout the region.

Recent scholarship has found that extirpation campaigns served a similar role long after the initial, tentative decades of Spanish rule. David Tavárez examines one such moment in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when zealous bishops and secular magistrates combined forces to stamp out the unorthodox religious practices that had developed in the Zapotec communities of Oaxaca's Villa Alta. The campaigns once again occurred within a larger political struggle, coming as they did in the years following the Tehuantepec rebellion of 1660 and the slow decline of the Dominican order's local influence. One of the most fascinating aspects of the chapter is the rich ethnographic detail Tavárez is able to pull out of the extant record, detailing how the Zapotec maintained two distinct systems of finance and ritual. A Catholic public sphere shaped pueblo life, supported by a typical array of lay brotherhoods and municipal officials. But, a clandestine sphere also endured: an ever-evolving indigenous spiritual world exhibiting the trappings of various Christian symbols and accoutrement. Seemingly reluctant to label this system as simply a hybrid of the two donor groups, Tavárez elects to emphasize instead the Zapotecs' perception of this realm as "essential" to "communal identity and well being" (57).

Whereas Terraciano and Tavárez depict a spiritual battle of attrition in which Spanish officials drove native religion underground yet could never fully eradicate it, Maureen Ahern's essay considers the more overt

physical and spiritual confrontation that consumed the early viceroyalty's northern frontier. Beginning with the Mixton rebellion of 1541 and concluding with the Tepehuan Revolt of 1616, native groups rejected the new colonial order, its religion, and its priests, by taking up arms against the invaders and granting a number of friars their wish to enter the graces of Christian martyrdom. To discern the indigenous point of view, Ahern must rely heavily on reading missionary spiritual writings against the grain given the paucity of sources for the groups she studies. Despite the methodological challenges, the end result is a fascinating discussion of the appropriation of Christian theology, ritual and sacred objects by indigenous people in a conscious effort to channel their enemies' sacred power for their own ends. Perhaps the most delicious in irony was the Caxcan cult that developed in the 1540s around the habit of the first Franciscan martyr, the garb of the Christian soldier becoming yet another so-called idol the friars had toiled so hard to destroy. Perhaps not surprisingly, native spiritual rebellions appear to have exhibited a greater understanding of the Christian religion and church over time. Ahern highlights, for example, an Acaxee shaman, who took the title of bishop to reinforce his authority, while two of his lieutenants appropriated the identities of the powerful apostle saints Santiago and Peter. Whether the resulting parallel structures of authority and belief ought to be considered syncretism or not, it is clear that the spiritual battles waged in the north followed their own distinctive pattern.

Lisa Sousa's discussion of early Nahua-Christian marriage rituals in central Mexico foreshadows in many respects the maturation of parallel system of religious devotion observed by other authors for a later period. Drawing on the observations of Franciscan friars and the ritualized discourse of Nahua elders, Sousa demonstrates how Nahuas came to accept the validity of the Christian sacrament, while nevertheless continuing to observe Mesoamerican customs. In contrast to Tavárez, Sousa is willing to characterize the result as a cultural hybrid. Students of religion will recognize in her interpretation a classic syncretic model of change wherein similarities in both cultures' marriage rites served as a "common ground" facilitating Indian adoption of a Christian ceremony, albeit one evidencing Nahua cultural influence (40). Sousa nonetheless recognizes that

significant ideological difference separated the two sets of rites, which would have profound ramifications. Perhaps most critically, the Christian ritual functioned as a powerful colonizing tool, as it replaced a certain level of gender reciprocity exhibited in Nahua culture with a brand of Spanish patriarchy symbolized by male clerics serving as the sole authority figure.

Similarly, Kristin Dutcher Mann explores how Franciscan and Jesuit friars operating in the far north employed seemingly innocuous sacred music as a tool of colonialism that imparted lessons of Christian piety, enriched communal celebrations, and marked the regimented daily life of Indian missions. Music satisfied a number of different needs, both mundane (such as combating homesickness among the friars) and extraordinary (including signaling a spiritual *entrada* into pagan territory). One Franciscan even employed a tactic similar to those Ahern observes among the frontier's indigenous groups: appropriating a native drum to accompany his chants in an unsuccessful bid to claim tribal territory as Christian space. While the focus rests on the musical backgrounds and evangelical strategies of the missionaries, Mann does second Sousa's observation of the importance of song and dance for attracting Indians to Christian ritual, noting that the meanings neophytes gave to these acts may not have coincided with the friars' intent. The author also posits that such encounters contributed to the development of a "syncretic religious culture," an idea that remains lamentably beyond the purview of the chapter (276).

There is some irony in the fact that the most explicit discussion of syncretism is to be found in Sonya Lipsett-Rivera's chapter, for it contains the least overtly "religious" content in the anthology. Lipsett-Rivera borrows the distinction Hugo Nutini has recently developed between "guided" and "spontaneous" syncretism to argue that surface-level similarities in how sixteenth-century Nahuas and Spaniards understood the body, its comportment and corporal expressions, served as a temporary bridge between the two groups that elided fundamental ideational differences long enough to create a new ideology and language repertoire of the body. To do so, the author draws from Nahua and Spanish moralist literature, and offers a thought-provoking and original thesis. Still, this

reader was left somewhat dissatisfied, more as a result of what seems to be the limitations of the syncretism model itself rather than how the author employs evidence or constructs her argument. In places the essay thus slides too close to such universal statements about the two donor groups—does any culture, for example, not hold the head, its adornment and movement, as a particularly important symbolic depository?—that it is difficult to discern how the specific body ideology that emerged from the Spanish-Nahua collision formed as a result. Nevertheless, the author should be commended for illuminating an intriguing dimension to the familiar topic of Mexican cultural mestizaje, and for suggesting interesting directions for future research.

The relationship of power and sexuality are also addressed in John Chuckiak's provocative analysis of Maya denunciations of sexual solicitation and abuse by priests during confession. Similar to the chapters on extirpation, Chuckiak faces the dilemma of how to recognize the truth amidst all of the accusations, counteraccusations, and denials that drove the source material. In a clever but not disingenuous way, he sidesteps the problem somewhat by arguing that denunciations could be both weapons for community leaders to depose unpopular priests and the means by which Maya women gained some empowerment in a world where they were oppressed by Spanish and Maya men alike. What is most innovative about the essay is the author's attempt to complicate the typical model of religious change that presumes a monolithic Indian culture colliding against an equally monolithic Iberian one. Chuckiak draws upon the work of European historian Guido Ruggiero to posit that the Maya were actually exposed to two distinct worlds of sexuality in the sixteenth century, both at odds with Maya custom. As a result, the Maya initially faced "a confusing sexual universe" (85). On the one hand, Spanish clerics preached the imperativeness of chastity and the holiness of monogamous marriage, wherein sexual intercourse was inherently linked to procreation. Yet, through their unchaste actions, Spanish priests and laymen also unleashed a libertine world of sexual conquest and predation. For their part, Maya nobles soon grasped the ideological dissonance, and learned to employ the language of Christian sexual morality against the very priests who would

deny them their own traditional claims over Maya women. His sources may not lend themselves to such an interpretation, but one wonders whether one might also speak of distinct strands of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse forming part of Maya sexuality, as well.

Stanley M. Hordes's essay on crypto-Jews in New Mexico further complicates overly simplistic models of religious change by demonstrating that Iberian settlers did not bring a uniform set of religious beliefs and practices. Arguing against the notion of an omnipotent and omniscient Inquisition, Hordes further suggests that the colony's crypto-Jewish population enjoyed a remarkable degree of religious freedom, notwithstanding official prohibitions against their presence in the New World, and the occasional pogrom in Mexico City. Hordes borrows from Solange Alberrro the idea that distance (coupled with economic opportunity) made New Mexico a relatively secure and attractive haven for *conversos*, where they could maintain a semblance of a distinctive minority community. Indeed, in terms similar to the Church's assault against Indian pagan survivals, New Mexico's Franciscans only evidenced interest in confronting crypto-Judaism once the order became consumed in a much larger political battle with the colony's governor. Once again, disentangling matters of faith from those of power becomes virtually impossible, and risks mischaracterizing the spirit of the age.

The essays reviewed thus far can all be situated within a set of larger debates concerning religious resistance and survival in New Spain. Although clearly an important aspect of the Catholic church's history in Mexico, such narratives are not the best suited for explaining the religious convergence that characterized a maturing viceroyalty and nascent Mexican culture. The anthology moves closest to this perspective with Martha Few's chapter on popular accounts of the miraculous healing of children in Guatemala and Mexico. In a world cleaved by ethnic and class divisions, parents proved remarkably united in their efforts to seek succor for their ailing and dying children through the power of divine intervention. The extant accounts reveal a number of similarities (such as the common appeal to San Diego for a miraculous cure) that evidence the viceroyalty's emerging common religious culture. Sharing with Lipsett-Rivera an

interest in popular understandings of the body, Few argues that the stories of survival emphasize the pliant quality of children's bodies, "open to the entrance of divine beings, and capable of physical and/or spiritual transformation" (120). In keeping with O'Gorman's point about the era's most central values, Few points to municipal celebrations for the miraculous healing of children, and how these children could become "objects of wonder" and the subject of earnest conversation (121). Readers of Carolyn Walker Bynum's treatment of medieval European notions of female sanctity will also recognize the critical importance of food, and its intimate relationship to maternal care and healing. Yet, Few rejects facile comparisons with Catholic Europe by arguing that the narratives "reflected broader concerns with and discourse about the meaning of illness and death in the Americas" informed by the Church's "ongoing campaigns of religious conversion of native peoples" (122). This is an intriguing concluding thought that merits further explication.

The most well-known Mexican symbol of maternal protection and aid has long been the Virgin of Guadalupe, the subject of Jeanette Favrot Peterson's ongoing research. Examining two pieces of art commissioned prior to the Creole campaign to promote the cult, Peterson argues for an established popular devotion to a "new wonder-working Virgin by the first decade of the seventeenth century" (127). Situating these works within a larger context of the Catholic Reformation—with its militant embrace of the cult of the saints and the efficacy of miraculous images—the author suggests that the Mexican church grew more comfortable accepting the circulating stories of the otherworldly origins of the image imprinted on Juan Diego's *tilma*, and the miraculous powers of Guadalupe, both claims that authors Miguel Sánchez and Luis Laso de la Vega later adopted for a literate audience. Here again, miraculous healing played a prominent role, although Peterson seems more willing than Few to connect these renditions to a European tradition. By identifying subtle differences between the stories depicted in the artwork and those of later Creole authors, Peterson is also able to argue for multiple sources dating to the early years of the seventeenth century. Even more intriguing, the author suggests that the engraver Samuel Stradanus sought inspiration from the ex-votos that

adorned the Tepeyac shrine, further breaking down the distinctions between popular and elite veneration of what would become Mexico's most potent symbol of national unity.

As Javier Villa-Flores shows us, much of the colony's early Hispanic population were also united by a fascination with the power of blasphemous words. Drawn from the author's larger work on the subject, Villa-Flores's chapter highlights how male gamblers employed blasphemy as the means to save face or express anger at a divinity, who was believed to manifest his providence even during a seemingly trivial event like the roll of a die. Fearing that divine retribution might imperil a Hispanic community already outnumbered and surrounded by heathen Indians and African slaves, lay people denounced blasphemers, while some officials sought to crack down on the gambling houses that fostered this dangerous behavior. Yet, ironically, Villa-Flores demonstrates that official condemnation went hand-in-hand with official complicity, given the tax revenue gaming generated and the gambling addiction of many clerics. Adding an important temporal dimension to his analysis, Villa-Flores argues that the Inquisition's interest in punishing blasphemers waned considerably by the early eighteenth century with the gaining acceptance of the notion of chance; rather than God's will, random luck explained the outcome of these ever popular forms of diversion.

A final theme that runs through a great number of the essays concerns the mostly privileged men and women who formed the ranks of New Spain's religious orders and the secular priesthood. Although exceptions existed, these posts and offices were held overwhelmingly by candidates able to demonstrate their "purity of blood." As María Elena Martínez demonstrates in her careful tracing of the evolution of this most infamous of Iberian concepts, what had been originally conceived as a temporary means of allaying suspicions concerning the validity of coerced Jewish conversions transformed by the early sixteenth century into an indefinite and essentializing stain for the offending parties' descendants, which served to reinforce hierarchal divisions between Old and New Christians. Transplanted to New Spain, discourse concerning the purity of blood took on added significance in a society increasingly characterized by

the intermixture of Old Christian stock with indigenous and African blood. The elaborate procedures adopted by ecclesiastical institutions to confirm the purity of potential candidates for office thus contributed to the creation of colonial racial ideology and the importance given to legitimate birth (and as a consequence female chastity), while reinforcing the privileges of a small interrelated set of aristocratic families, who "transmitted certificates of purity…and offices as if they were titles of nobility" (212).

Two of the volume's chapters further examine this intimate connection between privilege and church office at the regional and local level. The first, by James D. Riley, is an impressive prosopography of locally-born priests serving in the Tlaxcala area and the role these men fulfilled for their larger family interests. Many scholars have noted the predilection of elite families to place their children in honorable roles as nuns and priests, a lack of religious vocation occasionally compensated by larger economic and political ends. Riley's contribution is the compelling thesis that landholding families may have been able to retain control of indigenous resources thanks in part to the moral authority their sons embodied as priests. Riley identifies a subset of parish appointees who spent a significant amount of time, often in temporary, unsalaried posts, in areas associated with their own family's interests. Although direct evidence that they viewed their roles as such is naturally lacking, the details the author is able to reconstruct for some of these men suggest strongly that the correlation is far from coincidental. Michael Polushin extends the volume's discussion of elite efforts to employ the Catholic church as a vehicle for their own political and economic aggrandizement. His chapter explores the backdrop to the 1809 deposing of José Mariano Valero, the top royal official of Chiapas, by the patrician elite of Ciudad Real during the city's celebration of its holy patroness, the Virgin of la (?) Merced. In his reconstruction of the struggles between the peninsular official and his Creole adversaries, Polushin demonstrates how the latter actually benefited from ambiguities of the crown's late-colonial administrative reforms. In his efforts to gain control over key corporate resources, Valero, like so many benighted Bourbon officials, failed to respect the prerogatives the elite and their clients enjoyed through the city's secular and ecclesiastical offices.

Fittingly, for the elite no separation existed "between the interests of the state, religion and the patria," all three symbols intimately associated with their own class and family interests (327). Deposing the local symbol of regal authority thus reinforced traditional hierarchies of power rather than usurped them.

While male clergy often played prominent public roles in the viceroyalty, female religious have been traditionally depicted as silenced and cloistered away from the rest of society. Asunción Lavrin's chapter contributes to recent scholarship, published by the author and others, that challenges this interpretation by bringing the spiritual writings of nuns "out of archival seclusion" (163). Operating under constraints similar to their Spanish sisters, New Spain's nuns faced strict supervision from male confessors eager to enforce religious orthodoxy and feminine deference. Yet, the discovery of less compromised texts, including diaries, letters and conventual chronicles, allow entry into the concealed interior lives of these secluded women. Surveying the writings of four women sharing a common visionary and mystical bent, Lavrin finds that the nuns followed the spiritual models and exercises offered by Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, among others, although their writings also exhibited a fair share of post-Tridentine elements (including a renewed emphasis on the cult of the saints and the Virgin Mary, as we have seen elsewhere). Lavrin concludes that these women approached "divinity with awe, respect and humility," becoming such paragons of virtue that "lines of authority frequently became blurred and male authorities sought a source of faith and enlightenment in these women" (173). Mónica Díaz continues the discussion through an examination of the debates surrounding the proposed founding of a Mexico City convent (eventually established in 1724) intended strictly for native women of noble birth, and the protests these women registered upon the admittance of a number of Spanish nuns and novices. Reservations against the convent's founding centered on the common belief in the overly sensual nature of the viceroyalty's indigenous population, and the inability of Indian women, in particular, to remain chaste. The obstacles can hardly be over-emphasized; the extirpation campaigns that continued to ensnare some of the nuns' indigenous

contemporaries, for instance, almost certainly informed the negative opinion these women and their supporters faced. Remarkably, the translation of a spiritual life extolling the purity of a young indigenous woman associated with a Jesuit mission in distant New France helped sway some in New Spain to proceed with the proposal. While sexual chastity was certainly an important virtue, the nuns themselves emphasized that of suffering, a lesson imparted by the convent's *criolla* abbess, including in their efforts to expel the unwanted Spaniards from the convent. The sisters thus used the openings available in colonial and religious discourse to secure a modicum of agency, not unlike the rural and largely uneducated Maya women who denounced the sexual improprieties of their lecherous priests.

Religion in New Spain succeeds brilliantly in its goal to highlight the rich diversity of religious experience in colonial Mexico. The volume is an essential read for specialists, although some of its chapters will have a familiar ring (some of the volume's contributors have published similar pieces in the seven years that have passed since the original conference). Its utility as a teaching tool, though, might be limited by its prohibitive price (the book is currently available only in cloth) and the editors' somewhat brief and fragmented introductions. Indeed, this reader would have preferred that the editors attempted to situate the essays within a set of theoretical and historiographical contexts rather than providing a thumbnail sketch of the broader historical background. For these reasons, undergraduate courses, especially, might be better served by a similar volume on popular religion in New Spain, which was published just a year earlier by the same press as part of their acclaimed Dialogues/Diálogos series.[2] This minor criticism, however, should not detract from the value of this important set of essays on a topic, which O'Gorman's admonishment reminds us, is key to understanding the history of New Spain.

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