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Review/Reseña

Javier Villa-Flores, *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006.

Taking the lord's name (not) in vain: Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico

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Who would have thought that taking the lord's name in vain could have such ramifications? But in New Spain during the first two hundred years of crown rule there seemingly could not have been a worse crime. Blasphemy, as Javier Villa-Flores so eloquently reveals in *Dangerous Speech*, was the concern of institutions great and small and it cut across all segments of society, from the king in Spain to his most humble subject. Only native peoples were unaffected, since they were exempt from prosecution by the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Above all else, blasphemy was an attack on God, and as such jeopardized Spain's colonizing venture. The Spaniards had rationalized their invasion and conquest of the peoples

of the Americas as a mission of evangelization, and all colonials were to live in grace thereafter. But the Spaniards, as exemplars, confounded the enterprise with their swearing.

Theologians, philosophers, and politicians debated how to control that most duplicitous of organs, the tongue, and articulated policies to prevent or eliminate irreverent speech. The Holy Tribunal was the king's enforcer and the court bureaucracy, from *familiares* and judges to its lawyers, notaries, and jailers involved themselves in the matter of blasphemy, as defaming God was never a private matter but always required an audience.

Men were by far the worst offenders, especially sailors, soldiers, muleteers, and slaves. For some, swearing was a manifestation of manliness. Villa-Flores sees their verbal bravado as an attempt to enhance their "gendered strength" in their society (76). Beating their wives might also be an aspect of their virility. However, gambling seems to have afforded the most natural occasion for individuals to take out their wrath on God. Cards and dice were the most popular games, although they were forbidden, and women were unconditionally prohibited from all gaming activities.

Historically, Christians were known to have cast lots to determine God's will. It is known that even the conqueror Hernando Cortés's nursemaid resorted to lots to determine the saint best suited to favor her sickly charge. The Catholic God was omnipotent and all outcomes were divinely ordained. Chance and Fortune played no role, and when gamblers lost, it was Providential; thus the abnegation of their belief and the vilification of their deity.

But gambling was popular and widespread, and not uncommonly New Spain's leading citizens hosted the games, with some collecting commissions. Many justified their participation as a means to satisfy their need for entertainment, not for lucre, and therefore did not warrant the attention of a willful Holy Office. Ultimately, however, in spite of its proscriptive policies, it was the crown that benefited the most from gambling, for it established a monopoly on the production of gaming cards.

Spanish-sanctioned, stamped cards were shipped to the Americas, and only these cards could be used.

Women swore too, and this was considered an even more serious violation, for women traditionally were expected to be submissive and silent. Villa-Flores furnishes the example of doña Beatriz de la Cueva, who cursed God upon learning of the death of her husband, Pedro de Alvarado. God subsequently punished de la Cueva in an earthquake-induced mudslide, which caused her death, it was believed. Generally, fewer women were brought before the Tribunal for blasphemy, but those who were most often guilty had done little more than attempt to counter malicious gossip or defend the honor of their families.

Slaves surely had the most horrible lives during this period. The crown justified their enslavement through their salvation, but the slaves were quick to then capitalize on their Christianity. Upon experiencing unjust or brutal masters, they blasphemed both to save themselves and to challenge God. Moreover, they believed, Tribunal jails were a godsend compared to an unmerciful overlord. Both male and female slaves sought respite from bondage by swearing, although few benefited in the long term.

Blasphemers were renounced to the Holy Office, arrested, and placed in its jail. Some spent years in jail waiting to be heard; others were fined, flogged, imprisoned, sentenced to long years of labor in oceangoing galleys, sent into exile, or had their tongues cut out. Leniency was typical for upper-class offenders, but those who transgressed repeatedly were eventually punished.

Dangerous Speech is an erudite book that affords fresh insight into the lives of virtually all groups in New Spain. Heretofore thought to be a spontaneous outburst, blasphemy is revealed by Villa-Flores in counterpoise to the many purposes it served.