

# RELIGION AND REFORM IN COLONIAL SPANISH AMERICA

## Religious Experience in Latin American Culture before Independence

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**Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism.** By Daniel Castro. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 233. \$21.95 paper.

**La ilustración en el Río de la Plata: Cultura eclesiástica y cultura laica durante el Virreinato.** By José Carlos Chiaramonte. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2007. Pp. 383. \$16.19 paper.

**Religion in New Spain.** Edited by Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. Pp. ix + 358. \$39.95 cloth.

The works under review here are united not only by their concern for religion, ideas, and society in colonial Spanish America but equally by a common didactic orientation, which is very strong in each of them. Taken together, they are a good gauge of recent advances in dealing with religion in studies of Latin American history and the rethinking of how religion touches the heights of empire building, the valleys of confrontation and crisis, and the daily and frequently inglorious struggles of quotidian existence.

Castro's book and the collective volume edited by Schroeder and Poole share a common concern for the Indian in colonial Latin America. But in dealing with the great lifework of Bartolomé de Las Casas, Castro is more directly concerned with how today's misunderstanding of Las Casas's moment and his efforts in the past reveal an enduring legacy of colonialism toward indigenous Americans in the New World. Consequently, his study is clearly argumentative, with a singular desire to make the reader perceive Las Casas and his times in a new and more critical light than Lewis Hanke purportedly shed on the great defender of the Indians of

the New World.<sup>1</sup> Taking issue with a Hanke-inspired vision of Las Casas has a long history, yet Castro's stance is extreme.<sup>2</sup> Schroeder and Poole's collection has no such singular intent. The contributors to this carefully crafted volume work from a great variety of sources in pursuit of their analytical goals.

The strength and weakness of Castro's study is its clear and reiterated key argument. In the title, introduction, chapters, and conclusions, we are told that Las Casas must be understood as a more benevolent face of Spanish imperialism but in no way as a counterpoint or contradiction to it. Castro sees Las Casas as a proponent of "ecclesiastical imperialism" (8), which, in conjunction with royal interests, allegedly sought to control the "semi-feudal" (9) tendencies of the conquistadores and other Spanish colonialists. Castro gradually recounts the fascinating life of Las Casas and the stages through which it developed, depicting along the way his amazing power of personality and endurance. However, given his declared sympathy for the native peoples of the Americas—who are conceived as thoroughly vanquished in the processes of conquest and colonization—Castro cannot or will not empathize with his protagonist. Consequently, he does little to flesh out the germane cultural and juridical contexts that might help to explain Las Casas more fully as one of many—as Castro himself admits—crusading reformers. Las Casas is shown to be self-promoting, distant from the native peoples he sought to protect, and more at ease in the Spanish court than in the stormy confines of America. But Castro does not view his constant appeals to a higher concept of justice and his insistence on law and natural rights as participating in critical ruptures and recompositions within Spanish culture.

Castro's passionate and single-minded argumentation should prove useful for stimulating discussion, especially when read alongside materials that help question and relativize some of its severe judgments. There are not many facets to the Indians so dear to Castro in this book. The interpretations Castro puts forth would gain needed tension if one would bring in other studies on Indian demographic survival, resistance, and cultural continuities; changing Spanish policies; and growing sensitivity to the destructiveness of these policies, *mestizaje*, and increasing Indian resourcefulness in resorting to Spanish law and values in the defense of native rights. However, it should be clear that *Another Face of Empire* is part of our time's ongoing cultural wars in the interpretation of Western history and recourse to it in social and political debate.

1. Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (1949; reprint, Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

2. Benjamin Keen, "The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49 (1969): 703–719; and "The White Legend Revisited: A Reply to Professor Hanke's 'Modest Proposal,'" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 51 (1971): 336–355.

In its message of anticolonialism, Castro's book might fruitfully be read alongside those by Walter Mignolo and Richard Waswo on the extrarational basis of Western colonialism and imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Equally important would be contrasting works on colonial society and the law, such as those by Woodrow Borah and Brian Owensby.<sup>4</sup> Many studies bring in the complexity of Indian economies and societies, their resilience, and the diverse circumstances of Spanish penetration; these would be welcome and necessary to balance out the complexity of what was occurring in the centuries after 1492.<sup>5</sup> Ward Stavig, mediating between the emphasis, either on Indian continuity or on the oppressive conditions brought on by Spaniards, has insisted that the new nucleus for Indian permanence was local and communal, more than regional or ethnic, thus allowing for resistance and a variable permeability to outside influences to subsist simultaneously. Indian interests eroded by attrition but often while receiving immediate protections under the law.<sup>6</sup> Pointing to telling contrasts between Spanish and English colonialism, Patricia Seed has suggested that the flaw in Spanish thought was not that of vanquishing Indians, but of subjecting them to "forced assimilation" and Hispanization as Crown vassals, leading to their loss of "religious and moral freedom."<sup>7</sup>

The collective volume edited by Schroeder and Poole derives from a colloquium in March 2000 dedicated to Richard Greenleaf, a path breaker in colonial studies of religion. The contributors themselves are also clearly oriented to opening new ground on a number of fronts, particularly as regards recognizing endurance, determination, and agency by the Indian subjects of their stories. Many of the contributors are, like Castro, drawing on their doctoral dissertations. Others, by contrast, are seasoned historians, such as Asunción Lavrin, Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, and James D. Riley.

3. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Richard Waswo, *The Founding Legend of Western Civilization: From Virgil to Vietnam* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

4. Woodrow Borah, *El juzgado general de indios en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985); Brian P. Owensby, *Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

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

6. Ward Stavig, "Ambiguous Visions: Nature, Law, and Culture in Indigenous-Spanish Land Relations in Colonial Peru," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80 (2000): 77–111; Ward Stavig, "Continuing the Bleeding of These Pueblos Will Shortly Make Them Cadavers: The Potosí Mita, Cultural Identity, and Communal Survival in Colonial Peru," *The Americas* 56 (2000): 529–562.

7. Patricia Seed, "'Are These Not Also Men?': The Indians' Humanity and Capacity for Spanish Civilisation," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25 (1993): 629–652; William B. Taylor, "'De corazón pequeño y ánimo apocado': Conceptos de los curas párrocos sobre los indios de la Nueva España del siglo XVIII," *Relaciones: Estudios de Historia y Sociedad* 39 (1989): 5–67.

As a whole, the collection is heavily ethnohistorical and ethnosensitive in its approach to religion. Most of the essays address religion as part of complex social processes. The editors—themselves known for outstanding work on ethnohistorical and religious history—divide the book into seven sections with a total of sixteen chapters. Some sections work together better than others, but all feature helpful introductions with illustrative quotes by colonial contemporaries and include modern bibliographical suggestions.

The essays by Terraciano, Sousa, and Tavárez in *Religion in New Spain* arch through the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, covering similar topics of resistance and accommodation as twin and perhaps inseparable aspects of Indian responses to a new Catholic religion in their midst. While Terraciano and Tavárez work on obstacles to Catholic hegemony in long-standing religious practices and loyalties in Oaxaca, Souza puts the accent on hybrid cultural formulas as regards marriage in central Mexico. Lipsett-Rivera and Chuchiak address sexuality and morality; but whereas Lipsett-Rivera comes close to Souza's emphasis by speaking of the development of a "syncretic culture of the body" and its gestures that were increasingly oblivious to differing ideological and religious legacies (78), Chuchiak seeks to portray the oppressive but complex implications of a "sexual conquest" in Yucatan, whereby clergy could abuse their sacramental privileges (85–86, 99). Martha Few and Jeanette Favrot Peterson develop fascinating perspectives on the prevalence and power of belief in miracles. Few locates its deep roots in pressing recurrences of illness and disease, whereas Peterson emphasizes the prevalent cultural transmission of miracle stories by word of mouth, paintings, and engravings.

As these first essays demonstrate, Indians in New Spain possessed different social and cultural levels, and exercised varying power in society. In this context, Asunción Lavrin explores an intriguing aspect of the social aspirations and religious commitments of the Indian nobility in the eighteenth century: the opening of convents—heretofore a guarded cultural space for Creoles and peninsular Spaniards—to their daughters. She deftly explores the presence of Indian women in Corpus Christi and their spirituality in the tradition of Saint Teresa of Ávila, pointing up the social and cultural importance of the Indian nobility, much as has the recent work by Margarita Menegus and Rodolfo Aguirre on noble Indians in higher education.<sup>8</sup> Lavrin is especially interested in the "expansive female protagonism" (173) in writings by Indian nobles and the blurring lines of authority between Indian nuns and their male confessors and spiritual guides. Mónica Díaz, also interested in the Corpus Christi convent, points

8. Margarita Menegus y Rodolfo Aguirre, *Los indios, el sacerdocio y la universidad en Nueva España, siglos XVI–XVIII* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006).

up the racial debate that arose concerning it. Careful textual work with a new manuscript source allows her to underscore the participation of Indian nuns in this debate. She is careful to remind us of prior studies by Lavrin, Poole, Schroeder, William B. Taylor, and Antonio Rubial while adding a detailed analysis of this specific case.

Race, of course, was not only a question of Indians, Creoles, and peninsulars; the essays of María Elena Martínez and Stanley Hordes therefore take us into the complex world of crypto-Judaism, *probanzas* of racial purity, and the particularities of the New World. Martínez points to weakening rigor as regards *probanzas* in early New Spain. Hordes, in keeping with Solange Alberro's important work on the *Santo Oficio*, finds that distance from Spain, especially on the far northern frontier, was auspicious for tolerance of crypto-Jews.<sup>9</sup> While there were fairly well-defined periods of persecution between 1589 and 1604, and again in the 1640s, he finds that the north was a refuge for these religious dissidents.

Although grouped with Martínez and Hordes in a section titled "Guardians of the Christian Society," Javier Villa Flores's essay on gambling, blasphemy, and persecution might well sit aside the essays on miracles mentioned earlier. Villa Flores follows the gamblers' belief in immediate divine intervention in the game, to the point of faulting Divinity when stakes were lost. The twist here is that gamblers down to circa 1700 were disposed not simply to request aid from Providence, and fault it when not forthcoming, but also cajole or trick it into cooperation via amulets, spells, and less-than-pious use of Christian practices. Cursing and foul gestures might follow. Secularized luck 256, 257 would be an eighteenth-century phenomenon.

I found the section "Music and Martyrdom on the Northern Frontier" to be only loosely articulated around its geographical reference. Kristin Dutcher Mann has a tantalizing essay on music in the mission work of Franciscans and Jesuits, giving us to understand music as an "essential element in the construction of Catholic identity" (276). Especially interesting here is not only the careful explanation of the liturgical and evangelizing uses of music but also the mention of popular secular songs adopted for religious purposes, the emphasis on teaching music, and the creation of a syncretic religious culture with music and dance of disparate origins. I was surprised to find no mention of Lourdes Turrent's work on the musical conquest, even if to establish a distinct approach.<sup>10</sup> In my view, the essay would sit well if placed alongside those of Terraciano, Sousa, and Tavárez, given their emphasis on the problems of rooting down Christian

9. Solange Alberro, *Inquisición y sociedad en México, 1571–1700* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988).

10. Lourdes Turrent, *La conquista musical de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996).

meanings and practices in native soil. This is true of Maureen Ahern's essay as well. Although dedicated to the northwestern Indian frontier, Ahern essentially deals with violent resistance to Spanish rule, semanticized into "polysemic discourses" (281) of a syncretic nature. She finds that the perceived power of Christian religion demanded "ritual reversals" by Indians, some of which were quite brutal, the key point being that the frontier was "porous . . . in terms of ritual penetration" (289, 292). Although an extreme case of syncretism in which violence and rejection were combined liberally with modest adaptation, Ahern's discovery that missionaries lost control of their message is certainly complementary to the arguments made by Terraciano, Souza, Tavárez, and Mann, which make me think they would function better as one large section, together rather than divided up.

Finally, the essays by Michael Polushin and James D. Riley bring religion and business together in the midst of family-based strategies and provincial politics. Riley argues that in the boom of Hispanic growth and consolidation in Tlaxcala between 1660 and 1730, credibility and social standing were related to the presence of family members in the local priesthood and to intermarriage with the Indian nobility in the center and south-central parts of the province, where Indian towns and economic activities were dominant. After 1730, however, as Tlaxcala experienced an economic reordering, the number of priests declined precipitously and the local gentry took to careers in the law and bureaucracy. Riley here questions seriously what he calls the "roots of authority" (321n6) in the colonial world, and suggests that Creole socioeconomic power initially required divine sanction at the local level in family spiritual activities. Polushin's parallel reading of late-colonial Chiapas is more heavily oriented toward economic ties binding local secular and clerical elites, and confronting them with bureaucratic meddlers from on high. More than authority per se, Polushin is interested in complicity among regional groups through family ties and economic arrangements on the personal and institutional levels. Taking a later time, and dealing more with the exercise than the reception or perception of authority, Polushin paces the reader through the "entangled destinies and resources of church and state" (334) and eventually brings in not only the legitimation of provincial hierarchy symbolized in the festivities dedicated to the Virgin de la Merced but also the "crucial role of local custom and traditions in the maintenance of stability" (337). Not unlike John Preston Moore and John Fisher in their earlier studies on Peru, which he cites, Polushin finds that the erratic Bourbon reforms spurred on the ambitions of Chiapas elites rather than setting them back.<sup>11</sup>

11. John Preston Moore, *The Cabildo in Peru under the Bourbons: A Study in the Decline and Resurgence of Local Government in the Audiencia of Lima, 1700–1824* (Durham, NC: Duke Uni-

José Carlos Chiaramonte's book is a large step away from the overriding concerns with ethnic survival and resistance of the volume edited by Schroeder and Poole but fairly close to Castro's concern with the evolution of Latin American thought. This work by a distinguished Argentine scholar evinces the careful, painstaking analysis and fine, nuanced distinctions that one would expect. It is a reedition of a work initially published in 1989, yet it marks a precocious move forward in dealing with religion as a seminal part of the intellectual history of Latin America. Its didactic intent is evident in the long and erudite introduction, which is followed by a compilation of illustrative documents in the remaining two-thirds of the book. Chiaramonte aims to change our view of an important historical process and its purveyors. He depicts the eighteenth century as a period of Catholic Enlightenment, 18, 19, 46, 90 followed by an independence that was not planned but instead a by-product of the unexpected crisis of the Spanish Empire. This allows for a subtle treatment of changes in ideas and values during the century prior to independence, with participation by many whose innovative actions were frequently halting, tentative, or ineffectual. Chiaramonte is thus able to conjure up the force and inner workings of resistance to change in such a way that they make sense, appearing as a multifaceted but partial aspect of a porous eighteenth-century culture. He convincingly shows how debate and contradiction were defined in pre-Enlightenment culture, how they prepared the way for further change, and how the crisis of empire worked to spur change. Rarely if ever were matters of Catholic orthodoxy—or, as he wittingly adds, orthodoxies—questioned.

Chiaramonte's study derives not only from his long work in the field and his dedication to these themes in particular but also from a rich historiography of debate on these issues in Argentina and Spain. As he himself recognizes, his own ideas have matured and changed over time. There is still, perhaps, a teleological sense in this text that Enlightenment ultimately leads to cultural secularization and dominant liberalism, but the many refined perceptions of a culture in motion that seems, amazingly, to be without predetermined objectives overshadow whatever limitations this may imply.

Chiaramonte's concerns as a historian are oriented to state and nation formation in Argentina and Latin America, as is evident from perusal of his other works.<sup>12</sup> More recent Argentine authors such as Roberto di Ste-

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versity Press, 1966); John Fisher, "The Intendant System and the Cabildos of Peru," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 49 (1969): 430–453.

12. José Carlos Chiaramonte, *La crítica ilustrada de la realidad: Economía y sociedad en el pensamiento argentino e iberoamericano del siglo XVIII* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982); and *Nación y estado en Iberoamérica: El lenguaje político en tiempos de las independencias* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2004).

fano and Miranda Lida share his interest in the intersection of religion and intellect as part of this process.<sup>13</sup> Such historiographic contributions are important, adding to key work in this and closely related fields of interest by the historians David A. Brading and William B. Taylor, among others.<sup>14</sup>

Castro, Chiaramonte, and the volume of essays edited by Schroeder and Poole show us a multifaceted early Spanish America, in which religion is a chief element in forging justice or in perpetuating injustice. Religion appears as an intimate part of thinking, debating, and determining social objectives for three hundred years, and it informs the values, beliefs, and conduct of myriad individuals and groups throughout society in their daily lives. This powerful presence, never devoid of conflict and contrary opinions, was a fundamental legacy of colonial culture on the eve of Latin American independence. Much of its force, never uncontested and seldom indifferent, perhaps naturally fractious and contentious, would spill over into the nineteenth century and beyond, contributing to the complex realities of the region.

13. Roberto di Stefano, *El púlpito y la plaza: Clero, sociedad y política de la monarquía católica a la república rosista* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2004); Miranda Lida, *Dos ciudades y un deán: Biografía de Gregorio Funes, 1749–1829* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2006).

14. David A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacan, 1749–1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and *Mexican Phoenix: Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); and *Entre el proceso global y el conocimiento local: Ensayos sobre el estado, la sociedad y la cultura en el México del siglo XVIII* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana–Unidad Iztapalapa, and Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2003).