

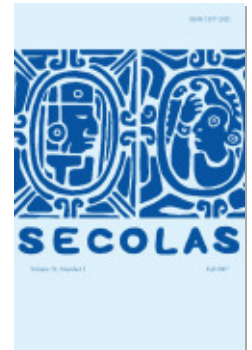


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Local Religion in Colonial Mexico ed. by Martin Austin
Nesvig (review)

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(Review)



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relations and American Studies to history and geopolitics, not to mention those studying ideologies *per se* or Latin America. As for its core theme, I believe Alan McPherson's *Anti-Americanism in Latin America and the Caribbean* must be seen as a fundamental addendum to any bibliography on the study of anti-Americanism.

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**LOCAL RELIGION IN COLONIAL MEXICO. By Martin Austin Nesvig (ed.)
Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 2006, p. 289, \$24.95.**

This compilation of ten essays explores the complex nature of religious practice in Colonial Mexico. The essays cover a wide breadth of topics, from the definition of "popular" religion to the practice of rituals steeped in pre-Hispanic religious tradition. Nesvig maintains that regardless of the diminishing influence of the Catholic Church in its government and culture, Mexico is still defined as a Catholic country. The Church has contributed heavily to the development of Mexico as a nation.

Nesvig disagrees with the presumption that mass secularization has supplanted religious fervor among the Mexican people. He points out that one has only to visit Tepeyac (also "Tepeyac"), the site of the shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, in order to see that multitudes of faithful pilgrims still make their way to pay homage to the patron saint of Mexico. Also, despite the efforts of the Spanish Catholic Church to impose its doctrines and rituals on the conquered, many pre-Hispanic religious practices continued to be observed as recently as the eighteenth century.

According to the editor, the purpose of this collection is to instigate dialogue and investigation into the nature of religion in colonial Mexico. Nesvig states: "The collective thrust of this book is to offer, by way of vignettes, broad-ranging discussions of the challenges to the view that religion in Mexico is either now extinct and thus deserves no scholarly attention, or that its colonial precedent was so ruthlessly oppressive and unmitigated that it went unchallenged, unrelieved and blindly obeyed until the 1850s." (xviii-xix) The essays do not claim to be an exhaustive study of the Mexican church or the Catholic evangelization of New Spain.

These are not merely anecdotal vignettes, but explorations of theoretical and methodological matters. A common thread connecting the essays is the attention given to the interaction between formal political, economic, and theological structures and "mentality," which "supposes that societies and cultures have complex and interwoven mental, philosophic and religious structures." (xxii) According to Michel Vovelle, the mentalities or informal rules juxtapose yet overlap with the formal structures of a culture which manifest themselves in government, legal systems and religious doctrine.

Local Religion in Colonial Mexico allows the trappings of formal religion to co-exist on the same page with the local traditions that have evolved through the history of the Catholic Church in Mexico. This aerial view allows the reader to comprehend the impact of informal traditions on a seemingly established and fixed institution.

The book opens up with an essay by Carlos M. N. Eire, discussing the definition of popular religion. The remaining articles explore the use of saints in popular Mexican Catholicism; the methods, theories, and prejudices surrounding the conversion and subsequent education of indigenous people; local religious practices considered to be heretical by the Catholic Church; the involvement of the conquered in the Church; confraternities and men of African descent; and contrasts between Catholicism in the Latin and Anglo worlds. The list of contributors includes university professors as well as independent scholars and authors from the fields of anthropology, history, religion, philosophy and sociology.

This work is accessible to the undergraduate student yet possesses sufficient depth to be utilized in graduate study. The glossary is a feature which will lend aid to the scholar who has recently embarked on the study of Catholicism in Mexico. The vignette-structure of the essays is designed to capture the interest of the reader, making him/her forget that this is a scholarly book.

Several of the articles merit mention in this review. Eire's detailed definition of popular religion elucidates the fact that Christianity, in all its forms, is influenced by the local populations it evangelizes. Rubial García points out that the proliferation of saints from the ranks of tribal folklore was viewed as a necessary evil by some friars and even encouraged by others. Nesvig explores the Church's controversial discussion and ensuing treatment of the autochthonous population. Each piece demonstrates how local traditions and the organized Church intertwine to form the *mélange* of popular religion.

The inclusion of two of the essays may appear controversial, specifically the discussion of African men in confraternities in "Routes to Respectability" and the use of theology to rationalize and deal with the institution of slavery in "Voices from a Living Hell." Upon closer study, however, it is clear that these realities were also part of the rich religious landscape of colonial Mexico. As a whole, this work offers a fresh perspective on the history of Catholicism in the New World.

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