SOCIETY AND THE SACRED

New World Transformations of Religion and Identity

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Imposing Harmony: Music and Society in Colonial Cuzco. By Geoffrey Baker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 308. $22.95 paper, $79.95 cloth.

Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century. By Joan Cameron Bristol. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007. Pp. xiv + 296. $24.95 paper.

Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform, 1761–1807. By John J. Clune Jr. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. Pp. ix + 131. $59.95 cloth.

Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico. By Asunción Lavrin. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 496. $65.00 cloth.

Genealogical Fictions: "Limpieza de sangre," Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico. By María Elena Martínez. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 407. $65.00 cloth.

From the very beginnings of the conquest, Spain held America to be a "supremely sacred space."[1] Despite disagreements between church and Crown as to how this sacred space should be administered, this holy geography underwrote all facets of Spain's conquest and colonization of the New World. Gripped by post-Tridentine fervor and emboldened by the literal and figurative distance from Europe and its contaminated Christianity, Spain sought to make up for its losses in the Old World with a fresh start in the New. Religion—understood as both the institutional practices of the church, and the cultural impact in society of the ideology and behaviors initiated by these practices—was at the heart of the imperial project and, consequently, "woven deeply into the fabric of daily life."[2] Accordingly, scholars of colonial Hispanic America must address

1. John H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 185.
2. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World*, 202.

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religion's presence in many different areas of study if they are to tackle the mentalities of the period.

The intersection of religion and culture, and its concomitant and inevitable role in the production of identities, preoccupies the texts under consideration here. In the colonial period, religion operated as the ground zero of the problematic category of identity, which has so preoccupied Latin Americanists working on an array of historical periods: it lies at the core of the tensions defining the triptych of race, class, and gender, as social groups processed the identities assigned to them by the imperial project, struggling to establish their own subjectivity. Identity and religion were both irrevocably transformed as a result of this juxtaposition.

The works discussed here address the complexities and specificities of a New World spiritual culture that was the necessary product of the convergence and coexistence of identities and belief systems brought together under the banner of Catholicism. Asunción Lavrin's magisterial *Brides of Christ* establishes the centrality of convent space to colonial Mexican society, showing how this space both influenced and interacted with the outside world—the *siglo*—in myriad ways. She demonstrates how the Mexican cloister—which was established as a bastion of white Spanish values—served as an incubator for the production of spiritual models deeply permeated by peculiarly American issues of race, class, and gender. Lavrin articulates the problematic protagonism of women in New World religious transformations: "Religious women were not excluded from the collective memory of the church or New Spain, but how they were included is critical in understanding the process of memory building among men and women of the cloth. The historical effort to legitimize the role of the church in the forging of 'new' Spain in the Indies would include nuns because they were regarded as embodying the grace that Christ granted to the humble and simple" (320). Nuns, however, were not content to have their role be purely symbolic and did not always accept the identities assigned to them and to convent space in New World religious culture.

Lavrin explores multiple facets of convent life and its significance to female religious through a series of loosely structured entries, some chronological ("The Path to the Convent," "The Novice Becomes a Nun") and others more thematic ("Sexuality: A Challenge to Chastity," "Writing in the Cloisters"). The book is detailed yet kaleidoscopic, breaking down the intricacies of convent life while recounting the development of female religious experience in the New World. Lavrin builds on her years of path-breaking scholarship on the topic of nuns in colonial Mexico to produce a book characterized by crystal-clear prose and a wealth of archival material skillfully threaded into the narrative. These elements make for cross-over appeal to a nonscholarly readership, while still maintaining the rigor that academics demand. The study of religion in colonial times is a flash

point for interdisciplinary inquiry, and the subdiscipline of convent studies is no exception. Historians, literary scholars, and art historians have all contributed to a growing corpus addressed to various facets of female experience and the multiplicity of identities within the enclosed space of the convent. Lavrin frequently reminds us that she is a historian and therefore possessed of a specific methodology; but she does engage in dialogue with literary scholars to reveal the liveliness of the field and the potential for interdisciplinary inquiry. Nuns' spiritual autobiographies and biographies (*vidas*) have been particularly fertile ground for literary analysis, and Lavrin is keen to call into question some of the methods that literary scholars use. However, she acknowledges the latter's contributions, if only to disagree with or add nuance to their arguments—speaking of the contradictory interpretations put forth by Jean Franco and by Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, for example, she allows that both "have a measure of truth" (322). This speaks of a productive interdisciplinary dialogue, or perhaps tension. Such interchanges can only serve to illuminate yet further the complexities of convent life, to showcase the appropriateness of religion as a site of cross-disciplinary investigation, and to offer a blueprint for other areas in the study of colonial religion and religious culture.

Lavrin takes great pains to stress that the New World cloister is an entity not collapsible with female monasticism in the Iberian Peninsula and urges scholars to take up the specificity of New World religious transformations: "If there is any topic that deserves special attention and is likely to reward the researcher in the future, it is that of the religious culture of the New World" (354). Hostile New World circumstances and Old World cultural exigencies initially raised the stakes of the symbolism attached to a cloistered community of virginal white women. Over time, cultural and ethnic realities left an indelible mark on convents that, despite the church's best efforts, were emblematically and concretely connected to the outside world. For Lavrin, one of the most powerful attestations of the development of a specifically New World spiritual culture in the convent is the scandal that arose in the eighteenth century over the imposition of *la vida común*. In recent years, critical attention has been drawn, on the one hand, to attempts (which Spanish-born prelates principally spearheaded) to reform and radically alter convent life by imposing "the common life"—restructuring of living quarters, lifestyle, reduction of servants and so on—and, on the other hand, to the vehement rejection of this plan by nuns.[3] Lavrin plots the polemic in detail and concludes that the nuns' hard-won partial victory attests, more than anything, to the New

3. See Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), and chapter 4 of my *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico: A Tale of Two Communities* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007), 81–126.

World character of the Mexican cloister. Despite the "cultural debt" owed to Europe, "communities began to form habits of observance that became their modus vivendi and a lifestyle that nuns appropriate as their defining heritage" (353).

With *Cuban Convents in the Age of Enlightened Reform,* John Clune takes a welcome look at a less-studied region in convent studies. His focus away from Mexico and Peru further documents the specificities of female religious experience. He also makes a useful addition to the growing corpus on later stages of colonial monasticism (the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century), helping us read religion and gender in the framework of enlightenment values. The book includes valuable information on the nineteenth-century arrival in Cuba of the Ursulines, a teaching order, and with them of the first attempts to organize female education there.

This is a slight book—ninety-eight pages of text—that does not seek to address larger questions beyond its narrow focus: "Convent reform is an excellent lens through which to understand the far-reaching influences of the sixteenth-century Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment" (1). This is a worthy object of study; however, it would also have been of interest to use this turbulent time in convent history to examine additional issues to which Clune only briefly alludes—among them the characteristics of elite criollismo in Cuba, how la vida común perhaps instigated a sea change in this initially conservative group, and, given Cuba's particular demographics, the racial politics of expelling servants from its convents. Lavrin makes clear the value of such a focus and addresses the role of race in the scandal over la vida común in Mexico, showing how Archbishop Lorenzana used this issue to help expel servants from the cloisters. Often slaves, Indians, or *castas* (mixed bloods), these servants drew the distaste of many, including the archbishop, who felt the need to "separate the [white] flowers of Christendom from the mud of the rabble" (284). Lavrin points out that race was the most stringent criterion for entry into the cloister, deeply linked to issues of illegitimacy and moral integrity in the complex demographic landscape of the New World (284). African women were never allowed to participate in convent life beyond the role of slave or servant. Elite indigenous women—*indias cacicas*—were finally allowed to profess as nuns in the eighteenth century with the foundation of the Corpus Christi convent. This foundation also speaks to the complexities of gender and class in a landscape where gender was used as a symbol of conquest. Lavrin suggests that Corpus Christi, founded to commemorate two hundred years of Spanish conquest, celebrated the submission of Indian males through the elevation (and immobilization) of Indian women, turning these elite native nuns into "a symbol of the ultimate Christian conquest" (256). Moreover, class still trumped race in a society where status was a delicate calibration of many identifying strands, all of them intimately intertwined

with the problematic idea of Christian identity and its different meanings for distinct groups.

It is precisely the origins and developments of these multivalent classifications and their relationship to religion that María Elena Martínez addresses in rich detail in *Genealogical Fictions*. She, too, attacks the issue of religious and cultural New World specificity, reading the transformation of racial categories from Spain to Mexico. Her book carefully plots change over time and space, charting the religious use of purity-of-blood statutes in late medieval Spain and their promotion of modern notions of race as society took on more secular characteristics in eighteenth-century Mexico. She also examines their relationship to the particularly New World phenomenon of *castas* (the race and caste system).

Martínez frames her study in the symbolic and concrete meanings attached by genealogy, explaining (following Cornel West) how genealogy is, for her, a way to excavate meaning about those who may not have left a detailed record. Moreover, genealogy lay concretely at the center of the forging of New World identities as they engaged in dialogue with and distorted Old World models: the "ideology of limpieza became pervasive precisely because of its articulation with different social relations and its ability to rearticulate the different levels of religious, social and political life in times of change" (86). Martínez compellingly insists that the traditional rigid model of "metropolitan core and colonial periphery" (7) cannot sufficiently well explain the transformation of Catholic spiritual models and the attendant "unexpected political transformations." She repeatedly stresses how religion is at the heart of this discussion of race and ethnicity, given, as Lavrin also points out, that the formation of these two concepts cannot be divorced from the religious culture that permeated all aspects of colonial society. As Martínez says in analyzing the Spanish colonial model: "No other European power relied so heavily on the Church to spread the faith, support the government, and structure colonial society" (16).

In this structuring of colonial society, we see how *limpieza* began to pervade all aspects of life following the conquest and so attain a peculiar New World identity. To this end, Martínez first addresses the enormously complex issue of Spain's attitudes toward Indian Christianity and the creation of the two-republics system in its American territories. This fascinating chapter has an enormous amount of primary and secondary bibliography, and Martínez does a wonderful job bringing it all together to investigate the religious underpinnings of the República de Indios and their relationship to the development of the idea of native purity. Key to the special status of Indians as vassals of the Crown of Castile was the premise of America as sacred space. Indians were in their own lands and had supposedly willingly accepted Christianity. Martínez carefully presents the debates surrounding this issue and the different interest groups

that opposed native purity and the protections that it brought. The concept of limpieza underwent a transformation to accommodate Indians as separate but equal. Martínez shows how indigenous nobles recast native concepts of lineage in Spanish terms. Throwing a spanner into the two-republics system of separate but equal was the rise of mestizo identity. Martínez first lays out the fascinating cultural and political gymnastics that went into the incorporation of mestizos, and then shows how purity-of-blood statutes were adapted to allow those who would become Creoles to "vindicate their religiosity, social status and purity" (137). Up for grabs in this was not only the land but also the concept of nativism, as a Creole discourse developed alongside and in opposition to indigenous claims, co-opting indigenous history—for example in Martínez's fascinating analysis of what she calls Creole antiquarianism—while rejecting the less useful elements to create a discourse of possession that tied Creoles inextricably to the land.

Linked to the Creoles through nomenclature and to the lowest part of the República de Españoles were Africans and Afro-Mexicans. Originally used to talk about livestock, the word *Creole* was used to describe blacks born in the New World before it came to designate Spaniards born there. The impurity of blood of Africans and Afro-Mexicans come from their role as slaves, which Martínez shows had its roots and justification in Christianity. The differentiation of blacks starts to appear more frequently in the seventeenth century, with the African slave trade playing a key role in the transformation of religion and identity in the colonies. Blacks were the economic and religious wildcard that put into jeopardy the intricately worked out and fragilely constructed system of two republics. Martínez uses the discursive intricacies of the system of castas to show that blacks and mulattoes were considered first and foremost as slaves, or as descendants of slaves, and were thus incapable of demonstrating *limpieza de sangre.* She argues that whereas a "symbolics of blood" held that Spaniards and Indians were "compatible," blacks had no such status, so that, by the eighteenth century, limpieza de sangre became inextricably linked to whiteness (154, 228). Martínez also offers an interesting reading of the feminization of impurity and of the fear of reproduction infused in the symbolism of the African female body, whose negative depiction is also present in casta paintings. Martínez is particularly adept at teasing out the nuances of gender in these painting to show how even the most innocent or playful gestures can be read as indications of the complexities of blood purity. Also interesting is the connection that she draws between casta paintings and the religious underpinnings of the statutes of limpieza de sangre charted throughout the book.

Martínez's book is ambitious, and for the most part, it makes good on such a big project, offering a theoretical and methodological way forward to deal with race in New Spain. It is the most compelling book that I have

read on racial relations among the three main demographic groups of New Spain, skillfully breaking down the legal, cultural, and religious positions of each group relative to the others, as well as the mixtures that they produced. It reframes this tripartite racial dynamic within the complex and contradictory Spanish obsession with purity, plotting its change over time as the New Spain became what Martínez calls a Catholic mestizo nation.

The "symbolics of blood" (154) that Martínez outlines are made flesh, if you will, in two other books that address what the sacred space of the New World meant to nonhegemonic groups that transformed the Old World religion they received into something with greater meaning for them. Joan Cameron Bristol's *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches* traces the development of African Catholicism in Mexico and its coexistence with distinct practices such as love magic, showing how, for Afro-Mexicans, "ritual practice served as both a model for understanding power relations in New Spain and as a practical way to influence those power relations" (16). Although Bristol's argument is compelling and ultimately borne out, I found it difficult to understand in what regard she was using the concept of ritual. By *religion,* Bristol refers to "a set of ritual practices that are codified and enforced by a disciplined hierarchy, i.e., Christianity," while *ritual* includes "both Church-sanctioned practices and unorthodox practices," as well as "practices that have a certain basic order . . . that is constantly recreated through action and is separate from every day events" (8). Such imprecision might have been avoided had Bristol availed herself more of a secondary bibliography and of a rigorous theoretical framework, as *ritual* is a loaded word, especially in regard to the religious practices of African slaves. This issue notwithstanding, her book provides a wealth of material to promote the point that Christianity was not purely instrumental in Afro-Mexican lives but an intimate and complex part of their identity. African spirituality is presented from the perspectives of both Iberian authorities and Africans themselves, usually in the form of Inquisitorial testimony in response to charges of perverting Christian doctrine. Bristol recognizes the pitfalls of reading highly mediated documents such as these as spaces of African subjectivity but nonetheless makes an interesting case for a subversive, subaltern strategy, whereby Africans manipulated the divisions between slave owners and religious authorities to their advantage. She reads a heterogeneous selection of archival material: the life story of an exemplary black convent servant, Inquisition documents of blasphemers and others accused of witchcraft and love magic, confraternity records, and Inquisition records on an alternative congregation made up of blacks, mulattoes, and whites. In each case, Bristol seeks to show how African and Afro-Mexican Christianity developed over time from forced conversions in African slave ports to a religion that went beyond assimilation and the mimicry of elite values to genuine and meaningful faith. Her *longue durée* looks at the complex relationship of Christianity

with slavery, the presence of European Christian missionaries and traders in Africa beginning in the fifteenth century, and the Spanish Crown's "lackluster" (91) policy of African evangelization in Mexico. Although in much less detail than Martínez—understandably for the type of book—Bristol also addresses differences in the evangelization of Africans and Indians. It is gratifying to see this issue addressed in detail by these two books, and to see scholars begin to tease out differences in the politics of conversion and their relationship to other economic, political, and gender discourses.

The religious experience of Africans in the New World was not monolithic and, early on, often depended on their land of origin and previous experience with Christianity. Bristol's research is solid and her reading of archival documents both rigorous and creative: she makes some fascinating points about the case of the black "nun" Juana de Esperanza, whose vida attests to the fact that she was not a model of African Christianity but rather an exemplary Christian despite her blackness. Also compelling is Bristol's reading of conversion and baptism in slave ports as a mercantile maneuver to incorporate slaves more efficiently into the colonial system; this practice exposes the complicated relationship between empire, economics, and religion.

Less successful is the often haphazard and at times frustrating organization of Bristol's book. Twenty-three pages of introductory material on the politics of slavery and religion as this changed from the Old to the New World are sandwiched in the chapter on Juana de Esperanza without any logical reason. The final chapter on an unauthorized mulatto congregation is not contextualized strongly enough to stand on its own and would have worked well, instead, in the section on *cofradías,* which reflects on how Africans, denied any collective identity, used these religious spaces—official or not—to form communities. Nevertheless, Bristol makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Africans' relationship to Catholicism in the New World.

Different in theme, but similar in intent, is Geoffrey Baker's *Imposing Harmony.* Baker, a musicologist, plots the presence of music and musicians in colonial Cuzco up to and through the eighteenth century, showing how, in contrast to Spanish models, sacred musical culture was not centered on the cathedral but instead spread over a variety of religious institutions. Although seemingly narrow in focus—and this is not a negative, for Baker presents in fascinating detail the soundscape of colonial Cuzco—the book shows how music was a vehicle for the expression and development of Christianity among indigenous nobles. Using the theoretical model proposed for written texts by Ángel Rama in *La ciudad letrada,* Baker uses painstaking archival work and a talent for reading the often-frustrating silences therein to show how Spaniards mobilized sacred architecture and music to subdue and awe the native population, and to transform Cuzco

from the ceremonial site of the Incas into a bastion of Catholicism, making it an ideal Spanish city. Baker re-creates the meaning of sacred music for many groups in Cuzco beyond those who wielded ecclesiastical authority. He traces music culture in the seminary of San Antonio Abad, in large convents and *beaterios* of the city, and in Indian parishes both urban and rural. He plots the importance of religious music in the lives of elite Creoles to show, for example, how elaborate musical performances that nuns staged in convents functioned as a "tool for self-expression in a male dominated and regulated world" (118). Nevertheless, his most interesting work regards elite Andeans, as this allows him to explore New World religious and cultural transformations. Here, Baker offers information on beaterios of elite Andean women whose musical performances were widely praised, and who, at least in one case, possessed a startling array of musical instruments. Baker concludes that this musical activity went beyond the mere assumption of European models and endowed Andeans with social authority, access to the socially important concept of religious "decency," and a refashioning of Christianity that drew on their own cultural capital. Performing (and in some rare cases composing) sacred music provided avenues of self-identification for the new native nobility as European, cathedral-centered music-making gave way to a more flexible model better suited to local conditions. Despite the Spaniards' desire to use music to reproduce the Old World in the New, it was too powerful as a cross-cultural symbol to allow them to do so. Music, even within the parameters of sacred Christian models, brought power to different groups and instigated a religious transformation that left no one untouched.

Like Martínez, Baker calls into question the division of center and periphery in the study of colonial Spanish America. He calls for the decentering and refashioning of "Hispano-centric ideology" (238) to look at groups on cultural and geographical margins far from the centers of power, both within Spain's colonies and to the colonies themselves within the Spanish Empire. All of the authors considered in this review read religious practices and the cultural phenomena they engender to challenge the notion of static centers and peripheries on one or both of these levels.

Plotting spiritual transformations facilitates the analysis of race, gender, and class in a colonial society in which religion and culture were not easily divisible. The church's anxious desire both to reproduce and to magnify Old World religious models collided head-on with the new spaces and populations that the imperial project brought into existence. This collision in turn allowed other groups to establish religious identities that obeyed societal dictates, yet allowed them to explore, even in limited ways, their autonomy. The books reviewed here will hopefully encourage other scholars from a variety of disciplines to carry out further investigation and to look as well at how New World models also crossed the Atlantic to reshape Old World beliefs and cultural practices. Ann Laura Stoler

suggests the usefulness of Michel Foucault's concept of *l'effet de retour* for understanding the role of "external colonialism" in "conceptualizing social inequities in Europe and not just the other way around."[4] The return effect of religious practices transformed in the New World is a fruitful area of investigation that I hope scholars will feel compelled to undertake.

4. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 75.