

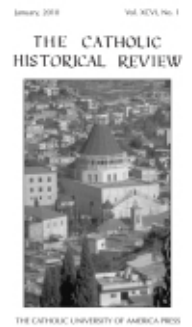


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Latin American Religions: Histories and Documents in Context
(review)

Paul Christopher Johnson

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heard). His dismissive and unsympathetic portrayal of preconiliar American Catholicism raises questions, while his comment that those Catholics lacked “interest in the social dimension of the Gospel” (p. 126) seems unfair in light of their unparalleled network of schools, hospitals, and other social service agencies.

These caveats aside, this “no ordinary fool” has had no ordinary life, and his memoir is marked by uncommon grace and profound gratitude. It is required reading for anyone interested in the life of the Church and the life of the heart.

The Catholic University of America

CHRISTOPHER RUDDY

Latin American

Latin American Religions: Histories and Documents in Context. Edited by Anna L. Peterson and Manuel A. Vásquez. (New York: New York University Press. 2008. Pp. xii, 324. \$25.00 paperback. ISBN 978-0-814-76732-0.)

This is one of those rare books that is at once accessible—as any introductory survey such as this one ought to be—and subtly sophisticated. An ideal teaching manual, it will dramatically sharpen students’ analytical tools while leaving them blissfully unaware of how “good for them” this book really is.

The volume’s introduction sets out key theoretical vectors in a refreshingly unencumbered style: popular versus official religions; orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and syncretism; domination, agency, and resistance; personal conversion versus social change; race, gender, and postcolonialism; and globalization and transnationalism, just to name a few. Once the terms of analysis are in place, the book moves on to description. The categories selected by the editors for the whirlwind tour are appropriately encompassing: Indigenous Religions, Colonial Encounters, Religions of the African Diaspora, Independence and Modernity, Protestantism in Latin America, Postconiliar Roman Catholicism, and Contemporary Religious Diversity and Change. Each section consists of two chapters: first, the editors’ introduction to the key issues at stake and to selected sources in which those issues are especially visible, and then a chapter composed of original sources and representative secondary sources. This two-step format cues the reader as to the pertinent issues to come and the reasons they matter, before approaching original documents that vary widely in rhetorical style, perspective, epistemology, and standards of evidence. This approach works beautifully. It yields an unlikely harmony from what could have been a cacophony and makes the volume a genuine pleasure to read.

The original and representative primary- and secondary-source materials were artfully chosen. They include both much of what one might expect

from the Latin American canon—parts of the Popol Vuh; the preface from Bartolomé de las Casas's *In Defense of the Indians*; a discourse of the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez. But they also include wonderful surprises—the diary of Gunnar Vingren, the Swedish emissary of Pentecostalism; a Mormon chronicle from Mexico; and reports on Muslims, Catho-Buddhists, and “new age” Santo Daime devotees in Brazil. Peterson and Vásquez have presented the widest possible range of Latin American religious practices and revealed the region as, on the one hand, a hothouse of hybrids and innovation, and on the other, a region of traditions' resilience. As to this latter, Catholicism is given the most space and is featured in multiple chapters—“Colonial Encounters” (chapter 3), “Independence and Modernity” (chapter 5), and “Postconcliar Roman Catholicism” (chapter 7). It provides the most continuous chronological thread with which the many other stories are interwoven. Yet even here, the editors show the enormous variety of Catholicisms: the cult of the saints of folk Catholicism; the mission Catholicism of different orders as they were variously inflected with indigenous practices they sought to transform; Catholic Action, CEBs, and the theology of liberation; Catholic Charismatic Renewal with its combination of Marian and spirit-foci (“virgophilic pneumocentrism,” p. 242); and the various shades of syncretic Catholicism as it is combined with African and Asian beliefs and rituals.

In sum, this volume is faithful to the historical record even as it pushes the reader to expand preconceived ideas of the contents of “the record” and to reread even familiar documents with new eyes. Peterson and Vásquez are not just experts on Latin America but also masters of cutting-edge theoretical issues in the study of religion. Thus this book is not just an ideal introductory text; it offers welcome challenges even for experts.

University of Michigan

PAUL CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

The History of the Conquest of New Spain. By Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Edited by David Carrasco. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 2008. Pp. xxvii, 473. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-826-34287-4.)

David Carrasco's revised edition of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's classic text *The History of the Conquest of New Spain* is a welcome addition to the published primary sources on colonial history. This is an abridged version of Alfred P. Maudslay's 1908 translation of the original manuscript, which Díaz wrote in Guatemala between c. 1550 and 1584, the year of his death.

Díaz was a capable writer who described highly dramatic events in clear and usually unemotional prose that sometimes rendered incredible events all the more incredible. Maudslay then translated the original into very readable English prose. Several features of this volume make it especially appealing for both student and faculty readers. First, Carrasco includes summaries