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CATHOLICISM AND THE HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICA: A REVIEW ESSAY

William B. Taylor

John Lynch's dedication to the historian's craft is remarkable. Since 1958 he has composed a steady stream of books and articles on an array of subjects in Latin American and Spanish history, all of them packed with insight and information, all of them of lasting value. If anything, he has picked up the pace in recent years, producing fully realized life-and-times biographies of Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, and now this survey of Latin America's "religious history." The subject of *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* is not altogether new to the author—he wrote a chapter on the Catholic Church in Latin America from 1830 to 1930 for the *Cambridge History of Latin America* (1986), and his *Bourbon Spain, 1700-1808* (John Wiley & Sons, 1989) includes substantial attention to the politics of Church and state in the 18th century—but it presents a different kind of challenge than his other studies.

His first book, *Spanish Colonial Administration, 1782-1810: The Intendant System in the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata* (Athlone Press, 1958), remains one of my favorites. It was the first well-researched regional study of the Spanish Bourbons' reform of provincial government in the American colonies, where intendancies were especially consequential for the collapse of the empire and the politics and economy of a future nation. A touchstone for the narrative thrust of that book is the third Marqués de Sobremonte, celebrated in his time as a model intendant, but a resounding failure when he was promoted to viceroy in a time of crisis. Leaders, political regimes, and decisive events are threads running through all of Lynch's scholarship. He is a leading authority on Latin America's independence movements in the early 19th century, and even when he takes on such sweeping subjects as Habsburg and Bourbon Spain (in three volumes) and anchors them in economic and demographic data, it is states, leaders, and political and economic turning points that come to the fore. The same is true in this new book.

Church history and religiosity in Latin America are not subjects for the casual author looking for ripe fruit on a low-hanging branch. It is a vast, controversial field still in great need of original research. The secondary literature is patchy, and much of the best scholarship has been published recently, apparently after Lynch began to write his book since he uses little of it. There is neither a thick base of monographic scholarship to draw upon nor a string of earlier surveys. Up to now, the outstanding attempt by an Anglophone scholar to survey the whole of Church history in the region was published nearly eighty years ago and it limits the discussion to Church-state relations.¹ In attempting more, *New*

Worlds makes a very welcome contribution. Its panorama of events, likely turning points, and patterns in Church history will be a touchstone of debate and enlightenment for years to come.

Lynch sets the bar high: "a modern history of religion in Latin America" from the 16th century to the present that promises to account for "all the major issues" and considers "not only the religion

John Lynch, *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* (Yale University Press, 2012).

of clerical elites, but also the faith of the people" (xii). He promises a "religious history" of Catholicism in Latin America that amounts to "the life of the Church." *New Worlds* touches many bases in a largely chronological narrative—the institutional Church, Church-state relations, popular religiosity, various ethnic groups, Protestants and Jews—and it tracks the following developments: early evangelization and the struggle for justice in Christian terms; institution building; a "second conquest" by agents of the Bourbon regime in the 18th century with their "relentless" reform and subordination of the Church; wrenching separations of Church and national states and the decline of the Church's influence and religious observance during the first half of the 19th century; Romanization of the Church and a "renaissance" of Catholicism from the 1860s to about 1900, especially in Mexico and Argentina, even as the Church struggled against secularization and state policies directed toward its further subordination; the objectives and limits of Catholic social action, 1870-1930; the challenges of populism and modern dictatorship during the first half of the 20th century; and religious ferment in a time of social movements and revolution that have stirred even sharper divisions, especially after the advent of liberation theology in the late 1960s. Along the way there are insights into the challenges faced by the institutional Church during the 19th and early 20th centuries, anchored in evidence of church attendance, clerical vocations, and income, as well as some pointed comparisons among various Latin American countries. Lynch warms to his subject especially when he finds signs of high-minded service and moral fiber, as in his eloquent appraisals of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Óscar Romero.

The politics of religion is the book's organizing thread, with empires, nations, and change-making leaders at the center of the unfolding story. Informed by the main economic, political, and social

developments of the time, the narrative rises above a chronicle of Church-state relations, but for the most part "the Church" is taken to mean the professional hierarchy and its institutions—a political contender comparable to the state—rather than the body of believers and communicants. As Roberto Di Stefano has recently suggested, this conception of the Catholic Church as a centralized legal-political entity came into currency during the 18th and 19th centuries, increasingly attached to religion as a matter of doctrine.² Yet it does not adequately describe how Catholicism operated as the state religion in the colonial period or what the familial metaphor of *la madre iglesia* meant to priests, governors, and the public.

Treating the Church as "it" in this way also separates "formal" from "popular" beliefs and practices, and posits a "gulf between Indian religion and elite opinion, between popular Catholicism and modernizing clergy" (90) that is expressed too readily as "a hierarchical Church and an obedient people" (344).

Perhaps because the 17th century does not offer many dramatic events, personalities, and developments, that sprawling but arguably formative time in the history of shrines, confraternities, and devotional practices is glossed over without comment, aside from passing mentions of idolatry campaigns, burnings at the stake, Jesuit missionary activity, and debates over African slavery. New Spain/Mexico—the most populous and wealthy part of Spanish America during the colonial period and beyond—understandably features in the first three quarters of the book, but then fades out after 1930 (except for a vignette of Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the context of liberation theology and social struggles since the 1960s).

While "the religion of the people" is not ignored, it is treated separately in a chapter placed in the middle of the book, with a few asides elsewhere. The effect is to wrap religiosity for all but a few in a gray blanket of anonymous "masses" engaged in timeless practices and either submitting to Church leaders or resisting their impositions in millenarian outbursts and "underground" rites. Women are absent from the discussion except as objects of clerical misogyny (101). And this reader was left wondering what to make of sweeping statements about other social groups: "Blacks were not notably Catholic" but were religious "after their own fashion" (163); or "Christianized Indians divided up more or less as Europeans did between the devout, the routine, and the indifferent" (15). Where is the promised "living world of Latin American religion"? Where is religiosity as "the currency of everyday life"? Where are places of worship in this history?

How were they used and altered? Where are the community festivals and processions, and their participants, sponsors, and audiences? Where are the home altars and family practices? Where is the material culture of devotion—the novena booklets and published sermons, the paintings, statues, cheap prints, ephemeral decorations, votive offerings, candlewax, incense, and more? How were people moved by faith other than politically? Where is the sense of wonder and despair that could draw disparate crowds to shrines, hilltop Calvaries, special masses, and particular devotions, evidence of the heart-thumping conviction that God was present and responsive?

Flying in the face of much recent scholarship, Lynch argues that in the 18th century “Indian leaders might protest that their people needed more than an intellectual expression of the faith and better understood living representations but neither Church nor state paid any attention to them. Thus the gulf between Indian religion and elite opinion, between popular Catholicism and modernizing clergy, was opened” (90). Here and elsewhere *New Worlds* skirts the dizzying diversity of the subject. One might well argue that lines between popular and elite culture became more pronounced from the 18th century through at least the mid-20th century, but, as J. H. Elliott (among others) suggests, these categories were always porous, always overlapping, interacting, and connecting.³ This, too, has a history that is part of the Catholic Church but beyond its power as a formally centralized institution. The anticipation of miracles was not only a matter of belief and practice of “the populace”; nor was “the Church” always in the lead. Priests at all levels and various branches (perhaps especially Franciscans and Jesuits), and even many late colonial royal officials, avidly followed news of weeping Madonnas, self-restoring statues of Christ, and marvelous cures.

The book’s concluding chapter emphasizes a perennial tension between traditionalists and reformists in the politics of religion. Authoritarian traditionalists—the company men of the Church—seem ever present, jockeying for position, often vying with state authorities. Catholic protagonists of justice and peace appear intermittently but more vividly, in a bright line from Las Casas and other mendicant missionaries of the 16th century to Peter Claver among African slaves in New Granada, Jesuits in their Paraguayan missions before the order was expelled from Spanish America in 1767, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, Óscar Romero, and Samuel Ruiz in the recent past. Having largely separated the Church hierarchy from the religiosity of “the people” and those who have spoken for them, *New Worlds* is inclined to treat the individuals it features as one or the other: conservatives enmeshed in the institutional hierarchy or those committed to the moral and social teachings of the Gospel, the latter being essential to the Church’s capacity for renewal. There is little room here for paradox, little sense that key figures have been caught up in both traditions. How did Chiapas Bishop Samuel Ruiz’s promotion of lay catechists and base communities in his vision of the

Kingdom of God for the diocese of Chiapas fit with his authoritarian streak and impatience with dissent? How could Catholic leaders during the colonial period so often warily accept what they had reason to censure as idolatrous native practices and at the same time encourage devotion to images of Christ and the Virgin Mary as bridges to divine presence and special favors? More broadly, how were particular religiosities rooted in place and at the same time ecumenical, both local and universalistic?

Is a more synoptic survey of Latin America’s religious history possible? Perhaps not, or at least not yet, but if it is, familiar dualisms that are treated sep-

Is a more synoptic survey of Latin America’s religious history possible?

arately or in opposition need to be questioned, and “popular religion” needs a place in the narratives of change and continuity in the ideas and politics of the Church. Yet so much of the history of “popular religion” occurred in villages, neighborhoods, and towns that it proves difficult to contextualize more broadly. Not surprisingly, much of the recent scholarship that examines events and contexts in rewarding detail gains its depth from localized settings—localized both in place and time. The results often suggest what David Tavárez calls “archipelagos of faith” more than smoothly connecting histories across regions and generations. Without a bank of comparable local and regional studies, generalizations and associations usually float as surmises more than convincing demonstrations. Perhaps some developments—both changes and eventful continuities—were, in fact, largely independent of national and global histories and so localized that they thwart generalization and may never find a place in a coherent narrative of Latin American religious history. But is there no place in the narrative for the now considerable scholarship on nuns and other women, Afro-Christians, Protestants (especially in Central America), surveillance of “idolatry,” confraternities, shrines, local practices, debates over the place of the Church in public life, and particular communities in time?

Associations and developments that can find a place in a more connected history are in fact coming into view. More than simple conversion or resistance, anthropologists, religious studies scholars, and historians are finding “epistemological exchanges” among indigenous peoples and Europeans, “epistemological dissent,” and the confusion of incommensurables and exuberant understandings. And scholars now see localized devotions not just as products of isolation; indeed, some were actively encouraged by royal policy and priests who meant to prevent mass movements. Continuities in the politics of religion also have a history that scholars are documenting in ways that help to explain some puzzling shifts in meaning and state practices. Idolatry, for example, was a perennial concern of colonial authorities, but

there was no clearly understood meaning of the term beyond “improper worship,” and no clear development of a policy on or an adjudication of idolatry. The same activity treated with vehement resolve as idolatrous in one situation could be dismissed as superstitious or simple ignorance in another. There seems to be no definitive chronology in the progression of colonial idolatry cases across three centuries, but there *is* a constant in the welter of meanings and official responses: ritual activities that did not pose an open and serious threat to colonial authority were not likely to be regarded as idolatries that required a decisive response. As Rosalba Piazza observes in her forthcoming study of the array of people caught in the web of idolatry investigations and trials in southern Mexico during the colonial period, “in evaluating the results of Christian evangelization, those in power found in obedience to the colonial order not only their principal criterion, but their only one.”⁴

Lynch’s narrative of the politics of the Church can be set in conversation with religious life in other ways and other times, too. One promising new study is Benjamin T. Smith’s *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750-1962* (University of New Mexico Press, 2012). Asking why many villagers traditionally chose to ally with conservative groups rather than revolutionary peasants during Mexico’s great social and political upheavals after national independence, Smith shows how religious affiliation and devotional practices were deeply woven into social and political relationships, as well as property rights. The examples are regional, but the implications are far-reaching and invite comparison. With a different slant that focuses on the high-stakes debates over the place of the Church and Catholic Christianity in the public life of new nations, Brian Connaughton has charted in remarkable detail changing clerical discourses during the first decades of Mexico’s nationhood in ways that blunt a neat separation of priests into conservative traditionalists and visionary subversives.⁵

One way to address the 17th-century gap in Lynch’s survey and to broach popular religion in a more integral, historical way is to consider the many facets of Baroque religiosity in terms of artistic expression, liturgical participation, and comparisons of local practices. The possibilities of collaboration across disciplines in this area are inviting and increasingly necessary. In recent years questions of reception, patronage, and production have been taken up by art historians, historians, ethnohistorians, and literary and religious studies scholars, even if we have gone about our work separately and longstanding disagreements about the meaning of Baroque sensibilities and their manifestations continue.⁶ Few seem to doubt the roots of Baroque culture in 16th-century religious reforms, its importance in the 17th century and beyond, or its articulation in a society where it was virtually impossible not to believe in God or to remain a citizen-subject in good standing without being a practicing Catholic. In recent scholarship the Baroque has come to be seen less as the art of a decadent elite than as a durable kind of sen-

suous devotion, which strove to materialize heavenly delights and longed for transcendence and union with God in this life and beyond. The Baroque engaged villagers and humble townspeople as much as it did elites. The incessant comings and goings of people to shrines and churches that date back to the 17th century may seem beside the point for the consequential politics Lynch traces. But the habits of sanctification and faith in divine immanence manifested by these pilgrimages anchored millions of people in the social and political fabric of their families, communities, dioceses, and countries. These commitments could divide as well as unite; they could be appropriated for imperial and nationalistic purposes by political elites; they could remain local or reach beyond the local; and they could connect paupers and the privileged.

Perhaps it will eventually become clear that the decrease in Church wealth, clerical vocations, and sacramental formalities—as well as the political hard times for the institutional Church during the early 19th century—were not certain signs of a decline in community religiosity that Church leaders would later work to reverse. Scholars might instead view this era as characterized by a widespread laicizing of the faith, as the case of Mexico suggests—a shift in vitality and direction to laypeople and local devotions that became regional in its appeal without much orchestration. The growing numbers of visitors to miracle shrines, more independent lay groups like the Penitentes in New Mexico, and the greater prominence of women and lay organizations in devotional practices may have been as much the basis for the “renaissance” of Catholicism Lynch speaks of in the late 19th century as a revitalized clergy with stronger ties to

Rome. That a revitalized Church hierarchy followed Rome’s lead in promoting labor syndicates, other Catholic action movements, new dogmas, and coronations of especially revered images of the Virgin Mary is not in doubt, but the clergy in many dioceses may well have been hastening to catch up with

Lynch’s strong suit, and be more open to ways of treating “popular” religiosity that relax the reins of a streamlining chronological narrative.

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A detail of a map of South America from Ferdinando Gorges, *America Painted to the Life: The True History of the Spaniards Proceedings in the Conquests of the Indians* (London, 1659).

the faith practices of a laity that had come to depend less on the Church hierarchy than they once had or might again. If so, future surveys of the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America broadly conceived will need to contextualize high-level politics and leadership across place and time, which is

¹ John Lloyd Meacham, *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (University of North Carolina Press, 1934). Coincidentally, another survey of Latin America’s Church history appeared a few months before Lynch’s book—John Frederick Schwaller’s *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America: From Conquest to Revolution and Beyond* (New York University Press, 2011).

² Roberto Di Stefano, “¿De qué hablamos cuando decimos ‘Iglesia’? Reflexiones sobre el uso historiográfico de un término polisémico,” *Ariadna histórica. Lenguajes, conceptos, metáforas* 1 (2012): 197–222.

³ J.H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (Yale University Press, 2012), 163–64.

⁴ Rosalba Piazza, “La conciencia obscura de los naturales. Procesos de idolatría en la diócesis de Oaxaca (Nueva España), siglos XVI–XVIII,” 201, book manuscript quoted with permission of the author. Much new thinking about idolatry in colonial Spanish America begins with Kenneth Mills’s *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640–1750* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁵ Among Connaughton’s many books and articles, I would recommend *Entre la voz de Dios y el llamado de la patria. Religión, identidad y ciudadanía en México, siglo XIX* (Fondo de Cultura Económica/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2011).

⁶ For a taste of recent thinking about the Baroque, see Kenneth Mills and Evonne Levy, eds., *Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque: Transatlantic Exchange and Transformation* (University of Texas Press, forthcoming in 2013).

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