REVIEW ESSAY

The Church: Institution and Spirituality in New Spain

Asunción Lavrin
Arizona State University


The new paths of Church history are taking us to fields where the flowers of spirituality mix with the fruits of world endeavors. Narratives of the inner life and stories of saintly lives, alternate with the solid presence of august conventual structures in the urban environment of colonial cities. In these various approaches there is a will to look into what have traditionally appeared as lateral spaces in historical memory: women’s writings, women’s convents, and frustrated aspirations to sainthood.

Historians, who have traditionally eschewed the use of literature as a form of evidence to explain social behavior, are now confronting literary texts as evidence and expression of spirituality and belief. The im-
petus comes largely from literary critics who have seen their field expand beyond any measure imaginable several decades ago, as they have turned their attention to noncanonical genres such as letters, sermons, autobiographies, and hagiography. When Kathleen Ross analyzed Siguenza y Góngora’s Parayso Occidental, a text which is partly history and partly hagiography, she was inviting other literary critics and historians of literature to find new treasures in works that earlier scholars had bypassed. Indeed, the most recent histories of colonial literature, such as the multivolume edited by Enrique Pupo-Walker and Roberto González Echevarría, and the ongoing project under the editorial stewardship of Beatriz Garza Cuarón and Georges Baudot, are testimonials to the increasingly porous boundaries between history and literature.1 Neither discipline has abandoned its headquarters, but they are lending each other their methodologies to search for new meanings.

Following that line of enquiry, two new titles on Mexican nuns lead us into intimate worlds of spirituality as well as the projection of cloistered lives onto their society. The emergence of a female voice and a female presence in the literary history of the Novohispanic Church was already heralded by Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau in Untold Sisters (1989) and Josefina Muriel in Cultura Femenina Novohispana (1994).2 A reaffirmation of voice and presence in the works of Myers and Powell, and Sampson Vera Tudela, suggests that we are beyond initiation and on the way to full-fledged recognition.

A work that required the combined crafts of research, interpretation, and translation is A Wild Country out There in the Garden, selected, edited, and translated by Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell. In this work, the editors develop a full-blown study of Sor María de San José and provide a lengthy selection of her works, part of which appeared in an earlier publication in England edited by Kathleen Myers.3 Sor María de San José was an Augustinian nun who professed in Puebla in 1687 after many years of waiting and longing for the religious life. Favorable reports on her spiritual life persuaded Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa


Cruz to appoint her as founder of another convent in Oaxaca. Throughout twenty-five years of life as a nun she wrote twelve volumes of autobiographical materials. They mixed information of a historical nature with expressions of her inner spiritual life in 1,102 folios which eventually found their way out of Mexico and into the shelves of the John Carter Brown Library.

The world of colonial spiritual writing is just beginning to be unveiled with the publication of the relatively few writings that so far have surfaced from the archives. Translations into English are rare. Amanda Powell’s rendition of the original writings of Sor María de San José is seamless and beautiful. Thus, the publication of this source opens a window into a world that has remained closed to us for centuries: that of the spiritual world of women. As a representative of a new generation of literary historians, Myers has searched for the meaning of the nun’s writings in her own world by digging into colonial archives and providing us with a wealth of historical information about her family, her convent, her relations with her confessors and religious authorities, and her sisters in religion. Sor María de San José emerges as a full-fledged person, a product of her times as much as of the reigning canons of spirituality.

Since the nun wrote several versions of her life, the passages have been taken from different notebooks and arranged so as to give the reader a chronological, seamless narrative. Given the intimate nature of the notebooks, we have a mesmerizing view of the writer’s spiritual world as well as her accounts of daily incidents and her reflections on worldly events. Colloquies with God, the agonies of self doubt, fears of being deceived by the devil, the fire of mystic love and much more is found in this world. Religion gave the greatest sufferings and the greatest consolations; in either case, being a nun was not a simple, quiet experience.

This work places Sor María de San José firmly in the tradition of women’s visionary writings. The linkages to European spirituality are strong and bear comparison now that the text has been incorporated into mainstream academic circles. The ties between confessor and nun and the writing’s rhetorical strategies, for example, recall Saint Theresa. Since the study of Spanish feminine conventual life and spirituality is also firming up, soon we will have all the resources necessary to verify the nature of those ties. A glossary, the history of the nun’s writing career, and an outline of the multiple volumes of writing complete this polished and carefully prepared book.

Another recent publication that explores the multifaceted world of nuns and nunneries is Colonial Angels, which seeks to provide examples of how the tension between models of Peninsular observance and religious inspiration and the process of cultural transmission resolved itself in colonial Mexican convents. As with Wild Country out in the Gar-
den, it is concerned with access to women’s texts, thoughts, and voices. The author focuses on five text-stories extracted from archival sources and hagiographic writings. Three of them belong to the Carmelites, a fourth to a Franciscan nun, and the fifth is on the foundation of the convents of Corpus Christi for Indian nobles in Mexico City. The author points to the metaphorical journey of Christianity to the New World, which, from a female viewpoint can be illustrated with the effort to found a Carmelite nunnery in the tradition of Saint Theresa. While the founding nuns did not migrate from Spain, the importation of a spiritual tradition was successful even though it was accomplished through ‘dissidents’ from the royal convent of Jesús María. The memory of this process is registered in the biographical genre, which follows two venues: the *vidas* written by the nuns, and the official rewriting carried out by male writers, confessors, biographers, or official historians, as with the case of Carlos de Siguenza y Góngora’s *Parayso Occidental*, historian of the convent of Jesús María. Siguenza used nuns’ writings as efficiently as he used other conventual records, and frequently ceded the writing lead to nuns’ writings, but he never assumed that women had the ‘right’ to write their own history. The colonial nun, the key subject of many biographies and sermons may have been the ‘heroine of the New World narrative’ (p. 29) but she remained ‘translated.’ Nuns, with notable exceptions such as Sor Juana and others in the late eighteenth century, served as grist for the male authors’ elevation and recognition throughout most of the colonial period.

The notion of writing an exemplary vida and the process of carrying out this task is examined in a chapter devoted to the biography of Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad by José Eugenio Valdés. Having the original manuscript of the nun’s spiritual letters to compare with the professionally written *vida*, Sampson Vera Tudela can engage in the analysis of writing as a gendered expression demanding different strategies. The difference between these two sources is significant. One is intimate and personal; the other constructs an ideal image that proves the worth of the nun, and of New Spain as a place where such virtues of criollo Christianity thrived. The chapter tells more about the hagiographer’s efforts and method than the nun’s spirituality.

A chapter on the tribulations of the Carmelites of San José when they asked to be relieved from the episcopal jurisdiction of the bishop and placed under the governance of the Carmelite Order offers the reader a closer view of women’s voices and agency, as the nuns were pitted against the obduracy of Archbishop Mateo Saga de Bugueiro and also involved in an internal rift of their own. They never achieved their release from the episcopal authority, but the records reveal not only male-female confrontation but the persistence of the division between peninsular
gachupinas and criollas, as the former argue against each others’ abilities to understand the Carmelite Order.

Sampson Vera Tudela wants to make a strong case of the political meaning of race as a venue for the transmission of spiritual virtuosity. Some of the most intense disputes within the cloisters happened on account of perceived differences between Peninsulars and American-born Spaniards (criollas), and criollas and Indian nuns. For the foundation process of the first convent for Indian nuns in Mexico City (Corpus Christi), defenders and opponents addressed their arguments on the credibility of women—Indian women, specifically—as venues for Christianity in a world full of potential dangers, such as heterodoxy. Sampson Vera Tudela analyzes Western speculative tradition on the nature of women and Indians and the manner whereby Indians were burdened by their race and their sex. It is this kind of contextualization—not necessarily the study of historical information—that makes this work appealing to the reader.4

Antonio Rubial, erudite historian of the regular orders and religious life has produced in La Santidad Controvertida a thorough and satisfying survey of the literature of sanctity in New Spain and the ‘larger than size’ men and women who became the centers of canonization-beatification drives. Here, Rubial analyzes the nature of hagiography, and the story of frustrated candidates to sainthood who never achieved that status. He also follows all the publications dealing with the processes of canonization or beatification, adding historiographical depth and value to his work. Rubial begins his book by studying the social function of the saints, the nature of religiosity in New Spain, and the hagiographical production in the colony. From these two key topics he proceeds to define the main characteristic of the Novohispanic baroque culture that took its final shape by 1750. He proposes three main stages in the creation and definition of the colonial religious culture: one extending between 1524 and 1550, characterized by the pursuit of the evangelizing utopia. This is followed by the infusion of ‘sacredness’ in the landscape and daily life. This stage lasted between 1550 and 1620. It is during this time that most of the would-be-saints live, as embodiments of a new understanding of religion and religious life. The consolidation of a criollo religiosity, in which the inhabitants of New Spain were assumed to be an ‘elected’ body of Christians, took place between 1620 and 1750. The American-born elites created a culture of their own which they distilled into religious and civil histories. Their centerpiece were a host of ‘vener-

able’ pious men and women who went through failed processes of beatification. New Spain was seeking its identity and found it, *inter alia* in the men and women who lived a pious life.

Rubial focuses on several prototypical figures as models of that spiritual life which so much defined the nature of Novohispanic culture: the hermit, exemplified by Gregorio López, who lived in the sixteenth century and who died in the odor of sanctity; the martyr, exemplified by several Augustinian friars who died in Japan as they tried to spread Christianity; the religious woman, embodied in María de Jesús Tomellín, a nun from the convent of La Concepción in Puebla; the pious bishop, with Bishop of Puebla Juan de Palafox y Mendoza as the prototype; and the missionary, with Fr. Antonio de Jesús Margil, a Franciscan as the model of the missionary in that golden age of conversion that ended in the late sixteenth century. Beatification or canonization causes were opened for all of them, generating a rich hagiographic literature consisting in viandas, sermons, and canonical processes that Rubial uses to examine the process of the construction of a model person as well as of baroque religiosity. He accomplishes his task with ease, grace, and a solid knowledge of colonial Mexico. Each one of the vignettes shows discerning understanding of the sources and a masterful combination of factual information and analytical finesse.

The meticulous research shows that hagiography emerged and fully developed in the seventeenth century, a cultural phenomenon that expressed the complete transplantation of Counter-Reformation Catholicism to the hispanicized sectors of the population. Criollos and Peninsulares wrote the body of literature that argued for the elevation of special members of the Church to the ranks of beatitude or sainthood, but Rubial denies any trace of ‘nationalism’ in the process. Even though there was a pride in ‘our America,’ Rubial insists that the need for cohesion and identity took place only among the criollo elite, and that words such as *patria* and *nación* had different connotations and do not have the same meaning as today. The quest for a ‘local saint’ was more a question of local pride. The majority of those ‘venerable’ targeted for beatification in the two main viceroyalties or canonization were born in Spain, and their dedication to the holy causes of the New World erased any question of ‘nationality’ consciousness. Rubial also underscores the pedagogic and entertaining quality of the viandas, a genre that has been called the proto-novel of Latin America. Stories of traveling evangelizers constantly traversing alien and hostile lands, facing innumerable perils, meeting martyrdom or success, fascinated the seventeenth-century reader or listener eager for prodigies beyond the routine of daily life.

The woman selected as a case study for canonization was Sor María de Jesús Tomellín (1582–1637) whose life is a study in contrast with those
of the men. Excluding the hermits, men excelled in confrontational situations that proved their strength and their freedom of movement. Women, cloistered for life, had to demonstrate their mettle in battles with temptations, the devil, their personal opponents, and themselves. Their rewards are often of a visionary nature and some of them experienced ‘voyages’ (bilocating) that mimicked those of their male counterparts.

As depicted by her biographers in a protracted and failed process that stretched beyond the eighteenth century, Sor María filled the bill as a model of virtue and religious perfections. In close contact with one of the most famous Jesuit theologians of the period, Irish-born Miguel Godínez (Michael Wadding), the nun was also a visionary mystic, a common experience in that century, and a biographical tour de force. The influence of Saint Theresa on Novohispanic nuns is undeniable, but it took its special twists in the process of transplantation. While Theresa developed a spirituality that relied on the intimate experience of God, seventeenth-century hagiographers and religious subjects claimed a colorful and lively interior life, imbued with drama and passion and full of realistic descriptions of contacts with the divine world. The memorialization of women through paintings, vidas, and sermons reached its height in the eighteenth century in a cultural phenomenon that bears further analysis. Somehow, the emblematic value of feminine virtue found a niche in the increasingly ‘rational’ style of eighteenth century spirituality. As with other ‘venerable’ women, of which Rubial counts up to thirty between the late seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries, Sor María de Jesús Tomellín’s memory declined in the Republi-
can period. Since little research has been carried out on the spiritual-
ity of the nineteenth century, the explanation for this decline is a theme ripe for investigation.

As this review has indicated, writings by nuns are not numerous and even hagiographies and panegyrics are less numerous than writings on other topics. The historical memory of women in convents is largely in-
stitutional and more often than not scattered in public archives and not in their own religious houses. The preceding works, rescuing forgotten manuscripts and contextualizing them in their period, fulfill a very im-
portant historical and historiographical goal. The orders of seculariza-
tion of nunneries and monasteries that took place in 1863 included the
convetual archives, many of which became property of the nation. To-
da, the largest public collection of documents is in the National Archives
of the Nation, but papers are also available in provincial, and private
collections. The compilation of documents kept in the convent of San Jeró-
nimo in Puebla by Alicia Bazarte and Enrique Tovar is a testimony to the
desire of those convents that were able to reconstitute themselves after
the laws of the nations allowed it, to preserve their communal memory.
The Hyeronimite nuns of San Jerónimo of Puebla’s small collection of testimonials were printed in 2000 to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Order in Mexico. Historians Bazarte and Tovar directed the task of ordering and preparing the documents for publication. They are the remains of what was a large collection and their value is largely emotional for the present-day nuns. Papers on the foundation, the rules of observance, the process of returning to live ‘la vida común’ or life in dormitories and food from a communal kitchen (1768); and several personal ‘memories’ of life in the convent in the early twentieth century, constitute the bulk of the documents recovered in this work. It is handsomely illustrated and is a valuable testimony of the drive to recover the Hyeronimite historical memory.

The loss of memory is not the issue, however. The numerous resources available in Mexican archives permit the recovery of much of the institutional history of nunneries up to the 1860s. Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del Siglo XVIII by Rosalva Loreto is a testimonial to the possibilities of constructing a satisfactory history of convents and women as key elements of colonial society. The volume is an apt mixture of urban and social history with insights into the spiritual world. Loreto places the convents in the context of the city, but goes beyond seeing them as architectural entities. Puebla was a city designed for Spanish settlement and built according to the traditional griddle pattern of the Renaissance with a rationality of design that affected all of its important building. Nunneries were founded on specific city axes that guaranteed water access, which they shared with the adjacent neighbors, thus rendering a civic service. The chapter on the relationship of nunneries and water access is a novel analysis of urban planning in Puebla and a tribute to the astuteness of the author.

As symbolic bridges between heaven and earth, convents underlined their urban function with the promotion of religious processions and feasts that, according to Loreto, invested public space with a sacred meaning. But what type of life was conducted within the cloister walls? Loreto provides us with an entertaining and historically accurate picture of the communities of women who shared patios, refectories, cells, and conventual churches according to rules of ancient European lineage. All aspects of life were carefully regulated according to an etiquette that had implicit religious meaning, insofar as they attempted to preserve the vows that tied the nuns to their chosen life style. However, if harmony and order was the purpose of such rules, the New World had its own mixture of traditions, peoples, and social habits that defied the adoption of European patterns. The criollo nature of life escaped definition except when Peninsular ecclesiastics attempted to reimpose practices
of observance that had become meaningless to most feminine orders in the New World. The crisis produced in 1768 with the enforcement of ‘common life’—eating from a common pot and in refectories rather than cells, and sleeping in dormitories—rocked the peaceful life of the convents and the vow of obedience.

Loreto has also established on firm bases the connection of the convents with the social hierarchy of the city. The ties with the outside community were through family. Throughout several generations, parents had daughters entering convents, which made them places of familial identification, and also strengthened ties to sources of patronage. However, toward the end of the colonial period this feature was in decline. What persisted was a very strong and fascinating system of devotion tied to the urban community. Loreto carefully analyzes the devotional practices around the Virgin Mary and the spiritual world of the nunneries as evidenced by personal visions, and she takes us back to the works of Myers and Sampson Vera Tudela. A circle is completed. Loreto extends the analysis of hagiography and devotional literature not only by reinforcing these two authors’ points but also by going beyond some of their assumptions. For example, her study on how the devotional literature defined and ruled the five senses of the body is an exercise in creative analysis not often found among conventional ecclesiastical histories in Mexico.

Altogether, these works represent a new wave of historiography that is pointing the course of ecclesiastical history into new directions. This history is becoming more oriented towards exploring the meaning of faith and religion; it is also becoming more interested in the personal experience of members of the Church who were neither evangelizers nor necessarily men, and who lived quiet, intense lives within the framework of orthodox Catholicism. It is obvious that from now on closer attention to writings by members of the Church will mark the increasingly interdisciplinary character of ecclesiastical history. Rules, sermons, manuscript and published biographies and autobiographies, spiritual diaries, letters, legal suits, and similar materials from archival collections are being teased for encoded meanings which lend new and richer dimensions to what we know about the lives of Church members. The new titles also raise the question of a gendered experience within the Church, which was definitely overdue. Men and women shared fundamental values within humanist and counter-reformation spirituality, as it was transplanted in the New World, but observance was gender specific, and so were the goals of their lives. Men could learn from the books of the ancient and the modern, travel, interact with lay people, exercise power, become pedagogues, and receive public and unambiguous recognition for their piety and behavior. Women’s goal was to become brides of
Christ in their compulsory encloisterment, and they turned intensively inwards in forms of piety peculiarly theirs. Doubtless, an important future task will be that of sorting out gendered characteristics of spirituality and how they made themselves explicit in novohispanic society. Neither of the preceding elements of analysis makes irrelevant the study of conventual and church politics, or the church’s economic nets and its connections with the laity. The works under review here abundantly demonstrate that there were politics of spirituality, and that even the most esoteric revelations of the heavens mirrored a worldly hierarchy and reflected human values.