
The Invisible War: Indigenous Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico by David Tavárez

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This book is an innovative and meticulously researched history of the extirpation of idolatry campaigns that various branches of the Catholic Church launched against indigenous communities in central Mexico (the basin of Mexico, Toluca, and the Cohuixca-Tlalhuica region) and Oaxaca from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Within this vast time frame, David Tavárez chronicles the investigations of the “apostolic inquisition” of the mid-sixteenth century, those conducted by the regular orders, and those of the post-1571 secular tribunals under the jurisdiction of the Provisorato de Indios. The author is to be commended, in particular, for unearthing previously unused or under-examined archival materials. Tavárez analyzes over 125 trials of roughly 900 “individual ritual specialists” whom courts accused of engaging in idolatry, sorcery, and superstition. He concentrates especially on those acts that most troubled the colonial church: sacrifice, divination, spell-making, and the possession of cosmological knowledge.

Tavárez’s analysis of this fascinating body of materials points him toward several conclusions. Most importantly, the variegated devotional practices across time, between regions, and even as articulated by distinct individuals within the same communities prompt him to argue against understanding colonial indigenous ritual practice as a monolithic phenomenon. Diverging from earlier scholars, who have tended to understand indigenous spirituality in the colonial era in terms of either syncretism (Nancy Farriss, Inga Clendinnen, and Serge Gruzinski) or the crystallization of indigenous vs. Christian spirituality (James Lockhart and Juan Pedro Viqueira), Tavárez argues for the existence of “a colonial archipelago of faith composed by hundreds of local cosmologies that incorporated insights and theories drawn from Mesoamerican and European beliefs” (p. 271). Beneath this variation, however, Tavárez does posit that one unifying trait characterized indigenous ritual practice in the colonial period: “epistemological dissent” from Christianity, which occasionally resulted in violent challenges to Catholic domination. Beyond this major conclusion, the author generates others: after the late sixteenth century, female commoners rather than male noblemen were more frequently accused of heterodox spiritual practices; in Central Mexico, accusations against native leaders diminished after 1571, while in Oaxaca, investigations of collective ritual practices continued at high levels beyond the late sixteenth century. Further, he cautions that the absence of consistency and the lack of increased rationalism among ecclesiastics’ application of disciplinary techniques demonstrate that these, although intended as public demonstrations of power exercised over the bodies of the ruled, should not be understood in strict Foucauldian terms.

Tavárez also offers a new framework within which to understand Mexican indigenous ritual practice in the colonial era: the “collective” and “elective” spheres. The former implies orientation toward communal well-being and the latter an act or belief directed toward private or familial gain. Tavárez effectively considers the distinctions between the two ritual spheres throughout the text, although his rationale for rejecting the more familiar concepts of “private/public” distinctions is not consistently clear.

Tavárez has undertaken an ambitious study of a key and hitherto insufficiently addressed issue in Mexican indigenous and religious history. His training in anthropology and history and his impressive command of indigenous cosmology and of Nahua and Zapotec allow him to track some of the linguistic subtleties that led Spanish clerics to distortions and misperceptions when parsing such phenomena as nahualtocaitl, a Nahua oral genre that allowed for the embodiment of deities. Tavárez is also scrupulous about substantiating each of his claims with evidence from his own sources and from the conclusions of previous scholars.

In spite of the book’s many strengths, this reader was occasionally left questioning exactly what subject this book hopes to reveal to us. Tavárez frames his study by qualifying the limitations he has self-consciously placed on its scope. In the introduction, he recognizes that, in part, he is studying official constructions of indigenous ritual practice, asserting that idolatry “became attached to specific practices only through the conjunction of legal discourses, doctrinal rhetoric, and specific accusations” (p. 3). And while one of his central concerns is how the traits and preoccupations of particular extirpators shaped the pursuit of idolatry, their influence, and the varying frequency and intensity with which they pursued prosecutions, are not always explicit in his conclusions.

This point aside, Tavárez has written an impressive and a scholastically rigorous book that will be welcomed by students and scholars of colonial Latin America, ethnohistory, colonialism, and religious history.

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This innovative and rigorous book will have a stimulating impact on the historiography of nineteenth-century Mexico. Rachel A. Moore focuses on the history of Xalapa and makes original claims about nineteenth-century Mexican politics and culture, the development of its public sphere, and the place of Xalapa and the state of Veracruz in relation to the Atlantic world and the Mexican nation. Moore deftly places public culture in space through multiple scales of analysis that include the circulation of commodities and news across the ocean, the relations between Cuba and Mexico, the everyday conditions of travel between Mexico City and American Historical Review April 2012