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Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism

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Book Reviews

Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism. Edited by Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. Pages, ix + 189. Paper, \$19.95.

Matovina and Riebe-Estrella have produced a collection of scholarly articles that combines historical, social science and theological perspectives on the Catholicism of Mexican Americans/Chicanos in the United States. The editors begin with a concise, helpful introduction that points out how the articles interrelate and suggests some basic themes that flow throughout the collection. Matovina's chapter is historical and traces the Guadalupan devotion at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio during the first four decades of the twentieth century. This piece reveals Matovina's craft as historian and avid student of the community's everyday life and practice. Three vivid ethnographic chapters follow. Karen Mary Dávalos describes and analyzes the *Via Crucis* or Way of the Cross as it is observed every Holy Week in the predominantly Mexican American Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. Lara Medina and Gilbert R. Cadena follow with a detailed study of the *Día de los Muertos* in East Los Angeles. They show how deeply rooted the practice is in the social and personal lives of Chicanos. The authors do a splendid job of documenting how popular religious practices can be successfully linked to serious social, public policy agendas. This happens when institutions like Self Help Graphics and a visionary local Catholic parish like Dolores Mission provide encouragement and support. As Dávalos also demonstrated in her piece, this one demonstrates how popular religious rites can reclaim public space. Luis D. León offers a fascinating and vibrant view of *curanderismo* as he unfolds the story of the mysterious Doña Hortencia, the *curandera*. León has done his homework and, as his extensive notes indicate, integrates the most pertinent background materials currently available on the subject.

Two theological reflections follow: Roberto S. Goizueta builds on some of his previous writings to get to the heart of the matter: Mexican American theological anthropology. Goizueta writes evocatively about how symbols function in Mexican American religion. He sheds ample theological light on what may to some appear to be merely lurid Mexican customs. Orlando O. Espín develops an original and convincing explanation of how Mexican popular Catholicism can be understood as a brilliant current within the larger Catholic tradition. He does pioneering

research and analysis on the development of doctrine and the *sensus fidelium*.

This collection raises the bar on edited collections of essays, which can be notoriously uneven. The editors and contributors reveal a greater level of collaboration than is usual in this kind of work. They exemplify what Latino/a theologians mean when they talk about *teología de conjunto*. The contributors read and digested each other's work and it shows. References to the others' work are notable both in the texts and the notes. This volume is also a happy instance of theological reflection on experience. The fact that the editors opted to limit the studies to the Mexican American or Chicano reality was wise. This gives focus and cogency to the collection; while a broader Latino approach is often more defuse.

The authors are also to be commended for making a credible contribution to the otherwise paltry social science literature on Latino/a religion. As has been observed before by several Latino/a theologians, it is lamentable that a great deal of Latino/a social science remains silent, reductionist or even slightly Jacobin in its approach to religion. Yet, almost everyone seems to agree that religion broadly understood—institutional, popular, syncretic, Roman Catholic or Protestant—has much to do with Latino/a identities today. Here we have a collection that shows how that is so.

The editors provide a good orientation that suggests that a "remapping" of American Catholicism is taking place. That means that the Mexican American presence is taking root in the U.S. context while retaining and transforming important symbols, rituals and myths of its Latin American and Christian Catholic past. As sociologist David Hayes-Bautista and others have argued, Latinos are the *new Americans*, not just another ethnic group for the proverbial melting pot. Virgilio P. Elizondo's seminal treatment of *mestizaje*, moreover, is revisited and projected now into the future through the transformation of symbols and meanings going on every day in the practice of Mexican American religion. The fact that the authors understand that this process is taking place within a postmodern and highly pluralist context makes their work all the more complex and dense. Similarly, the inclusion within these essays of Latina feminist perspectives of María Pilar Aquino, Gloria Anzaldúa and others is worth noting.

One curious detail about the collection is the relative brevity of Espin's chapter. His is arguably the most complex and technical one. It is surprising that it is almost half the length of the others, a mere thirteen pages. This is somewhat unsatisfactory. Espin's extensive research needs more detailed development in this reviewer's judgment. Perhaps this was overlooked by the editors.

In future discussions of Mexican American and Latino/a "horizons of the sacred," it may be wise to include the reflections of pastoral theologians and missiologists like Robert J. Schreiter, Gerald A. Arbuckle and Michael Paul Gallagher. The concepts of inculturation and interculturalization are not usually dealt with by systematic theologians. Yet practical theology has something to offer if the questions turn, as they certainly do in this collection, on the crucial issue of the transformation of symbols, rituals and myths.

Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J.
