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Review Essay

THE PENITENTE BROTHERHOOD

Enrique R. Lamadrid and A. Gabriel Meléndez

Critics and cultural activists agree that the *Fraternidad Padre de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* has played a key role in the cultural and political history of New Mexico from the turn of the nineteenth century forward. The so-called Penitente Brotherhood was especially influential in the turbulent territorial period following American conquest, when modern notions of intercultural relations and resistance were forged. But the consensus ends there. What were the *origins* of this *cofradía* or confraternity and how does it compare with other *cofradías* in the Iberian diaspora? Is it some kind of medieval relic from a remote province of New Spain, a modern transplant, or a response to challenging social and political conditions on the northern frontier? Historians disagree about the origins and devotional practices of the Penitentes, and some have looked to as far away as Andalucía in search of its cultural roots. Ethnographic inquiry has revealed that the lineage is closer at hand and is part of the intangible heritage of the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro. But what can be added to the discussion from the perspectives of psychohistory and the psychology of religion?

Michael P. Carroll, *The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. viii + 260 pp. 14 halftones, 2 maps, bibliography, index. \$47.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8018-7055-0). Enrique R. Lamadrid is Interim Director of Chicano, Hispano, Mexicano Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. A. Gabriel Meléndez is Chairman of the Department of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

In *The Penitente Brotherhood*, Michael P. Carroll delineates some novel and controversial arguments while he convincingly challenges some of the oft-repeated assumptions about the Brotherhood. He questions whether the Brotherhood is a remedy to the scarcity of clergy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and if fervent New Mexican Catholicism is an unbroken legacy of four centuries. He exposes the orientaling discourses that romanticize, medievalize, and disparage the Penitentes. However, it is unbecoming and rare behavior for an academic to advance scholarship by first looking to start a row. Carroll comes onto the scene of Southwest Hispanic religious studies as a self-styled “Young Turk,” making audacious leaps from otherwise carefully amassed documents and archives. Readers so inclined can speculate how such showmanship has crept into the mindset of researchers who purport to do serious scholarship. Carroll comes up with an unusually long list of provocations, hoping to draw fire from his readers. A response from any quarter will do—the pious or non-pious, the initiated or uneducated in Hispanic Catholicism, the hostile or the sympathetic.

He attacks the spiritual heritage of Hispanic New Mexicans, accosting what he judges as a long-unexamined supposition about Hispano religiosity: the assumption that Hispanic Catholics were a deeply pious people prior to 1800. He asserts that it “rests implicitly on a model that has never been examined and that is *likely false*” (p. 35, emphasis added). Dismissing the historical evidence of religiosity in New Mexico, Carroll charges forth with psychoanalytic postulations to explain the emotionalism in the acts of repentance practiced by penitents. Armed with Freudian theory, Carroll makes three quite disturbing estimations of Penitente piety: (1) oedipal rage and guilt explain the “emotional intensity” of their practices, (2) penitential ritual is linked to homoerotic desire, and (3) Penitente membership “created a personality type that accorded legitimacy to the U.S. legal system and thereby made it easier for that system to transfer control of Hispano land to Anglo opportunists” (p. 187).

Another of Carroll’s tendencies, inappropriate for a trained academic (unless, of course, he believes that his training accords him the privilege to suppress dissidence), is that once he has finished battering his subject, he moves to silence the bystanders and interested parties. He preempts established Penitente scholars by anticipating the charge that historians often see psychoanalytic arguments as “unprovable.” Carroll fires ahead even as he is withdrawing from the scene of his polemics: “equally disturbing is the tendency of professional historians to ignore important patterns that do not

seem explainable using conventional arguments" (p. 209). Although professional historians can speak for themselves, Carroll fixates on quelling the voice of the subaltern by challenging his or her privilege (which some might call a right) to produce their version of a shared past through narrative. He declares that stories of the past told by subalterns are "a powerful political tool" and further claims "this is why members of the subaltern group will quite naturally work for the right to articulate the stories they prefer and this is why they protest the loudest when their preferred stories are challenged by non-indigenous academics" (p. 219). The very idea comes across as something those charged with abuse of power might utter: "Protest if you will but no one will believe you."

Carroll's most innovative and lasting contributions are twofold. First is his linkage of the emergence of the Brotherhood to the social and cultural impacts of Bourbon military and economic reforms in New Mexico and to a crisis in traditional patriarchal authority. Second, is a full historical contextualization of the crucial role of Padre Antonio José Martínez in the development of the Brotherhood.

The controversies that Carroll defiantly anticipates branch from corollary arguments and an attempted paradigm shift based on a refractory adherence to documentary history. This results in a rejection of the testimonial of ethnohistory as a kind of culturally privileged discourse coupled with a willingness to engage in heuristic psychological speculation based on the most fragmentary of evidence. Writing from an extreme physical distance, for a university press likewise insulated from the cultural politics of the Southwest, and having apparently made only one brief field trip in 1999, Carroll reasons that since Nuevomexicano religiosity prior to 1800 existed in a documentary vacuum in a backwater region, its very existence is suspect. He rightfully points out the assumption of cultural continuity that most scholars engage in, extrapolating backwards in time from the fervent spirituality that characterizes the present. Carroll challenges such speculation as a leap of faith unwarranted by the gaps in the documentary record, and assumes he has sufficient justification to take his leap in the opposite direction. He argues that the emergence of the Penitentes is what brought New Mexico out of an essentially faithless era lacking in both the features of model Tridentine Catholicism (familiarity with church doctrine, regular participation in liturgy and sacraments, etc.) and popular or folk Catholicism (apparitions, miraculous images, pilgrimages, etc.). Before approaching the

controversies that have eroded rather than stimulated his readership, it is first necessary to assess the strengths of the book.

Most scholarship on eighteenth-century New Mexico has emphasized the military predicaments and state of siege that afflicted the region. Carroll joins scholars like Ross Frank in reassessing the economic and cultural dimensions of the decisive period. Beside the military reorganization of the northern frontier came the strategy of pacifying enemy Indians by supplying them with food and trade goods. The economic boom created by this new market was accompanied by new modes of production. The Bourbon Reforms encouraged fresh forms of administration while they stripped other groups like the Church and the nobility of the special privileges they had enjoyed for generations. The authority that regional elites had maintained in New Mexico was challenged and worn down. This power had been based on patriarchy and was exercised by males who were related by family ties of blood and marriage within an oligarchy. In the new economy, working relations with unrelated males became the norm. The population grew and differentiated into groups of land owners and landless laborers.

With new groupings of men in a new era, a novel conceptualization of power relations among males was needed. Enter the *Hermanidad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno*, to which a majority of Nuevomexicano males belonged by the mid-nineteenth century. A thorough inventory of *cofradías* and how they changed during the Bourbon Reforms both in Spain and Spanish America is a worthy scholarly gift that Carroll offers his readers.

Now for Padre Antonio José Martínez of Taos, who a committed cadre of scholars has only recently redeemed from the clutches of Willa Cather and the obscurantist appraisal of him that lasted most of the twentieth century. Carroll agrees with other scholars that Martínez is truly an *ilustrado* (intellectually of the Spanish Enlightenment, or *Ilustración*) who brought to New Mexico the enlightened values and practices that he learned from the Jesuit Seminary in Durango. The author also places Martínez in a lineage of nationalist leaders like Padre Miguel Hidalgo and Padre José María Morelos, who struggled for the rights of the common people against oppressive secular and religious elites. What Carroll adds to the picture is the historical link of Martínez's pastoral vision and practice to Tridentine reformers like Domenico Bollani and Carlo Borromeo from two centuries earlier. The Counter Reformation advocated an interiorized spirituality cultivated by a regime of social discipline that included the teaching of the *doctrina* or catechism to children, a new emphasis on public preaching, regularized partici-

pation in the liturgy, sacraments, and collective prayer. With his printing press and an impressive list of pedagogical and devotional pamphlets, Martínez and the secular clergy that he helped train more fully implemented these objectives than in any previous time in New Mexico. His mentorship of the *Hermanidad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* was a central part of his pastoral plan. Carroll makes the case that Martínez embraced the Brotherhood as soon as he returned from the Durango seminary, and that his puzzling 1833 missive to Bishop Zubiría confirming his suppression of penitential excesses was written in pragmatic preparation for the impending visit of his superior, who officially opposed fervent public displays of faith such as flagellation.

Carroll's most provocative assumption of a faithless New Mexico prior to 1800 is part of the same chain of ideas. The social discipline that Martínez and his colleagues provided and the instant fervor achieved by public rituals of penance account for the sudden appearance of the Brotherhood around the turn of the century. It is true that in the previous two centuries there were only three documented examples of ritual penance and that devotional practices of the *Nuevomexicanos* and their places of worship are scarcely mentioned. But Carroll's leap is unnecessarily reckless. There is almost no mention of clothing in the documentary record of colonial New Mexico. But that is scanty proof that people went around with no clothes.

After all, New Mexico was a missionary province where the priorities of the church were with the Pueblo Indian neophytes rather than the settlers. People were undoubtedly weary of the constant tug-of-war between ecclesiastical and secular authorities that surrounded them. In such a precarious state of affairs and with enemies on all sides, it is doubtful that the full paradigm of Tridentine Catholic practice was achieved. But Carroll's argument that there was an absence of popular or folk Catholic elements just does not bear up to full scrutiny.

For example, it is true that pilgrimage does not emerge as a devotional practice in colonial New Mexico. But since travel was restricted by both the authorities and the dangers of the road, sacred journeys to holy places were decentralized and localized. Every community had a hill or high place designated as a *Calvario*, the destination of Holy Week *Vía Crucis* processions and the outdoor setting for the stations of the cross. The interconnected activities of travel, trade, and pilgrimage emerged when the Indian wars subsided.

Miraculous apparitions are rare in the documentary record but not absent in the popular memory. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared at the foundation of Zacatecas in 1546 and showed the Basque miners, including Juan

de Oñate's father Cristóbal, the location of mines eventually yielding the silver that paid for the settlement of New Mexico. After his initial appearance at the siege of Acoma in 1599, Santiago has appeared repeatedly to the people of the pueblo to ensure their well being. Guadalupe also appeared in 1694 along with San Diego de Alcalá to deliver the people of Jémez Pueblo from the siege of Diego de Vargas's army. In the census of colonial santero art, Guadalupe is as popular as Dolores, but the latter is most closely linked with New Mexico. The Lady of Sorrows is a continuous presence in a dangerous and war-torn province and appears at the foot of the cross every Good Friday. Beginning in the late eighteenth century when Nuevomexicano traders brought him back from Zacatecas, the Santo Niño de Atocha, patron saint of travelers and captives, makes so many appearances that he wears out his shoes, which people leave him as an offering. It is true as Carroll points out that the most famous local Marian devotion, La Conquistadora, was organized by social elites rather than common people.

Carroll is willing to jump to profound conclusions, assuming that silences or lapses in the written record are somehow indicative of larger trends. Likewise, his daring psychoanalysis of paternal and filial male relations and his identification of a deeply embedded and latent homoerotic semantic and emotive field hangs on the female gendered Death cart figure present in most morada chapels, sometimes nicknamed doña Sebastiana. The highly erotic iconography of the martyred San Sebastián, whose youthful body is pierced with arrows, is at the center of Carroll's argument. Never mind that the saint is almost unknown in New Mexican iconography. The other problem is that the Death figure has many names and nicknames, some of which are playful and ironic, like doña Sebastiana. Besides La Muerte, the list also includes La Huesuda, La Pelona, La Calaca, La Parca, and another doña, La Catrina. How would this plethora of names fit into the argument?

More deeply challenging is Carroll's suspicion that the spiritual and social discipline inspired by the Penitentes helped facilitate the American takeover of New Mexico. The Brotherhood produced a personality type with "a strongly internalized compulsion to obey authority figures charged with enforcing written codes" (p. 186)—a law-abiding citizen not likely to protest or resist. It is true that in the 1880s when membership in the Brotherhood was soaring, the courts were in the process of rejecting two-thirds of Hispano land claims. Despite the disasters imposed by the new system, Nuevomexicanos sensed that the American republic was a rule of law, and that some degree of justice would follow with the full citizenship of statehood

and the right to vote. From defeat and victimhood, a sense of agency emerged. An important development that Carroll overlooks is the intense participation of the Brotherhood in the political process, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century. The block voting the Brotherhood could deliver was a critical factor in the politics of northern New Mexico. Another aspect of secular affairs is the Brotherhood's whole-hearted participation in mutual aid societies.

At his best, Carroll challenges preconceptions about the *Hermandad de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno* and deconstructs orientalist stereotyping. He demonstrates that the Brotherhood is not medievalist, but modern, and responds to change with change. In the end, the paradigm shift he seeks does not fully consummate. The exuberance of his leaping arguments, plus a lack of grounding puts him in the unenviable position of the zealous and hungry stranger, *pidiéndole peras al olmo*, asking the elm tree for pears.

Carroll does go to great lengths to consult much of the available scholarship on the Brotherhood, but paradoxically, he systematically up-ends, sets to the side, or steps over the book's intensive archival and documentary work in favor of privileging the shock value of his set of imagined postulations. Ultimately, the author's failure to historicize his claims ironically marks Carroll's scholarship as highly conjectural and deeply speculative, a matter of serious concern and one that should send readers interested in the Penitentes running back to the classic works on the Brotherhood: Marta Weigle's *Brothers of Light, Brothers of Blood: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (1976); Thomas J. Steele and Rowena A. Rivera's *Penitente Self-Government: Brotherhood Councils, 1797–1947* (1985); and Alberto L. Pulido's *The Sacred World of the Penitentes* (2000). Since Carroll has called these scholars out, he is unable to overturn their scholarship. The curious reader who may still be tempted to purchase this book should go into a reading of it with eyes wide open, for here is a study in which the subject has been provoked, profiled, poked, beaten, bruised, bound, tied, and gagged. Serious readers will ultimately determine whether the adage "all publicity is good publicity" applies here.