

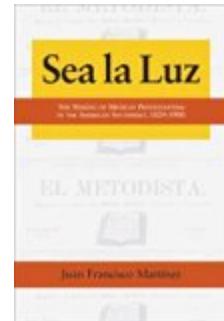
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Juan Francisco Martinez. *Sea la Luz: The Making of Mexican Protestantism in the American Southwest, 1829-1900*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2006. xii + 196 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-222-2.

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Una sola luz

It is well known that the American conquest of the West, which includes the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, resulted from socio-economic pressures, the ideological faith in superiority of a way of life, and the drive toward “civilized expansion.” In *Sea la Luz* (*Let There be Light*), Juan Francisco Martinez describes an important aspect of this process, in particular the intent to gain hearts and (especially) souls through the missionary activities of Protestants living among the supposedly inferior Mexicans. The work provides a rich overview, based on a wide range of primary sources from pastors of seven denominations (Baptist General Convention; Congregationalist Church; Methodist Episcopal Church; Methodist Episcopal Church, South; Presbyterian Church, U.S. [South]; and Presbyterian Church, USA [North]) throughout the territory of five American states (Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California).

Martinez dedicates three chapters to describing the points of view of American Protestants concerning the war, the Southwestern Mexicans, and the missions’ motivations. Thereafter, four chapters are dedicated to the description of missionary efforts and their results, beginning with a historical chronicle of the pastors and their works, and finishing with a summary of the number of converts and their geographical location. This information is also supplied with graphs and maps. Finally, chapter 8 contains a brief portrait of the Mexican American Protestants.

A reader who is interested in the history of the missionary efforts of American Protestants addressed to the Hispanic populations of the territories of the Southwest of United States is bound to find this book satisfactory. However, a deeper study on the complex sets of identities and the anthropological process of cultural construction is not to be expected. Although Martinez takes notice of the existence of the mixed identities of a minority (Protestants) inside a minority (Mexican Americans), the methodological tools of this publication and its use of the primary sources are insufficient to spell out the complex aspects of identity-making.

A single light (*una sola luz*) is thrown onto the work of Protestant missionaries; one that comes from documents produced by American Protestant congregations. It is not possible to understand the culture or the motivations of Mexican Americans from this point of view, considering that the converts are the only Spanish voice that the author includes. This publication omits the perspective of the conquered and the illiterate poor farmer Mexicans. Therefore, the contrast between these different cultures and ways of life cannot be articulated. Instead, this book offers a rather limited reverberation of the discourse of Protestant pastors and missionaries.

This one-sided point of view is precarious. This is because the history that *Sea la Luz* tells is a reflection of the activities of only one agent (i.e., the missionaries). Consequently, the Mexican Americans are included in this

history only as recipients of the missionaries' actions and strategies. Even though this might not have been Martinez's intention, the result of such a one-sided narrative is that history appears to be determined by the activities and policies of a single set of actors. Also, such a narrative potentially reinforces prejudice against Latinos as passive and unfit.

With regards to the methodological aspects of this book, two points need to be stressed. First, the appendix (p. 151) does not give a sufficient clarification of the membership criteria of each denominational record. Second, the methods used to set estimate numbers and

the scarcity of Mexican American sources used in this book cannot be defended, because both the American Catholic Church and local governments did preserve records which could have been employed. Some procedures of oral history could also have been used.

To sum up, Martinez's book seems to be the result of a detailed research of a comprehensive set of sources regarding the Protestant records and periodicals. The result is an insightful overview of the missionary efforts of the American Protestants in order to convert Mexican Americans in Southwestern states up to 1900—but not much else.

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