Brian A. Stauffer's *Victory on Earth or in Heaven: Mexico’s Religionero Rebellion* traces the history of Mexico’s Religionero rebellion in 1873-76, a popular uprising that swept through central and western Mexico in response to anticlerical moves by President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada (1872-76). Coming to power after Benito Juárez’s death in 1872, Lerdo hardened the anticlerical policies pursued by his predecessor, which had been ameliorated through a mix of moderation and compromise. As a result, in October 1873, the National Congress reasserted the principles of state and church separation, religious freedom, and civil marriage, and enacted a ban on liturgical celebrations outside the churches and religious communal life, forbidding ecclesiastical institutions to acquire landed property.

This work is in line with a renewed historical interest in Catholicism’s past, which emphasizes its intrinsic heterogeneous nature and approaches it as something different from the institution of the Catholic Church itself, thus going beyond a traditional narrow view focusing on state-church relations alone. This new strand of religious historiography, in fact, takes issue with the idea of monolithic nineteenth-century Catholicism, forcefully aligned with ecclesiastical rule from above, transcending the view of a homogeneous Catholic Church always pitted against the state. Instead, it seeks to emphasize the role played by many different protagonists, their diverse spiritual traditions, and their distinct political views, highlighting a wide range of factors that impinged on their attitudes toward both state policies and local or Roman-inspired ecclesiastical orientations. In a nutshell, this new strand of research claims that Catholics, far from being mere instruments playing in the hands of “the church,” were protagonists acting in an extremely autonomous way from ecclesiastical institutions. Furthermore, within the institution itself there were various tendencies that sought to respond in their own idiosyncratic way to the challenges posed by the nineteenth century. Such historiographical renovation has enabled us to gain a more complex approach to Catholicism and its church, and also deal with secularization and laïcité from a new perspective. We now use these concepts in plural to refer to a wide range of events in different historical contexts, both nationally and regionally.

The book also draws on research that points to the prevalence of the lower strata of society in nineteenth-century politics and the complex process of state-building, an endeavor that was not merely the work of the ruling elites. Quite otherwise, adherence to the principles of liberalism, nationalism, republicanism, and federalism was widespread across social classes. From a different ideological perspective, the advocates of conserva-
tive politics were also influential in state-building, including a popular peasant strand of conservative politics, which historians have usually regarded as non-historical, as if flowing directly and automatically from ultramontane Catholicism altogether.

The book is an outstanding achievement of these new strands of religious and political historiography dealing with Latin American developments. Stauffer gives new life to a movement that historians tended to underestimate, sometimes explaining it away through simplistic, essentializing terms. He refuses to consider religioneros as mere reactionary zealots, or just puppets acting on behalf of the clergy, taking issue with those approaches that have neglected the complexity inherent to the movement itself, either by explaining the rebellion away as a response of “the church” to President Lerdo’s anticlerical moves—that is, a clash between church and state—or else by understanding it as a peasant response to the agrarian policies of the state of Michoacán, which tried to privatize the old communal land, many of them owned by indigenous communities.

Instead, the book advances a series of bold hypotheses. One of them is that the rebellion, rather than being a minor incident, had quite a significant impact on the course of Mexican history, by spreading the discontent with Lerdo’s government, thus easing Porfirio Díaz’s access to power. The Díaz-led coalition, in fact, was able to enter into alliances with prominent leaders of the religioneros, and some of them were rewarded with high-ranking positions in the Porfian army. According to Stauffer, Díaz’s own experience with the religioneros might have had an impact on his future religious policies. Díaz did not abandon reformist principles, but all the same he softened some anticlerical initiatives, thus allowing the Catholic Church to regain some of the terrain it had lost. Therefore, the movement would have effectively contributed to shaping and moderating Mexico’s secular state. Additionally, the book claims that the religionero movement itself was heterogeneous and the by-product of several causes. Stauffer explains the rebellion as emanating from various political, economic, and religious factors. The key to appropriately apprehend its dynamic and heterogeneous nature lies in one of Stauffer’s methodological approaches: adopting a reduced scale of observation without losing sight of regional, national, and even global contexts, so as to be able to focus on a fundamentally local phenomenon, both in its motivations and its inner workings. That is why the book has three chapters devoted to subregional surveys where the author thoroughly probes the ideas and motivations—at least up to the point where the sources permit—nourishing the protagonists of the rebellion.

Through this methodological approach, Stauffer is able to account for the religious heterogeneity of the movement. According to Stauffer, Mexican Catholics held opposing views, not only with regard to Lerdo’s government and its anticlerical agenda but also toward the deep changes being implemented within the church by Pius IX, who sought to impose an ultramontane and Roman-centered type of Catholicism. With remarkable subtleness, Stauffer examines the different responses elicited by such a move on the various actors within the Mexican church, among the upper echelons of the clergy as well as the faithful and their communities. The ultramontane move gave birth to a new sensitivity, new ways of spirituality, and new religious practices and devotions, and sought to impose them on all Catholics—an attempt that was at times successful and sometimes fruitless. Such endeavors elicited many different responses across Catholics around the world—a much more heterogeneous lot than we tend to think—none of which can be considered as akin to passive acceptance. Indeed, the ultramontane turn gained both enthusiastic supporters and vociferous opponents because it sought to do away with long-standing spiritual traditions, old communal forms, and deeply rooted ritualities. In some rural areas of Michoacán, Catholicism of
baroque spirituality was so heterogeneous that Stauffer cannot but highlight its plural nature. Deeply rooted in indigenous communal institutions, craft guilds, and peasant brotherhoods, such baroque Catholicism had survived the Bourbon Reforms undertaken in the eighteenth century and was still alive in the 1870s. According to Stauffer, the religioneros rebellion was aimed at defending Catholicism against Lerdo’s anticlerical onslaught and also entailed a clash between different views on traditional religion and its place in communal life. In other words, the upheaval also channeled the discontent with the ultramontane attempt to uproot long-standing baroque traditions—a more extroverted theatrical type of Catholicism deemed “popular” and “superstitious.” In this regard at least, ultramontanism seems to have been curiously close to the Catholic Enlightenment promoted by the Bourbons.

Stauffer’s work is not only a remarkable contribution to Mexico’s political and religious historiography in the second half of the nineteenth century but also an extremely rich resource with plenty of conceptual and methodological reflections.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54946

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.