

Javier Villa-Flores. *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico*. Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2006. Pp. 248. Paper. \$24.95

Javier Villa-Flores, Associate Professor of Latin American studies at the University of Illinois, demonstrates the differences in using blasphemy by various socio-ethnic groups in Colonial Mexico. He explains blasphemy was considered an offense to God, as well as defiance of Church authority and morality, leading to consequences against the offender that varied based on intent and social standing. The book includes various accounts of people, what they expressed, and what the consequences for their blasphemy were, offering a new interpretation of reactions against blasphemers by the State, Church, or Inquisition.

Villa-Flores provides insight into the lives of blasphemers through manuscripts, monographs, illustrations, theological manuals, journal articles, law codes, legislation, and written speech accessed in various academic archives and libraries. The book features primary source illustrations and artwork created at the time to express the condescendence of blasphemy; one in particular, featured on the cover, depicts Julius the Apostate releasing the winged sword of blasphemy to pierce Jesus (representing an attack against God and Christianity) in the sky among clouds. Including excerpts from primary sources in an appendix might have made this book even more suitable to assign to undergraduate students.

*Dangerous Speech* focuses on the interaction between male, female, enslaved blasphemers, and their audiences. Women used blasphemy to gain a voice in expressing grievances when society would not listen to them. In chapter three, a group of women asked gamblers to give them alms, when one Maria de la Rua was told off vulgarly by gambler Jaime Viadel; To defend her honor and gain justice, she and another woman reported the man, who ended up being publically humiliated. Viadel was forced to attend mass while gagged, wearing a rope, and holding a green candle (which signified he had committed heresy). Villa-Flores also mentions blasphemy by men; Spanish soldiers, sailors, and muleteers used blasphemy to bolster their masculinity and ego by denouncing their

faith and the Catholic institution. Other men would use it in a lewd attempt to appeal to women; one such case is 30-year old Juan de Aspeitia, who claimed a woman he stared at was more beautiful than God. Slaves, in contrast, were held to a different social standard: whereas Spanish blasphemers were often fined and/or publically humiliated for their oral sins, slaves were often corporally punished. Slaves often used blasphemy in attempts to avoid being whipped, bound, to escape abusive masters (even if briefly), and to be transferred to other areas of colonial New Spain.

This book succeeds in explaining the use of blasphemy by marginalized peoples to gain agency or validation, the cultural context of blasphemy, gender differences, and the theological offense it represented against the authority and morality of the Spanish Church. Villa-Flores's unique contribution is the analysis of blasphemy used by different social groups and reactions by Catholic Church members in an attempt to mold cultural norms and make blasphemy akin to sin to prevent its use. This book is suitable for undergraduate and graduate students.

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