

Mario T. García. *Católicos: Resistance and Affirmation in Chicano Catholic History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. 378 pp.

On Easter Sunday, 1966, César Chávez and a cadre of renegade priests, nuns, rabbis, and Protestant ministers celebrated ecumenical “mass” on the steps of California’s state capital building in Sacramento for a crowd of ten thousand revolutionaries. When Chávez entered Sacramento, he was leading several hundred “pilgrims” who had embarked on what they deemed a “peregrination” or pilgrimage, in the spirit of both “penance” and as a “revolution.” In effect, his entrance set the path for the Chicano movement: the movement to liberate Mexican Americans from the persistent effects of colonialism would have a spiritual grounding which was based largely – though not exclusively – in re-imagined Catholic ideals, symbols, and doctrine.

Yet, as García laments in *Católicos*, the majority of Chicano historians have overlooked or ignored this reality. This lacuna in mind, García’s work is a valuable contribution to the fields not only of Chicano/Latino studies, but also to the field of religion and more specifically to Catholic history in the United States. The text is divided into eight case studies focused on various relationships between Mexican Americans or Chicanos and Catholicism; the essays are organized chronologically, and consistent with the book’s broader thesis: “political and ethnic identity and consciousness in the Mexican American context have been directly influenced by religious beliefs” (54). Catholicism, particularly a distinct *mestizaje* Catholicity (or Indian-Spanish-Catholic-American hybrid), García argues, has loaded the cultural “grab bag” that is the source for the continued invention of Chicana/Chicano identities more than any other faith.

Each chapter demonstrates a conflicted relationship between Chicanos and the Catholic church, characterized by the dual impulses toward resistance and affirmation; whereby, ironically, even the discourses of resistance are indelibly stamped by a Catholic moral imagination – a world view uncontainable within the boundaries of catechism alone. Insofar as catechistic excess spills over hierarchal boundaries to create secular schisms – especially the Mexican American civil rights struggles – the text begs the question of the religiosity of *Chicanismo*, breaking new ground on which to consider the Chicano movement as a religion in itself. The Introduction to the text is confessional in this regard. In it García describes his own Chicano Catholic formation and how that has shaped his work, coining the term “political Catholic.” His professions are revelatory: he, like countless others no doubt, was a “convert” (or perhaps revert): “Chicanismo replaced Catholicism as my faith” (7). It’s clear from the collection of historical narratives

or genealogies that at least in its earliest formations the Movement was a series of debates over matters of Catholic doctrine with the church itself.

The first study on Franciscan historian, “*Hispano*” Fray Angelico Chávez (1910-1996) demonstrates post-colonial instantiations of this debate. Working from the inside of the Church, Chávez revised the story of colonialism in the Southwest, particularly New Mexico. He meticulously recovered documents demonstrating the beauty and power of the ritual traditions impugned by colonial record keepers. This essay and the following buttress García’s substantial work recovering political efforts that were direct precursors for the Chicano Movement. Chapter two focuses on Texas and the efforts of two political activists whose reliance on Catholic moral and ethical discourses led them to significant reform among those García has deemed the “Mexican American Generation” (1930-1960).

The third chapter returns to New Mexico for an examination of the Federal Writers Project (1935-39) that recorded Hispano cultural practices, especially religious traditions. This chapter unearths the near buried treasure of ethnographic narratives while simultaneously reviving in vivid detail the lush ceremonial life of depression era religiosity in the U.S. Southwest. Chapter four further explores the issue of religiosity among the “Spanish-Speaking” in the Southwest as it was negotiated between the clergy and the laity. During World War II the Church became acutely aware of its Mexican American presence, and began policies of sensitivity and inclusivity.

The nineteen sixties marks the beginning of what García calls the “Chicano Generation,” the central theme of chapter five’s examination of “*Católicos Por La Raza*” (Catholics for the People). The story of the Christmas Eve Protest at St. Basil’s church in 1969 that erupted into a violent melee is legendary in Chicano letters and folklore. However, García probes the group that staged this demonstration, CPLR, in great depth, shedding light on little known details and underpinnings of the movement – especially the Catholicity (or better, “political Catholicism”) of its brilliant founder, Ricardo Cruz (1943-93).

Chapter seven turns to Chicanismo within the Catholic Church, focusing the activist group of Mexican American priests known as “PADRES.” In addition to a historical narrative of the group’s formation, he profiles priests who were centrally involved with the association from the start. The eighth chapter is a religious biography of an activist Chicano priest, Father Luis Olivares (1931-1990) who served as Pastor of the historic Placita Church (Our Lady Queen of the Angels) in downtown Los Angeles. Olivares declared his church a sanctuary for refugees from all parts of Latin America, catalyzing a movement that proved essential for the emergence of a pan-Latino identity.

At Olivares's funeral, César Chávez spoke of "Father Louie" with great affection. Chávez had inspired Olivares, and vice versa. In fact, César Chávez emerges as a major influence on the Chicana/o movements both within and outside the walls of the Catholic Church. From within the church, Chávez was instrumental in organizing what García dubs "community priests."

The eighth chapter brings the narrative into the present day, drawing from a pool of interviews conducted by students in Chicano Studies courses at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Student ethnographic interviews describe in graphic imagery the religious practices and beliefs of their Latino relatives—bringing fully to bear the historical connections across generations. The concluding essay looks to directions for further research. There, García insists that Chicano Studies and religious studies share data, literature, and theories. For him, "religion, in this case Catholicism, has been and still is a way for Chicanos and other Latinos to defend their integrity and honor as a people and as a way to defend their very being" (281).

Insofar as historical agency guides the narrative, it sometimes blurs a critical view of Catholicism. The church continues to reject and persecute Chicanos who reject the Church's erotic and other mandates. I agree with García when in this chapter he suggests that a critical erotic history of Chicanos and the Catholic church remains to be written, pointing to Gloria Anzaldúa as a first step in this direction. Still, García's helpful self-location as (at least marginal) Catholic insider would have been better clarified by additional locution with regard to Catholic political discourse. Nonetheless, *Católicos* is an important contribution to the literature in many academic disciplines. I believe it mines and maps fresh terrain in that border space connecting and dividing Catholic and Chicano studies. I recommend it highly.

Luis León
University of Denver