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Taking religion seriously: New perspectives on religion in Puerto Rico

ANTHONY M. STEVENS-ARROYO

Black Puerto Rican Identity and Religious Experience.

By Samiri Hernández Hiraldo


320 pages; $59.95 [cloth]

Virgenes, magos y escapularios: imaginería, etnicidad y religiosidad popular en Puerto Rico

(Second Edition).

Edited by Ángel G. Quintero Rivera

San Juan: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad de Puerto Rico y Centro de Investigaciones Académicas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, 2003.

213 pages; $30.00 [paper]

Catolicismo y política en Puerto Rico: bajo España y Estados Unidos: Siglos XIX y XX

By Samuel Silva Gotay.


503 pages; $24.95 [paper]
between the same two covers. As a writer sympathetic to the choices made in history by institutions of faith, Silva does not disparage Catholicism, although he is not shy about offering a critical perspective. For the most part, he is content to cite sources and documents that reveal the good, the bad, and the ugly of church involvement in politics. Thus, for instance, he juxtaposes the 1898 statement from US Army chaplain, Father Thomas Sherman, that religion on the island “is dead,” with the opinion of celebrated Jesuit historian, Fernando Picó that “popular religion was thriving” among Puerto Rican Catholics when the US invaded. The reader is likely to ask: “Which is it? Religion can’t be dead and thriving at the same time.” Here, as in other passages, Silva refrains from interrupting the narrative by imposing his own perspective.

In one sense, this is a wise strategy for an outsider to Catholicism. Silva Gotay is not now and never has been a Catholic. Such distance shields him from ecclesiastical pressures, allowing him to write critically of popes and bishops without fear of accusations of disloyalty. At the same time, his tone is respectful and even compassionate toward leaders who are attempting to do the best they can with the poor hand they have been dealt. In fact, when Catholics have been critical of their own church in Puerto Rico, they have tended to be far more angry about the institution than Silva.

The core arguments of the book are solidly based. It is certain that opposition to the anticlerical liberals under Spain painted the 19th-century Catholic Church of Puerto Rico into a reactionary corner, where it opposed republican government and the separation of Church and State. Silva adds that Catholic clergics in Puerto Rico (which is not the same as “Puerto Rican clerics”) often proved antagonistic to the stirrings of independence and political autonomy, even bemoaning the abolition of slavery. (Indirectly Silva’s narrative helps clarify that Spain had a policy of repressing native Puerto Rican priests who sided with popular causes, although he does not examine this facet of Puerto Rican Catholicism.) When US rule began in 1898, Silva’s explanations connect the relative absence of a native Puerto Rican Catholic clergy to the actions of the institutional church. Instead of promoting
throughout the work. For instance, he fails to recognize the fingerprints of Jaime Balmes in the apologetics of the turn-of-the-century weekly, *El Ideal Católico*. Those of us born and baptized Catholics will recognize in the argumentation of this pro-Catholic publication certain positions first elaborated by Balmes in the 1840s. Discipleship in Puerto Rico was not unique since the erudite arguments of Balmes had been repeated for a half century by American Catholics such as Orestes Browson, and by Irish rebels like Terrence McSwinney, the imprisoned Mayor of Cork, before the Easter Rising of 1916. In Spain during the Generation of 1898 the novelist Galdós paints a caricature of a Balmes’ disciple, thus witnessing to the ubiquity of the influence from the Catalan cleric in the Catholic conscience of the *Madre Patria*. Puerto Rican Catholics drank from these same intellectual fountains and Balmesian themes are frequent, most notably in the political thought of the Nationalist leader, Pedro Albizu Campos. I consider this a relevant point since Silva argues for discontinuity between the Hispanophiles of *El Ideal Católico* and Albizu, while the common thread of Balmes provides instead for continuity.

The observation above comes from my own research into Balmes and Albizu, and I am certain that experts on other points of Puerto Rican church history will make similar critical responses to the Silva’s narrative. And although scholarly critique on specific issues is eminently constructive, it is more like rearranging furniture than constructing a building. No one can deny that the more significant task is in erecting a new edifice, because without a building there would be no place at all for the furniture. Thus, in a sense, virtually every section of Silva’s book may suffer extensive renovation of interpretation and the foundations of the building will remain steady.

I would say that Professor Samuel Silva Gotay has done for the history of Puerto Rican Catholicism what in cultural studies Antonio Pedreira produced with *Insularismo*, René Marqués with *El puertorriqueño decíl*, and José Luis González with *El país de cuatro píos*. I make these comparisons because, even if there is disagreement today about the premises of these classics, their imprint on intellectual discussion has extended beyond the generation. In a similar vein, I cannot conceive that any future histories of Puerto Rico for this period, whether written with a secular or religious perspective, can avoid citing Silva’s seminal work. He has advanced history of religion in Puerto Rico beyond pious biographies of individuals or documentary study disconnected from social process. Silva has given us a view of the forest, which was often lost by those who looked only at the trees. The challenge to future historical scholarship on religion in Puerto Rico will be to provide better detail and sharper description of the markers on the trail without wandering off the map Silva has given us to understand Catholicism and politics in Puerto Rico.

A very different type of publication is found in Angel Quintero Rivera’s new version of *Virgenes, magos y escapularios: imaginaria, etnicidad y religiosidad popular en...*
religion so badly needed in Puerto Rican Studies. The author examines the different faith expressions in Loíza Aldea, a village enclave first settled by former African slaves. Without a whiff of pedantry, Hernández elegantly weaves history, politics, and ecclesiastical endeavors into a narrative that is preeminently about people of faith.

This is not to suggest that the book is weak on theory: on the contrary, there is a judicious citing of key works about the anthropology of religion found in almost every chapter. However, the author subordinates theory to her interviews, and she is not afraid to gently distance the Puerto Rican experience from those in other places.

The now de rigueur practice of explaining one’s own personal experience is mercifully confined mostly to one chapter at the beginning of the book. We are told of Hernández’s own upbringing in the Baptist Church in Puerto Rico and her racial experiences as she moves from home to university to the US and back again to the island for her doctoral research. She clearly understands Protestantism in Puerto Rico, noting for instance that congregations that allow women to wear pants are “Neo-Pentecostal” and that Pentecostal women now have adopted the use of make-up in order not to be viewed as lesbians (pp. 203–5). Her informants open up to her because they see her as “a real Christian” (pp. 194–5), a confession that ought to permanently bury the theoretical notion that neutrality is the only role for effective participant observation. Yet, her chapters on Catholics in Loíza, including those in the Charismatic Movement, show the author as no less simpática to Catholics as to Protestants. She insightfully renders a realistic sketch of the clerical rivalries that are always part of life in a Catholic parish.

Hernández’ work includes people of all faiths in Loíza Aldea: Protestants of historical denominations, evangélicos, Catholics, Pentecostals and Pentecostal “heretics” such as the Church of Living Waters (p. 144 ff.). She shows how all of these Christians are aware of the espiritistas and santeros in Loíza Aldea, who have created the image of brujería as a distinct dimension of being black in Puerto Rico. Hernández’s chapter eight on hair and its anthropological meaning within religions is a gem that probably is worthy of inclusion in some future source book with excerpted readings on Puerto Rican religion. Her accounting of religious witnessing sorts through linguistic fashions and tropes of believers with an ease that might make Quintero Rivera envious.

Speaking of an invitation delivered to her to become “pastor” (pp. 203–4), she is told she cannot be called “pastora” because that word is not in the bible, but nonetheless the church will allow her to do all the work that this role implies. On the other hand, she reports considerable innovation in the roles offered Catholic women and also in their reconceptualization of the example of Mary. With these and other citations, she discredits the reigning supposition that women everywhere have more freedom in evangelical churches than in Catholicism. Moreover, I was edified
In most cases, there is no single Catholic position on most political issues. The historian needs to look at not only some eventual pronouncement, but at contexts of the theological tug-of-war leading up to it.

Second, political terminology like “liberal” and “conservative” is not generally applicable to ecclesiastical policies. The ideology of the church does not derive from secular politics but from faith dynamics. Silva provides an example of this “transpolitical” approach when he notes that the US bishops in Puerto Rico after 1898 were characterized by a progressive economic policy based on Catholic social teaching, even when other actions identified them with Americanization. Third, the 19th and 20th centuries hold a different role for the Catholic Church than the role played out in the first 300 years of Puerto Rican history. While the church was a dominant institution for almost two centuries of the colonial society, Catholicism was not in a commanding political or social position for most of the 19th century—even if it was the religion of the majority. Hence, histories of Puerto Rico must be nuanced in terms of periods and trends. Fourth, when consulting previous histories—even those considered classics—one needs to exercise what Paul Ricoeur has called “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” Just as we automatically filter history books according to our current understanding of gender bias, we need to exercise a similar vigilance when citing older histories of church and religion in Puerto Rico. Hernández, for instance, finds evidence that Catholicism is not more antagonistic to women than Pentecostalism, even though many previous studies accept the premise that Protestantism is liberating to women and Catholicism is not.

I suspect that much of what has been labeled ‘Americanization’ in Puerto Rico is better described as ‘modernization’.

Fifth, be wary of dichotomies like “medieval vs. Enlightenment,” “hierarchy vs. freedom of conscience,” “Puerto Ricanization vs. Americanization.” These terms are often confusing when used uncritically as labels. For instance, if speaking English constitutes Americanization, then must we consider all the Puerto Rican independentistas who speak English as more Americanized than stateholders who do not? If the separation of Church and State is Americanization, were the Spanish liberals of the 19th century “Americanizers”? “Americanization” is a cultural, political, and ideological affinity to US society, whose intention is to replicate these attributes in Puerto Rico. I suspect that much of what has been labeled “Americanization” in Puerto Rico is better