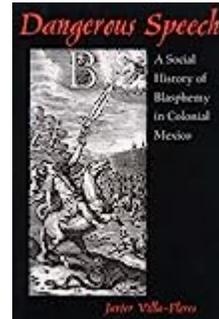




**Javier Villa-Flores.** *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. xii + 243 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-2563-8; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2556-0.



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## How to Tell Colonial History through Stories of Blasphemers

As a good microhistorical work, *Dangerous Speech* develops a comprehensive discourse, which gives the reader an insight into of the complexity of the colonial society of New Spain. Through the analysis of blasphemy cases proceeded and judged by the Holy Office representatives, a vivid picture of social realms and structures is drawn. It encompasses such issues as faith, law, colonial project, political structure, and private life.

As the publication record of the author demonstrates, his theoretical and methodological influence comes, *inter alia*, from the work of Carlo Ginzburg (on whom Javier Villa-Flores has written previously).[1] In fact, Ginzburg's approach in *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller* (1980) is closely followed. Therefore, *Dangerous Speech* is likely to appeal to those who appreciate the construction of social and individual meanings that are dissociated from a judicial archival research.

The style of writing in *Dangerous Speech* is clear, explanatory, and devoid of disciplinary jargon. As a consequence, one does not necessarily need to be a specialist in Spanish colonial history to discern the context and

understand the historical phenomenon of blasphemous speech and its wider societal consequences. The author brings in explanations of that phenomenon by contemporary moralists and jurists; moreover, he positions his historical interpretations within a comprehensive analytical and theoretical framework.

In a nutshell, the study builds upon a detailed analysis of the Mexican Holy Office files in order to understand how blasphemous speech was regarded and addressed in New Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The main research problem formulated in *Dangerous Speech* is, therefore, how to understand the complex socio-political and socio-juridical functions of blasphemy in that particular historical moment. The author captures that complexity by elucidating the wider historical and discursive context of that phenomenon.

Consequently, each of the five substantive chapters in *Dangerous Speech* addresses a particular aspect of the discursive and historical context of the phenomenon of blasphemous speech: the legitimization of the colonial project by the Catholic faith and the complex role of the Church in maintaining the colonial rule (while it some-

times resisted the imperial thrust of the colonial state); the assertion of manhood through menacing language; gamblers' complaints against the Holy Providence; the resistance of women against gender discrimination; and the pragmatic use of blasphemy by slaves trying to avoid the corporal abuse by their masters through the protection by the Holy Office, at least during the procedures.

Although at first sight the subject matter looks too broad, the comprehensive theoretical research, as well as the meticulous study of primary sources, provides solid underpinnings for the proposed analysis and narrative. However, a more skeptical reader would ask if, while constructing the intricate and fragile web of historical hermeneutics, the author has not been trapped by his own interpretative assumptions and consequently interpreted the available data so that they would fit his presumed theories. While I personally remain convinced by Villa-Flores's argumentation, I also assert that inclusion of a detailed methodological appendix and the reproduction of the tables and categories used in the interpreta-

tion of the Holy Office's files would help more specialized readers to evaluate the credibility and persuasiveness of the author's conclusions.

Nevertheless, *Dangerous Speech* has provided a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of blasphemous speech in the colonial Mexico. It has also invited the reader on an intellectually exciting journey through complex narratives that reveal both the idiosyncrasies of a very specific historical context (where, on one hand, people believed that blasphemy could bring disgrace and where, on the other, bloodshed and toughness were necessary ingredients of life) and the universal features of humanity, such as faith in transcendence, fear from violence, and resistance against abuse.

#### Note

[1]. Javier Villa-Flores, *Carlo Ginzburg: El Historiador como Teórico* (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1995).

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