Fall 2000

Review of *The Sacred World of the Penitentes* by Alberto Lopez Pulido

Gustavo Paz  
*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch

Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/519

In The Sacred World of the Penitentes, Alberto López Pulido addresses popular religion in the southwestern United States from an innovative point of view. By concentrating on the story of the penitentes as told by actual participants in the religious brotherhood, he is able to deliver an interpretation that transcends the official history as well as popular beliefs held since the nineteenth century. López Pulido also breaks away from common views on penitentes by focusing more on the beliefs (the sacred) and less on the ritual components of the brotherhood.

The penitentes, a Catholic brotherhood (with possible Franciscan origins) established in New Mexico and Colorado in Spanish colonial times, flourished in the Southwest, possibly as a consequence of the area’s neglect by Spanish, and later Mexican, religious authorities. From the United States government’s move into New Mexico and the establishment of a Catholic bishopric there by 1850, penitentes were always at odds with the Church’s hierarchy. The bishops perceived the brotherhood’s rituals—especially the public display of penance and flagellation during Holy Week—as a threat to Catholic orthodoxy and resented the secret confraternity for having too much influence and power in local society. They tried therefore to control the penitentes by applying regulations and finally, in the 1880s, by condemning the brotherhood altogether. Popular beliefs on penitentes as a secret flagellant society were reinforced in the twentieth century by travel accounts, newspaper articles, and cinema attracted by the exoticism of their ritual practices.

What is absent in these “official” versions of penitente history is an exploration into the inner core of penitente sacred experiences: charity, prayer, and good example—all of them parts of penance. López Pulido provides readers with a sophisticated and engaging analysis of penitente religious beliefs based on the brothers’ own stories and memories, thereby
conveying a sense of profound popular religious feelings that encompass both spiritual and material aspects of life.

Penitente beliefs are summed up in the concept of “practical Christianity,” an “efficacious style of communal spirituality in which the sacred worth of an individual is dictated by [one’s] effectiveness in simultaneously sustaining and enhancing the spiritual as well as the material aspects of community” (61). This type of Christianity has endowed the penitentes with a deep sense of identity rooted in communal religious experiences and memories. It also explains their success organizing religion in the American Southwest.

López Pulido’s study is at the same time a reminder of how deep religious feelings are imbedded in a people’s history and how little may be known about them. Only by having the participants themselves offer their own interpretation of their history can the study of popular religion be endowed with the kind of testimony needed to untangle otherwise hidden meanings.

My only criticism of the book is the author’s narrow conception of his larger subject, namely the study of ethnic cultural manifestations in the United States. His study would have benefitted immensely had he incorporated into his narrative the long tradition of studies of popular religion (particularly in relation to official Catholicism) in Spanish America, especially Mexico. After all, the American Southwest has been a part of Spanish America longer than it has been a member of the American Union. The story of the penitentes is a living testament of this. **Gustavo L. Paz, Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.**