

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

On the Padres' Trail. By Christopher Vecsey.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rf8276b>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

McPherson, Robert S.

Publication Date

1999-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

On the Padres' Trail. By Christopher Vecsey. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996. 520 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Rooster blood, dancing deer, flowers, and Kateri Tekakwitha, a seventeenth century Mohawk woman, appear to be strange bedfellows for a discussion of Catholicism in Mexico and the American Southwest over the past five centuries. In reality, they are a few of the numerous examples that make concrete the struggle of worldviews on a religious frontier. Frontier it was and frontier it is today. While the dramatic saga of white—Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo American—settlement ground to a halt one hundred years ago, the establishment of control over the hearts and minds of Native Americans has persisted. At the forefront of this love-hate relationship has been the Roman Catholic Church with its missionary efforts and orders (Franciscan and Jesuit), its uneasy alliance with civil authorities, and its vast geographical domain containing numerous cultures. How successful the church has been in spreading the faith is the subject of this book.

Christopher Vecsey is to be congratulated for a job well done. He has taken a complex topic that spans a long chronological period and a wide variety of responses to the church and made it understandable. The author begins with Christopher Columbus and later Hernan Cortes' conquest of the Aztec, then moves to missionary efforts with the Yaqui, the eastern and western Pueblos, the Pima, Papago, and Navajo, and concludes with Indian Catholicism in California. The reader soon realizes that there was no monolithic structure that imposed itself in ironclad rule over subjugated peoples, but rather an organization comprised of individuals reacting as much to local response as to church-directed policy. Vecsey maintains this view throughout, rarely slipping into the trap of generalizing beyond his material.

As would be expected in a work of this breadth, the heart of the historical analysis comes from secondary sources—monographs, books, and journal articles—as well as from literature and archival resources of the Catholic Church. Familiar names and titles such as Robert Ricard's *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, Herbert E. Bolton's writings about Father Kino and the Pima, Zephyrin Engelhardt's multi-volume work on the missions of California, and Edward Spicer's books on the Yaqui and his *Cycles of Conquest* provide a sound scholarly base. On more contemporary issues, the author has held numerous interviews (many with Native Americans) and taken extensive field notes in various Indian communities. Consequently, the text is rich in case histories and quotations that illustrate both sides of an issue.

The theme of *Padres' Trail* revolves around "how American Indian Catholics have adopted Catholic belief, faith, piety, and behavior and how they have adapted those features to their Indian practices" (p. xii). To explore this idea, the author starts at the time of Spanish conquest of each of the tribes and traces events, personalities, and changing perspectives as they affected the different cultures. For instance, the response of the Yaqui, who lived in rancherias spread across a sizeable area, was different than the majority of more centralized Pueblos seated along the Rio Grande. Compare this latter group to their hunting-gathering-and-herding neighbors, the Navajo

and Apache, then these tribes to those in California who were subjugated quickly and thoroughly during their initial contact with Euramericans. One quickly sees the complexity in the church's response to these various groups. By the time Anglo Americans officially assumed control over the California missions, much of the acculturation process was complete. This was not the case with the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache peoples who had successfully resisted many aspects of Hispanic institutions, including Catholicism.

Herein lies the central conflict in these various histories—to what extent and in what form did each Indian group accept Catholic beliefs? The author takes a balanced view of the historical record, bathing neither side in an extreme light. Abuses found within the system and perpetrated by individual church leaders are placed beside the stubborn resistance and negative drawbacks of traditional Native cultures. While the wrongs of the Catholic Church have been discussed at length elsewhere, not as much has been written on the down side of Native American culture. Vecsey does both with an even hand. The Black Legend, recounting the cruelty of the Spanish conquest and subsequent practices, and the White Legend, provided by apologists, still have their supporters to this day. The reader finds in this book the gray facts, with advocates on both sides of the fence. The author's tone, however, is dispassionate.

To what extent, then, were Catholic beliefs corrupted or changed by contact with Indian beliefs? It could be argued by some church purists, that there has been a conquest of their beliefs by Indian peoples, who have added, subtracted, and redefined the doctrines of Catholicism to the point that they are barely recognizable. Hence, the flowers and rooster blood mentioned previously have become symbols associated with Christ's crucifixion, while the dancing deer, one of the oldest aspects of traditional Yaqui beliefs, remind the people of their vows made to Mary and Jesus and of the Nativity. Pueblo kachinas dance outside Catholic churches on "saints' days [to] emphasize traditional religious organization and masquerading. On those days the Pueblo honored itself and its kachinas as much as its saint. As for the Christian God, He was simply another deity among others in their pantheon" (p. 181).

When one looks historically at the issue of local adaptation of Catholic beliefs throughout the world, one realizes that this is hardly a new or isolated phenomenon. At the same time, there has been a constant striving, often undergirded by various means of persuasion and force (dependent on the times and circumstances), that shows how the Church had its own agenda and could be just as insistent as the Indians. The seizure and burning of 1,600 kachina masks and prayer sticks in 1660; the constant use of the whip—especially noted in the California missions; the reduction, abandonment, and centralization of Native communities to consolidate and simplify missionary efforts; and the conflict over Indian labor and property with civil authorities during both the Spanish and Mexican periods were elements of this contest for power.

In a modified form, this contest continues today. Ever since the 1960s, when American society began celebrating its ethnic differences and abandoning its melting pot mentality, Indian heritage has become a point of pride.

Today, there are united efforts by Native Americans to re-instill traditional practices that have been lost. This is particularly difficult with the Indians of California, but an issue in varying degrees for all Native peoples. The Catholic Church and its history have become targets ripe for this dissatisfaction. While there are thousands of faithful Indian members, there is also a growing number who want history to be rewritten, recognizing the Indians' point of view. Vecsey has wisely included a final section, "Detractors and Defenders," addressing this issue, although each of the other sections also discuss this to some degree.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this conflict is to look at a recent example—the canonization of Fray Junipero Serra, founder of the mission system in California during the mid 1700s. While no one doubts that he was hard working, dedicated, and relatively free of abusive behavior, the system that he inaugurated was not. As a frontiersman in that setting, he has become a saint to some people, but to others he is the man who started the cultural genocide of the Indians.

Serra has his defenders, perhaps the most vocal being Father Louis J. Luzbetak, who argues that the frontiersman was "one of the greatest friends the American Indian has ever known and one of the greatest missionary saints the Church has ever produced" (p. 380). Luzbetak marshals his evidence by pointing out that Serra loved the Indians, protected them from evil influences introduced by white settlement, and helped provide food and clothing which they greatly desired but were not been able to obtain in sufficient quantities up to that time. Discipline and control was certainly introduced, but it was generally benign and rarely cruel. The Franciscan order continued to protect Indians and their land right through the secularization of the missions in the 1800s.

Others believe that Serra did not deserve sainthood and that one of his missions was an "Auschwitz with roses" (p. 382). The National Tekakwitha Conference, an organization supported by the Church and comprised of faithful Indian Catholics, had similar feelings. Named after an Indian woman had shown extreme faithfulness to the church and was worthy of being canonized, the organization has become the spokes-group for Native America and a vehicle to right some of the wrongs of the past. Aligned against it in the issue of Serra were the Franciscan order and many of the white Catholic faithful in California. Following a long-standing debate, Serra received sainthood in 1988, but not before nerves were rubbed raw on both sides. To Vecsey's credit, he remains neutral in reporting the controversy.

In noting the contribution of this book to the field of scholarship, one quickly recognizes that it is an excellent single volume (this is the first in a three-part series on American Indian Catholics) that summarizes the vast topic of Catholicism in Mexico and the American Southwest. It is written in a lively style, is accurate, considers various interpretations, and is non-partisan. This book is recommended to readers interested in religious studies, history of the Southwest, Native American studies, and Catholicism.