

Introduction

Troubling Devotion

The image of the highly pious Mexican woman – devoted to priest, sacraments, and saints; clutching her rosary; and attending daily mass – is a familiar one in film and print and the cultural imaginary of both the United States and Mexico. It has a timeless quality; the women this image conjures appear to be living in a past that, for them, has not changed. Scholars of the national period have historicized the origins of this image, linked to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican nationalism and its discontents more than to the nonspecific colonial past it seems to represent. Rather than an unbroken tradition of female piety from the Spanish conquest to the present, the reality that this stereotype conceals is one of great dynamism and change in women’s postcolonial relationship to the church. As we learn more about these changes, it becomes clear that they were a significant part of larger shifts in the church’s role in society and its relationship to the rapidly changing Mexican state. Women’s participation in these processes has begun to garner some of the attention it deserves, but the colonial precedents of this participation are still largely a mystery.¹

This gap in our knowledge about women’s participation in colonial religious culture has been partially filled by the important scholarship on convents and nuns; literary and historical studies of the past two or three decades have rightfully placed these elite institutions and exceptional women at the center of the Catholic Church’s colonial history.² However, in doing so, it has also cast a long shadow over our understanding of what it meant to be a woman in colonial Catholic culture. The idea that women in

- 1 Margaret Chowning, “The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Past and Present*, 221 (November 2013); Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887–1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) and *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and Popular Culture in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).
- 2 For an overview of this scholarship, see Margaret Chowning, “Convents and Nuns: New Approaches to the Study of Female Religious Institutions in Colonial Mexico,” *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008): 1279–1303.

the colonial period had only two viable options – marriage or the convent – remains a fallback assumption in much of our scholarship and teaching, even though scholars have shown that consensual cohabitation, illegitimate children, and economically independent (though perhaps struggling) women were not unusual.³ This is understandable because, while the notion of women as either wives or nuns may not entirely square with historical realities, it does reflect a powerful colonial ideal that remains salient for historians precisely because of the way it shaped all women's experiences and, in particular, their relationship to the religious culture that permeated colonial society. In other words, while it may have been unattainable, the proscription that a good woman should be either a cloistered nun or a secluded, pious, and obedient wife was familiar to everyone in New Spain. And women of all walks of life knew that they were being measured against this ideal in some context of their lives.

The day-to-day particulars of women's complex negotiations with this largely unattainable social and spiritual mandate, along with many other aspects of the church's ubiquitous role in colonial life, have remained relatively unknown. Only when the church was threatened – its traditional roles and privileges challenged after Mexico ceased to be a Spanish colony – did laywomen's intense attachments to the church become more visible to historians; and yet this happened in an era in which they were also changing tremendously. What appear to be the historical actions of women defending the church in the context of liberal opposition may be more accurately described as both women and the church seeing new opportunities, in each other, for increased civic engagement in a period of crisis, rupture, and redefinition. The affiliations, public activities, and passionate engagement that lay behind the anticlerical image of a conservative woman wedded to an antiquated, backward institution actually represented new dynamics in women's relationship to the church.⁴

3 On the distance between sexual and marital behavior and church proscriptions, see Asunción Lavrin, "Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma," in *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1989). On the realities of women's lives and choices, see Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Las mujeres novohispanas y las contradicciones de una sociedad patriarcal," in *Las mujeres en la construcción de las sociedades Iberoamericanas*, eds. Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Berta Aires Queija (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2004).

4 Margaret Chowning, "The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua"; "La feminización de la piedad en México: Género y piedad en las cofradías de españoles: Tendencias coloniales y pos-coloniales en los arzobispados de Michoacán y Guadalajara," in *Religión, política e identidad en la época de la independencia de México*, ed. Brian Connaughton (Mexico City: UAM, 2010); and "Liberals, Women, and the Church in Mexico: Politics and the Feminization of Piety, 1700–1930." Paper presented at the Harvard Latin American Studies seminar, Cambridge, MA, 2002; Silvia Marina Arrom, "Las Señoras de la Caridad: pioneras olvidadas de la asistencia social en México, 1863–1910." *Historia Mexicana* 57, no. 2 (Oct.–Dec. 2007): 445–90; and "Mexican Laywomen

But how do we explain the willingness of women to seize upon these new opportunities? What was it that made women inclined to seek them out and to lend their support to the church in the first place? Nineteenth-century changes alone do not suffice as an explanation, nor does the exclusion of women from the masculinist state and its nation-building projects. Historians need to also reckon with the long history of women seeking and finding a significant portion of the scarce emotional and material resources available to them in their relationship to the church and their participation in religious culture. If we accept the story of colonial Catholicism as uniformly oppressive to all but the most elite women and, even then, offering only very limited avenues of participation, we cannot fully understand the phenomenon of so many ordinary women publicly defending the church in the early national period.

The fuller explanation is not a simple one, however. Neither is it found clearly in stories of resistance or accommodation. Rather, to understand the colonial history of the possibilities women sought, found, and created in the national period, we have to examine the gradually forged relationships, day-to-day interactions and practices, and cumulative knowledge that constituted women's participation in colonial religious culture. This history is one of troubling devotion in two senses of the words: troubling, as an adjective, because women's devotion was significant even when it seems to have reinforced the very ideas and power dynamics that caused them harm; and troubling, as a verb, because the history that results from examining laywomen's role in shaping religious culture challenges the usual understanding of what counts as religious devotion. Women of all geographies, racial categories, and social positions participated in a spiritual economy that was both transcendent and material and that involved institutions and social networks as much as it did intimate and emotionally charged relationships. "Devotion" gets at some of the affective potency of women's connections to religious ideas, authorities, images, and sacraments and other embodied practices. But it falls short of explaining the depth to which these things shaped the whole of women's lives and possibilities, the urgency of women's negotiations and interpretations of them, and thus the impact women had on them.

Understanding women's participation in colonial religious culture has the power to change the way we think about the church's role in colonial society in general. Throughout the course of my research, I encountered a number of things that challenged what I had previously thought about colonial dynamics and processes more generally. Taking women's

Spearhead a Catholic Revival: The Ladies of Charity, 1863–1910," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 50–77.

interactions with the church as the point of departure can nuance and sometimes transform time-honored interpretations of religious practices and cultural change. Most of these shifts are subtle, and yet they engage with important debates in the historiography. Things as varied as the development of the individual in early modern history, the relative strength and effectiveness of the Inquisition in New Spain, jurisdictional divisions in ecclesiastical justice, the shape of convent reforms, and the development of prisons and other disciplinary institutions all look somewhat different when seen through the lens of women's engagement with the church.⁵

This book explores women's participation in religious culture through their engagements with rituals, authorities, institutions, and ideas. Throughout, it pays attention to how colonial understandings of sexuality, gender, race, and social status shaped those interactions. It makes four general arguments: the first is that, over time, the church developed a distinct body of ideas and practices related to laywomen; the second is that laywomen absorbed, sometimes embraced, and always strategically engaged with these practices, even as they were deeply meaningful; the third is that women's understanding of and responses to these ideas and practices constituted an additional recognizable, though informal, body of knowledge; and the fourth is that this body of knowledge was something that church authorities and institutions engaged with in ways that in turn subtly altered institutional and sacramental practice. It is through this back-and-forth exchange that laywomen became essential players – in partnership and tension with many aspects of the church – in creating and shaping colonial religious culture. The details of this process, its varying contexts, and the specific content it produced fill the rest of these pages.

Documenting this dialogic relationship between laywomen and church authorities, infrastructure, and ritual reveals important aspects of the daily elaboration of cultures of religiosity and the social contracts that supported, challenged, and shaped the Catholic Church's role in colonial society. By the mid-seventeenth century, church courts' broad jurisdiction over marriage and sexuality, together with a long discursive tradition of theological and social concern over women's spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional capacities, led to an expansive body of pastoral, institutional, and juridical ideas and practices aimed specifically at laywomen. Ecclesiastical authorities were especially concerned with the perceived contagion of sin and scandal and with women's roles either as dangerous vectors of such contagion or as protective bulwarks against it. Images, ecclesiastical

5 Each of these subjects warrants focused research that centers women's experiences and religiosity, which may very well lead to important interpretive shifts.

communication, and official religious discourse depicted women as existing on a continuum in relation to this question – from those who posed the greatest threat to society (the defiantly corrupt woman, the fallen but redeemable woman, and the vulnerable but protectable woman) to those whose sanctioned position and model behavior actually strengthened society (the securely protected woman and the exceptionally virtuous woman capable of sanctifying others). Women of diverse social locations engaged with these concepts in their devotional lives and interactions with church authorities and institutions; they embraced, challenged, and interpreted these ideas in ways that helped them create meaning, solve problems, and navigate disciplinary forces. These efforts constituted a layer of lay religious culture that clergymen and institutional authorities then had to contend with to do their jobs effectively.

Seeing laywomen’s experiences and choices in New Spain requires paying attention to both formal and informal interactions, mining fragmentary evidence, and incorporating both marginal and mundane contexts and events. It is helpful in this process to think of the colonial church as a web of social relationships, practices, ideas, moral obligations, and beliefs rather than as a discrete institutional entity or even a collection of interlocking institutions. “The church” in New Spain (and other early modern places) was at once an institutional network, a community, and a culture. Seen this way, the boundaries of what was “church” and what was not become porous, which is precisely how people living in colonial Mexico most likely experienced them.

Historians over the past two decades have increasingly challenged the separation of “popular” and “elite” religiosity and troubled the demarcation of clear boundaries between an official, orthodox, institutional church and an informal realm of practice.⁶ In spite of this important shift, it remains methodologically challenging to focus on the role of devotional practice in people’s daily lives while also attending sufficiently to the workings of church institutions within colonial society. However, this is the very challenge we must continue to meet if we are to accurately reflect the history of “religion” and “church” in the early modern era. In colonial Mexico, this means attending to the human exchanges that forged the social contract between the church and society, which simultaneously limited and validated ecclesiastical power. It means keeping in mind the

6 The analytical lens of “local religion” has been particularly helpful in moving beyond these binaries. See, for example, William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Martin Austin Nesvig, ed., *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Amos Megged, *Exporting the Reformation: Local Religion in Early Colonial Mexico* (New York: Brill Press, 1996); and Jennifer Schepher Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

material and economic aspects of religious culture. And it means remaining alert to the ways that emotions and affective states like fear, respect, reverence, desire, guilt, relief, and joy brought meaning to and motivated people's decisions.⁷

Imagining an interlocking history of institutions, ideas, practices, and embodied, emotional experience and holding in productive tension concepts like devotion and coercion, belief and negotiation, and power and intimacy are essential in this history. While many laywomen identified profoundly with church teachings and practices, these same women also learned to interpret and navigate them strategically in order to find protection, assistance, and comfort. A key way that they did so was by expressing their needs and desires as consistent with the purposes of the church – particularly as manifested in attitudes toward sin and guilt, practices related to sacraments and the seclusion of women, and the proper role of priests in communities.

This expression both challenged and strengthened the constrictive force of Catholicism on women's lives. Confessors, ecclesiastical judges, and administrators of church-supported cloisters and shelters for laywomen found themselves having to accommodate women's interpretations in the day-to-day execution of their jobs. In this dynamic and ongoing exchange, women learned to see themselves as female parishioners with gender-specific obligations owed to them, and religious authorities learned to see their vocations as including specific responsibilities to laywomen. Through this mutually constitutive learning process, laywomen contributed to, elaborated upon, and helped shape the devotional landscape and religious culture of colonial Mexico.

Laywomen: Clarification of Terms

“Laywomen” is an inherently problematic term for this time period. Though some scholars of modern Catholicism consider all women part of the laity because they are excluded from the clergy, this is not the way the term was used in colonial Mexico. *Laicas*, or laywomen, referred to women who had not taken binding religious vows to live as black-habited nuns, living in a convent, after completing a novitiate period and professing to a particular religious order. There was nonetheless some slippage in this term. *Laicas* included a whole range of women, some of whose lives looked very much like nuns – namely, novitiates, white-habited nuns, and *beatas*

7 Javier Villa-Flores and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *Emotions and Daily Life in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, ed., *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*, Vols. I–III (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004).

living in convent-like institutions called *beaterios*.⁸ In some instances, the language used to describe these women combined the language of the laity with that used for professed nuns. The terms “lay sisters” and even “nuns of the white habit” show up in convent records and other documents, and scholars of nuns and convents do not always agree about their meaning. *Donadas*, for instance – women who were “donated” or who “donated” their own bodies and labor to convents but who wore habits and participated in the devotional life of the convent to a greater degree than other servants – sometimes appear in both primary and secondary sources as nuns who could not afford a dowry and found another path to a permanent, second-tier, cloistered religious life, while at other times they appear more like ordinary servants or even slaves.⁹ Contemporary observers and scholars alike reflect a certain fluidity between the terms “lay sisters,” “beatas,” “donadas,” and “nuns of the white habit.” In addition, laywomen living in convents – including servants, slaves, and *niñas* (girls and women who lived as dependents of individual nuns) – often shared space and daily routines with professed nuns. All of this renders the distinction between these groups of women more or less relevant, depending on the question at hand.

With all of this ambiguity and blurriness around the category of “laywomen,” my use of the term requires some justification. First, the term “laywomen” is simply a more elegant way of saying “non-nuns.” Nuns appear in this study, but they are not the focus. Nuns were an important but unusual group of women in colonial Mexico, and their prestige and education resulted in a rich body of sources that has led to a layered historiography. This study seeks to place the “other” women at the center – the majority of women who did not take binding religious vows and live as a class of cloistered religious elites. My second reason for using the term “laywomen” is its capaciousness. Using laywomen as my broadest organizing category allows me to see the variety of factors that shaped women’s lives within and aside from their lay status. In other words, rather than making a claim that laywomen’s lives were more like one another’s lives than that of nuns, my hope is that by excluding nuns from my main focus but including everyone else, I can highlight the diversity of experiences and practices that existed among laywomen. Race/*casta*, class/social status, geography, and spiritual status are the primary categories of analysis through which I understand the choices available to different laywomen

- 8 Beatas were laywomen who took nonbinding vows of celibacy and devotion. Some lived independently, some took additional vows of poverty and obedience to a particular religious order and lived adjacent to them, and some lived in cloisters exclusively for beatas called *beaterios*.
- 9 Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Asunción Lavrin, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and J. Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas*”: *Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2005).

and the varying ways they participated in the making of colonial Catholicism.¹⁰

The very imprecision of the term “laywomen” is also useful; like the boundaries of church and not-church, complete clarity is not possible, nor should it be. Some laywomen’s lives and associations placed them squarely within the world of nuns and clergy, while others had very little contact with these manifestations of church authority. These differences, and the fact that some women are more accurately thought of as inhabiting a liminal space between professed nun and laica, make “laywomen” a productive category for highlighting the way that gendered understandings of piety and reputation shaped women’s social status, alongside and entangled with racialized, economic, and geographic differences.

Spiritual Status

A theoretical proposition that underlies many of the arguments in this book is that there existed a historically specific category of social power that was related to one’s reputation for piety and virtue, together with one’s concrete connections to the church. Elsewhere I have proposed using the term “spiritual status” to describe this nexus of social difference and argued that doing so helps us better understand the co-constitutive nature of racialized, gendered, and economically shaped colonial hierarchies.¹¹ When historians approach “religion” as a category of analysis rather than simply an object of study or a description, it becomes clear that what I am calling spiritual status was something that accrued and could be lost through relational interactions. It was both entangled with and distinct from other forms of

10 I use the word “casta” throughout the book in three ways: (1) together with race, to indicate the workings and hierarchies of power mapped onto the differences between colonial categories such as: *Españoles, Indios, Negros, Mulatos, Mestizos, Castizos, Moriscos, and Lobos*; (2) in the plural, “castas,” to refer collectively to people of “mixed” descent; and (3) with the phrase “casta category” to refer collectively to the recognized colonial racial/ethnic categories that people used and assigned to one another. For various approaches to the workings of casta in colonial Latin America, see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and Rachel Sarah O’Toole, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

11 Jessica Delgado, “Virtuous Women and the Contagion of Sin: Race, Poverty, and Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” unpublished essay; “Public Piety and *Honestidad*: Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2012; and “Contagious Sin and Virtue: Race, Poverty, and Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2012.

social power and difference and thus worthy of analysis in and of itself. When we look carefully at the practices, modes of expression, qualities, ideas, relationships, and structures that modern people tend to associate with religion – which in colonial Mexico were intrinsically bound with politics, culture, law, economics, and social structures – it becomes clear that “religion” in colonial Mexico was not merely something people believed in or practiced but was also a field of relations that produced and was productive of social hierarchy.

Like race, class, and gender, “spiritual status” is not a phrase that colonial Latin Americans would have recognized or used in the way modern scholars may understand it. Recent scholarship seeking to better integrate the specificities of colonial Latin America and the Iberian early modern world in general into our understanding of modern concepts of race and racism has yielded productive and provocative arguments about the utility of the various categories and languages of difference that circulated in the colonial period as well as those historians of Latin America have used. These include *raza*, *casta*, *vecindad*, *razon*, *educación*, *limpieza de sangre*, old and new Christian, *miserable*, and *natural*, as well as the modern English language terms “race,” “class,” and “social status.”¹²

I am particularly compelled by the usefulness of imagining all of these historical terms and the hierarchies they implied as being a part of the ubiquitous colonial category of *calidad*, or, literally, quality, which was used in a holistic way to refer to someone’s social position as well as their personal characteristics. My contribution to this understanding of *calidad* is to encourage us to be attentive to the unnamed yet materially and socially significant category of social power and difference based on one’s reputation for piety and virtue, which may have been particularly significant for women.¹³ Spiritual status was fundamentally gendered. For women, it was essentially a combination of one’s public reputation for piety and

12 For a definition and discussion of these and other terms, an overview of recent scholarship related to them, and a critical analysis of the role of religion in colonial racial formation, see Jessica Delgado and Kelsey Moss, “Race and Religion in the Early Modern Iberian Atlantic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History*, eds. Kathryn Gin Lum and Paul Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For examples of recent debates about race, class, and the colonial languages and hierarchies related to these modern terms, see the essays in María Elena Martínez, Max-Sebastián Hering Torres, and David Nirenberg, eds., *Race and Blood in the Iberian World* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2012).

13 There is a strong argument for thinking of *calidad* as a broad field of power and difference for colonial Latin America and spending our analytical time and energy trying to understand how people’s individual qualities and group identities – understood as social, biological, or behavioral life circumstances, choices, and locations – operated together to produce people’s perceived and experienced *calidad*. It may be that once such a framework is broadly utilized, we will no longer need to use modern terms except in the service of comparative and cross-regional histories of the terms and concepts themselves.

one's public reputation for sexual virtue or honor.¹⁴ The most historically appropriate word to describe the latter part of this equation would be *recogimiento* – a complex word that, among other things, described the qualities of modesty, obedience, sexual continence, and withdrawal from public view.¹⁵ However, women whose economic circumstances made withdrawal and seclusion impossible, nonetheless claimed the term, calling themselves *muy recogida* and asserting that they lived lives of *mucho recogimiento*. By this they meant that they avoided scandal, behaved in ways appropriate to their gender, and were sexually virtuous as fitting their role as either married or single.¹⁶

Historians have previously spoken about the “honor/shame” complex in ways that relate to spiritual status.¹⁷ The benefit of using the honor/shame complex as an analytical tool is that it highlights the way *vergüenza* (shame) worked as both a positive and negative quality for women and that it reveals the social mandate for men to control women's behavior and reputation. A key part of men's honor, according to this scholarship, was their ability to ensure that the women in their families exhibited *vergüenza*. The limits of the honor/shame complex as a lens, however, is that it does not allow us to talk about the productive elements of social status for women as it related to sexual reputation nor about the way this status could accrue in relation to both sexual and gendered virtue and a reputation for piety. Seen through the honor/shame complex, only men were truly able to lay claim to honor; *vergüenza* was a female quality upon which men's honor depended but it did not accrue independently for women. Men's honor certainly affected the women in their families, but this formulation of gendered power does not take into account anything other than referential status for women. In other words, the shame/honor complex reveals something important about patriarchal relations, but it does not reveal the connection between women's own social status and gendered behaviors of modesty, “honesty,” obedience, and reserve. These characteristics are connected to *vergüenza*, but they are not exactly the same thing.

The term “*recogimiento*,” on the other hand, does much of this work for us. Women laid claim to *recogimiento* as something they had and

14 I have yet to work out the usefulness and limits of the term for men, and I invite others to join me in this task.

15 For an excellent history of the concept and practice of *recogimiento* in colonial Peru, see van Deusen, *Between the Sacred and the Worldly: The Institutional and Cultural Practice of Recogimiento in Colonial Lima* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

16 In New Spain, this is particularly visible in women's testimonies before diocesan courts.

17 Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class, and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1989).

something they expressed, and men and women both used it to describe women. *Recogimiento*, by some evaluations, might require possessing the proper amount of “shame” (scrupulousness, modesty, caution, even squeamishness), but overall, it operated much like the English word “virtue” does now. In other words, a woman described as “muy recogida” or “de mucho recogimiento” was not merely a woman who had shame but was a virtuous woman – a woman of honor. Her honor may have been determined in large part by her degree of modesty, seclusion, and self-containment, but the word nonetheless also implied a level of moral righteousness that *vergüenza* does not quite convey.¹⁸

One’s public reputation for *recogimiento* was part of what defined women’s spiritual status, but another was women’s public reputation for piety. These two things were interrelated; if a woman was known to frequent the sacraments, have close but appropriate relationships with priests, and otherwise exhibit signs of devotional piety, the reigning presumption was that she was also chaste, modest, reserved, and obedient. And if she was known as a woman of great *recogimiento*, observers would likely assume that she was also pious and that her piety was orthodox. Conversely, if it was known that a woman had been sexually active outside marriage – especially in a public or scandalous way – her piety would also be suspect, even if she was openly devoted to the sacraments. And if a woman’s piety was in doubt – if she had been accused of religious error, was suspected of unorthodox religious practices, or was simply openly lax about fulfilling religious requirements – the assumption that she was also sexually incontinent tended to follow.

Spiritual status was a ubiquitous category that marked a woman’s degree of privilege and prestige in colonial Mexico, but it operated in interlocking ways with other social status indicators. Race/caste, class/social status, gender, and spiritual status were co-constitutive and reinforcing. Concretely, this means that while in theory, the spiritual status of a woman of African descent with a reputation for great piety and *recogimiento* could partially mitigate her subordinate position within the

18 Peter Bakewell and Jaqueline Holler define the relationship between honor, *vergüenza*, and *recogimiento* in the following way: “Both men and women inherited honor from their families, yet the nature of the virtue demanded of the sexes was quite distinct. Men’s honor resided in manliness, loyalty, honesty, and zealous concern for the reputation of their families . . . Women’s honor, by contrast, was primarily conceived of as *vergüenza*, or shame, a quality that manifested itself in modesty, sexual propriety, and, among the higher classes, *recogimiento*.” Peter Bakewell and Jaqueline Holler, *A History of Latin America to 1825*, third edn. (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 333. This use of “*recogimiento*” takes at face value the elite definition, which includes literal seclusion, however, as van Deusen found for Peru and I have found for Mexico, women in the lower social classes also claimed this term for themselves as exactly those qualities attributed in the above quote to *vergüenza* – that of modesty and sexual propriety. However, they did so in a way that implied the possibility of owning, accruing, and recovering *recogimiento* as a positive quality.

colonial racial hierarchy, in practice it was very difficult for a woman of African descent to arrive at such a reputation. The presumption that black women were promiscuous and prone to religious error was widespread and difficult to surmount.

Nonetheless spiritual status was a factor in determining one's life circumstances and position in the colonial society, and it had the potential to both reinforce and undercut other categories of difference and power. Just as some people of African, Indigenous, and mixed descent did achieve unusual levels of wealth and social power, so did some poor and nonwhite people come to be admired for their piety or some wealthy people lose their social status when sexual or spiritual scandal destroyed their reputations. Spiritual status could sometimes alter the social perception of a woman's race or caste. However, the most important insight that comes of employing "spiritual status" as an analytical category is not the revelation that there was sometimes some wiggle room in colonial social hierarchies but rather that "religion" in this time and place – alongside race/caste, gender, class/social status, and other factors – shaped people's social and material possibilities and was implicated in relations of power. Spiritual status had material ramifications that varied in relation to other aspects of a woman's social position and circumstances; one's reputation for piety and sexual and gendered propriety mattered for laywomen and all the more so if they lacked the shield that whiteness, wealth, and effective male protection could provide.

This is not to reduce religion to class, however; there was certainly more to piety and virtue than reputation and more to reputation than its material implications. The point of naming spiritual status as such, rather, is to highlight the way in which concerns we might think of as spiritual were intricately intertwined with concerns we might think of as social and material. For instance, greater spiritual status provided increased access to spaces and practices that had salvific and transcendent value. And public reputation for virtue and piety protected laywomen's ability to enjoy a vibrant and fulfilling devotional life, which in turn deepened their relationships to God and the saints and assured them safety in the afterlife.

This study does not focus primarily on women's accrual and loss of spiritual status, but both were important factors in the constraints and opportunities through which laywomen engaged with the church and shaped colonial Catholicism. Furthermore, laywomen's efforts to protect, gain, or regain spiritual status were in and of themselves an important way they participated in and shaped religious culture. In order to understand what spiritual status meant to women, it is crucial to understand colonial ideas about the contagiousness of sin, scandal, and virtue and the gendered nature of this contagion.

Contagion of Sin; Contagion of Virtue

Another set of assertions that are folded into the main arguments of this study include the following: (1) women occupied a particular place in colonial notions of the self in relation to the community, (2) sin and scandal were experienced as contagious, (3) women were understood as particularly dangerous vectors of this contagion, and (4) under certain circumstances, women's virtue could also be contagious. Religious authorities and laypeople alike discussed and related to sin, scandal, and spiritual health as if they spread from person to person and from individuals to the collective. Furthermore, institutional practice and cultural discourse alike placed all women on a spiritual continuum that spanned from especially dangerous contaminants to powerful forces for sanctification, and these seemingly dichotomous positions were in fact intimately linked.

Seen as particularly susceptible to corruption and temptation, women represented a weak link in the community's defenses against the forces of Satan, a notion visible in trials against women for witchcraft, false visions, and other religious crimes.¹⁹ Furthermore, clergymen, religious institutions, and pious society operated out of an awareness of the spiritual liability that women's subordinate social position represented for the collective. In a sexual economy that prized the appearance of virginity for marital prospects and a social context that included limited economic possibilities for women outside marriage, the belief that women were physically, emotionally, and spiritually weaker than men meant the ever-present danger of "fallen" women who had been forced to turn to a life of sin in order to survive. Even when a woman was virtuous, social weakness, especially when compounded by poverty, could lead her to ruin, and this ruin threatened the spiritual well-being of society as a whole. Concern about this vulnerability gave rise to a variety of "solutions" to the social problem of unprotected women, including institutional cloisters, funds to provide dowries for marriage or entry into a convent, and the practice of *depósito* – an official transfer of legal guardianship of a woman, either temporary or indefinite, to an institution or private residence.

19 Solange Alberro, "Herejes, brujas, y beatas: mujeres ante el tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en la Nueva España," in *Presencia y transparencia: la mujer en la historia de México*, ed. Carmon Ramos Escandón (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1987), 79–94; Mary Giles, *Women in the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Stacey Schlauf, *Gendered Crime and Punishment: Women and in the Hispanic Inquisitions* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013); Nora Jaffary, *False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Martha Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives: Gender, Religion, and the Politics of Power in Colonial Guatemala* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Laura Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Laywomen were constantly interacting with these ideas and the practices and institutions to which they gave rise. They encountered them in their relationships with priests and their experiences of confession. They both suffered and benefited from them in the context of ecclesiastical courts. And they utilized and contested the possibilities and constraints they found in systems and institutions designed for the seclusion of women. These choices and the dialogues of which they were a part affected and helped construct colonial Catholic religious culture in an ongoing way.

Place, Periodization, and Change over Time

The approach of this study is more thematic than chronological. While I maintain a historian's interest in change over time and try to note it when it is most visible, diachronic analysis is not the primary mode of storytelling here. This was not my original intent, but as I deepened my research, the narrative became more and more synchronic. Rather than changes, I focused on the relational dynamics I saw played out for a more than a century, and I sought to understand how laywomen shaped and participated in religious culture in New Spain in the mid-colonial period.

Nonetheless, the periodization of the study is an interpretive choice. The bulk of my material is from the early to mid-seventeenth century to the mid- to late eighteenth century. Most of it falls between 1640 and 1770, though the more expansive dates of 1630 to 1790 reflect the smaller number of sources and examples that stretch beyond this core time period. My rationale for choosing these dates was twofold. One was my interest in what scholars have deemed the long seventeenth century as a useful time to study societal dynamics and social relations. In between the tumultuousness of the formative period following conquest and establishing colonial society throughout the sixteenth century and the dramatic changes brought by the most aggressive Bourbon reforms in the last two or three decades of the colonial period, the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries provide an opportunity for historians to study the workings of a colonial Catholic society that was fairly well established. Because I wanted to be able to highlight the mechanisms through which laywomen shaped, enforced, challenged, and negotiated religious culture in an ongoing way, this time period provided a fruitful though challenging opportunity. Nonetheless, some sources, particularly those coming from the Inquisition and petitions related to cloisters, do not demonstrate significant changes in kind or quantity around 1770. This is in contrast with local diocesan ecclesiastical courts, the sources from which reveal a dramatic decline in women's engagement after 1775.

In the future, in addition to taking a closer look at change over time, I hope that scholars will pick up the various themes, subjects, and sites of

interaction represented by each of these chapters and look more closely at how they mapped on to particular places. The bulk of the sources for this book come from central Mexico, but I did not exclude material from any part of New Spain. For the same reason that change over time became less important than taking the whole of what I could see into account, so did a commitment to local context give way to a broad lens that attends more to generalizable differences in place – such as differences between urban and rural locations, small and large cities, indigenous towns and Spanish or mixed-race communities – than to a deep grounding in particular local histories. The next step for further research would be to look for variations in the context of focused local and comparative histories.

The difficulty in finding material that elucidates the lives and choices of laywomen and the fragmented and often decontextualized nature of what sources do exist led me to cast a wide net in terms of both time and place, to allow my arguments to be more synchronic than diachronic, and – with the notable exception of one chapter that is set in the town of Toluca – to focus on general categories of space rather than the contours of particular places. These choices also responded to the scope of the study and the questions I am asking. There has been no book-length study of laywomen and the church, and I wanted to understand this relationship broadly by engaging with various sites of interaction.²⁰ I wanted to look at married and single women together, in both urban and rural spaces, and to include laywomen of the fullest range of status and life experience. However, I hope this attempt to address the gap in our knowledge of ordinary women's lives and contributions to religious culture will open the way for future scholars to look more closely at the many individual subjects and themes this book takes up, with heightened attention to particularity of location and change over time.

Organization and Logic

The book is divided into two sections: Part I consists of three chapters that examine laywomen's experiences and interactions with sacraments, clergy, and courts; and Part II is made up of three chapters about laywomen's engagements with places, practices, and ideologies of cloister and containment. Both sections are tied together by three things: the importance of colonial notions of sin, scandal, piety, and virtue as contagious and of women as particularly significant agents of these spiritual and diabolical

20 Brianna Leavitt-Alcantara's important new book will also significantly remedy this gap by improving our understanding of unmarried laywomen's devotional practice in the late colonial and early independence era Guatemala. Brianna Leavitt-Alcantara, *Alone at the Altar: Single Women and Devotion in Guatemala, 1670–1870* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

contagions; the way in which women's navigation of these ideas shaped their spiritual status; and the ways laywomen's choices, responses, and interpretations of the world around them shaped the religious culture of colonial Mexico.

The logic of a tryptic consisting of sacraments, clergy, and courts might not seem evident at first glance, but in the lives and experiences of laywomen, these three elements of the church and colonial Catholicism were intertwined in revealing ways. The sacraments of confession and communion constituted a fundamental learning ground for the ideas that shaped women's religiosity as well as the primary site for their engagement with clergymen. Priests understood their sacramental roles as including those of teachers, fathers, and healers first but secondarily that of judges. Local diocesan courts, on the other hand, were explicit manifestations of clergymen's judicial powers. Though women's interactions with these courts were less frequent and regular than was their exposure to confession and communion, they took ideas and sensibilities worked out in the confessional and expressed them in these courts in ways that were sometimes to their benefit. As confessors, clergymen were charged with didactic, regulatory, and restorative duties at the level of individual penitents, and they enacted these in particular ways with women. As ecclesiastical judges in local diocesan courts, clergymen were charged with the protection of the local community from public sin, which allowed women opportunities to seek their help in their conflicts with men. The first two chapters look at these two aspects of women's relationships with priests as well as their engagement with the ideas that threaded their way through these sacramental and judicial contexts.

Local investigatory mechanisms of the Inquisition are the focus of the third chapter. These practices relied heavily on the contexts of confession and diocesan courts and, specifically, on the relationships that women and priests forged within them. The Inquisition imposed itself onto women's sacramental experiences and relationships in order to gather information, and it sometimes co-opted ecclesiastical judges for this purpose as well. But most importantly, the Inquisition utilized women's emotional, spiritual, and social experiences related to sin and scandal in ways that turned women into agents of an Inquisitorial culture.

Part II picks up the thread of ideas related to female contagion and looks at practices of containment and women's engagement with them. The subjects of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are the practices, ideologies, and actual places involved in the cloister, control, containment, and protection of laywomen. All of the places and practices studied in Part II developed out of the belief that it was necessary both to protect society from the coercive impact of some women and to benefit society by protecting others and concentrating their sanctifying power. I argue in this section that religious

authorities and pious society envisioned these cloistering and containment practices as connected and existing on a continuum, whether they dealt with highly pious or highly suspect women.

Part I: Chapters and Sources

Chapter 1 explores women's diverse experiences of the twin sacraments of penance and Eucharist with a particular focus on women's relationships with the priests who acted as sacramental facilitators and gatekeepers. It approaches these sacraments as learning contexts for both laywomen and priests through which both parties communicated and expressed expectations, gathered knowledge, and developed repertoires of behavior and practice. The didactic function of confession and the repetitive, physical, and somatic nature of these ritual interactions forged and deepened women's understandings of church teachings and how to interact with church authorities. In turn, these same interactions forged and deepened clergymen's understanding of women and how to relate to them in these contexts.

While some scholars have explored the oft-contested significance of these sacraments in Indigenous communities and in the complicated relationships between uniquely visionary nuns and their confessors, there has been little written about the role of confession and communion in laywomen's lives, particularly nonelite laywomen.²¹ Patriarchal social relations, gendered ideas about sin, and beliefs about women's particular vulnerabilities and weaknesses distinguished women's sacramental experiences from those of men. At the same time, great diversity in life circumstances and status among laywomen meant that their engagement with confession and communion was far more varied than that of cloistered religious women. Differences in geography, wealth, social and spiritual status, and caste and race shaped laywomen's experiences with these sacraments as well as the ways priests related to their female penitents. For some women, these rituals represented nearly the only contact they had with priests, and this contact may have been limited to the annual Lenten requirement to complete a single confession followed by communion. For other women, frequent confession and communion were significant aspects

21 For confession in Indigenous communities, see Nicholas Griffiths and Fernando Cervantes, eds., *Spiritual Encounters: Interactions Between Christianity and Native Religions in Colonial America* (Birmingham, AL: University of Birmingham Press, 1999). For nuns and beatas and their confessors, see Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Elsa Sampson Vela Tudela, *Colonial Angels: Narratives of Spirituality and Gender, 1580–1750* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000); and Kristine Ibsen, *Women's Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999).

of their regular interactions with priests – interactions that may have included social visits, family connections, and female networks of piety grounded in relationships to particular clergymen.

These sacraments pose challenges to social historians. While ideals about confession and communion can be found in didactic literature, what actually transpired was documented only in the breach. Historians' ability to see what took place within the actual events of confession and communion is limited by the private nature of confession and the lack of description of ordinary examples of communion in the historical record. If sacramental relations and procedures were unproblematic and uncontested, they rarely left written traces. Documentation of them generally happened only when something went wrong enough to warrant court testimonies, official complaints, and clerical investigations. The resulting judicial and institutional sources reflect the importance of these sacraments as places of learning, but they do so in a refracted manner.

Nonetheless Inquisition records produced in response to unsanctioned sacramental behavior offer the most detailed window into what happened during confession and communion. In spite of the distortions inherent in these kinds of cases, the testimonies they contain allow us to see patterns in women's experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them. Inquisitors asked open-ended questions about their histories with clergymen and sacraments, and in response, laywomen spoke broadly about their experiences, referencing practices, emotions, and learned strategies that often went beyond what the Inquisitors were looking for. In particular, the richest body of sources for learning about women's experiences and expectations of confession and communion come from testimonies the Inquisition gathered in relation to the crime of *solicitudión*. *Solicitudión* was a minor heretical offense in which a confessor used the sacrament to engage in sexual acts or express sexual desires. While these sources clearly contain distortions in terms of their depiction of "normal" confessional practices, the structure of these testimonies still conveys aspects of the significance and meaning of both sacraments in women's lives as well as revealing important aspects of their relationships with priests.

The experience and threat of sexual violence and violation were a part of women's experiences of confession, but the sources that provide a window into these sacraments unavoidably over-represent this aspect of sacramental relationships. There is no way to avoid this, and readers will inevitably be powerfully affected, as I have been in doing this research, by the painful histories of trauma that cases of *solicitudión* captured. It is a difficult task to glean information about ordinary interactions from evidence produced by largely disturbing and often violent ones and then to write about both in a way that neither overemphasizes nor minimizes the abusive possibilities of these sacraments. Imagining how to do this is a part of my ongoing work

as a scholar of women's lives.²² I have not yet found a satisfactory balance, and I look forward to the questions and critiques this chapter in particular will undoubtedly provoke.

It is important to understand how women came to testify in *solicitación* cases in order to read them with the necessary caution and to recognize what makes them valuable sources of information. Most laywomen came to testify against their confessors either because the Inquisition specifically called them to do so or because a priest – usually another confessor – told them they were obligated to present a denunciation. In fact, the majority of women who appeared “voluntarily,” meaning without having been called by the Inquisition, had actually been compelled to do so in the course of an actual confession. The Inquisition asked confessors to help regulate religious error by looking for evidence of particular sins or crimes, including *solicitación*. If a penitent mentioned something that fell into the category of religious errors under the Inquisition's jurisdiction, confessors were not allowed to absolve the penitent until she or he had informed the Inquisition. This was true whether the penitent had committed the sin themselves or merely suffered from a troubled conscience as a result of knowing about someone else's crime. In the sacramental theology of colonial Catholicism in New Spain, both of these states required confession and absolution. This meant that the penitent would remain in the spiritually perilous state known as *enboramala* until they presented a formal denunciation before a local *comisario*, or Inquisition representative.²³ Sometimes this was done in person, but other times, confessors would take a penitent's dictated denunciation and then deliver it to the *comisario*.

Chapter 2 examines another aspect of laywomen's relationships with clergymen, namely their interactions with priests as judges. To get at these interactions, this chapter looks at women's initiation of court cases related to sexuality, marriage, and gendered violence in the *Juzgado Eclesiástico de Toluca* – a regional ecclesiastical court under the authority of the archbishop of Mexico. Through this local case study, I explore women's interpretations of the court's stated purposes, their engagement with ideas about sin and scandal, and their expectations of and communications with priests as judges. In these court cases, women engaged with the notions of spiritual

22 Jessica Delgado, “Foregrounding Marginal Voices: Writing Women's Stories Using Solicitation Trials,” in Sylvia Sellers-Garcia and Karen Melvin, eds., *Imagining Histories of Colonial Latin America: Synoptic Methods and Practices* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2017).

23 The literal translation of “*enboramala*” is “unfortunate, in a bad hour,” or sometimes as an exclamation, “damn the hour.” But in the sacramental context it referred to a dangerous state of the soul in which a person had sin on their conscience and had not completed confession. In this state, taking communion was forbidden, and if the individual died, she or he would have to pay for this unconfessed sin in purgatory. Its opposite, *enborabuena*, connotes being in a fortunate state and is also used as a statement of congratulations or blessing.

health as collective and communal, of sin and scandal as contagious, and of women as particularly dangerous vectors in this equation. In their efforts to appeal to ecclesiastical judges for help and support, they invoked rather than contested these ideas but did so in a way that spurred judges to act on their behalf. Rather than simply presenting themselves as weak and in need of protection, these women reminded ecclesiastical judges of their obligations to protect the community from damage caused by unchecked sin and scandal, and they did so by positioning *themselves* as the unwitting sources of this scandal. Forced into a position in which their very circumstances threatened the health of the community, these women sought restitution for the crimes committed against them by the men ultimately responsible for the damage inflicted by women's compromised bodies and souls.

The archive of the Toluca court is unique among repositories of diocesan court records; whereas the records of most regional and local branches of the bishops' *Audiencia* have been either lost or scattered, the records of the Toluca court have remained largely intact. While women's use of this court to navigate their sexual and domestic relationships with men is striking, it is important to keep in mind that it was also still probably a last resort. Women in the region brought perhaps only two such cases a year. Nonetheless, women utilized the court in particular ways and significantly more than men did. In addition, testimonies from cases related to sexuality and marital conflict reflect that knowledge about these types of cases was more extensive than was the practice of bringing them, suggesting that women in the community knew it was a possible resource for them. In other words, the relatively few cases brought to court had a wider impact than the numbers might suggest. Whatever the case, these court documents themselves provide uncommonly clear examples of women articulating their own interpretations of church teachings about themselves.

The third chapter explores the ways that laywomen became entangled in the Inquisition's investigatory mechanisms and how this entanglement interrupted and affected their devotional lives and relationships with clergymen. This interruption reflects an important dynamic in women's experiences of "church" – namely, the distinctions, overlapping boundaries, and sometimes contradictory purposes and styles of different church institutions and authorities. Whereas women were able to engage with the purposes and priorities of diocesan courts with relative success, those of the Inquisition were rarely conducive to women's needs. Rather, the Inquisition's investigatory activities and methods utilized women's sacramental, judicial, and social relationships with priests – as well as women's informal homosocial communication networks – in ways that compromised laywomen's sacramental experiences and access, damaged their relationships with priests, and threatened their reputations and standing in their communities.

What made it possible for the Inquisition to tap into women's sacramental and social relationships was women's own engagement with church rituals and practices. Women's belief that sin and scandal were indeed contagious and that confession was necessary to restore one's spiritual health after being exposed to the sins of another led them to spread information – turning for comfort to each other as well as priests – in ways that the Inquisition could then utilize. And the importance of confession and communion in women's lives allowed the Inquisition to coerce them into testifying by threatening to interrupt their access to these sacraments. Thus, in addition to reflecting some of the complications of women's interactions with a multifaceted church, a focus on the Inquisition reveals elements of women's piety and the intersections of their devotional and social lives.

This chapter also complicates the view of women's participation in colonial religious culture presented in previous chapters. In Chapter 3, women themselves become agents of local Inquisitorial cultures of guilt, catharsis, and rumor. These cultures were bounded by time and place, and women's participation in them was largely the result of coercion, fear, and anxiety; nonetheless, the mechanisms and results were widespread enough to make up a significant aspect of women's contribution to colonial religiosity. Though women often unwittingly contributed to the Inquisition's methods of gathering information, and in spite of the fact that they were frequently harmed by the process and the resulting spread of suspicion and scrutiny, these dynamics remain a part of laywomen's role in the making of colonial Catholicism.

However, in order to see this, it is necessary to look beyond the usual scholarly emphasis on women as defendants in Inquisition trials and instead examine their roles as witnesses. It is also important to take into account the enormous amount of fragmentary evidence and testimony produced by dead-end local investigations rather than focusing on the relatively rare instances of full trials that arrived to the main tribunal of the Holy Office in Mexico City. Though scholars of the Inquisition in New Spain have correctly argued that the number of actual trials and convictions was in fact very small, the gathering of local denunciations and follow-up testimonies was far more widespread. When inspired by a particularly vigilant clergyman, the periodic publication of edicts, or even the fluctuations of informal communication practices and networks themselves, the processes examined in Chapter 3 could lead to a flurry of activity that could affect a community for years. Seen through the resulting fragmentary and incomplete records, women's engagement with the Inquisition appears far less rarefied and spectacular than a focus on trials would make it appear. Instead, it emerges as one factor among many that shaped women's devotional lives and relationship to the church.

A Note on Ecclesiastical Justice

The Inquisition serves as a major source of documentation for all of the chapters in Part I, and the role of ecclesiastical justice in general looms large throughout the entire book. While it is not my primary purpose to enter into the historiographic debates related to the Inquisition and other ecclesiastical courts in New Spain, it is unavoidable that some of my arguments both build on and have implications for this scholarship. For this reason, it may be helpful to address some of these questions up front and to clarify the relationship between the two main branches of ecclesiastical justice represented in Part I.

Starting in the 1960s and increasing after the 1980s, scholarship about the Mexican Inquisition began to move against the legacy of the “black legend” that had previously shaped so much of the historical memory of the Spanish Inquisition as a whole. Scholars reassessed the significance of the Inquisition in colonial Mexican society, arguing that it was not the all-powerful institution of successful repression that this legend implied and increasingly turning to Inquisition trial records primarily as sources of social history.²⁴ While these have been important correctives and research directions, they have not fully addressed the local and informal impact of the Inquisition within Mexican communities. It is true that very few people found themselves the focus of an Inquisition trial; Richard Greenleaf found that only 5 percent of the population was subject to an Inquisition accusation; that of this 5 percent, only one-sixth of these cases ever came to trial; and that of these few trials, only about 2 percent of defendants were convicted.²⁵ However, these numbers do not reflect the much greater numbers of people who testified before a *comisario* as witnesses or accusers, nor can they measure the more widespread and indirect impact of the Inquisition’s methods of gathering information. These mechanisms mobilized both clergy and laypeople in ways that encouraged the spread of information, along with guilt and surveillance, and had the potential to damage reputations, families, and communities.

A focus on trials rather than local investigations also gives the impression that Indigenous women and men rarely interacted with the Inquisition by the seventeenth century. However, this is not the case because Indigenous people frequently testified as witnesses. Royal and religious authorities

24 See, for example, Richard Boyer, *Lives of the Bigamists: Marriage, Family, and Community in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Few, *Women Who Live Evil Lives*; Jaffary, *False Mystics*; Villa-Flores, *Dangerous Speech: A Social History of Blasphemy in Colonial Mexico* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2006); and, for the Iberian world, Stuart Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

25 Richard Greenleaf, “Historiography of the Mexican Inquisition: Evolution of Interpretations and Methodologies,” in *Cultural Encounters: The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 249–73.

debated the correctness of Native Americans being subjected to the harsh scrutiny of the Inquisition throughout the monastic and Episcopal Inquisition periods but finally decided against it in 1571, when the independent tribunals of the Holy Office of the Spanish Inquisition opened their doors in Mexico and Peru. At this time, King Philip decided that Native Americans, as a class of childlike subjects and neophytes in the faith, should be formally excluded from the Inquisition's jurisdiction for the time being, perhaps indefinitely. This meant that bishops and archbishops – and in practice, local clergymen as well – retained the primary authority to police the boundaries of orthodoxy in Indigenous communities. Formally, these duties belonged to the bishops' audiencias, known collectively as the *Provisorato de Indios y Chinos*.²⁶ However, in practice, heresy, idolatry, and other religious errors that the Inquisition regulated constituted only a small part of the work local ecclesiastical courts undertook in these communities. Rather, parish priests and regular clergy tended to take most of the responsibility for disciplining and educating the Indigenous population through confession, public penance, and didactic sermons.²⁷

This being said, there remained a fair amount of fluidity and even confusion in how Inquisitorial authority was supposed to function for the Indigenous population.²⁸ The *Provisorato de Indios y Chinos* was one-third of a larger judicial apparatus under the bishop, shared by the *Provisorato de Españoles* and the *Juzgado de Testamentos, Capellanías, y Obras Pías*. Local tribunals of this apparatus, like the *Juzgado Eclesiástico de Toluca* and smaller parish courts, heard cases brought by and against members of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population within their jurisdiction and tended to have their hands full with matters other than religious heterodoxy. Only when a case was too serious or when the court wanted the advice of a superior did the local judge have to decide which central court had jurisdiction. On the other hand, in its formal inquisitorial function, the *Provisorato de Indios* continued to operate as an *Inquisición Ordinaria* and its *provisores* as *Inquisidores de Indios*, terms to which the Inquisition strongly objected but that the diocesan tribunals continued to claim throughout the colonial period.²⁹

26 This was the umbrella court that supervised the *Juzgado Eclesiástico de Toluca*, the local tribunal that is the subject of Chapter 2.

27 Jorge Klor de Alva, "Colonizing Souls: The Failure of the Indian Inquisition and the Rise of Penitential Discipline," in *Cultural Encounters: The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 3–21; Greenleaf, "The Inquisition and the Indians of New Spain"; and Richard Greenleaf, "The Mexican Inquisition and the Indians: Sources for the Ethnohistorian," *The Americas* 34, no. 3 (Jan. 1978): 315–44.

28 Greenleaf, "The Inquisition and the Indians."

29 Greenleaf, "The Inquisition and the Indians" and "The Mexican Inquisition."

It is also the case that such trial records are scarce, due perhaps to some combination of poor bookkeeping, a tendency to leave all but the most serious cases of Indigenous heterodoxy in the hands of confessors and parish priests, and the loss of documentation in the nineteenth century when the state appropriated the bulk of church property and records. All of these factors have most likely contributed to the paucity of evidence of the Provisorato de Indio's Inquisitorial activity in all but the most notorious extirpation of idolatry campaigns. During the life of the Juzgado Eclesiástico de Toluca from 1680 to 1825, there were a total of three cases of idolatry, eighteen of witchcraft, one of superstition, two of blasphemy, and six of bigamy. All of these proceedings were very short, as they were primarily concerned with gathering testimony to be forwarded on to the Provisorato de Indios. The relatively few cases of religious crimes heard in this tribunal, which had jurisdiction over the largely Indigenous Valley of Toluca, suggest that it was parish priests who most often dealt with these issues through penitential discipline.

J. Jorge Klor de Alva has argued that penitential discipline was ultimately more important than the Inquisition or the inquisitorial activities of the diocesan tribunals in dealing with heterodoxy in Indigenous population.³⁰ This argument is borne out by Klor de Alva's evidence, but in the case of Indigenous people called to testify as witnesses before the Inquisition and for the non-Indigenous population in general, the division it makes may be too clear-cut. The impact of the Inquisition was in fact intimately linked to penitential discipline through the practice of confession and the activities of local clergy. The Spanish Inquisition in Mexico depended on the work of confessors and parish priests and would not have had the impact it did without incorporating both into its mechanisms of local investigation. It may be, therefore, that some of the patterns of laywomen's interactions with the Inquisition as witnesses might be relevant in complex ways for Indigenous people who lived among Spaniards and castas. It will take the research of many more scholars focusing on witnesses, rather than defendants, to understand this and other aspects of the Inquisition's impact on local communities – a task I suspect would be well worth the effort.

Part II: Chapters and Sources

Part II of the book examines places and practices designed explicitly for the control, protection, and seclusion of laywomen, namely, those encompassed in the terms *depósito* and *recogimiento*. "*Depósito*" was a general term describing the legal transfer of guardianship of a dependent, usually

30 Klor de Alva, "Colonizing Souls."

a woman, from father or husband to either an institution or another private household. It was mediated and mandated by a range of judicial forces, sometimes at women's own request, sometimes at the behest of husbands, and sometimes at the discretion of ecclesiastical or civil authorities themselves. "Recogimiento" was a related and expansive term that referred to a broad range of institutional cloisters, the practice of gathering and secluding women in a range of locations, and the illusive ideology and set of characteristics that both described and proscribed the qualities of modesty, seclusion, and obedience in women. Protecting virtuous and vulnerable women, reforming those who were lost but still redeemable, punishing and quarantining those who needed to be controlled, and gathering together unusually virtuous women in order to concentrate and spread their sanctifying power were all connected and interrelated projects central to religious authorities' and other elite men's treatment and imagination of women.

However, laywomen themselves interpreted and attempted to shape depósito and recogimiento in a variety of ways – sometimes in contradiction to the intentions of founders and regulators. Though women's engagement with depósito and recogimiento was mediated by ecclesiastical and civil authorities, women attempted to use them to their benefit and define them in their own ways as much as possible. In some instances, women themselves sought out depósito in private homes and institutions and chose to celebrate and claim aspects of the ideology of recogimiento. In other situations, judicial authorities imposed the constraints of depósito and recogimiento on them, often at the behest of husbands. The reasons and circumstances involved in all of these situations were diverse, but the practices, ideas, and places of depósito and recogimiento were always connected to a nexus of issues related to sexuality, marriage, theologies of contagion, and women's spiritual status. As the chapters in Part II illustrate, this nexus represented a contested field of ideas and relations.

Together, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 include a wide range of experiences: relatively elite laywomen living in convent-like lay cloisters; women voluntarily and involuntarily placed in depósito within private homes or a range of protective, disciplinary, or rehabilitating institutions; and laywomen living and working in convents for nuns all appear in these three chapters. When referring to institutions, the word "recogimiento" could be either a general term for any kind of cloister or a specific term for places meant only for laywomen. The latter included *colegios*, or schools for girls; prestigious and exclusive lay cloisters; shelters for "poor but virtuous" women and girls; rehabilitative and disciplinary institutions; and asylums for women labeled as deranged or insane. A combination of religious and civil authorities authorized and administered these places, while religious brotherhoods, bishops, and pious individuals contributed financially to

their support. Finally, judicial authorities of every kind received and decided on requests and petitions related to women's entrances and exits.

Chapter 4 looks at laywomen and girls living voluntarily in *colegios* and prestigious *recogimientos*. Though these were meant to house laywomen temporarily in preparation for marriage or profession as nuns, they also housed a significant minority population of permanent residents. Another portion of the residents moved between these places for years, occasionally spending time in convents as well. For these women, such institutions represented a kind of third option – a way to survive outside marriage or the convent while still maintaining or enhancing their spiritual status.

This chapter contains case studies of three of the most prestigious lay cloisters for women in colonial Mexico: *the Colegio de las Niñas de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad*, run by one of the largest *cofradías*, or confraternities, in New Spain; the *Recogimiento y Colegio de San Miguel de Belem*, which was under the authority of the archbishop of Mexico; and the *Colegio de San Ignacio de Loyola*, founded and administered by the Basque *Cofradía de Nuestra Señora de Aránzazu* exclusively for daughters and widows of Basque men and their descendants, all in Mexico City. Founders and supporters of all three of these places imagined their target residents as virtuous girls and women whose ability to protect their spiritual statuses had been compromised by poverty or the death of fathers or husbands. The histories of all three institutions also reflect changes over time in both the ideal and reality of whom these places served and how they did so.

The stated goal of all of these institutions was to educate, protect, and socially and spiritually elevate worthy but vulnerable women in preparation for marriage or the convent or, in the case of virtuous widows, to maintain their family's reputation. However, a close look at the alternate forms of community, family, and female authority forged within these cloisters reveals a more diverse range of possibilities and a greater diversity of residents than founders and regulators imagined. Additionally, the ways these institutions fit within the institutional landscape of female cloister suggest that like professed nuns, these virtuous laywomen could, when properly secluded and gathered together, become a sanctifying force for surrounding communities and the colonies in general.

Chapter 5 looks at cloistering practices aimed at a very different population of women – those thought to require containment, correction, and repentance, either in private homes or in less prestigious *recogimientos*. Some of the institutions included in this category were originally founded for repentant prostitutes or other women who had voluntarily turned away from sexually “disordered” lives. However, in reality many of the women living in these places were seeking divorce or escaping marital conflict, had been sent by their husbands as punishment for disobedient behavior, or were seeking temporary shelter because of their husbands' absence.

In addition, and increasingly in the eighteenth century, these types of recogimientos also served as places of punishment for women accused of nonsexual crimes like theft, selling prohibited liquors, drunkenness, or violence. The ideal of voluntary repentance as the purpose of these institutions was intertwined from the start with the goals of upholding patriarchal authority and offering practical solutions to marital problems, and increasingly over time, with indefinite punishment and correction as well.

The residents of these less prestigious cloisters were generally not as successful in engaging with them on their own terms, but this was not for lack of trying. Petitions and complaints presented to a wide range of judicial authorities illustrate the often-intense negotiations with husbands, other family members, religious and civil authority figures, and the *rectoras* – the female residential supervisors of the institutions themselves. Ideas about contagion and containment are prominent in founding documents but less visible in the record of women’s actual experiences of and negotiations with them. The function these cloisters served within colonial society was contested from both within and without and was linked to the role of convents and prestigious lay cloisters on one hand as well as with the gradual development of prisons, asylums, and poorhouses on the other.

Chapter 6 focuses on the large population of laywomen who lived and worked as servants, slaves, dependents, and temporary residents in convents of nuns. This population overlapped with those in Chapters 4 and 5, sometimes moved between convents and recogimientos, and engaged in similar ways with the ideals of female cloister as did many residents of lay cloisters. However, the emphasis in this chapter is on laywomen’s relationship with the nuns themselves. The ideology of recogimiento that nuns represented, and the crucial work of sanctification that nuns and convents provided, was in fact dependent on the labor, company, and mobility of the laywomen who lived and worked in these prestigious cloisters. Because of this, these laywomen’s personal spiritual status, in some ways, lay outside the logic of recogimiento; their own exposure facilitated and bolstered elite women’s claims to exceptional spiritual status. In practice, however, many of them were there exactly because of that logic in their own lives, and the line between servant, dependent, and nun was never as clear as bishops and other religious authorities would have liked.

As religious authorities’ and pious society’s priorities shifted in relation to how best to respond to the problem of women’s special relationship to the contagion of sin and scandal, opportunities for voluntary cloister for laywomen narrowed. Ironically, protecting the pure seclusion of elite religious women in convents facilitated some kinds of voluntary cloister for a wider range of laywomen than did lay cloisters; the complete seclusion and heightened piety of nuns depended on the presence of women of lesser spiritual status who could perform labor while nuns prayed and who could

facilitate necessary communication with the outside world. The intense struggle that resulted when reformers tried to limit the number of laywomen living in convents reflected nuns' own sense of this dependence.³¹ What is less clear is what these reforms meant for the laywomen themselves who had previously experienced the convents as places of work and residence.

Though it is difficult to learn about convent laywomen before, during, and after the eras of reforms – they were anonymous in most convent records – it is clear that they played a crucial role in cloistered female piety and thus in religious culture in general. This chapter builds on the work of other historians who have successfully illuminated the conventual context in which these laywomen lived. Its new contributions are found largely outside convent records. Nuns' petitions about servants and slaves, testimony of convent laywomen themselves, and testimony and communication by priests about convent laywomen are scattered throughout various kinds of ecclesiastical court records, both inquisitorial and diocesan. This chapter works with this fragmented record to explore the way these women helped make colonial Catholicism.

The sources for the chapters in Part I differ in some significant ways from those in Part II. For both parts, many of the sources are judicial in nature, which reflects both the nature of colonial authority and the practical realities of doing women's history for the early modern world. But the differences in the forms of justice, kinds of testimonies, and ways the sources have been preserved present distinct opportunities and challenges. The sources for Part I consist primarily of either Inquisition documents, in which women appear as witnesses, or diocesan court cases, in which women are primarily the ones presenting complaints and seeking justice. In contrast, the judicial sources for Part II are as often petitions and complaints initiated against women as by them.

The sources for Chapter 4 are not judicial records in the same sense as the rest of the chapters. Rather they are *visita* records and other institutional documentation internal to the three regimientos studied. Archbishop *visita* records come the closest to judicial records in their style and content, but in general, the records of "visits" to cloisters, be they of archbishops or men of the founding *cofradías* assigned to supervise and regulate the cloisters, are quite different than documents produced by an interaction between a petitioner, judge, notary, and witnesses. There is more narrative about the institution, record of authorities' choices, and information about

31 For the history of this conflict, see Margaret Chowning, "Convent Reform, Catholic Reform, and Bourbon Reform in Eighteenth-Century New Spain: The View from the Nunnery," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 85 (2005); and *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1751–1863* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

the daily lives of the female residents. And yet women's actual words play a smaller role than they do in documents in which they testified.

The sources for Chapter 5, on the other hand, are judicial. But they are far more miscellaneous and fragmented than those of Chapters 1, 2, and 3. They do not represent consistent institutions or judicial traditions, and there is very little continuity between the various sources of the paper trails. This is part of the shape and context of women's engagement with *recogimientos*; any authority figure could act as a judge, which led husbands, wives, sisters, mothers, brothers, and fathers to utilize a range of judicial powers, pitting judges against each other when necessary or simply seeking out other options when initial efforts failed.

The miscellaneous, decontextualized quality of these sources also has to do with the way colonial archives were translated by nineteenth-century bureaucrats. The petitions that make up the source base for this chapter are not organized by the judicial entities receiving them, in relation to particular cloisters, nor even by type of petition. They are scattered throughout a wide number of collections organized through other logics. Most of the individual documents name the title of the authority to whom the petition is presented, but in contrast to the archives of the ecclesiastical court of Toluca or the Inquisition, these petitions are not surrounded by other cases heard by the same judge nor even in the same court. For this reason, it is very difficult to find patterns in judges' responses and even to learn about the particular procedures involved. Thus, these sources do not lend themselves to a study of how women engaged these particular courts or judges. Rather, what is most visible are the actions and arguments of the men and women pitted against each other and the ways each of them was relating to the practices and places of *recogimiento*.

Chapter 6 draws primarily on a range of judicial records to expand what we know about convent laywomen. Convent sources themselves are generally less helpful for this task, and the surprising nuggets revealed elsewhere help bring the anonymous laywomen to the foreground. What is lost through this approach, however, is a vision of the particular convents themselves. A general picture of daily rhythms and possible relationships emerge, but not a close look at any one specific place or specific relationships within that space.

The differences in these kinds of sources result in a different style of narrative in the two parts of this book. In Part I, there is more possibility for constructing stories that takes into account the experiences and representations of emotion and affect, and particular choices, rationales, and relationships are also more visible in the first half of the book. All of these things are harder to see in the sources for Part II. Particular material environments and institutional goals are visible in Chapter 4. Patterns emerge from the petitions used for Chapter 5. Chapter 6 illustrates possibilities through

varied examples that were nonetheless sparsely recorded. In all three chapters of Part II, generalizations about laywomen's relationships with female family members, nuns, and other female authority figures also emerge as central.

Troubling Devotion

This is, in the end, a story of devotion as much as a story of negotiation and dialogue. The communication and interactions I examine all took place in a devotional context; some of this devotional communication is troubling. It is troubling to see women risk sexual assault in order to receive confession and communion. It is troubling to see the naked power that husbands could exercise with the support of ecclesiastical judges when they sent their wives to less than desirable *recogimientos*. And it is troubling to see the Inquisition require confessors to betray the trust of their penitents, compelling them to become witnesses when they were only seeking to privately unburden their consciences before God and a trusted clergyman. But the stories and arguments set forth here also trouble the notion of devotion itself. Devotion still calls to mind a force that is nonrational and separate from material and social concerns. But this is not how laywomen's relationship with the church and religious culture in general worked in the colonial era; devotion motivated their choices but did so within a social context that was shaped by forms of power that modern readers might not recognize as religious.

Colonial laywomen's devotion may be troubling to us sometimes, but by troubling our very notion of devotion, it is also possible to see the ways it could also be life affirming, strategically beneficial, and materially necessary. To understand how so many Mexican women in the postcolonial period came to imagine themselves as defending something crucial that had been lost, it is necessary to explore the possibilities of what women in the colonial era felt they had prior to this moment. Rather than evaluating whether the colonial church was good or bad for women, the most fruitful way of understanding their choices is to examine the ways they participated in the making of colonial Catholicism. Colonial laywomen were both savvy and sincere; they were involved in a complex, paradoxical relationship with the Catholic faith and culture that enlivened their lives and to the ecclesiastical institutions, symbols, authorities, and practices that supported and gave structure to that faith and culture. Perhaps the answer to why so many laywomen felt so strongly about protecting and defending the church in the face of a hostile state was less about the church itself and more about the time and energy they had invested. In the following chapters, I hope to bring to life some of what they built – both for good and for ill – over time, with their bodies, hearts, and minds, through their practices, emotions, and interpretations.