J. Michelle Molina


Dr. Molina’s overall argument in favor of the pre-modern, religious roots of the modern (disembodied) self (a process which she claims was neither restricted to nor defined by the West) is bound to stimulate considerable debate. Furthermore, she draws effectively on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theories to show how anachronistic it is of us to posit the existence of “the inner (wo)man” and the duality of mind/body in the early modern period (18–19). Her big question is a highly pertinent one: how did Ignatius Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises—that “science of the self”—not only develop a “narrative sense of self” (8–9) but also contribute to the spiritual dynamic that enabled Roman Catholicism to become the first world religion. It is refreshing to see due weight being given to the medieval legacy that informed Loyola’s Exercises. That said, as an historian of early modern Roman Catholicism with specific interest in the reciprocal relationship between the Old and New Worlds in the making of the first religion with global reach, I found the treatment of several themes problematic and inconclusive.

To begin with, although it is clear that Molina is determined to exorcise what this reviewer once referred to as “the curse of Max Weber” (whereby Catholicism is excluded from playing any part in the emergence of modernity), her engagement with the extensive literature which has sought to counter this exclusion is surprisingly limited, even given that her focus is on Mesoamerica. A central strand of this historiography has been founded on showing the structural similarities between the Protestant and Catholic Reformations and how the common process of confessionalization constructed a political subject whose body and soul came to be controlled by the state in collusion with the territorial churches. This has been championed for Catholic culture pre-eminently by Wolfgang Reinhard, who has also written extensively on the history of colonialism (in both German and English translation), which he sees as having been enabled by the whole process. Mention of Reinhard is, however, nowhere to be found in Molina’s text. Given the importance of confession to her narrative of the emergence of the modern self, it is striking to notice the absence of any engagement with the work of John Bossy, whose Christianity in the West 1400-1700 (1985) remains the most powerful evocation of the “[soul-] world we have lost.” Also absent is reference to the work of Bossy’s supervisor, H. Outram Evennett, chapter three of whose The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation (1968, but given as lectures as long ago as 1951) memorably characterized the Exercises as “a shock-tactic spiritual gymnastic [instructor’s
and linked this directly to the effectiveness of Jesuit global dynamism.

I understand that Molina is working out of a different tradition which views the *Exercises* as a Foucauldian “technique [or technology] of the self” (16) and in phenomenological terms as “a ritualization of being through which the exercitant became an object to herself” (43), an unintended consequence of which was to bring the notion of “self” into being. However, I believe that her characterization of their intended effect as being the monasticization of the laity is historically misleading. By her own admission, it was the mendicants (not monks) who offered the bridge between “the retreat-from-the-world of pure monasticism and the Jesuit form of worldly Catholicism” (27). Molina is on firmer ground when she relates—all too briefly—Ignatius to the tradition of *recogimiento* which had been dominant in late medieval Spain and which became topical (and dangerous) owing to the association of this form of silent prayer with the heterodox *alumbrados* precisely when Loyola was undergoing the experiences which lie behind the *Exercises*. That said, I really don’t believe that one can discuss the role played by the *Exercises* in taking Christianization to a new internalized and embodied level without engaging more extensively with the wider literature, which has, more recently, led to a growing interest in the history of the senses. (See here the work of Wietse de Boer, particularly his book *Conquest of the Soul* about Carlo Borromeo’s Milan, from 2001, and the collection of essays he has co-edited with Christine Göttler: *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, Brill, 2012. Also relevant is Moshe Sluhovsky’s excellent article: “St Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* and their contribution to modern introspective subjectivity” in the *Catholic Historical Review*, October 2013.) Although all this research is focused overwhelmingly on the Old World it has manifest relevance for the New, since by Molina’s own admission (to borrow the phrase of Claudio Lomnitz): “New Spain was Europe’s westernmost extremity” (5).

Although I am aware that Molina’s argument does not turn on the meaning of particular words or even phrases within the *Exercises*, I must confess to being uneasy in a work of academic scholarship to find the author making but a single reference to the critical edition of this key text (I. Calveras & C. de Dalmases, eds., *Exercitia spiritualia Sancti Ignatii de Loyola et eorum directoria*, Monumenta Ignatiana, series II, vol. 1, Rome, 1969). Instead she uses a single translation and commentary, that by George Ganss in the “Classics in Western Spirituality” series (1991), which in certain respects is inferior to that by Joseph Munitz (available as part of the Penguin edition of *Loyola’s Personal Writings*, 1996). The same is true as regards Molina’s exclusive reliance on the albeit excellent English edition (1996) of the directories for the *Exercises* edited and translated by Martin E. Palmer for the Institute of Jesuit Sources. Elsewhere, when discussing Loyola’s