A MYSTIC IN THE AGE OF THE INQUISITION: BERNARDINO DE LAREDO’S CONVERSO ENVIRONMENT AND CHRISTOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY*

JESSICA A. BOON

The spirituality of the Spanish Golden Age is a study in contrasts. It is perhaps surprising that the same country and era would implement an extensive juridical tool for curbing heterodoxy (the Inquisition) while at the same time providing the environment for the development of early modern mysticism seen in the works of Ignacio de Loyola, Teresa de Avila, and Juan de la Cruz. Less astonishing is that these two extremes, while coexisting, did not do so peacefully. In fact, most sixteenth-century Castilian mystics either appeared before the Inquisitorial courts or had their writings proscribed by inquisitors in the Spanish *Indices de libros prohibidos* (Indices of Prohibited Books) updated at regular intervals after 1559.

While it is true that mystics posed a potential problem for inquisitors due to their originality and individuality in the practice of Christian devotion, most of the mystics who were denounced during the Inquisition received official scrutiny based on their status as *conversos* or New...
Christians—that is, as the descendants of converted Jews. This fact has generated a subcategory of scholarship that seeks to prove the _converso_ genealogy of particular (and particularly famous) mystics, either by locating documented evidence as evidence of the mystic’s family background or by demonstrating the ways that Jewish belief can be adduced from the best-known mystical treatises of the Golden Age. This approach in turn draws on the debate within modern scholarship over the religious affiliation of the _conversos_ in general: whether converts retained covert links to their religious heritage (the theory of the crypto-Jews) or whether they converted fully without any carryover of practice or belief.

In this article, I take a different approach to the question of Golden Age mystics, using as a case study Bernardino de Laredo (1482-1545?), the author of one of the first vernacular Castilian mystical treatises, a cofounder of the genre of _recogimiento_ (recollection mysticism), and a known influence on Teresa de Avila. Laredo is unique among sixteenth-century Castilian mystics for neither coming before the Inquisition nor having his _Subida del Monte Sión_ (Ascent of Mount Sion, 1535, 1538) banned or expurgated by the _Indices of Prohibited Books_. These facts are remarkable enough in themselves, yet still more so, given that it is possible to prove that Laredo’s life choices would have led his fellow residents of

---


2 An example of attempting to prove Kabbalistic influence on Golden Age Christian mysticism is found in Catherine Swietlicki, _Spanish Christian Cabala: The Works of Luis de León, Santa Teresa de Jesús, and San Juan de la Cruz_ (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), passim.

3 For example, Francisco de Osuna and Bernabé de Palma, immediate contemporaries of Laredo who also articulated the method of recollection mysticism, both ended up in the _Indices_. Palma’s _Via spiritus_ was banned entirely in 1559, as was Osuna’s _Gracioso convite:_ Carlos Clavería, ed., _Arte de prohibir libros: Indice de libros prohibidos 1559_ (Barcelona: Edicions Destres, 2001), 52, 63. Osuna’s _Primer abecedario espiritual_ was first expurgated in Antonii a Soto Maños, _Novissimus librorum prohibitorum et expurgatorum indice pro Catholicus Hispaniarum Regnis, Philippo IV_ (Madrid: Didacus Diaz, 1640), 862; and his _Segundo abecedario_ in _Index librorum prohibitorum et expurgatorum_, by Bernardi de Sandoval et Roxas (Madrid: Ludovicum Sanchez, 1612), 45. See Alfredo Vílchez Díaz, _Autores y anónimos españoles en los indices inquisitoriales_ (Madrid: Universidad Complutense, 1986), 82, for the complete list of _Indices_ that expurgated Osuna’s works.