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From the Selected Works of Jason Dyck

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Review of Ryan Dominic Crewe. The Mexican Mission: Indigenous Reconstruction and Mendicant Enterprise in New Spain, 1521–1600

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supports Cassen's claim that Jews could not fully participate in early modern cultural exchange. Although *Marking the Jews in Renaissance Italy* raises more questions than it answers, this book convincingly reveals the political precarity of late medieval and early modern Jewish communities.

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The Mexican Mission: Indigenous Reconstruction and Mendicant Enterprise in New Spain, 1521–1600.

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Mendicant monasteries are massive structures that still dominate several parts of the Mexican landscape today. Why did Mesoamerican peoples build these new temples—symbols of Spanish rule and a foreign god—as they were still recovering from the chaos of conquest and epidemic disease? This is the question Ryan Dominic Crewe tackles in *The Mexican Mission*, a new look at the early missionary theatre in New Spain that moves away from the spiritual encounter to the social aspects of evangelization. Crewe argues that the mission was both “a vehicle of native survival” (2) and “a pawn in the intensifying rivalries” (10) between Indigenous polities in the postconquest period. Throughout the sixteenth century, Indigenous peoples erected monasteries in their *altepetls* (city-states) to assert their own political autonomy and to rebuild their communities in a changing colonial context.

The Mexican Mission is divided into three sections, the first of which concentrates on the politics of conversion. For Crewe, religious change was not a question of spiritual conviction but rather a social process deeply rooted in Mesoamerican politics and Iberian expansion. He explains that the *teocalli* (temple) was the centre of the *altepetl*, a symbol of sovereignty and the heart of local identities. While Spaniards razed temples of various faiths across the Atlantic world, they still had to deal with the social, political, and spiritual afterlives of these structures. Crewe makes other transoceanic connections

by drawing comparisons between Granadan Muslims, Canary Islanders, and Mesoamericans. In all cases, colonized peoples were forced to convert to Catholicism, and the Indigenous acceptance of missionaries on both sides of the Atlantic was a way to obtain protection, curb mortality rates, and restore order to their societies.

Crewe suggests that the trauma Indigenous peoples experienced in New Spain has been minimized in both older and newer strands of mission historiography. Instead of referring to evangelization as a “spiritual conquest,” he calls it a “dirty war” in which friars sequestered Indigenous children “like janissaries” and deployed them as a “shock force” (69). While conjuring up images of the Ottoman empire and Latin American dictatorships is questionable for New Spain, Crewe’s emphasis on missionary violence is important. Scholars have often fallen prey to mendicant portrayals of themselves as peaceful defenders of Indigenous neophytes. Many mission histories are still dominated by images of friars and elite children engaged in cordial scholarly dialogues and catechism classes without due attention to the dire consequences of denying baptism.

In the second section, *The Mexican Mission* covers the mission building campaigns of the 1500s. Crewe depicts mendicant monasteries as “bicultural structures” (177) and “sign[s] of indigenous endurance” (160) that were simultaneously both centres of Catholic missions and new *teocallis*. In his reading of the missionary theatre, the friars were not the sole or even the most important architects of Indian *doctrinas* (proto parishes); they were a small group of cloaked outsiders who were dependent on Mesoamerican social structures, territorial organization, rituals, leadership, and labour. Missionaries only had success when their goals aligned with local leaders, who wanted *doctrina* status to obtain political recognition as *cabeceras* (head towns) from the viceregal government.

Crewe claims that “Mexico was no Thebaid” (155) by focusing on the “darker side” (131) of the mission economy. Mendicants insisted that Mesoamerican communities offered them pious donations, but they were no different than encomenderos in their reliance on traditional systems of tribute rooted in the *altepetl*. They had to establish ad hoc agreements with local rulers to sustain their missions because they were prohibited from collecting the tithe and received limited funding from the crown. Friars were also dependent on hordes of Mesoamerican workers in draft labour arrangements to construct

their monastery complexes. There is a wealth of literature on Indigenous sculptors and painters, but Crewe turns his attention to the lesser-known masons, stone cutters, and commoners hauling lumber and stone “in the shadow of mass death” (158).

The final section of *The Mexican Mission* offers a different take on the process of secularization in the second half of the sixteenth century. Instead of only concentrating on the conflicts between the regular and secular clergy, Crewe highlights how Mesoamerican communities were affected when their *doctrinas* became full parishes. Friars saw loyalty to them over secular priests as a sign of enduring affection, but local leaders were in fact navigating a new landscape of uncertainty and asserting themselves against other competing Mesoamerican polities. Crewe notes how secularization was also happening as the Indigenous population and church construction were both in major decline between the 1570s and 1590s. The mendicants adapted by shifting away from a reliance on Mesoamerican tribute to a more active role in the colonial market economy.

The Mexican Mission will become a central text for those studying the history of the early church in New Spain. Crewe offers revised and expanded lists of the foundations of *doctrinas* and the construction dates of monasteries in the appendices, both of which will be very useful for researching a range of historical themes in the sixteenth century. He also provides a narrative of the missionary theatre in which Mesoamerican peoples take centre stage in leading roles that have often been assigned to mendicant friars. Missions were indeed “hybrid enterprises” (91) in which monastery complexes were tools of both Spanish colonialism and Indigenous survival.

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