Review of The Cult of the Saints, by P. Brown

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At the same time, however, one wishes that greater attention had been paid to the processes by which civilian dominance emerged in Venezuela—no clear explanation is given, for example, for the crucial turn about by President López Contreras regarding elections and openings for political parties. In short, the historical context is altogether too brief and too compact. Nor does the post 1973 period receive more than summary treatment — less than fifteen pages in all — so that the reader does not capture the means by which COPEI retained its viability and capacity to win again in 1978. Thus the picture on the dust jacket of Luis Herrera Campins (1979-1984) during the 1978 campaign tantalizes but ultimately misrepresents the major concern of the book. Clearly Caldera himself would have been a more fitting subject for such a photograph. Some awkward translations and a composition room goof rendering discussion of some important historical background totally incomprehensible further detract from the study.

Overall, however, the volume is a useful contribution and is recommended for students of Latin American politics.

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The cult of the saints has long posed problems for the post-Reformation Christian theologian. Protestant theologians by and large have seen it as Christianized idolatry, deflecting the faithful’s attention away from coming face-to-face with the word of God in Scripture for the sake of unnecessary intermediaries. Roman Catholic theologians have dutifully followed the party line and provided casuistic defences of the system, but the sighs of relief when Vatican II played down this custom were almost audible.

Fortunately religion is not solely the property of theologians, and many students of religious institutions, comparative religions, folklore and the like, have long recognized the positive value if not the actual need of the cult of the saints for many religious people. Brown’s little book, originally the Haskell Lectures on the History of Religions, concentrates on the cult’s “rise and function in Latin Christianity,” specifically in the late Roman period.

The saints provided ancient man with power and protection in a world dominated by totalitarian political systems and increasing social and economic disorder. The grave of the saint, the *locus sanctus*, was a meeting place of two worlds. Death was society’s only equalizer but feared for the unbridgeable gap it created. The saints bridged this gap. They drew from the power of the divine to aid the human; free from the oppressions, and especially the oppressors, of late Roman society, they provided invisible aids and companions to the people.

The saints could, however, be taken for granted. Like all living beings, they had their wants. Their shrines were adorned; their feast days observed. More than a *quid pro quo*, such activity made the saint a community figure, a guarantor of safety to town or country.

Popular movements inevitably become co-opted by the establishment, and the cult of the saints met the inevitable fate. Secular and ecclesiastical authorities regulated activities around the shrines, and while they surely curbed some superstitious excesses, the cult lost much of its freshness and spontaneity. But in spite of this, the cult did not

lose its main function, and the saints’ tombs and shrines continued to “be places where men could stand in the searching and merciful presence of a fellow human being.” (p. 227).

Brown has command of a great many facts to support his case. Examples are drawn from all over the Late Roman Empire and from several centuries. But as Brown’s vigorous prose marches quickly on through all this, the reader often feels caught in the rush. To be sure, the book arose from a lecture series, but one still cannot help concluding that this should have been a much longer work. We must hope that Brown will return to this topic again, and this time allow some of his truly illuminating insights to grow into chapters.

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From the sociological vantage, the muddy contingencies of historical events pose problems for a discipline intent on becoming a rigorous and precise science. Often modelling itself after the natural sciences, mainstream sociology has been inclined to equate rigor with quantifiability. Given the fact that historical data has not appeared to be as amenable to quantification as they would have liked, it has to large extent been excised from the purview of sociology. The shift away from history can be seen, for instance, in the work of Robert Merton. He began his career with a magnificent study of science and technology in seventeenth century England; it was a study which, in its scope, depth, and concerns, was very much in the tradition of Weber. However, the promise held forward for the advancing of a genuinely comparative historical sociology was not delivered, as his subsequent work was conceived and executed within the parameters of the self-imposed strictures of middle-range theory. Similarly, the work of George Homans (to whom Tilly pays homage in this volume) evidences a shift away from historical inquiry and an advocacy of an explicitly positivistic version of the behavioral sciences.

However, recent years have witnessed a considerable expansion of interest among both historians and sociologists in overcoming the methodological, theoretical, and institutional barriers that have kept the disciplines apart for decades. For those concerned with the lives of ordinary people—particularly as they were forced to confront an epoch of revolutionary change, which included, in addition to economic and political transformations, dramatic changes in science and technology, transportation, communications, life expectancy, and structures of consciousness (i.e., secularization and rationalization)—a new social history afforded much promise. Historians and sociologists gravitated to the work of such scholars as E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Barrington Moore, George Rude, and others. Tilly’s work is conceived in this tradition. His primary focus of attention is on the class dislocations which resulted due to the emergence of capitalist economies in the nation states of Western Europe and on the North American continent.

Methodologically, Tilly differs from many who practice the “new history” insofar as he is intent on utilizing increasingly sophisticated quantitative techniques in the study of collective behavior and class contention. In this regard, Tilly’s work reminds one of Lucien Febvre’s comments slightly more than three decades ago: “The day will