Book Review of Stuart B. Schwartz. All can be saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World

Karin Velez, Macalester College

In this impressively wide-ranging study of religious sentiment in the early modern Atlantic, Schwartz poses questions that speak directly to the anxieties of our own time and place: Where do ideas of tolerance originate? Did attitudes of tolerance survive notorious periods of suppression such as that of the Inquisition? Schwartz turns the tables with his answers: he argues that the torch of tolerance was lit and nourished not by “philosopher-kings” like the eighteenth century’s Voltaire, but by the “plain folks” (p. 139) of the Iberian world at a far earlier and more guarded moment of imposed orthodoxy. His protagonists, “rustic Pelagians” (p. 242) from across the Spanish and Portuguese empires, were mostly uneducated, disorganized, outnumbered, and harshly punished. But their opposition to state policies of intolerance persisted over time, creating a social context conducive to home-grown, experience-based notions of justice. Schwartz emphasizes two generally overlooked groups among these dissidents summoned before the Inquisition. He highlights “Old Christians” (p. 12) from Iberia’s majority population, and foreigners including Dutch, French, and English Protestants. By focusing on these groups, he effectively dispels the “Black Legend” of a uniformly fanatical and culturally isolated Spanish Catholic realm.

Schwartz locates hundreds of stubborn advocates of religious heterodoxy in the Inquisition records of Spain, Portugal, the Canary Islands, Brazil, Peru, Mexico, and Colombia between 1500 and 1700. His primary sources are trial records surrounding “proposiciones” (p. 18), public expressions that countered Catholic dogma, particularly with regard to the official Church stance against fornication outside of wedlock and against salvation outside of the Church. In these documents, Schwartz finds common folk repeatedly countering authority with the popular dictum “Each person can be saved in his or her own religion” (p. 1). What stands out in Schwartz’s detailed survey is not this elegant refrain, however, but his carefully drawn spectrum of different articulations of this concept. He prefers to quote the far clumsier words of run-of-the-mill relativists, universalists, skeptics, atheists, doubters, good Catholics, the insane, and even the indifferent; moriscos, conversos, renegades, and Old Christians; doctors, friars, and pastry chefs; Spanish, Portuguese, creoles, and mulattos; readers and nonreaders; the well-traveled and the sedentary; and both men and women, though he notes that there were far fewer cases of women accused of propositions in Inquisition records (p. 249). Schwartz’s crowning touch is to resitu-
ate historical luminaries such as the skeptic Baruch Spinoza (pp. 57–61) and the Jesuits António Vieira (pp. 107–114) and Alonso de Sandoval (pp. 163–166) in this contextualizing and mundane company. Rather than presenting these men as exceptional, he discusses them alongside Old Christian wool merchants and blasphemous carpenters whose heretical statements of tolerance sound strikingly similar to those of the canon of greats.

Schwartz depicts a noisy Atlantic sphere where arguments over religious tolerance regularly interrupted dinner conversations, book exchanges between friends, and even military battles on frontier beaches. Against a background of socially accepted slurs of “damned heretic dogs!” Schwartz presents a parade of individuals selflessly and recklessly retorting, “How do you know the heretics are damned?” (p. 228), or “Shut up and leave the Indians alone” (p. 153). Indeed, Schwartz is so successful at presenting these memorable voices from below that it is difficult for the reader to avoid the “Schindler’s List” phenomenon that he cautions so sharply against (p. 8): to see Iberia’s violent Inquisitorial past as somehow redeemed by the failure, chronicled in the Inquisition’s own records, to stamp out this resilient strain of tolerance among the masses.

All Can Be Saved is pathbreaking for its methodology as well as its argument. Schwartz explicitly rejects many of historians’ assumed oppositions between elite and popular, literate and illiterate, Iberian (Catholic) and foreign (Protestant), and Old and New World. In doing so, however, Schwartz risks overstating two other pervasive dichotomies. First, he sets independent-minded rustics starkly against oppressive state institutions. One is left to wonder whether some of Schwartz’s collected exclamations of tolerance might also have been leaking from the apparatus of the Iberian Inquisition itself, perhaps even from the mouths of the dreaded inquisitors. Second, Schwartz tends to sharply separate Europeans and creoles from native populations in his analysis. Surely these new peoples, freshly incorporated into the Iberian empire and the Christian fold, were equally vociferous contributors to the emerging notion of religious tolerance. To his credit, Schwartz does allude tantalizingly to the crossroads of Portuguese Goa (p. 88) and to the indigenous concept of nepantla, or liminality, in Mexico (pp. 173–176). Yet he does not weave into his narrative such extra-European dialogue about religious tolerance except in one fascinating, all-too-brief aside about the sixteenth-century “Santidade” religious movement in Brazil that drew together Tupi Indians, Portuguese sugar planters, mameluco, and African slaves (pp. 187–188). Nonetheless, Schwartz sets a brilliant precedent here for pushing aside the tired boundaries of
Iberian historiography to uncover surprising, deeply rooted, and shared societal attitudes of the early modern world.

KARIN VÉLEZ
Northeastern University

The History of the Conquest of New Spain. By BERNAL DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO. Edited by DAVÍD CARRASCO. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. 504 pp. $27.95 (paper).

Born into a family of local prominence in Old Castile, Bernal Díaz del Castillo rose in rank from foot soldier to captain and, toward the end of his life, transcribed his memories of multiple expeditions to Mesoamerica and of his participation in the legendary offensive that brought down the Aztec empire. Although circulated among an elite few in the sixteenth century, Bernal Díaz’s epic history was not published until 1632, and his original manuscript in Guatemala came to light only in 1904. The English-speaking world did not have access to an accurate version until pioneering archaeologist Alfred Maudslay published a five-volume English translation between 1908 and 1916, followed by a concise edition in 1927. Drawn from Maudslay’s original work, this new abridgment, edited by Davíd Carrasco, professor of anthropology and religion at Harvard University, gives students and teachers alike a balanced interpretation of Bernal Díaz’s influential text La verdadera historia de la conquista de Nueva España. Tellingly, Carrasco omits the word “true” from the title, providing a window into the analysis offered in a series of short essays that accompany the narrative. In the introduction, Carrasco successfully situates Bernal Díaz within sixteenth-century polemics over the nature of the conquest and his often vitriolic debates with men like Francisco López de Gómara and Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose works had preceded his own. Carrasco encourages the reader to consider the veracity of the account presented rather than assume Bernal Díaz is an unbiased, objective witness to history. Material drawn from Miguel León-Portilla’s The Broken Spears, for example, illustrates the indigenous perspective on defining events such as the massacre at Cholula and Mexica (Aztec) rites and rituals. Significantly, in this new version, the Spanish conquest does not end with the defeat of the Aztecs in 1521. Whereas earlier editions, such as Maudslay’s 1927 The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico and J. M. Cohen’s 1963 The Conquest of New Spain, portrayed Cuauhtémoc’s dramatic surrender of Tenochtitlan as the climactic denouement of two years of brutal fight-