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J. Michelle Molina. To Overcome Oneself: The Jesuit Ethic and Spirit of Global Expansion, 1520-1767

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J. Michelle Molina. *To Overcome Oneself: The Jesuit Ethic and Spirit of Global Expansion, 1520-1767*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013. 292pp. Hardcover \$85. ISBN: 978-0-520-27565-2.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the Jesuits were a major missionary enterprise across the globe, rapidly expanding the frontiers of Catholic presence. Key to the Jesuits' early successes were techniques of self-transformation inspired by the pedagogy of their founder, Ignatius of Loyola, in his short manual of prayers and meditations entitled *The Spiritual Exercises*.

Despite the subtitle of the book, *To Overcome Oneself* is not about the Jesuit ethic, but a narrative of the various adaptations of the Ignatian exercises for the spiritual formation of modern Catholics in Europe and New Spain. Drawn primarily from archival letters and documents, Molina's study of Jesuit spirituality "historicizes a particular mode of self-objectification" by examining the "intersubjective relationships" fashioned between spiritual director and his subject, whether in a retreat house or through confessional practices (2-3). Using an interdisciplinary approach, Molina skillfully demonstrates throughout the book that self-making requires embodied efforts to know and transcend oneself in and through relationality.

Molina's narrative of the Jesuit influence on modern self-understanding unfolds in seven chapters. The first three chapters sketch the background of the Jesuit approach to subjectivity and its effects. Beginning with the aim of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the author describes the Jesuits' desire to bring their spiritual practice to the laity, especially in

sharing with them the practice of daily self-examination as a modality for self-transcendence (36-45). The early experience of women with the *Exercises* and their complex relationships with their directors provides a framework for understanding the various women's movements in early modern Catholicism (52-65). As part of self-transformation, consolation experienced in prayer by practitioners of the *Exercises* elicited in them a desire to reform others, to renew and replicate the experience they felt (93-103).

The main contribution of the book is in its last four chapters, where Molina painstakingly retells the transformation of self in the reality of the Jesuit mission in New Spain in the seventeenth century, particularly in the ministry of the Italian Jesuit missionary to Mexico, Padre Juan Bautista Zappa. Itinerant missions, frequently accompanied by the practice of general confession and communion (110-130), the establishment of retreat houses, and the distribution devotional literature (131-142) characterize the novel adaptation of the *Exercises* to the masses. The recipients of Padre Zappa's and his confreres' ministry include many indigenous peoples in whose lives colonial prejudice played out in subtle forms (151-170), and women whose interior lives were filled with intense emotion and complex interpersonal relations (173-184).

Molina's aim is more than recounting the stories of Jesuit expansion in the New World. Her study conducts a painstaking inventory of the relevant elements of an Ignatian pedagogy for self-awareness: self-examination, confession, and correction, which were as relevant then as they are now. The journey of self-discovery is akin to an evangelical renewal, aiming at a dramatic assessment of self-knowledge through the various spiritual practices adapted by the individuals. In Molina's historical assessment,

an individual's concept of self is situated and discovered primarily through a process of personal engagements—whether with a spiritual director or with a self-help book.

What makes this book especially informative is the author's methodology, which bridges disciplines as diverse as colonial history, spirituality, devotional literature, ethnography, sociology, philosophy of self, and women's studies. In this project, Molina skillfully weaves together many different strands and historical narratives, from the description of preaching strategy to the material culture of New Spain Catholicism and the study of the evolving understanding of the self and subjectivity in early modern philosophy. Again and again, she engages the reader in considering the emergence of the turn to personal introspection as the mode of religious practice that characterized the period. To Molina's credit, the "inward turn" to a privatized and personal view of religion that began in the modern period can be viewed as the byproduct of a self-transcendental pedagogy spread by the Jesuits on both sides of the Atlantic.

Throughout the book, Molina raises many questions and exhausts none of the topics she promises to treat. A casual reader, however, can get lost in colorful details and meticulous references that she articulates. This book is a welcome addition to the field of Jesuit studies as well as to the history of early Catholicism in Mexico.

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