These two books provide a necessary and welcome addition to our knowledge of religion in Spain. In the past, too much emphasis has been given either to heterodoxy and the Inquisition or to major theologians and clerical bureaucrats. Christian pulls us away from these exceptional aspects to concentrate on the religious expressions that formed the more common heritage of Spaniards. In redirecting our attention to local, personal religion, he has expanded our understanding.

Christian brings to his study a solid preparation in anthropology. His Person and God in a Spanish Valley (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1972) lucidly exposes many of those features of local religion that are central to the books reviewed here. In fact, these books can be taken as models of a successful fusion of anthropology and history.

Individuals do not often meet divine beings, and their infrequent contacts with Mary or the saints are thus significant spiritual experiences both for the witnesses and for those who make the vision public property through devotional practices. Although he has done research on numerous visions from the fifteenth century to the present, in Apparitions Christian focuses only on those from 1399 to 1523. Throughout, his interests are broad: “What people hear saints say, or the way they see the saints, reveals their deepest preoccupations. The changing faces of divine figures over the last six hundred years lead us to changes in the societies that meet them” (p. 4).

Christian has tried to avoid frauds and stories for which there is no contemporary report. His research is based on the written results of investigations by church and village authorities of direct accounts. “In the cases I have studied of public, socially significant visions, there is a substantial probability that the vision took place. By that I do not mean that a divine figure really materialized or that a statue really wept or bled, but merely that people present thought or said so” (p. 7).

One very valuable aspect of this book is that the author appends the texts of thirteen of these reports from rural Castile and Catalonia and extensive translations of the most important sections are incorporated in the body. Castilian and Catalan texts are treated in separate chapters. Each begins with an introduction which is followed by the text translations and their glosses. The final two chapters deal with the close of the Renaissance age of apparitions and with the general themes of the visions.

The author milks more out of this “world of images” he exposes for us than could possibly be conveyed in a review. Perhaps one of the most important insights has to do with the nature of rural Christianity compared with that of the institutional church. In his Le catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1971), Jean Delumeau has argued that medieval Christianity was a minority religion of missionaries which did not begin to have significant evangelical success, especially against the paganism and superstition of the rural world, until the period of the Catholic and Protestant Reformations. Where the vision in Castile and Catalonia resulted in the discovery of an image, the
dominant pattern was for the image to insist on veneration in the rural location where it was found. “I believe what was partly involved was a paganization (from pagus, country) of Christianity—a kind of encoded recapitulation of the process by which rural pre-Christian notions of a sacred landscape reasserted themselves over an initially cathedral- and parish-church-centered religion” (p. 20). Christian argues that the activities of one organ of the church, the Inquisition, terminated the age of socially-significant visions after 1525, but one should not too quickly draw a conclusion of stark confrontation between rural “paganism” and the institutional church. In Local Religion, Christian himself suggests a different relationship, and church involvement in the investigation and certification of visions did a great deal to promote various devotional practices, giving some shrines regional or broader significance. Moreover, Christian points out that one function of the visions was to communicate doctrine. “That is, the visions integrated a theological system of punishment and grace into a local pantheon of saints” (Apparitions, p. 213).

Christian recognizes that more than repression by the Inquisition was involved in the decline of apparitions, but he surprisingly shows too little interest in an important change. “In the early sixteenth century, the cultural form of public, lay visions itself may have worn out. This particular way of connecting with God was no longer believable enough” (p. 184). But saying that some cultural form is “worn out” dodges rather than confronts the need to explain ones received by those in a trance. Here Spaniards began confronting the saints in different ways, but the author does not lead us to the accompanying social changes as he appeared to promise. Perhaps these explanations will come in a future book on modern apparitions.

The chapter on the general themes of the visions is very good, and attaching the subject to a consideration of the trial of Jeanne d’Arc increases its interest. There are analyses of the functions of visions, the spread of vision stories, and the relationship between doctrine and vision. But Christian’s comments on fifteenth-century notions of childhood should be underlined as they challenge the view that this stage of development was not recognized then. While the conception of a child’s nature might have been different from our own, the author argues that one existed. Moreover, he ties fifteenth-century ideas about children to discussions of the impact of the plague and a growing devotion to Christ crucified that are well worth reading.

In his Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain, Christian treats a subject both geographically narrower (Catalonia is excluded) and thematically broader than that of Apparitions. Popular religion has become the focus of numerous publications on other European countries, particularly France, during this period, and two important interpreters of Castilian history have sought with radically different approaches to direct attention to the subject: Bartolomé Bennassar in L’homme espagnol: attitudes et mentalités du XVIe au XIXe siècle (Paris: Hachette, 1975) and Julio Caro Baroja, Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa: religión, sociedad y carácter en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII (Madrid: Akal, 1978). Christian rightly ignores Bennassar’s book and unfortunately was unable to consult that of Caro Baroja before completing his own manuscript.

As in Apparitions, in Local Religion Christian examines a particular group of
documents. Most of the book is based on the modern published editions of the answers from communities of various sizes in New Castile to the famous printed questionnaire sent out between 1575 and 1580 by the chroniclers of Philip II to acquire information on a wide variety of subjects as an aid to their research. Two of the questions asked about local relics, chapels, miracles, holy days and vows, and from the responses to these the author constructs an explanation of local religion. To put the results in perspective, Christian uses information provided in 1782-1789 in response to a questionnaire sent to parish priests by Francisco Antonio de Lorenzana (1722-1804), cardinal-archbishop of Toledo, as well as a 1957 catalog of patron saints in the villages of the diocese of Cuenca.

While recognizing two levels of religion, “that of the Church Universal, based on the sacraments, the Roman liturgy, and the Roman calendar; and a local one based on particular sacred places, images, and relics, locally chosen patron saints, idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from settlement’s own sacred history” (p. 3), Christian does not want to call the latter “popular” religion. The concept of popular religion has been applied to religious manifestations with a supposedly class base: the religion of the masses as opposed to that of an elite. But the local religion that the author discusses involved collective practices in which distinctions of class or literacy made little difference. In fact, Christian finds little difference between the rural and urban communities surveyed, although, since the bulk of the responses are from villages, he concentrates on rural religion.

There are two parts to the book. The first is a straightforward description of local practices from a functionalist perspective. Communities responded to bad weather, disease and locusts by vows to honour particular saints, and these were chosen according to very specific ideas which Christian explains. Often local relationships to divine individuals were made permanently visible through the establishment of a chapel or shrine as a concrete reminder of the group’s responsibility to honour a saint invoked during crisis. Possession of relics could reinforce community identity and pride. Multiple protectors required a hierarchy be established, and in the face of difficulties, villages followed a progression of responses to get help. Christian’s discussion of the use of images for cures (pp. 93-105) merits particular attention.

Despite the attraction of widely popular saints or the importance of the Marian cult, the author feels all this activity had a local focus and helped bind together communities seriously divided by differences in wealth and social standing. Without really presenting evidence to make plausible his hypothesis, he concludes: “From the way townspeople tell about them in the reports, it appears that their net effect was not so much to universalize devotion in the town or city, not so much to make persons more aware of their brotherhood with all Catholics and the authority of Rome, as to make more attractive and holy their own sacred places and times” (p. 146).

More dynamic elements are introduced in the second part of the book as the author seeks to account for significant transformations and variations in devotional practices. While there were differences, it is interesting to note that cities like Toledo and even the court of Philip II were caught up in sacred concerns much like those of any Castilian village. With such support in high places, it is no wonder that reforming bishops and councils did not touch local vows to patron saints by people
desperate in the face of disaster even if such practices did fragment international Catholic solidarity as Christian alleges. In any event, the author argues that the conflicts between local and universal Catholicism were rare, and he points out that the church's insistence on supervision of local religious activities by its representative, the parish priest, actually strengthened these practices and helped them to endure. Thus, it is hard to see Delumeau's Reformation missionaries labouring here to destroy the "paganism" and "superstition" of local communities. Christian's work makes very clear that one must understand the variety of ways people can embrace essential doctrine before an attempt is made to define a movement as broad as the Catholic Reformation.

The last chapter offers food for thought. Through a simple counting of devotions in the 314 towns covered by both the 16th and 18th century surveys, Christian discovered a tremendous increase in the use of images of Christ, "virtually all crucifixes or depictions of moments in Christ's last day" (p. 182), and the author does a good job of relating this development to his discussion at the close of Apparitions about the cross as a symbol during the age of the plague. Christian documents a similar shift of attention from Mary to Jesus through Inquisition records of denunciations of sacrilege. This veritable wave of Baroque Christocentric emphases deserves more attention, as does the subsequent return to Marian devotion. While recognizing that more research is needed, Christian bases his explanation of shifts in lay views of the saints on changing conceptions of chance accompanied by a replacement of collective responses to troubles by individual solutions.

One hopes that so imaginative an author will pursue further the shifts in religious conceptions he feels that he has discovered thus far. While he writes persuasively about these matters, there are legitimate grounds for concern about the reliability of Christian's conclusions. First, in both these books he promises his readers improved understanding of broad changes in Spanish society, but his documentary base may be too narrow for the level of explanation he seeks. For example his argument for a transition from corporate to individual concerns may simply reflect the nature of the documents used. Since the 1580 survey asked only about community devotions, we learn nothing about the personal attitudes of its members. Despite the author's negative comments on Inquisition archives as a source (Local Religion, p. 4), Jean-Pierre Dedieu, a student of Bennassar, has demonstrated these documents can reveal a great deal about lay ideas on salvation and the sacraments that might have led Christian to reshape some of his conclusions.

Moreover, except for isolated references (e.g., Local Religion, p. 164), the reader would never know that a significant attraction of many devotional practices was the fun people had. Anyone who has witnessed the nazarenos bearing the crosses and images in holy week processions with their tunics poorly concealing great bags of candy for children along the route will suspect that the divine was not confronted locally with all the awe and wonder Christian would have us believe. Reading the documents of local sixteenth-century authorities who were responsible for organizing special observances suggests that such impressions based on modern observations are not anachronistic. People were having lots of fun, and it
is necessary to know about that if local religion is genuinely to be understood. Even the documents used are hard to evaluate because Christian tells the reader so little about the period and the place he discusses. The matter is somewhat better handled in Apparitions, but a necessary general perspective is completely lacking in Local Religion. For example, it was precisely during 1575-1580 that Castile was convulsed by a serious dispute over fiscal matters, and there was justified concern over significantly higher tax assessments for local communities. Would this political crisis have made respondents suspicious about the central government’s attempts to get detailed information about their towns, and would such worries have influenced their responses? Who was Cardinal Lorenzana and why was he quizzing parish priests in his archdiocese during the 1780s? Who initiated the 1957 survey in the diocese of Cuenca, what was to be done with the results, and how did the inquiry relate to the religious policy of the Franco regime? When very broad conclusions are based on such limited documentation, the reader deserves a solid enough background to be able to evaluate the sources.

Finally, Christian’s somewhat eclectic methodology often makes his arguments hard to follow. As anyone who has read Person and God in a Spanish Valley would expect, much of his approach is functionalist. But particularly when he discusses devotion to Christ or Mary, he reaches for explanations based on an analysis of sacred symbols. I think I understand what the author is trying to do, but he could have made matters much easier for his readers if he had been explicit about the theoretical framework within which he wished to interpret his evidence. Moreover, greater methodological consciousness might have saved Christian from explanations like that about Franciscan influence partly accounting for devotion to the crucifix and Christ’s Passion (Local Religion, p. 16). Anthropologists are supposed to save historians from that sort of question-begging interpretation.

Christian has done a great service to Spanish historians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He has helped draw attention to an important topic, and he has suggested a number of stimulating hypotheses which should attract further research. His results, attractive writing style, and imagination qualify him as one of the leading experts on local religion. Christian is the sort of scholar whose next book one awaits impatiently.

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