



The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico

Michael P. Carroll

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The Penitente brotherhood of New Mexico soared in popularity during the early nineteenth century. Local chapters of the brotherhood, always exclusively male, met in specially constructed buildings (called moradas) to conduct their business and engaged in a variety of religious rituals, including flagellation. The traditional view, still very much accepted, is that Penitente spirituality was a continuation of pietistic practices brought to the New World from Spain by Franciscan missionaries in the sixteenth century.

In this book sociologist of religion Michael Carroll argues that the movement in fact developed much later. There is in fact little evidence that Hispanos in pre-1770 New Mexico were particularly religious, and indeed the usual hallmarks of popular Catholicism—such as apparitions, cults organized around miraculous images, or pilgrimage—are noticeable by their absence. Carroll traces the rise of the Penitentes to social changes, including the Bourbon reforms, that undermined patriarchal authority and thereby threatened a system that was central to the social organization of late colonial New Mexico. Once established, the Penitentes came to incorporate a number of organizational elements not found in traditional confraternities. As a result, Carroll concludes, Penitente membership facilitated the "rise of the modern" in New Mexico and—however unintentionally—made it that much easier, after the territory's annexation by the United States, for the Anglo legal system to dispossess Hispanos of their land.

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