

REVIEW ESSAY

Religion: Recent publications on religion among Puerto Ricans and in the Caribbean

SAMUEL CRUZ

Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo

By Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert.

New York: NYU Press, 2003.

272 pages; \$20.00 [paper]

El Iris de Paz: el espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900–1905

By Nancy Herzig Shannon.

Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 2001.

159 pages; \$9.95 [paper]

Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico

By Raquel Romberg.

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.

335 pages; \$24.95 [paper]

How refreshing and exciting to read the works of scholars such as the ones whose works I shall review in this essay. Refreshing, indeed, since their work represents the growing interest in spirituality, one of the most integral aspects of life, culture and community. *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, by Raquel Romberg; *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and *El Iris de Paz: el espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900–1905*, by Nancy Herzig Shannon are three books that focus on the religious practices of Puerto Rican/Caribbean peoples.

Latino studies have been trapped in the social theories of the great 19th- and 20th-century philosophers—Marx, Durkheim, Freud and Nietzsche—and their theories of secularization, modernity and the power of reason for positive transformation of human reality—with all assuming or concluding that religion had run its course and would become unimportant in modern society. The books reviewed here serve as contemporary evidence that sociologists, anthropologists, novelists, literary critics and other scholars can no longer ignore the fact that the religious practices of Latinos are an extremely significant component of the Latina/o cultural system. Indeed, the religious landscape of the United States is undergoing major shifts as a result of the influx of Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean immigration and migration. Recent statistical demographic figures of Roman Catholicism in the U.S. show that Latinos/as currently make up 40 percent of Roman Catholics in the U.S. Similar patterns of Latino/a growth in membership among the historical and evangelical denominations, especially among Pentecostal organizations, has also become evident. What might be the political, cultural and social implications of this demographic shift in religion in the U.S. still remains to be seen. Will Latinos move these churches to the right or left? Will the face of the hierarchy change or remain constant? What social issues might be the primary focus of these religious institutions with the Latinization of churches in the future?

To better grasp the place of these works within the social, historical and theoretical milieu (of social theory) I will briefly discuss recent scholarship in the sociological theory of religion. In the last twenty years the study of religion, at least as it pertains to the United States, has made some major shifts. Scholars such as Finke and Stark 1992, Warner 1993 and Neitz 1997 began to demonstrate that, contrary to the uncritically held views that the practice of religion and its influence had been on a decline over the last century, the very opposite might actually be true. Unlike previous assertions that secularization and religious pluralism would weaken religious practice, Finke and Stark (1992) developed the perspective that the opposite has actually occurred within the United States. They assert that a free religious market has brought vitality to religion. In fact, Finke and Stark (1992) argue quite persuasively that there is currently more interest and participation in religion now in the United States than during the colonial period. Warner (1993) and Neitz (1997) also see a positive role played by a religiously pluralistic society in the growth and vitality of religion. Warner (1993) emphasizes the important role that religion plays among immigrant communities. As a result of the theories of secularization, which held the view that religion would decline and become irrelevant in modern society, scholars had neglected to study religious practices in general and particularly the religious practices of those peoples outside the centers of economic, cultural and

military power. Prejudices against religious phenomena in general and more specifically against religions on the periphery of society have dominated scholarship. The books I review here attempt to combat and rectify this scholarly myopia—for the most part quite successfully.

Anthropologist Raquel Romberg's book is the result of many years of ethnographic research as a participant observer of Puerto Rican spiritism during the 1990s in Puerto Rico. Although she places her conclusions within a larger historical, theoretical and global context, most of her research, ideas and conclusions arise from her major informant, Haydée, a *bruja* from Villas de Loíza.

Romberg begins her book by addressing some of the theoretical issues regarding the decline or disappearance of religion as a result of secularization and modernity. She begins by arguing that if one followed the propositions of enlightenment thinkers and the persecution by colonialist religious and political ideologues, religions, especially vernacular religions such as Espiritismo, should have disappeared. She argues, however that the opposite has held true. Espiritismo in Puerto Rico has not disappeared or even declined, but thrived and flourished instead. Romberg states: "After centuries of persecution by the Catholic Church in Europe and the Americas and against enlightenment, brujería has not disappeared with modernity; it has just changed its face" (2003: 1). Romberg argues that most post-emancipation Latin American states had co-opted Eurocentric and U.S.-based notions of a new world propelled by reason and not by the pre-modern era of religion. Within this cultural and political milieu Puerto Rican spiritism emerged in late 19th- and early 20th-century Puerto Rico.

Although spiritism began to take a hold of Puerto Rican society in the late 19th century, Romberg makes the point that with the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, the political, juridical and religious stage for the expansion of spiritism was set. Romberg suggests that with the advent of U.S. colonial rule, the national religious and political discourses coming from the religions closest to the center of power (i.e. Protestant denominations and Roman Catholicism) were very critical of spiritism. However, Romberg continues to assert that with the U.S. capitalist notions of economic free markets came the legal and political notions of U.S. understanding of a free religious market. No longer was there any legal or ecclesiastical power to hold back the vernacular spiritual practices and aspirations of the Puerto Rican people. With the U.S. colonial government also came the separation of church and State.

According to Romberg, during the 1860s and onward, the influence of French Kardecian spiritism (known as Scientific Spiritism) began to take hold among the Puerto Rican left wing, upper elite class. Eventually French Kardecian spiritism would be incorporated into the indigenous spiritism practiced by the lower class majority. The spiritism of the masses was a hybridization of African-based traditions and that of the extinct Taino natives of Puerto Rico. Romberg makes the point that the spiritism practiced by upper class Puerto Rican society was not one that wished to be associated with the spiritist practices of lower class peoples. Romberg's book focuses mostly on the spiritism practiced by those on the margins of society, rather than on Scientific Spiritism, which is practiced predominantly by the intellectual elite class, although her research shows that individuals from all classes were clients of Haydée la Bruja.

There are several major contributions that Romberg's book makes to Puerto Rican/Caribbean studies and to Latina/o cultural studies in general. She describes a religion that has been cast in a pejorative sense as primitive, magical and lacking

internal structures and has shown it to be very coherent, albeit not in the Western sense. Secondly, scholars of Puerto Rican/Latina/o studies who intend to understand, interpret and analyze Puerto Rican/Latina/o culture, history, political activism, etc., who do not seriously consider the spiritual, religious aspirations and life of the people, are working with a torn map. Although Romberg does not view the survival and adaptations of Puerto Rican spiritism as evidence of resistance to dominant culture or modernity, but more so as reproducing them, it is nevertheless equally important to understand and analyze the brilliance of the process of adaptations of pre-modern religions with modernity that the Puerto Rican people have achieved in their religious lives.

Finally, this work calls into question the uncritical and reductionistic perspective that religion is simply the "opiate of the people" or simply at the service of "primitive" or "pre-modern" ideologies and beliefs. According to Romberg, spiritism in the hands of some very skilled brujas/os has been used to facilitate for many Puerto Ricans the negotiation of the capitalist/welfare state of modern Puerto Rico. Her insightful analysis of the role of globalization in the transformation of spiritism through hybridization provides a greater understanding of the impact of this global process on the future of the hybridization of religion in general. Within the wider context of Puerto Rican and Latino studies, Romberg's book makes a significant contribution toward the growing research and literature propelled by post-colonial studies.

Romberg refers to but never clearly defines or explains indigenous Puerto Rican spiritism to the extent of providing to a student of religion some clear guidance as to what spiritist beliefs are. In fact Haydée, her main informant, is said to be a devotee of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba that Santeros identify as Oshun the Yoruba orisha. However, she never alludes to or develops the implications of that fact. Romberg makes little effort to explain the religious practices of Taíno, African, French spiritism, Catholicism and Protestant hybridization that make up modern day spiritism in Puerto Rico. She places undue emphasis upon peripheral historical issues and repetitive stories of her time spent with her informant to the detriment of explaining or describing spiritism. I have found her use of the term syncretism to refer to spiritism and the hybridization that occurs in Caribbean religion to be problematic. The term syncretism has been used pejoratively for so long by scholars to devalue the worth of Afro-Caribbean and indigenous religions that its negative meanings cannot be dismissed, even if the reader does not know whether her use of it intentionally implies these negative historical meanings. Despite these reservations, I enthusiastically recommend the book for students of Caribbean culture and religion.

If one were to teach an introductory course on Caribbean religion or become better acquainted with its diverse religious practices, one need not compile a selection of many different books and articles. It would be simpler to reach out for Margarite Fernández Olmos' and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert's book, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*. The book provides a unique sociocultural, historical and political analysis of Caribbean religion. Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert have provided a general introductory text that is richly informative and well versed with the current research and scholarship being conducted by experts of the best known religious traditions found in the Caribbean.

The book begins with a solid introduction describing the religious practices from the different Caribbean Islands and how these practices manifest themselves in the

daily lives of people within the diasporic populations throughout the United States. They go on to suggest that these manifestations demonstrate that spiritual Afro-Caribbean traditions continue to strongly influence people living in the region. This in turn, requires a greater understanding of Afro-Caribbean belief systems by those who intend to understand Caribbean diasporic communities. In this introduction Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert speak of the creolization of Caribbean religion as opposed to syncretism. They define “creolization” in the following manner:

the malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices as they adapt to new understanding of class, race, gender, power, labor, and sexuality—is one of the most significant phenomena in Caribbean religious history (2003:4).

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert also provide an excellent historical analysis and concise definition of the polemical and pejorative history of the term syncretism. They discuss how the term has been used to render illegitimate any religion that was outside the center of power. It is made clear that Caribbean religions have been vulnerable to this denigration.

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert offer a very helpful discussion of certain shared characteristics between the different Caribbean Creole religions. This issue is essential to discuss, because the analysis moves beyond a discussion of similarities to view differences, as well as making it clear these characteristics emanate from divergent cultures and historical trajectories. For too long it has been assumed that because many African-based religions in the Caribbean have their origins in Yoruba traditions, the influence of other African cultures has been ignored. Belief systems with origins in the Congo, Fon, Ewe, and Bantu traditions have been ignored by scholars. As is demonstrated throughout this book, many other African cultures are represented among the religious practices of Caribbean people and their corresponding diasporic communities. In a brief but informative historical sketch, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert place these different religious traditions within their sociohistorical and political settings, including the role that the African-based religious traditions has played in sustaining the African people through horrible colonial periods. Religious practices were central in fueling the underlying force behind the revolutionary and liberation movements of the late 18th century, such as in the case of Haiti.

Upon my initial examination and review of the content of this book, I became immediately curious to ascertain whether the authors had examined the religious practice of Haitian Vodou. As a scholar of Caribbean and Latina/o religion this is particularly interesting to me for several reasons. Haitian Vodou is perhaps the most misrepresented and maligned religious practice emanating from the Afro-Caribbean-based traditions. As a result, much of what people purport to know about Haitian Vodou is incorrect, prejudiced and derogatory. Particularly in diasporic communities most practitioners of Haitian Vodou are aware of this reality and therefore unwilling to discuss or even admit that they are practitioners of Vodou. This denigration of the Vodou religion and ensuing obscurantism has made it virtually impossible to uncover the misconceptions or correct the false assumptions through information obtained from practitioners.

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert provide an excellent analysis and assessment of the social, political, historical and religious context within which Haitian Vodou developed in Saint Dominique (the present-day nation of Haiti). They succeed in demonstrating that Haitian Vodou is among the more complex belief systems found among the religious traditions of the Caribbean. This fact, combined with its need for secrecy for its own protection, makes it difficult to acquire a true grasp of its internal structure, beliefs, symbols, rituals and theology. If this chapter on Haitian Vodou were the only accomplishment in the book, it would still be tremendously valuable to the study of Caribbean religion since very little accessible and scholarly material on this religious belief system is available. However, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert do an excellent job of compiling some of the other materials of African-based Caribbean religions and synthesizing them for the reader.

In chapters two and three, the authors describe Santería/Regla de Ocha as well as Regla de Palo and the Abakua Secret Society. Most books on Afro-Cuban religion focus mainly on “Santería” Regla de Ocha, only peripherally alluding to the Regla de Palo without even making distinctions among the diversity of religious traditions from Cuba and placing all under Santería. In much the same way, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert deconstruct Espiritismo. They take the reader through a historical journey by describing what originated in 1848 at Hydesville, New York, depicting French Kardecian spiritism of the mid-eighteenth century, as well as the Creole spiritism of Cuba and Puerto Rico. The authors move on to unravel the development of scientific spiritism practiced by the elite intellectual class of Puerto Rico and Cuba and the strand of spiritism influenced by African beliefs, which is more popular among the working class.

One major contribution of this work is that it identifies for the reader some of the lesser-known religious traditions of the Caribbean such as Obeah, Myal and Quimbois—practices that consist mainly of herbalists who make and break spells. These lesser known and rarely discussed traditions, such as Obeah, are very much alive and practiced in the Bahamas, Antigua, Jamaica, Barbados, the United States, England and Canada. Myal, a form of Obeah, is practiced predominantly in Jamaica. Quimbois is mostly found in Martinique and Guadeloupe. The authors provide an excellent chapter on Rastafarianism, a popular religion found predominantly in Jamaica and largely ignored by scholars of Spanish-speaking Caribbean religions.

Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert do an excellent job of gathering the most competent recent scholarship on Caribbean religions, but offer very little of their own interpretative and critical analysis. This leaves the reader with a sense that the work is unfinished and allows the question to linger: What prevented the authors from being more critical and interpretative in the analysis of the material they compiled? Despite this omission, the book is an extremely valuable work that contributes meaningfully to the body regarding Caribbean religions.

Nancy Herzig Shannon’s book, *El Iris de Paz: el espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900–1905*, was the most engrossing of the three books reviewed here. In addition to the excellent job that Herzig accomplishes when she argues the book’s thesis that Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico had help to propel the feminist movement as well as provide an avenue for feminist empowerment, there are several reasons why this book held such interest for me. Prior to Herzig’s book only two histories of Scientific Spiritism have been written in Puerto Rico, one by Néstor Rodríguez Escudero and

another by Teresa Yáñez vda. de Otero. These authors are both insiders, and although their books have value, they were written as subjective defenses of the movement rather than from a social scientific perspective.

Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico traces its roots to French Kardecian Spiritism rather than to either native or African indigenous religious practices. Unlike other Caribbean religions that are considered erotic and therefore worthy of study, Scientific Spiritism breaks that mold. In this respect Herzig takes on a research project traditionally ignored but for which modern historiography has helped to encourage research. Interestingly, her research is conducted on women, an oppressed group who, rather than passively accepting the status quo, resist in a religion that was not serving the interests of those on the political and economic margins of Puerto Rico society. In fact, although Scientific Spiritism was outside the mainstream religious culture of early 20th-century Puerto Rico, it was a religion that was mainly practiced by many radical intellectually and politically savvy Puerto Ricans, such as Ana Roqué de Duprey, Rosendo Matienzo Cintrón and others. Women are the majority of the practitioners in most Caribbean and U.S. religious organizations, but studies ignore their role with descriptions of the movements offered from the heterosexist perspective. This book is an excellent contribution to gender studies as it regards Puerto Rican society in the late 19th and early 20th century.

The title of this work is borrowed from the most important magazine of Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico, *El Iris de Paz*, which began to circulate in December 1899. According to Herzig Shannon, this magazine was extremely important to Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico for several reasons. It helped the spiritist movement become a national movement. It connected the Puerto Rican spiritist movement with other spiritist movements internationally. In addition it played a major role in founding La Federación Espiritista in 1903 and led to the consolidation of its leadership. It also provided the movement's ideological orientation. Through a detailed analysis of the articles found in the magazine, Herzig has traced the ideological and political development of women in the movement.

Herzig quite convincingly begins this work by explicitly describing her theoretical approach in understanding the development of feminist consciousness within different social, historical and religious contexts. She builds her theoretical framework upon the work of María de Fátima Barceló Miller, who has conducted extensive research on the suffragist movement in Puerto Rico. Barceló Miller's study focused on the contradictions found in the early stages of the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, when the traditional roles assigned to women by society were challenged and at the same time affirmed. To understand this seemingly contradictory perspective, Herzig Shannon follows Barceló Miller's use of what other historians have called *feminismo social* (social feminism). Herzig Shannon describes social feminism with an example:

Por ejemplo, los defensores de una mayor accesibilidad de la mujer a profesiones como la enseñanzas, planteaban que se trataba de una extensión natural del rol maternal. Estas posiciones pretendían aumentar la presencia de la mujeres en la esfera pública, sin alterar radicalmente las nociones tradicionales de lo femenino. Esta dinámica contradictorias es lo que diversos historiadores han bautizado con el término 'femenismo social' (2001: 30–1).

Herzig approaches the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, particularly that found in the spiritist movement, from this perspective because of her understanding that any move toward a feminist consciousness is complicated and quite often riddled with contradictions. This is a significant approach since one can easily dismiss a religious movement as incapable of providing for the empowerment of women if the researcher simply focuses on the apparently contradictory, reactionary or conservative vestiges of the past or status quo. Unfortunately, reductionism in the social sciences has led to the misrepresentation of many social movements as well as a misunderstanding of the role they play in moving people on the periphery of society toward their own liberation. Herzig analyzes some of the teachings of Scientific Spiritism and explores how these have led to the empowerment of Puerto Rican women in the early 20th century, as well as the push it began toward a feminist consciousness. She argues that what happened in England when Scientific Spiritism propelled women to question the traditional roles assigned to them can be compared to the Puerto Rico phenomenon. She demonstrates this through the writings of spiritist Puerto Rican women in *El Iris de Paz*, as well as through an analysis of the beliefs and teachings of the movement. Scientific Spiritism in Puerto Rico, as in Europe, was concerned with social reform. The movement began to question everything, from poverty and traditional medicine to education and historical religious traditions such as Roman Catholicism. In many spiritist centers, providing for the poor, the ailing and the elderly was an essential component of the movement. Interestingly, as is described in this book, the care of the poor, the ailing and the elderly was performed from a politically critical perspective.

To illustrate an example of the critical thinking of the *espiritistas* we find the occasion when a medical doctor named Manuel Guzmán Rodríguez denounced the movement for its use of alternative healing methods. A spiritist woman named Francisca Suárez in 1892 replied to Doctor Guzmán Rodríguez by making the accusation towards him and the whole medical industrial complex of not caring about the well being of the poor. Suárez exposed the hypocrisy of Doctor Guzmán Rodríguez by arguing that alternative healing methods were available to the poor in the quest for healing, whereas "scientific" medicine was inaccessible and therefore of no value. She pointed out that to speak of alternatives was absurd when the poor did not have access to any other method of healing. What I found astonishing was not the coherence of her argument, but that a woman would feel liberated enough, in Puerto Rico in 1892, to challenge a male member of the upper class.

For many Puerto Ricans, spiritism was considered to be a much more attractive movement than Catholicism because of its openness to science and different political currents in early 20th-century Puerto Rico. Herzig discusses clashes that occurred with the Catholic hierarchy since spiritists viewed the Roman Catholic Church as backward and detrimental to the development of women. Spiritism signified the modernization of society especially within the colonial situation in Puerto Rico. Hand in hand with modernization, explains Herzig, came the need for a well-educated population. For Spiritists this did not mean a good education for men alone, but for women as well. The social feminism Herzig describes can be clearly seen when viewing instances where the education of women has been at issue. In defending the education of women, comments by spiritist women found in the articles of *El Iris de Paz* included the idea that educated women are more capable of being better wives to their husbands and better mothers to their children. Inherent within their feminism was the assumption that the role of women was

to support their husbands in order to maintain the natural order of things. Whether these voices in the struggle for liberation used this as a tactical argument is unknown.

The director of the magazine *El Iris de Paz*, from its inception in 1899 through 1912, was a woman named Agustina Guffain. It was not unusual for many of the articles in the magazine to be related to women's issues and concerns since five of the ten contributors were women. Herzig identifies three constant themes that were emphasized in *El Iris De Paz*: the condemnation of the Catholic Church and its hierarchical structures, the spiritist vision that a new era of modernization would bring great changes in the upcoming century and the emphasis on women being the agents of change in the family and society at large. The strong emphasis on women's issues leads Herzig to suggest that this magazine should be considered a woman's press, an idea that presently has not been fully researched.

Herzig demonstrates that underlying the women's views of these issues were strong ideological and spiritist beliefs, such as the view that the world was in an historical epoch ripe for a modern and egalitarian society. In addition, they believed that the soul did not have a gender and, therefore, there was essentially no difference between men and women. On a local level, for the Puerto Rican Spiritist this implied the political, cultural and social modernization and renovation of Puerto Rican society. On a host of controversial issues, including marriage and prostitution, Herzig's analysis of the articles written by women in *El Iris de Paz* helps to show the early stages of feminist critique in the making. For example, on the subject of prostitution, they condemned the women for selling their bodies, but they saved their harshest critiques for the men who participated in prostitution, but were not affected by the laws of those days, whereas women were.

The three books that I have had the pleasure of reviewing for this essay make genuine contributions in discovering the histories, beliefs and manifestations of culture as well as the philosophy, theology and politics of Puerto Rican/Caribbean women and men who have been on the underside of history. These books and the research contained in them can be situated with other significant research in Puerto Rican and Latina/o studies that have been fueled by post-colonial theory/studies. It should no longer be acceptable to ignore the histories, including the religious life, of those who have been on the margins of society as if they have not been actively negotiating, resisting and engaging in being active agents in the destiny of their particular communities.



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