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## Review of Carina L. Johnson, *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe. The Ottomans and Mexicans*

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**Carina L. Johnson. *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe. The Ottomans and Mexicans*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 322 pp.**

The title to this learned and suggestive volume points to both its strengths and shortcomings. Europe is that of the Habsburgs and especially their court, meaning that after the reign of Charles V and the succession to the Spanish throne of Philip II, who did not become Holy Roman Emperor, Spain's place in Carina Johnson's discussion diminishes rapidly. Ottomans and Mexicans do not figure comparably, nor arguably should they do so, given that the Ottoman Turks were a sovereign, proximate and powerful rival to the Habsburgs, while almost from the outset of Charles V's reign Mexicans were a distant and exotic, but definitively defeated, entity. Notwithstanding that difference, in the first three chapters that form Part One, "Categories of Inclusion," Johnson succeeds in identifying a number of points of similarity and connection with regard to how Habsburg Europe responded to the people and what she calls their "cultural goods."

That response is more easily understood and described in relation to Mexicans. Although Johnson writes that "a steady stream of well-born Nahuas" visited the Spanish court during Charles V's reign (71), their presence was limited. The Spanish acknowledgment of the principle of natural lordship extended to the rulers of defeated indigenous American polities, meaning that for a time some descendants of Moteuczoma and other high-ranking Mexicans were welcomed at the Habsburg court. The material representations of Nahua culture also met initially with a positive response, although the coincidence of the Mexican conquest with the early stages of the Protestant reformation quickly began to transform their reception. The author notes that "the vernacular German interpretations of Peter Martyr's and Cortés's letters began producing cultural estrangement and religious alienation" (53). The reception of Turkish culture and religion most likely entailed a more complex response. Islam, like Judaism, was familiar to Spanish and other European theologians in ways that the religious practices of the Nahua or Maya were not, and humanists like Erasmus argued for the capacity of people of other religions to live virtuously. Yet as religious differences within the European Habsburg dominions crystallized, humanism was viewed with increasing suspicion in Charles's court. Early optimism that native Mexicans could be brought fully within the church soured, Johnson argues, while at the same time policies geared toward segregating Indians and relegating them to permanent second-class status within Spanish American societies became the norm. Views of Islam also became increasingly at odds with what Johnson calls cultural relativism.

Johnson is able to demonstrate these changes not only through the evolving attitudes reflected in contemporary writings, but also in the apparent

devaluation of collections of exotic objects that in earlier years had attested to both imperial hegemony and to the universalism of Habsburg rule. Exquisitely crafted objects became useful for their worth in bullion and lost their value as representations of the diversity that universal empire encompassed. The diminution in value of these objects both reflected, and perhaps contributed to, a decreasing estimation of the cultures and societies that produced them, undergirding the cultural hierarchy of the book's title that placed Christian Europe at the pinnacle of civilization.

While the conquest of Mesoamerica early in the sixteenth century and the progressive containment of the Ottoman Empire made it possible to sustain these claims, the internal dissension experienced by European Christendom in this period generated new and sometimes uncomfortable questions with regard to practices associated with non-Christian cultures. Protestants aligned with Muslims in rejecting the religious iconography associated with Roman Catholicism. The case that Johnson makes for associating Jews as well as indigenous Americans with idolatry seems shakier.

This is a valuable contribution to the literature on European and Christian response to Islam and the cultures of the Americas. Johnson draws on a considerable body of scholarship and images (mainly, but not exclusively German), which she integrates into a well written, accessible text. Her discussion of the ways in which understandings of other cultures figured in the debates between Protestants and Catholics are solid. But while the comparisons that she draws between responses to Mexicans and Ottomans are thought provoking, Johnson's privileging of the impact and perception of "cultural goods" and of interactions with individuals of high standing (Mexican nobles, Ottoman diplomats) seems narrow in view of the complexities of Habsburg Spain's relationship with its overseas territories and its enemies. She fails to address directly the very different Habsburg geopolitical relations with Ottomans and Mexicans, which surely played a major role in the formation of cultural hierarchy. This reviewer at least cannot help but wonder whether her argument would have been different had she chosen the Incas rather than the Aztecs as the focus of her American comparison, given Spaniards' admiration for (and, some have argued, emulation of) Inca imperial achievements, or considered the Portuguese and their empire alongside the Habsburgs, which she does only very briefly in her conclusion.

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