Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru by Kathryn Burns, Duke University Press, 1999

Jim Keating
Butler University, jkeating@butler.edu

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A few years ago, visiting Peru, I noticed something. In Cusco, the charming ancient capital, drivers recklessly speed through crowded streets heedless of rules or common sense, scattering pedestrians before them… with a single exception. Everyone stops for nuns! I mentioned this to a friend who said he actually knew something of the nuns in Cusco, for his niece had written a book about them. Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru by Kathryn Burns (Duke University Press, March, 1999) is the fascinating story of the surprising political and economic power once exercised by religious women in this remote Andean outpost. Convents were de facto government, providing social services and public works. They were banks as well, accepting deposits for safekeeping and lending money to finance infrastructure and business in the Sacred Valley. The sisters were held in high esteem as trusted leaders. Of course, it didn’t last. By the 18th century traditional institutions supplanted the sisters who returned to their convents, to lives uncoupled from economics and politics. Kathryn Burns’ work reminds us of what they accomplished. Colonial Habits is skillfully written, enjoyable, and well worth reading. It will surprise readers to discover the power of an unlikely group of women in an unlikely place. And possibly may explain the respect still given…when traffic stops to let nuns cross the street.

- James Keating is an instructor of English at Butler University.