



*Going Native or Remaining Foreign? Catholic Missionaries as Local Agents in Asia (17th to 18th Centuries)*. Nadine Amsler (Bern) / Andreea Badea (Rom) / Bernard Heyberger (Paris) / Christian Windler (Bern), 30.05.2017–01.06.2017.

**Reviewed by** Samuel Weber

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As the title of this conference suggests, Catholic missionaries who were dispatched to the Middle East and Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often navigated a thin line between going local and remaining loyal to Rome. Setting out to win new souls for the Catholic Church, they made history, albeit under circumstances not of their own choosing. As local agents they found themselves entangled in communicative and social settings that shaped their interactions with locals in many and often unexpected ways. The aim of this conference, generously hosted by the German Historical Institute, the École française, and the Istituto Svizzero in Rome, was to focus on four such settings – the city, the princely court, the household, and the countryside – in order to lay the groundwork for a trans-imperial comparison of missionaries' experiences in early modern Asia.

In line with this comparative approach, the first panel, devoted to urban missions, featured case studies on China and the Ottoman Empire. In a paper on the Jesuit mission to Peking, NOËL GOLVERS (Leuven) examined some of the outcomes of the missionaries' embrace of the habitus of the local literati elite. Although the Jesuit fathers continued to be perceived as foreigners, their accommodation to local culture and engagement with Oriental philosophy paved the way to

meaningful interactions with potential converts in urban China.

While the Jesuits initially had a monopoly over China, the Ottoman Empire was a missionary area contested by rivaling religious orders, which added new variables to the missionary experience. CESARE SANTUS (Rome), in a comparison of various missionary orders active in the major cities of the Ottoman Empire, challenged the idea that each order developed a widely shared signature approach to interactions with the local population. Missionary contacts with local actors, Santus argued, were not so much shaped by the corporate culture of the order to which they belonged as by the constraints of the specific urban setting in which they operated.

This idea was taken up by MARKUS FRIEDRICH (Hamburg). In his concluding remarks on the session, he encouraged further study of how the corporate cultures of the Jesuits and other missionary orders unfolded in practice. This, he argued, would bring to light both the differences between and within the orders in how they approached the ultimate goal of all missions: the conversion of non-Catholics to Catholicism. Studying how missionaries engaged with and weaponized local knowledge for conversionary ends would reveal that the polar opposites of “going native” and “remaining foreign” in the conference title were not fixed but flexible and fluid cat-

egories whose meaning changed with time and place.

The second panel on missions to the world of princely courts was opened with a discussion of the dress strategies of Jesuit missionaries to China. EUGENIO MENEGON (Boston) argued that the adoption of the clothing of the literati was an integral part of the Jesuits' accommodation to the culture of the local court. Encouraged by the order's rule, which did not prescribe a specific habit, members of the Society of Jesus in China decided that the change to more sumptuous attire was a *sine qua non* for meaningful interaction with the indigenous elites. Rather than shrewd dissimulation, the dress strategy of the Jesuits was, therefore, first and foremost a necessity.

Engagement with local cultures of knowledge was often seen as a gateway to the hearts and souls of potential converts. It is, therefore, surprising that missionaries to Mughal India did not appeal to the widespread interest in astrology at the court of Agra. In his paper UROŠ ZVER (San Domenico di Fiesole) made the argument that this reluctance is best explained against the backdrop of the scientific revolution engulfing Europe at the time. Early theorists of Oriental despotism cited the Mughal rulers' fascination with astrology (as opposed to contemporary European monarchs' patronage of math-based astronomy) as a glaring example of eastern superstition, with which missionaries did not want to be associated.

By contrast, in South India, a Jesuit missionary named Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi was desperately trying to emulate the local pulavars, court poets who wrote poems in praise of their princely patrons. However, as MARGHERITA TRENTO (Chicago) showed, Beschi failed to make any significant headway during his lifetime. Though he produced literary works in the local language, Tamil, his poems flouted convention in that they praised not so much the local rulers as the Christian God. All but forgotten when he died in 1747, Beschi ironically rose to fame when Lutheran

missionaries rediscovered his work in the late eighteenth century.

Unlike Beschi, some of the missionaries to Safavid Persia became active members of the local court society. As CHRISTIAN WINDLER (Bern) argued, even when initial conversionary hopes had long been crushed, the religious orders dispatched to Persia continued to interact with Muslim scholars and courtiers. As Windler showed, economic transactions with locals were vital to the mission's economic viability and thus to some degree justifiable. The same could only partly be said of the missionaries' extensive contacts with Muslim scholars and their work as interpreters and translators, which put them in the uncomfortable position of having to rationalize countless deviations from European norms to their superiors in Rome.

In his comment RONNIE PO-CHIA HSIA (University Park) drew attention to the shared Mongolian origins of the courts of China, Mughal India, and Persia to underline the importance of a comparative approach to research on the missionaries who operated in them. One experience shared by all missionaries was their precarious position between two worlds, which forced them to negotiate competing demands. He urged further research into the multiple loyalties of missionaries and how they steered a middle course between "going native" and "remaining foreign." Such research would reveal, Hsia concluded, that individual missionaries fell at different points on what should be thought of as a spectrum rather than as binary opposites.

The presentations of the third panel focused on the household and especially on the relationship between missionaries and women. After elaborating on the scope of missionary activities in the Islamic context and the missionaries' need to adapt to local conditions, BERNARD HEYBERGER (Paris) showed that the position of women in local society structured missionary action and determined its success. Since women in the Islamic

and eastern Christian contexts were largely excluded from the public sphere, conversion needed to take place in the secluded sphere of the household. Catholic missionaries, therefore, used spiritual guidance to foster a sociability that appealed specifically to women in domestic life.

As NADINE AMSLER (Bern) pointed out in a paper on the Jesuits' mission to China, local women who converted to Catholicism gained a degree of religious autonomy. The Jesuit fathers had to accommodate the gender separation typical of the literati elite they had chosen to emulate. As they adapted the very public devotion of Tridentine Catholicism to a society where women were banned from the public sphere, households became a primary site of religiosity for Catholic women. In the long term the initial converts became important transmitters of the gospel to other women, thus playing a fundamental role in the construction of a household-centered Catholicism in China.

Unlike in China, contacts between missionaries and women were common in Japanese households. HARUKO NAWATA WARD (Decatur/Georgia) showed that Jesuits relied on workshops for the translation and writing of Kirishitan books in converts' households. In many cases these workshops were under protection of noble women, who were highly educated and expressed an interest in Christian literary culture. As Ward argued, these households can be described as private learning spaces for women and Jesuits alike.

In his comment, NICOLAS STANDAERT (Leuven) raised the question of whether missionaries were local agents. To this end, he presented a series of methodological reflections about what local agents were and what they did. Echoing earlier comments, he encouraged participants to take into consideration not only the issue of accommodation but also the "in-betweenness" of missionaries who remained very much part of the European culture in which they had been raised.

RONNIE PO-CHIA HSIA opened the session on rural settings with a paper on the impact of the social and spatial differentiation in late imperial China on Jesuit missions. According to Hsia, patronage determined the spatial scope of missionary activities to a critical extent. Given the concentration of power in administrative urban centers and intense urban-rural exchange, cities were starting points and retreats of Jesuit missions in the countryside.

In Japan, by contrast, the countryside was a focal point of Jesuit missionary activities. Most of the converts to Catholicism were peasants, and the few Christian local lords ruled over mostly rural domains. In this context, the integration of Jesuits into the rural economy and society was deeper than reports to the Roman Curia suggested, as HÉLÈNE VU THANH (Lorient) pointed out. On the one hand, Japanese Christians contributed significantly to the funding of the mission through (monetary) donations. On the other, Jesuits met the peasants' need for religious experts by imitating monks of the Zen sect (*bonzes*). This strategy facilitated Jesuit inroads into the countryside and increased the willingness of the rural population to convert.

For missionaries, it could be dangerous to ignore the need for adaptation to the communicative settings in which they were operating, as the example of Rodolfo Acquaviva's martyrdom in India at the center of INES ŽUPANOV's (Paris) presentation showed. At the time of his death, Acquaviva had already completed his first mission to the Mughal court, which had failed because in the eyes of the Jesuit the emperor was too tolerant of other religious specialists in the court. The second mission to the Salsete peninsula (Cuncolim) ended in the violent death of Acquaviva and four other Jesuits who had underestimated the complexity of the rural setting, specifically the dangers posed by conflicts in the countryside.

Conflicts with locals were also part of the day-to-day experience of Franciscan missionaries in

the villages around Jerusalem, especially in Bethlehem. According to FELICITA TRAMONTANA (Warwick), missionary activities in Bethlehem were embedded in a set of long-standing, but conflict-ridden economic and personal relations between the monastery and the surrounding area. In the seventeenth century, the Franciscans intensified interactions with local society by administering sacraments and charity to new converts. However, this gave rise to new conflicts as spreading Catholicism to the villages led to tensions with the Greek communities.

BIRGIT EMICH (Frankfurt am Main), in her comment on the four papers of the session, discussed some of the hallmarks of rural missions. In the rural context, as well as more generally, missionaries needed to transfer the social roles which they had in their native European societies to the local structures in Asia. What set rural missions apart from missions in other settings was that they were organized from urban centers. As a result they were even more dependent on functioning local networks to be effective than other missions.

In the final discussion CHARLOTTE DE CASTELNAU L'ESTOILE (Paris), SABINA PAVONE (Macerata), and ANTONELLA ROMANO (Paris) pointed to the opposing pulls of "going native" (or, as some preferred, "going local") and "remaining foreign," and the often unexpected outcomes this had on Christianity as a lived religion. Although missionaries were convinced that the gospel was universal, they themselves inadvertently proved that it could be interpreted and lived in many different ways. Building on this crucial insight, two panelists called for further research into the religious ideas and practices of the people whom the missionaries had won over to Catholicism. While placing missionary activities in the context of distinct communicative settings was seen as helpful for the purposes of this conference, some discussants felt that mobility between settings had emerged as a theme in many

papers and was, therefore, deserving of further study. Others suggested widening the scope of such investigations to other missionary areas, including the Americas and possibly even Europe.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Introduction*

Nadine Amsler (Bern) / Christian Windler (Bern)

#### *Panel 1: Urban Settings*

Chair: Bernard Heyberger (Paris)

Noël Golvers (Leuven), Jesuit Missionaries in the Peking Court City (17th-18th Centuries): Between Proselytization and Acculturation

Cesare Santus (Rome), Conflicting Views: The Local Practices of Catholic Missionaries in the Urban Settings of the Ottoman Empire

Comment: Markus Friedrich (Hamburg)

#### *Panel 2: Court Settings*

Chair: Nadine Amsler (Bern)

Eugenio Menegon (Boston), The Habit that Hides the Monk: Missionary Fashion Strategies at the Imperial Court in Early Modern China

Uroš Zver (San Domenico di Fiesole), Missionary Courting in Agra and Nanchang: Jesuit Mirrors for Emperor Jahangir and Prince Jian'an Wang

Margherita Trento (Chicago), At the Court of God: Tamil Poetry and Courtly Aspirations in the Life of Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi (1680-1747)

Christian Windler (Bern), Between Convent and Court Life: Missionaries in Isfahan and new Julfa

Comment: Ronnie Po-chia Hsia (University Park)

#### *Panel 3: Household Settings*

Chair: Christian Windler (Bern)

Bernhard Heyberger (Paris), Missionaries and Women: Domestic Catholicism in the Near East

Nadine Amsler (Bern), Holy Households: Jesuits, Women and Domestic Catholicism in China

Haruko Nawata Ward (Decatur/Georgia),  
Transforming Christianity into Kirishitan Reli-  
gion: Translation Workshops of Jesuits and Wom-  
en in Japanese Households

Comment: Nicolas Standaert (Leuven)

*Panel 4: Rural Settings*

Chair: Andreea Badea (Rome)

Ronnie Po-chia Hsia (University Park), Urban  
Residences and Rural Missions: Patterns of  
Catholic Evangelization in Late Imperial China

Hélène Vu Thanh (Lorient), Funding the Mis-  
sion: The Jesuits' Insertion in the Economy of the  
Japanese Countryside

Ines Županov (Paris), Between Mogor and  
Salsete: Rodolfo Acquaviva's Error

Felicita Tramontana (Warwick), A Peculiar  
Case of Rural Mission: The Franciscan Minors in  
the Villages of the Jerusalem District (17th Centu-  
ry)

Comment: Birgit Emich (Frankfurt am Main)

*Round Table and Final Discussion*

Charlotte de Castelnau l'Estoile (Paris) / Sabi-  
na Pavone (Macerata) / Antonella Romano (Paris)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
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