Brockey on Strasser, 'Missionary Men in the Early Modern World: German Jesuits and Pacific Journeys'

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Over the past two decades, the field of Jesuit studies has experienced a considerable flourishing with reconsiderations of the Society of Jesus’s educational institutions, extra-European missions, and models of sainthood predominating. A new generation of scholars has used a variety of lenses to view the order’s past, whether in terms of its spirituality, its conversion strategies, or its economics. One prism that has been lacking until recently, however, is a gender analysis. Ulrike Strasser’s study Missionary Men in the Early Modern World attempts to fill this gap with regard to one set of missionaries in the late seventeenth-century Pacific. While centering her study on the experience of a handful of German and Spanish Jesuits in the Mariana Islands and beyond, Strasser considers the larger context of the order’s early modern Catholic culture and its particular notions of masculinity. Missionary Men is therefore an analysis of both terms, discussing the experience of Jesuits as missionaries and as men in New Spain, the Philippines, and Guam.

Strasser’s study consists of five chapters focusing on different aspects of Jesuit masculinity and missionary activity in the Spanish Pacific. Intent to situate the drama of the Mariana Islands—where two of her main protagonists, Diego Luis de Sanvitores and Augustinus Strobach, were martyred—within a broader Jesuit frame, she begins by discussing early modern concepts of masculinity and, more specifically, Jesuit models of manhood. It is perhaps unsurprising that Strasser first concentrates on the figures of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, who as founders of the order provided the initial templates to which later Jesuits would attempt to conform. These models of mortification and perseverance, repeated often in literature imbibed by young Jesuits in the seventeenth century, shaped desires and created expectations for Jesuits in Europe and beyond. The first stage for the performative masculinity of the German Jesuits at the center of Missionary Men was the decks of the galleons, which bore them to the far side of the world. Rather than Loyola, however, the primary Jesuit model for shipboard behavior was Xavier, whose extensive sea travels were central components of his various hagiographies.

Deep into Strasser’s study, her missionaries attempt to enact other forms of Jesuit masculine heroism when they confront the politico-religious leaders of the Marianas as part of their conversion strategies. In that arena, Sanvitores and Strobach went beyond even where Xavier could lead them, since he died of illness rather than from the blows of persecutors. In her detailed discussion of the Marianas martyrdoms, Strasser mentions the parallels between the attitudes of the late seventeenth-
century missionaries and their Jesuit forebears. And her analysis of missionary strategies on the islands permits her to pay close attention in her concluding chapters to how the Jesuits attempted to reshape Chamorro notions of gender and social organization according to European norms. Her presentation centers on their deployment of Marian devotions as a way to subvert and redirect the matrilineal culture of the islands, drawing on Jesuit writings that, in ways perhaps to be expected in light of the order’s widespread promotion of Marian piety, describe the gradual transformation of the Mariana Islands from a hostile environment to one where Catholicism continues to thrive as it does in few other places. Given the limited number of sources about the Marianas mission, Strasser makes good use of comparisons to other areas of the Spanish Empire in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To enhance the themes found in Jesuit writings about female piety in the Marianas, she examines the example of the Jesuit Adam Kaller’s biography of Catarina de San Juan, the famed virgin from Mexico.

Missionary Men contains several organizing themes, as suggested by the preceding discussion, but the one that persists to the end is that of the German Jesuit contribution to early modern Jesuit missionization. Strasser includes a discussion of the efforts of Paul Klein in the Philippines and his quest to create a new mission field in the Palos Islands at the end of the seventeenth century and concludes her analysis with a return to Europe—a discussion of the Neue Welt-Bott, a serial publication in the eighteenth century intended as a German counterpart to the Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses, published in Paris. Her discussion of Joseph Stöcklein’s publishing project demonstrates how the promotion of German texts from the far-flung missions helped give a German Jesuit flavor to what was otherwise an Iberian affair.

Strasser’s Missionary Men provides a useful set of conceptual tools for scholars in Jesuit studies. Its insistence on the usefulness of gender as a category of analysis even for single-sex communities and its examples of clear Jesuit attempts at performative masculinity are valuable reminders of the oftenscripted nature of missionary accounts. This last point, about the role of texts in creating and sustaining certain models of missionary behavior, is both a strength and a weakness of Missionary Men. Strasser’s book relies primarily on printed sources rather than manuscripts, so the vision of Jesuit activities in the Pacific that she recounts is largely that which passed through Jesuit censors and editors. While she does acknowledge Stöcklein’s role in crafting a specific image of Jesuit missions for his eighteenth-century audiences, a similar discussion of the role of the continental European editors who created the printed books at the heart of her study would have been useful. Indeed, comparisons of manuscript reports from the mission field against the printed versions of the Jesuit texts at the heart of Missionary Men would likely have shown that the models of missionary manhood that Strasser discusses were mainly European creations for European audiences.

The idea of the missions was often very different from their reality, something that Jesuit editors knew well. Before sending texts to the press, they worked vigorously to massage the raw material sent them from the mission fields into the types of pious fantasies that would inspire new missionary vocations—a constant need for the order’s expansive global enterprises—and elicit new donations from secular patrons. The images of missionary heroics were therefore often more the reflection of the editors’ tastes and notions of manly piety than straightforward translations of dispatches from the arenas of conversion. As a result, the locus of Jesuit notions of missionary masculinity as reflected in the texts that Strasser considers was in Europe rather than in the mission fields. This is confirmed by the evocations of missionary manhood that prospective recruits to the missions wrote in their “Indies
petitions,” the corpus of letters sent to Rome by generations of Jesuits, where they wrote unceasingly about dying for the faith—something not always likely in the late seventeenth-century missions. How the Jesuits around the globe outside of Europe understood or expressed their masculinity remains a question for other scholars to consider in light of manuscript sources, unedited by the order’s censors (although surely filtered through Jesuit screens before reaching the archives). We are nevertheless grateful to Strasser for opening up this new line of inquiry, which will hopefully produce much fruit in the coming years.


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