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Author: Ulrike Strasser
Reviewer: David Dzurec

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


Reviewed by David Dzurec (University of Scranton) Published on H-TGS (January, 2022)
Commissioned by Alison C. Efford (Marquette University)

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Strasser largely succeeds in using the experience of Jesuit missionaries to integrate the study of the history of gender into a global context. The work also makes important contributions to our understanding of the development of European visions of empire in the Pacific and the history of religion (particularly Jesuit history). After an introduction, the book is divided into five chapters, the first four of which run thirty-four pages each, while the fifth extends to fifty-four pages (more on this later). The first two chapters focus primarily on notions of Jesuit masculinity, chapters 3 and 4 focus on missionary experiences in the Mariana Islands, and the final chapter weaves the book’s themes into a unified whole through a consideration of the generation of missionary texts and maps. Strasser finally provides a brief conclusion and epilogue that briefly explores the enduring legacy of Jesuit missionaries on ideas of gender and religion in the Pacific.

The first chapter provides an insightful consideration of how the emergence and early success of the
Society of Jesus was tied directly to a distinct notion of Jesuit masculinity. This form of masculinity, according to Strasser, included an “emotional appeal” that provided the foundation for a “homosocial fellowship of men ... that other men wanted to emulate” (p. 46). Strasser finds the root of Jesuit masculinity in Ignatius’s *Autobiography*, in which he rejected the sixteenth century’s more violent forms of masculinity, favoring a more emotive style that blurred the lines between traditional male and female characteristics. The result was a “controlled and clerical masculinity” that stood in contrast to the “violent conquistador” (p. 64). Even as Ignatius offered his followers a broader model of masculinity, the Society hardened gender lines by prohibiting the women from holding any role within the Jesuit order. With such a clear separation of men and women, Strasser argues, the Jesuits could promise a “lifelong homosociality that centered on emotionally sustaining father-son relationships,” allowing for the creation of a global network that was essential to Jesuit missionary work and the project of European colonialism in the century to come (p. 69).

If Ignatius’s *Autobiography* provided the theoretical framework for a Jesuit masculinity, the life of Francis Xavier (1506–52) served as a model for how Jesuit masculinity might be put into practice. Strasser’s second chapter, in examining the missionary work of Francis Xavier, provides an important consideration of how transoceanic voyages forged young missionaries. Strasser traces both Xavier’s voyages and their memorialization, making direct connections to “the biblical story of Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee” (p. 89). In so doing, she successfully demonstrates how the transoceanic voyages themselves were as essential to missionary work as the proselytization at the destination. At the heart of these voyages was the Jesuit ability to connect with the notion of *timor filialis* (filial fear). Strasser presents this form of fear as an uplifting experience for the missionaries and their fellow passengers, which could serve as a “powerful educational tool” in the face of the dangers of a transoceanic voyage (p. 91). In expanding the boundaries of missionary work to include the initial journey to the missionary site, Strasser helps develop a deeper understanding of both the evolving notions of manhood in this period and the ways in which the retelling of these journeys recruited young men to missionary work.

If the first two chapters successfully demonstrate a form of Jesuit masculinity that eschewed the violence of the conquistadors, the story of the martyrdom of Spanish Jesuit Diego Sanvitores in the late seventeenth century demonstrates the limits of that masculinity and the intrusion of the “dirty business of colonial warfare” into the Jesuit mission in the Marianas (p. 142). At the heart of this breakdown was a conflict between the Jesuits’ modified European masculinity and the matrilineal traditions of the islanders—due in part to the Jesuits’ homosocial traditions and their rejection of marriage. The Jesuits’ inability to marry into the local clans “made all of their alliances unstable and contributed to the quick escalation of hostilities” (p. 116). Yet, if an eruption of hostilities marked a kind of failure for the Jesuit missions and a breakdown in Ignatius’s version of Jesuit masculinity, the descent into violence also paradoxically boosted the Society’s work. Sanvitores’s death in 1672 highlighted the possibility of martyrdom in the Mariana Islands, which served to attract European Jesuits to the missions in the Pacific.

It was stories of Sanvitores’s martyrdom that “sparked a virtual run for the Mariana missions” in the Holy Roman Empire (p. 148). Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the section of the book that will likely prove of most interest to readers of H-TGS. Strasser employs the story of the Bohemian Jesuit Augustinus Strobach to illustrate the larger “clamoring” of German Jesuits “to go to the Marianas precisely because of the promise of difficulty and potential for martyr’s death” (p. 157). The lure of a
martyr’s death proved a reality for Strobach, who was killed in 1684. Although there were no European witnesses to his death, the official report to the missionary superior used the term “martyrdom” (p. 168). Strobach’s martyrdom inspired even more missionaries from across Europe to follow in his footsteps. In relating the story and impact of Strobach’s death in Europe, Strasser also cites the rise of the “Cult of the Virgin” as “one of the great long-term successes” of Strobach’s missionary efforts (p. 172).

Drawing heavily from material in the serial missionary publication Der Neue Welt-Bott, the final chapter works to pull the book’s wide-ranging themes into a cohesive whole around the theme of “products of Jesuit knowledge production” (p. 183). The scope of this task is made clear in the fact that the chapter runs a full twenty pages longer than each of the previous four chapters. It has two distinct sections, the first dealing with hagiographies of “holy women” written by German and Spanish Jesuits in an effort to “shed light on their own masculine struggles” (p. 184). Strasser focuses on accounts of the life of Catarina de San Juan, “an Asian-born mystic from colonial Mexico” (p. 183) written by the Spanish Jesuit Alonso Ramos and the German Jesuit Adam Kaller. As Strasser notes, Jesuit interest in Catarina paralleled French Jesuits’ celebration of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France (p. 215). It is through an examination these connections that, Strasser argues, “one discovers ‘the transatlantic’ and ‘the colonial’ in early modern German history, and the ‘early modern’ and ‘Pacific’ in Latin American history” (p. 194). The second section of chapter 5 includes an extensive consideration of the role Der Neue Welt-Bott played in laying the foundation for a German global imagination. The stories of missionaries, religious women, and even maps of exotic places created a space in which “missionary knowledge production met colonial fantasy, arguably laying the imaginary groundwork for modern masculine imperializing endeavors” by the German state (p. 208).

Some minor weaknesses do deserve mention. First, the book might be better subtitled “European Jesuits and Pacific Journeys.” The German Jesuits in this book appear alongside their Spanish and French counterparts. The final chapter does focus on German history, but it seems to try to do too much in a single chapter. Additionally, there are times when the book’s themes are not fully integrated with each other. This is particularly apparent in the fourth chapter, which includes both the attraction of possible martyrdom and the rise of the cult of Mary in the Marinas. Strasser herself notes that Marian devotion in the archipelago appeared long before the Jesuit mission and is a clear example of a process “for which no single Jesuit could take altogether too much credit” (p. 172). None of these concerns diminishes the overall contribution of this book. Any unexplored paths serve to indicate routes for future studies that follow in Strasser’s impressive effort to weave religion, gender, and global history into a unified study of Jesuit missionaries in the early modern world.

In successfully engaging such a broad range of topics, the well-written and approachable monograph will appeal to a wide audience in an array of disciplines including history, gender studies, languages and literature, and religious studies. While the final chapter works to unite the book’s many strands into a unified whole, each chapter successfully stands on its own. Drawing on a range of Jesuit source material, Strasser’s consideration of Jesuit masculinity also adds a novel layer to the growing body of work that employs Jesuit sources to understand both Atlantic and world history.

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