Agents of Change or Victims of Empire? Native Converts to Christianity By Joseph G. Howard, Simon Fraser University

Introduction

As European imperialism spread around the globe, following Iberian journeys to the Americas and Asia in the 1490s, occupants of these newly accessible lands encountered Christian missionaries in growing numbers. Christianity already existed in some of these places, while elsewhere people heard the Gospel for the first time. In all cases, Christianity adapted—with varying success—to facilitate transmission into the local society and culture.

Who were the agents of this religious change, European missionaries or local converts? Historians are divided over the answer to this question. For some time, the European missionaries took center stage, and historians have explored how they adapted their message to achieve greater evangelical success. Recently, a number of scholars have turned their attention towards native converts, though not usually abandoning the story of the missionaries completely. The agency of the missionary remains unquestioned; the active or passive nature of the convert varies with the individual scholar.

This discussion of agency exists not just within the context of missionary history, but in the history of European imperialism in general. This paper seeks to explore the limits and extent of native agency in the face of European imperialism by focusing on the roles of native converts to Christianity in the shaping of the Christian message to fit local conditions in China and Latin America. It examines the degree to which different historians have granted agency to converts, looking for a change in the perspective of historians over time. Ultimately, this paper argues for the need to acknowledge the contribution of native converts to the adaptation of Christianity in
order to better understand the complexity of the historical processes of conversion and to accurately depict the missionaries, both in future research and in the classroom.

**The Field—From the Americas to China and Back Again**

In *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*, John Phelan focuses on Gerónimo de Mendieta, a Franciscan missionary in Latin America, and his efforts to build an earthly paradise among the natives. The book deals primarily with the missionaries, but naturally the Native Americans must appear in the work. They appear as wards of the state and the Church. Mendieta argues for their segregation from the Spanish—but not the Church—to maintain the purity of the natives, while the government and the colonists insist on exploiting their labor. Despite the perseverance of the Spanish in exploiting the natives, “Strenuous and not always unsuccessful efforts, however, were made to protect rights of the natives.”

In this formulation, the Spanish took the role to encroach upon or protect the rights of natives. Mendieta, in his defense of segregation, “emphasized what the modern anthropologists would call the demoralization produced among the conquered race by the cultural shock of the conquest.” Mendieta argued that the Spanish should strive only for the Christianization, not the Hispanization, of the natives, as doing both would be overwhelming to the conquered peoples and result in the failure of both endeavors. “Being by nature children easily led astray by bad examples, the natives were confused and demoralized by the workings of the world of Europeans which suddenly thrust itself upon them and which they were incapable of understanding.”

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
world in which they find themselves. The conquest is complete and absolute. Native tradition is destroyed, and only what the Europeans protect might be retained.

In this version of events, Mendieta comes through as a hero, another Bartolomé de las Casas, protecting the fragile Indians against the excesses of the Spanish conquistadores. The inhabitants of New Spain lacked the ability to shape the conquest, to alter the world in which they lived. They could only react to what the colonizers did, and their reactions would be predictable by the Spanish, thus the Spanish could get the result they wanted simply by taking different actions. In the end, the Franciscan paradise collapses due to imperial policy, not any act of the local inhabitants. The natives in this story serve as raw material, as a canvas ready and waiting for the missionary to come and mold them into something. When imperial policy turns against the missionary, the natives are the property stolen away from the Church by the state. Taking Europeans as the only agents of change results in a view that sees only Europeans as heroes and villains, and sees natives as pliable receptors of state or Church policy. Here the number of conversions correlates with the number of missionaries, the missionary strategy, and state support of the missions. The natives do not shape Christianity, do not choose to convert, do not even choose to rebel against the missionaries, but only respond according to the actions of Europeans.

In George Dunne’s *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty*, the title itself suggests that converts will take a backseat to heroic, larger-than-life missionaries. Similar to Phelan’s book, here the Chinese converts serve as pawns in the chess match of conversion. Dunne also relates elements of Christianity beyond the grasp of the Chinese, for example “one of the features of Roman Catholic Christianity to which imperial China would have extreme difficulty reconciling itself: the existence of a supreme spiritual
authority, independent of the emperor, to whom Chinese Catholics would be expected to look as
the final arbiter in matters of faith and morals.”⁴ Arguably Dunne is vindicated in stressing the
difficulty of this point for Chinese, as this issue continues to create tension between the Chinese
government and the Vatican today, but it still asserts the inability of the native convert to
comprehend the complexities of European Christianity.

In contrast to the Latin American case, in China prominent Chinese converts—Xu
Guangqi, Li Zhizao, and Yang Tingyun—tend to share the spotlight with Matteo Ricci and the
other Jesuit missionaries. However, their inclusion does not necessarily change the degree of
agency granted to converts. In Dunne’s work, Xu Guangqi’s conversion, “rightly regarded as the
greatest glory of Chinese Catholicism,”⁵ is summoned as support for Ricci’s missionary
method—in this case his printing of a world map to draw learned Chinese to Christianity. The
point of including Xu is not to discuss why he chose to convert, but to highlight Ricci’s success
in gaining converts. In other places the number of converts serves to measure the success of the
missionaries, as when Dunne writes, “This number [2000] represented the immediate fruit of
twenty-six years of patient labor. But the prescience of Ricci saw in it only reason for hope. He
knew the dynamic potentialities contained in the seed now planted in Chinese soil. . . . He knew,
of course, that clumsy hands could destroy the tender plant before it reached maturity.”⁶ The
imagery of caring for a plant makes it clear that the missionaries’ actions determine the success
or failure of the mission. When discussing the spread of Christianity in China after Ricci’s death,
Dunne continues to credit the missionaries with the success, as when, after relating the number

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⁵ Dunne, 67-68.
⁶ Ibid., 105.
of converts in Fujian, he concludes, “The merit of these achievements was that of Giulio Aleni.”\(^7\)

In this volume, Dunne sets out to celebrate the accomplishments of the Jesuits in late imperial China, and in this endeavor he enjoys great success.

Taking Phelan and Dunne together, the missionaries overshadow the fruits of their labor. The numbers of converts mark success or failure of the missionary or the hostility or hospitality of the environment. Individual converts find themselves at the mercy of forces greater than themselves, and act in response to external pressures. This is the view before 1970. Let us discover whether this view changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* Sabine MacCormack strikes a balance between the influence of the missionaries and that of the natives. This balance may in part arise from the attitude of her missionary subjects, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Garcilaso de la Vega, whom she finds to consider Andeans as “partners in a religious and cultural discourse.”\(^8\) I suspect the difference lies with MacCormack. Like earlier historians, she relates the image of the Andeans as culturally backward and lacking in intellectual talent; however, she identifies this image as a perception of the Spanish. This extra word makes it clear that she does not share that vision of the natives.

MacCormack’s view of the missionary also diverges from that of her predecessors. Unlike Dunne and Phelan who related the exploits of heroic figures, MacCormack finds that “these men [Spanish missionaries and officials] have left a set of unflattering portraits of themselves in the documents they generated.”\(^9\) MacCormack thus sets herself apart in two ways: first, she finds the historical documents to reflect badly on the missionaries; second, she groups

\(^7\) Ibid., 260.
\(^9\) Ibid., 9.
together missionaries and officials. If Spanish missionaries in Peru left records similar to what their counterparts in Mexico left behind, then clearly what Phelan found laudatory MacCormack finds unbecoming. This leads to the conclusion that she finds it objectionable that “the colonial church came increasingly to rely on coercion rather than persuasion” and retained views of Andeans as intellectually deficient. Considering missionaries alongside colonial officials underscores MacCormack’s distaste for the missionaries’ evangelical practices by implicating them even more in coercive behavior. Whereas Phelan identified a battle between exploitative Spanish officials and beneficent missionaries over the fate of the natives, MacCormack sees Spanish officials and missionaries, together, imposing imperialism upon the Andeans, on a spectrum from persuasion to coercion. She conceptualizes the engagement as including “Andean responses to missionary initiative and coercion.” Including the natives as agents of change resulted in a dynamic of Spaniard versus Andean. However, MacCormack is careful not to overstate the role of the Andeans, arguing that “[this story] is about violent confrontations between representatives of opposing religious traditions, who all acted, to a greater or lesser degree, within the constraints imposed by those traditions.”

Including the Andeans as active players does not result in MacCormack demonizing the missionaries. She recognizes, “The officials and missionaries of colonial Peru acted from within their own culture and from within the constraints that this culture imposed on them. Although there did exist certain choices as to how, specifically, the values of that culture could be accommodated in the Andes, these choices were limited.” Acknowledging the agency of the

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10 Ibid., 8.
11 MacCormack, 9.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
Andeans coincides, in MacCormack’s work, with a balanced view of the missionaries, one that does not applaud their efforts but also stops short of attacking them.

David Block’s *Mission Culture on the Upper Amazon: Native Tradition, Jesuit Enterprise, and Secular Policy in Moxos, 1660-1880* marks the extreme case of granting agency to natives. Beyond recognizing “the paramount role played by the Indians in the establishment and functioning of the missions” and that they “actively participated in all phases of mission life, sagaciously sifting and shaping European traditions to local realities,” Block goes on to argue that they freely chose to enter the missions and adopt ‘mission culture’ instead of ‘tropical forest culture’. He adopts this interpretation because “only inducements such as these [material and ideological] could have convinced the native peoples of Moxos to abandon their tropical forest culture [the term used by Block to describe their pre-contact way of life], tied as it was to centuries of subsistence and belief structures, and to enter missions established to centralize their conversion.” Indeed, Block suggests that Spanish missions “ended forever the monopoly of native cultural modes in Moxos. But they established a viable substitute for premission life-styles, one acceptable to both priests and Indians.”

Block’s treatment sounds similar to MacCormack’s in many ways, but he goes a step beyond her in describing conversion as a clear choice between an old and a new way of life. In fact, this step could be seen as a step backward. Conceptualizing ‘mission culture’ as a distinct break from ‘tropical forest culture’ asserts the difference between the two. If they are so different, then many elements of tropical forest culture must be missing from mission culture, suggesting that mission culture is more akin to European culture than it is to Moxos culture. In that case,

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15 Ibid., 9.
16 Ibid., 7.
Block’s missions sound like Phelan’s, oases of natives living in a Spanish-Christian utopia. Block means to counteract this tendency by asserting the immense role played by the natives in developing mission culture, but if they were so involved it seems that mission culture would not radically differ from their pre-mission way of life. Either mission culture and tropical forest culture are not that different or the inhabitants of Moxos did not have a strong influence on the development of mission culture.

Another similarity with Phelan is Block’s identification of the antagonism between the Jesuits and the government. In MacCormack’s account, balancing the agency of Spaniard and Andean resulted in tension between those two groups, with missionaries and officials working towards greatly similar goals. In overstating the agency of the natives, Block has returned to tension between inhabitants of the missions (Spanish and native) and colonial officials. Block’s overemphasis of native agency has the same result as Phelan’s neglect of it: missionary and convert losing paradise because of imperialism. These treatments separate Christianity from imperialism and identify the struggle between them as the defining struggle of the early colonial period in Latin America. On the other hand, MacCormack identifies the main struggle as between colonizer and colonized, and so she sees interaction, conflict, and accommodation between those two groups.

In *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation* Kenneth Mills, like MacCormack, balances the roles of the Spanish and Andeans. In Mills’ account the Andeans have an active role in shaping cultural interactions; they “did much to determine what constituted colonial religion, but their religion, like their history, interlocks with that of Spaniards and

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17 Block, 1.
Christianity”\textsuperscript{18} and “were selective in their religious assimilations.”\textsuperscript{19} Here Mills describes the interactions between Andean and Spaniard in terms of meshing and interlocking, a more organic image than Block’s clear distinctions between pre- and post-mission ways of life.

Mills avoids Block’s pitfall by confirming that the Spanish also played a role in the persistence of Andean religion. The militant presence of the Inquisition and efforts at the extirpation of idolatry did not reach into every corner of Peru. The face of Spanish Christianity was the parish priest, many of whom “saw the encouragement of religious ‘convergence’ between native and Christian religious forms as the best recipe not only for the Indian parishioners’ gradual Christianization but also for peaceful parish life.”\textsuperscript{20} Ultimately, Andeans learned that the greatest defense against Spanish Christianization was “to keep their true beliefs to themselves.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus Mills takes account of the Andeans’ active resistance to Christianity as well as what James Scott classifies as “everyday resistance.”\textsuperscript{22}

In terms of the major tension in colonial Latin America, Mills’ title indicates that he sees colonial processes as mostly pitting Andeans (idolaters) against the Spanish (enemies of idolatry). However, just as Mills identifies complexity in the interactions between conqueror and conquered, he similarly complicates the dichotomy of ‘idolatry and its enemies,’ finding that most people existed between the extremes laid out his title and practiced a combination of Andean and Christian religion. One of his purposes in this book is to overcome “the ill effects of polarized conceptions of colonial religious history (in this context, the idea of a Spanish

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Mills, 281.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 285.
Christianity locked in mortal combat with Indian religion).” 23 Mills pushes against using polarized dichotomies to understand religion in colonial Latin America, offering a more nuanced approach that takes into account the intricacies of human interaction.

Barbara Ganson’s *The Guaraní under Spanish Rule in the Río de la Plata* fits in with the developing pattern set by MacCormack and Mills. In opposition to views of “indigenous people merely as a reflection of European culture or a part of an exotic background of South America” and the argument that “the Guaraní rapidly lost their native culture in early colonial Paraguay,” Ganson asserts that “these indigenous people shaped the encounter with Europeans and retained aspects of their native culture in this remote province throughout the colonial era.” 24 Ganson is careful not to understate the affect of the Spanish, but considers “the adaptive processes of the tropical lowland Guaraní in South America, the persistence of their indigenous value systems, and the melding of European and Guaraní cultures in this part of colonial Spanish America.” 25 Ganson insists that the Guaraní had the power to react to Spanish imperialism in such a way so as to maintain their former way of life, negotiating the affect of imperialism in Paraguay.

Ganson sets up a clash between the Guaraní and the Spanish, including government officials and missionaries in the colonial enterprise. She tries to acknowledge the agency and influence of each side, writing, “The Catholic Church and the colonial state certainly were important influences in their lives, but as this study will demonstrate, the Guaraní in the Jesuit missions were able to make many of their major life decisions and determine their own destinies. The Guaraní not only helped shape the formation of Paraguay’s hybrid culture but also were

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23 Mills, 3.
25 Ibid., 6.
active participants in the historical processes of the Río de la Plata.”

Here, the agency of colonizer and colonized are mutually limiting and the result of cultural interaction is a hybrid culture influenced by both parties. Ganson does not exaggerate the power of the Guaraní nor does she attack or applaud the actions of the missionaries.

Ganson’s book helps support the argument that a balanced view of the agency of convert and missionary produces a more objective history by providing an example from a region other than Peru, the subject of study for both MacCormack and Mills. Scholars, both male and female, studying regions of Latin America as removed as the Andes in Peru and the Río de la Plata in Paraguay, demonstrate the effect of acknowledging the extent and limits of native agency.

For support from even farther afield, we turn to Nicolas Standaert’s *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange between China and Europe*. Standaert resists two trends in the historiography of Christianity in China by opposing the “essentialist views holding that Chinese and European cultures are incompatible and that cultural transfer is thus impossible” and by taking a “shift downward from the converts belonging to the Chinese elite or the missionaries working at the court, to the common, often anonymous, Christians in the provinces and to the itinerant missionaries doing pastoral work.”

Standaert does not take an explicit stand on the agency of the Chinese converts, likely because this matter is less contested in the historiography of Christianity in China than in Latin America. However, the two trends he does hope to correct do resonate in the historiography of Latin America.

The idea that cultural exchange between China and Europe was impossible because the societies were too different has implications similar to the argument that the natives of Latin America were too intellectually deficient to fully comprehend the intricacies of European

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26 Ibid.
Catholicism. In both arguments, the success or failure of the missions lies beyond the missionary’s control; he is attempting an impossible task. Relating the stories of those attempting impossible (or near impossible) tasks leads scholars such as Dunne and Phelan to build their subjects up into heroic figures. Standaert—like MacCormack, Mills, and Ganson—tears down the altar to heroic missionaries, replacing it with due consideration of their efforts as well as the efforts of the converts.

Standaert’s other endeavor—to shift focus to ordinary Chinese Christians—implies that he takes seriously their ability to affect cultural exchange between China and the West. His purpose is to show that Chinese and European rituals influenced one another, so choosing to focus on ordinary converts implies that they were the agents of this exchange. In facilitating this exchange, ordinary Chinese not only affected the way Christianity came to China, but they also worked at cross purposes to elite Chinese who hoped to prevent its spread. Even if elites (in both Europe and China) opposed a Sinified Christianity, human actors on the ground, in the interstices, found ways to navigate the space between two different cultural traditions. This emphasis also resonates with the work of MacCormack, Mills, and Ganson, as they too illustrate how ordinary converts to Christianity affected the way it accommodated to local native culture.

Standaert lays out four theoretical frameworks that help him accomplish his task: transmission, reception, invention, and interaction. He identifies advantages and limitations of the first three, but finds the interaction framework the most suitable for studying cultural interaction in general and Christianity in China in particular. As he argues that the key to understanding cultural exchange is to analyze the interstices in which the interaction takes place—rather than focusing more on the transmitter, receiver, or the transmitted cultural entity—it becomes clear that Standaert wrote about funerals, at least in part, to demonstrate the
superiority of the interaction framework in studying the exchange between Europe and China that played out during the spread of Christianity, using funeral rites as a case study to show the possibility of cultural exchange and blending between China and Europe. Considering that his interaction approach dovetails with a balanced recognition of the roles of Europeans and Chinese in cultural exchange, Standaert provides another case where a perspective that balances the influence of all participants involved results in a study in which neither missionary nor convert comes across as heroic, demonic, or as wielding all the power. Instead Standaert catches a glimpse of the intricate and complex interaction of cultures in late imperial China.


Anderson asserts that his story “poses a range of significant new theoretical challenges to the study of European-aboriginal interaction,” though she does not clearly articulate the historiographical trends she challenges. Devoting such attention to the life of one convert suggests that he made a remarkable contribution to the interaction between aboriginals and Europeans in North America, but her Atlantic scope draws attention back to the missionaries.

Her main point seems to be to “demonstrate the necessity of recognizing rather than dismissing religious factors in our attempts to understand the difficult conceptual challenges aboriginal peoples faced as the result of a second European advent—the missionaries.” Using the language of conceptual challenges resonates with earlier works, like Phelan’s, that allowed

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29 Ibid., 208.
30 Ibid., 207.
the Spaniards’ questions about the intellectual capacity of Americans to go unchallenged. The language Anderson employs outlines a confrontation not between European and aboriginal, but between aboriginal and missionary. Distinguishing between secular and religious aspects of European imperialism rather than looking at a friction between cultures is another similarity between Anderson and Phelan. However, unlike Phelan, who praised the missionaries and relegated the natives to the background, Anderson paints the missionaries as malevolent figures.

Anderson’s demonization of the Christian missionaries begins in earnest as she recounts the “missionary preference for the one-way imposition of their religious commitments onto vulnerable children” and the “black robes . . . presenting conversion as requiring the utter repudiation of the convert’s former way of life.” Her description of the uncompromising missionary contrasts especially with Mills’ account, which suggested that a number of priests in Peru saw the benefit to Christianity of encouraging convergence between Christianity and local religion. Anderson’s frequent description of the missionaries as “black robes” portrays them visually as intimidating, malevolent figures.

Anderson ultimately prefers the “much-maligned fur traders” who “established a more tenable, mutually productive with Pastedechouan’s people” and “affirmed rather than eroded Innu collective identity” to the black-robed “purveyors of disastrous change” who “even when numbering less than the fingers of one hand, . . . audaciously sought nothing less than the total cultural and religious capitulation of native societies to their priestly authority, resisting rather than facilitating the development of a shard conceptual or behavioral world with the aboriginal populations who dwarfed the Recollets’ tiny cadre.” This account of the missionaries’ activities contrasts with Block’s, MacCormack’s, Mills’, Standaert’s, and Ganson’s, who all conveyed the

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31 Anderson, 208-209.
32 Ibid., 208-210.
story of how cultural exchange between native and missionary resulted in a new cultural form, often acceptable (if not preferable) to both groups. Here, Anderson also begins to undermine the agency of the aboriginals. She repeatedly emphasizes how few the missionaries were, yet she simultaneously emphasizes their effect on aboriginal life. If such a small number of individuals could have such a drastic effect on a much larger group or, conversely, if a large group could not repulse or counteract the cultural attacks wrought by a much smaller group, this places much more power (and agency) in the persons of the smaller group. Anderson’s account of the degenerative effect of European missionaries on aboriginal culture relies on reducing the aboriginals’ agency, as otherwise they would have been able to at least develop a hybrid culture, if not altogether resist the invasion of the Europeans. Conceiving the distribution of agency between missionary and native in this way enables Anderson to present the missionaries as malignant colonial invaders who attack native culture rather than as brokers of cultural exchange.

Taking Anderson together with the above historians, she shares more in common with those who overemphasize the influence of one group at the expense of the other and those who see a basic dissimilarity between secular and religious harbingers of imperialism than she does with those who explore how individuals negotiated a “middle ground” between two different cultures. Since historians of the same regions often draw conflicting conclusions, it may be that other scholars of European-aboriginal contact in New France might relate a story counter to Anderson’s.

Conclusions

Engaging a diverse set of secondary literature on Christian missions in Latin America and China in the early modern period bears up the argument that acknowledging the contribution of

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native converts to the adaptation of Christianity helps historians to better understand the complexity of the historical processes of conversion and to accurately depict the missionaries, if the reader agrees to stipulate that European Christian missionaries were neither heroic defenders of the beset Indian nor the malevolent harbingers of disaster and cultural destruction, but somewhere in between.

A change over time appears absent in the sense that some recent as well as older volumes both mischaracterize the relationship between missionaries and their (prospective) converts. The change that occurs over time is the shift from heroicizing to demonizing the missionaries, though even this change is not absolute, as works like Block’s contain the shadow of gallant missionary defenders protecting natives against the exploitation of colonialism.

Finally, the conclusion that natives could, in fact, influence the adaptation of Christianity to local conditions suggests that they may also have been capable of influencing how other colonial institutions developed in their home regions. Colonialism in the Americas involved a great deal of invasion and destruction, but the colonial governments did not create administration and bureaucracy ex nihilo; they built on the ruins and remains of local culture, and native aid and resistance influenced the shape such colonial machinery would eventually take.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Establishing the importance of acknowledging native agency is not merely a theoretical exercise to be filed away. It is critically important that theoretical considerations such as these find their way into our classrooms. We have not effectively recognized native agency if we continue to give Europeans pride of place in our teaching of European imperialism. World historians are well positioned to show students the breadth of human experience. Next time you teach, ask yourself whether you are teaching the history of the world or the history of Europeans
in the world. Try to find ways to integrate native peoples into your teaching, rather than relegating them to a few lectures. The history of imperialism is one of interaction, not just of imposition. This is a truth to be confessed, not held quietly in the heart.

Works Cited


