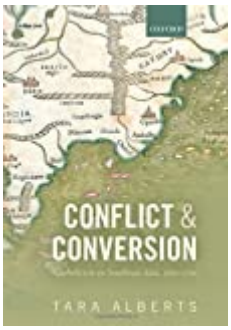
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tara Alberts. *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500 - 1700.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 304 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-964626-5.

Reviewed by Julius Bautista (Kyoto University)

Published on H-Catholic (January, 2016)

Commissioned by Carolina Armenteros

In *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500-1700*, Tara Alberts derives historical insight from the written accounts of bishops, secular clergy, and members of the various church orders as they pursued the conversion of Southeast Asians to the Catholic faith. The book pursues two very important currents of research, namely: (1) the challenges faced by Roman Catholic missionaries in maintaining practical and theological consistency under difficult and often hostile logistical conditions; and (2) how the pre-existing belief systems held by Southeast Asian converts impacted upon missionization as the age of exploration transitioned into the era of high imperialism.

It should be noted from the outset that the book does not provide complete coverage of all missionary fields in Southeast Asia. Readers are invited to follow missionary trails across three specific zones of missionization, each characterized by fairly well-entrenched political and religious belief systems. Both the first zone (which includes Tonkin and Cochinchina in what is now Vietnam) and the second zone (Siam or modern-day Thailand) are marked by the influence of the "triple flower" of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. The third zone, meanwhile, encompasses the Islamized parts of island Southeast Asia, primarily around the port city of Malacca. Relatively less focus is placed on the two places in Southeast Asia in which missionary work proved the most successfulâthe Philippines and East Timor, which are mentioned only occasionally and incidentally as they are considered peripheral to the early machinations of missionary orders in Southeast Asia. Be that as it may, the zoning structure deployed here has its advantages. The biggest one is that it furnishes a fascinating comparative perspective on the friction that existed among missionaries as they confronted a diversity of responses to evangelism by politically and culturally distinct Southeast Asian civilizations.

In the first three chapters, Alberts analyzes the broader geopolitical tensions and conflicts that affected the pursuit of missionary objectives. In an era of Catholic missionary enterpriseâone characterized by an indomitable zeal that carried the crusade against the "infidel" across from the Holy LandsâJesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Carmelites were eagerly vying with one another for traction on potentially fertile mission fields. Alberts discusses the jurisdictional fissures that were manifested in a "tangle of ecclesiastical authorities" (p. 34) as missionary orders promulgated and sustained their respective evangelic endeavors in the region. She cites the overt friction, for example, between SociÃ©tÃ© des

Missions ÃtrangÃ¨res de Paris (MEP) and the Jesuit order, who each accused the other of unethical, unscrupulous, and even heretical missionizing practices. Alberts provides intriguing insight about how missionaries were even skeptical about the performance indicators brandished by their predecessors, particularly in obtaining large numbers of baptisms, which were often indicted as âsymptoms of vanity and self-regardâ (p. 136). There is useful coverage of the range and nature of contestation over geopolitical boundaries and ecclesiastical jurisdictions, as well as the vehement disputes about what was legitimate evangelical practice, and even over the concept of the sacred itself. Overall, this cluster of chapters paints a general portrait of a missionary field that was at times tense and cynical, while at others reluctant, tentative, and contingent. This is a depiction that is counterintuitive to a conventional reading of missionary archives.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, Alberts addresses the practical and tactical methodologies missionaries employed to persuade target audiences of the validity of the faith. The wider historical scholarship on this topic typically describes the vernacularization and localization of evangelical strategies. Alberts covers these, but also goes further in highlighting the strategies that were responsive to a mission terrain âoverlaid with confusing and shifting webs of authority“ (p. 33). She begins by discussing how the prospect of successful conversion was premised upon stereotypes of the nativesâ inherent predisposition towards conversionâessentilaized portraits that were often frustrated by the practical, on-the-ground vicissitudes of evangelization. The sources she analyzes convey the great challenges missionaries faced in maintaining sacerdotal authority, particularly in the context of well-entrenched traditions and spiritual customs. A valuable contribution of this section is in outlining how missionaries sought evangelical strategies that conformed to religious orthodoxy (how much could be âborrowedâ from local rituals and customs in evangelical strategies) and yet was âpowerfulâ enough to impress local converts inclined towards practical efficacy of spiritual beliefs. In the second zone, for example, she shows that a major obstacle to conversion was the fact that the spiritual needs of the Siamese were adequately met by the range of spiritual practices offered by religious leaders of the Buddhist Sangha. Similarly, in the third zone, she notes that missionaries could offer no compelling alternative to the specialized advice offered by highly trained local ritual specialists, for âneither missionaries nor lay Catholics had the necessary skills, nor could offer a sufficient range of devotional practices and objects to meet all local needs” (p. 57). In this vein, Alberts provides relevant and useful analysis of the paradox of conversion, wherein locals may enthusiastically take up the faith at times of social distress, only to rescind it when it no longer suits them. She shows that missionaries were well aware of these challenges and oriented their strategies in ways that enhanced the persuasiveness and practical utility of conversion. This perspective is crucial in developing a nuanced understanding of the contingencies of missionary zeal and perseverance in the region.

In the final four chapters, Alberts considers the âlived experience of converts to Catholicism in Southeast Asia“ (p. 205). The premise of this analysis is that ”Southeast Asian converts themselves also took a leading role in the creation of new forms of Catholic devotion, which spoke to their own spiritual needs and concerns“ (p. 146). Notable in this section is the specific focus on women in chapter 8 and on slaves in chapter 9âgroups for which Alberts seeks to âput flesh to the convert's bones” (p. 14) by reading missionary accounts in a way that recognizes the agency of otherwise silent objects of Roman Catholic proselytization. In the end, Alberts corroborates a familiar argument: that missionaries had limited success in their target zones in mainland Southeast Asia because of fairly well-entrenched political, cultural, and religious systems in which âthere was no space or need in local cosmologies for a new god, or a new explanation for and remedy for misfortune and disaster“ (p. 205).

Where the book provides its most valuable contribution is in demonstrating how missionary accounts can be utilized as a valid source of historical and ethnographic insight. It is indeed the case that missionaries were instructed to evaluate the fertility of missionary fields, often with the same precision and concise description as scientific ethnographic accounts. Even though they were encouraged to avoid superfluity and vanity, there are valid grounds to suspect that missionaries projected their own hopes and ambitions onto their accounts and reports. Nevertheless, what is noteworthy about the book is how Alberts treats the missionary record as proto-ethnographies of Southeast Asian societies. There are those who see this as a problematic approach given that these accounts are biased towards proselytizing agendas. To this suspicion, we may well be reminded that early ethnographers of the classical anthropological tradition were themselves embedded in the colonial apparatus and were just as subservient to the agenda of imperial propagation.

Indeed the overall strength of the book is in the way Alberts adeptly manages and contextualizes an intriguingly diverse array of ostensibly biased missionary opinions and reports. Alberts frequently provides astute commentary and summarization at the end of each section to round up and make sense of the range of archival sources. In this vein, her work is a crucial methodological contribution towards a more robust historical ethnography of Christianity in Asia, particularly to those who seek to supplement their ethnographic analyses with substantive historical grounding. To date, it is the most important historical analysis of Roman Catholicism in the region, which comes at a most crucial time in which the center of gravity of Christianity is shifting outside of its Western bastions.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic

Citation: Julius Bautista. Review of Alberts, Tara, *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500 - 1700*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2016.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42270

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.