Stéphane Nicaise

Les missions jésuites dans l'Océan Indien: Madagascar, La Réunion, Maurice. Paris: Éditions Jésuites, 2015. Pp. 174. Pb, €12.

What are the links and continuities between the various outposts of Jesuit missionary presence in the western Indian Ocean, both chronologically and geographically? This is the central question that animates Stéphane Nicaise's slim but ambitious volume, which considers the work of French and native-born francophone Jesuit missionaries in the Indian Ocean islands of Madagascar, Réunion, and Mauritius. The author, an anthropologist of religion and a Jesuit in Réunion, weaves together a *longue durée* account of the missionaries who came before him, with an analysis of present-day challenges and suggestions for the future of Jesuit efforts in the Indian Ocean.

The book attempts to position these three islands at the center of analysis, rather than as marginal or peripheral satellites to better-known (and much better studied) Jesuit missions in China and in India. The desire to place the islands and their religious history front and center is laudatory and much needed, since both the Jesuit presence in the western Indian Ocean, and the French presence in the Indian Ocean more generally, are topics that have been woefully neglected.

The islands each have a rich and complicated political history, and Jesuit missionary efforts have been a feature of life in them since the seventeenth century, through periods of significant political upheaval. Mauritius first became a French colony in 1715, named Île de France, following several decades of Dutch colonization. It became a British holding in 1810, and remained so until its independence in 1968. Réunion, claimed by the French in the mid-seventeenth century as Île Bourbon, has been an overseas department of France (DOM) since 1946. The population of both islands is a testament to this colonial history, with inhabitants tracing their origins to a diverse group of colonists, merchants, slaves, and indentured servants, with roots in Africa, Asia, Madagascar and Europe. In both Réunion and Mauritius, the presence of the Jesuits was inextricably tied up with the political and commercial efforts of the French state. In the much-larger Madagascar, which had a history of human settlement stretching back thousands of years and well-developed local state systems, Jesuits navigated a very different terrain, and the French missionaries who arrived on the island the 1840s pursued their work with approval from the Kingdom of Madagascar. The island became a French possession in 1897, and remained so until its independence in 1960.

In all three locales, the presence of the Jesuits is a constant in the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial era, and the relationship between the

Jesuits and the colonizing state was a complex one. As Nicaise argues, even in the eyes of the most anti-clerical French governors, the Jesuits were viewed as auxiliary figures to the state's projects of assimilation—even when the Jesuits had different understandings of their own roles. Ultimately, Nicaise points out, the Jesuits in the region lived according to the “rhythm of colonialism, then that of decolonization, and finally that of redefining the identity” of each of the three islands (19). It is in this third and final stage, the creation of a newly imagined regional identity, in which Nicaise suggests that today's Jesuit missionaries can and should find a new role for themselves. The central ambition of the book is to answer this question; what role can the Jesuits now find for themselves in this intensely diverse region, with its multiple religious practices, cultural modes, and ethnic origins. With this focus, the book can best be understood as a manifesto. In other words, a religious-political program of sorts, an attempt to encourage fellow Jesuits to embrace diversity, to understand it as historically central to the Jesuit project in the region, and to work to foster an interfaith dialogue, undergirds Nicaise's scholarship. This is history in service of policy and activism, written for the use of Jesuits, not simply about Jesuits.

The book is most successful in two realms. First, it thoroughly demonstrates that connections between all three islands, at the level of personnel movement, joint initiatives, shared challenges, and cultural and religious practice, are key feature of life in the region and Jesuit presence within it. Second, and on a broader scale, Nicaise establishes the “Indian Ocean-ness” connectivity of the Jesuit mission, made possible by what he terms the Jesuits' state of “constant circulation,” a description that holds true for both native clergy and those born in Europe.

In charting the contours of this Jesuit Indian Ocean world, both Asia and Africa figure centrally. Nicaise highlights the importance of India, and especially the Jesuit mission in Madurai, for the development of the Jesuit projects in these islands. In this, he offers an important corrective to two scholarly tendencies: both the separation of the study of South Asia from that of the Western Indian Ocean; and the further segmentation that separates Réunion and Mauritius on the one hand, and Madagascar on the other. A closer examination of the Jesuit presence in India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would have been a welcome addition to this line of inquiry, and one remains curious about how the early presence of French Jesuits in India, both in Madurai and the Carnatic mission, differed from or informed the later examples in the Indian Ocean. But the book devotes the majority of its analysis to the twentieth century. In addition to Nicaise's insights on the importance of the mission in India for Madagascar and the

Mascarene islands, he also highlights the ways in which connections with African Catholics have become increasingly important in all three islands, thereby further underlining how important it is to consider the Jesuit presence at a multi-sited, regional scale.

The vast majority of actors quoted and discussed in the text are Jesuits, and one wishes that the voices of lay Catholics found a more central place in this work, so as to shed light on how the mission was viewed by those who interacted with it. In addition, a more rigorous mode of citing the source material would have been helpful for other scholars. Almost all of the quotes in the book, mostly from Jesuit missionaries who served in the islands, are presented with no citation to the archival document or published work in which the quote originally appeared. In the chapters that concern the recent past, one assumes that much of the material was collected through interviews conducted by Nicaise himself. But with such scant explanation about the origins of the material from earlier periods, other scholars will unfortunately find it difficult to return to the source material and expand on it in future work.

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