Book Reviews

Antje Flüchter and Rouven Wirbser, eds.

Translating Catechisms, Translating Cultures: The Expansion of Catholicism in the Early Modern World. Leiden: Brill, 2017. Pp. 352 + viii. Hb, \$152.

Flüchter and Wirbser are to be congratulated for convening a superb group of scholars for a volume that wonderfully advances our understanding of three themes indicated in its title. First, we learn much about “translating catechisms,” their composition and translation in multiple settings far from the places in which they were composed. Second, we can better see the (im)possibility of “translating cultures”—the West to the world, the world to the West—as well as the extraordinary efforts made by realistic missionaries in recasting Christian culture for the sake of indigenous populations who in turn received Christian culture on their own terms. Third, and in light of the preceding, we can review from multiple perspectives the sixteenth- to eighteenth-century “global expansion of Catholicism” (largely through the lens of Jesuit endeavors) that, despite money, power, and arms of the colonizing West, was always a series of encounters in which the indigenous peoples did not entirely surrender their agency in the creation of local Catholicisms, at least those that would endure. As co-editor Antje Flüchter says in her introduction, this global frame indicates a “turning away from the concept of evangelisation as a one-way street. Rather than focusing only on the transfer from Western Europe to the world, we must also consider and analyse the circulation between the non-European regions of the world, as well as the repercussions from the periphery to the centre” (9).

Flüchter’s points note a creative paradox: through the ministries of loyal Jesuits, Tridentine orthodoxy kept encountering religious cultures by no means amenable to the strict interpretation of the Council of Trent’s dictates; and yet those same Jesuits were the champions of adaptation everywhere they went. The early Jesuits were not in a modern sense tolerant and open-minded; they proselytized on behalf of the truth, aiming to save people from their own religions. Yet they had great imagination in creating templates in which vital

religious exchange could occur, and not always to their advantage. Catechisms became a key tool for them, and for analysis in these essays, since they are both vehicles of the transmission of orthodoxy and consciously pedagogical tools that required creative accommodations, that the desired truths and values be intelligibly received.

The book is divided into four parts. First, "Cultural Translation, Missionary Linguistics, and Catholic Catechisms in the Early Modern Age": the Jesuits José de Acosta and Antonio Ruiz de Montoya in Peru (Dürr); Peter Canisius's *Catechism* in Protestant Britain (Walsham). Second, "Translating Christian Terms": Jean de Brébeuf's catechism in French Canada (Steckley); the catechetical teachings of Henrique Henriques, Roberto de' Nobili and Constantine Beschi in India (Amaladass). Third, "Translating Christian Practices": Fernandes's *Book on the Virgin Mary*, explaining Catholic piety in a Christian but unsympathetic Ethiopia (Cohen); de' Nobili's teaching on marriage in seventeenth-century south India (Nardini); the fuller translation of marriage as doctrine, sacrament, and practice in Japan (Wirbser); catechesis and mutual practical influences, for the creation of Christian cultures in Japan (Abé). Fourth, "Translating the Christian Faith with Pictures:" the evolving interplay of catechisms, prayer books, and instructive images in China (Hosne); the use of pictorial script by native Christians in catechesis in New Spain (Ødemark). It is not possible to summarize all these extraordinarily informative essays, and I will touch simply on one in each category.

Renate Dürr's "Reflection on Language in Christian Mission: The Significance of Communication in the Linguistic Concepts of José de Acosta SJ [1540–1600] and Antonio Ruiz de Montoya SJ [1585–1652]" documents the enormous difficulties faced by these Jesuits in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Peru as they sought to shape and preserve indigenous communities. They were committed to the norms of Catholic orthodoxy, but wanted also to be effective in the less predictable, but absolutely necessary, language of lived experience. Although they did not abandon the European ideal of universal meanings and values, they recognized that the universal could be realized effectively only by concrete instantiation in each local culture.

John Steckley's "Inventing New Words: Father Jean de Brébeuf's Wendat Catechism of 1632," shows in remarkable detail the problems inherent in de Brébeuf's effort to negotiate the complicated grammatical and linguistic differences between French and indigenous languages—even before religious differences could be addressed. He was acutely aware of the vast gulf between the French and indigenous ways of thinking, speaking, and acting and, realizing that easy translations would never work, he went to extraordinary lengths as a pioneering scholar to find grounds for intelligible communication. Few

missionaries could be more sensitive and alert than de Brébeuf, later a martyr, and yet, Steckley observes, many of his best improvisations hardly outlasted the first catechisms in which they were tried out.

Rouven Wirbser's "A Law Too Strict?: The Cultural Translation of Catholic Marriage in the Jesuit Mission to Japan" exemplifies the larger translation practice at issue in the encounter of European and Christian cultures with Asian cultures and their various religious traditions. Insightful regarding changes in the form of catechisms—the shift, for example, to the student's asking the questions—Wirbser focuses on the problems accompanying the introduction of Christian marriage practices to Japan. Unsurprisingly, mundane factors had over the centuries created social and economic networks customs incompatible with those woven into European Catholic cultures. The accommodation of practices related to the sacrament required a wholesale engagement of complete ways of life. But this would work only insofar as the Jesuits, however orthodox their intentions, also remained willing to compromise regarding what was possible in Japanese society. Wirbser ends with a note of ambivalence: did the eventual Jesuit decision to adhere strictly to Catholic norms not also make it impossible for most Japanese to even understand, much less implement, a Christian way of being Japanese?

Finally, John Ødemark's "Preaching with Pictures, Transforming Memories: Catechisms and Images as Contact Zones in Sixteenth Century New Spain" takes us into the fascinating world of picto-linguistic communication in Mesoamerican New Spain, drawing on Franciscan sources. Indigenous Christians used the local pictorial script to express the truths of faith in local terms, that they might be received and memorized. The linear patterns of Western thought, with their images that replicate that thought, are replaced with a more daring and successful reimagination of the Christian realities in local signs. These works stand out too because they are produced by indigenous Christians, rather than foreign missionaries (like de Brébeuf, for instance) who had tried to use a local language and imported images to communicate Christian doctrines already settled in word and image.

By illuminating what these missionaries actually thought and improvised under the most difficult circumstances, *Translating Catechisms, Translating Cultures* considerably deepens our understanding of the encounter of European Christianity and the wider world in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. These essays offer us impeccable scholarship. The authors' shared admiration for the great Jesuit adventure does not entice them into overlooking the limitations of those efforts, exaggerating their success, or neglecting their failures. The volume also serves us well by thoroughly discrediting the notion that missionaries were merely early Orientalists who without hesitation imposed Western values

on the East. To balance the picture, we might next hope for a parallel volume on Protestant missionary efforts—surely so different—and, more fancifully, a volume on those other missionaries, Catholic or Protestant, who either failed, or succeeded in a most un-Christian way, because they did not care to think through the real challenges of translation so finely documented here.

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