Thomas S. R. O Flynn, O.P.

The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qājār Persia, c.1760–c.1870. Leiden: Brill, 2017. Pp. 1116 + xxviii. Hb, €199.

Western missionary activity in areas such as Russia, the Caucasus, and Persia has long been overlooked. Moreover, so this book contends, the further one seems to move from the golden age of European evangelization of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the more Western efforts to spread Christianity seem to lose their historiographical traction. This is an unfortunate lacuna, as this period of missionary work coincides with the apogee of Western imperialism (above all the British Empire), which had designs to expand its influence in places such as Egypt, India, Russia, Persia, and the Caucasus. Thomas S. R. O Flynn attempts to bring to light these later missions that emanated from Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. He interrogates the myriad goals, efforts, and results of missions conducted by Moravians, Presbyterians, Jesuits, Congregationalists, Lazarists (Vincentians), and those whom he labels “freelance” missionaries. Furthermore, O Flynn’s choice to study both Protestant and Catholic missions constellates around their “distinctive ethos and objectives” (6), but not their theological differences.

O Flynn’s goal is not to write a synthetic history of these missions in the name of illuminating some larger pattern concerning the ways in which Western evangelical efforts were interconnected; rather, the book provides “a continuous, coherent account where none existed previously, and is interspersed with biographical detail not readily available elsewhere” in part because these missions were “multipronged but mainly independent” (1). The book therefore is more a series of meticulously researched and beautifully reconstructed case studies that probe the efforts, desires, struggles, and intrigues of missionaries who plied their soteriological trades.

Structurally, the book begins with two introductory chapters, including essential historical context, and then two background chapters on what he calls Catholic and Protestant missionary “forerunners” to the missions that comprise his study. O Flynn then explores, chapter by chapter, the missionary efforts of the various groups he discusses in the introduction. Each chapter considers both the missionaries’ cultural and intellectual milieux as well as the historical trajectory of their targets, the latter of which is most useful for scholars and students of Europe who are not familiar with the history of, say, Persian Jews. The book wraps up with a succinct conclusion.

Each chapter stands alone quite well. Not always apparent, however, are the ways in which these missions related to one another, which they surely did despite O Flynn’s claim that they operated independently and often with little

interaction. For example, Chapters Eight and Nine follow the course of two missions to Iranian Azerbaijan: those of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Affairs and the French Catholic Lazarists, respectively. However, they, along with missions from Basel and Scotland (Chapter Seven), were contemporaneous missions operating in close geographic proximity to one another. Yet, with one brief exception (744–46), they are not discussed in light of one another, nor are they depicted as rival missions, which they most certainly were. Scholars of early modern missions have shown that evangelizing rivalries were rampant, even within the same confession, e.g., those between Jesuits and Franciscans. At least giving a nod to this reality would have been beneficial.

That said, O Flynn does more than just survey each mission. He situates them in a world that saw political upheaval in Persia; Russian expansion and Tsarist views of missionaries as often unwilling or unknowing tools of Russification; Western Christianity's complex, and often contradictory, relationship with Enlightenment thought; the Second Great Awakening; and conservative efforts to combat "destabilizing influences of democratic revolutions in North America, France and elsewhere in Europe" (228). This larger picture allows the reader to see that these missionary efforts could never just be about the Word of God. Instead, they are only rendered coherent if we see them within "the context of the contemporary world of ideas, cultures and politics from which they emerged, and the corresponding cultural and political environments in which the missionaries found themselves" (3).

The problem, however, is that O Flynn downplays the relationship between these missions and the Western imperial enterprise. While the missionaries might have claimed that their aims were not to Westernize the Russian and Persian empires, but to Christianize them, it is impossible to disentangle the two, especially when their evangelizing efforts were often, but not exclusively, to Eastern Rite Christians. By way of comparison, the Society of Jesus's missions were also purportedly about "saving souls," but it would be difficult to prove that the Jesuits' efforts were "not linked to Western colonialism" or were "fiercely independent of political interests and concentrated on their religious aims" (7) in the way O Flynn claims these missions were. Simply put, while missionaries might have believed that evangelization was about salvation alone, it was always political. To suggest that these missions were "not aimed in any way at promoting western imperialism" (939) intimates that Western imperialism only meant conquest, as opposed to cultural hegemony percolating from the spread of Western ideals such as Latin Christianity, capitalism, Enlightenment thought, neoliberalism, and modern political philosophy. O Flynn even betrays his claim regarding politics by admitting that "the upper classes in Persia

appreciated the missionaries as purveyors of western thought and the values and achievements of western civilization" (941), which we would be remiss to disconnect from imperialism.

Nevertheless, this is a useful book for understanding these missions that took place during the rise of Western hegemony over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It possesses a flowing narrative and is festooned with fascinating characters whose personalities and foibles are as central to understanding the missions as they were to their missionary efforts. It also integrates substantial previous research via its rich footnotes and extensive bibliography. This will enable future scholars to dig deeper into these missions, which certainly deserve monographs of their own. Therefore, O Flynn's book provides fodder for future research that will further nuance our understanding of these missions on their own terms, in relation to one another, and where they fit into the larger imperialist trajectory of the West and its relationship with Russia and Persia in the long nineteenth century.

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