Historians have long debated the signifying features of early modern Catholicism. Their thematic tallies of the decisive shifts the Catholic denomination experienced in this era have traditionally included the subjects of church abuse, counter-reform, and militancy, since Luther’s bold campaign against the programme of indulgences worked out by Leo X in 1515 to finance the rebuilding of St Peter’s in Rome tends to focus interest on the causes of fracture within traditional religion. However, a topic deserving at least equal attention is the creative capacities evident in the Catholic church during this period, because the ingenuity of this denomination in the face of increasing challenges is just as compelling. Indeed, even before the scandal over indulgences erupted, the church evinced some capacity to seek reform, although this entailed a variety of measures, both negative and positive. In Spain, for instance, the destructive forces of the Inquisition and the rich fruits of mysticism presented by Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross represented polar extremes of efforts to reactivate religious discipline and purify the church. Elsewhere, pioneers restructured inherited frameworks in order to restore elements of church life once attacked. In 1630s Paris, Vincent de Paul and his collaborators used confraternal structures to reinvigorate religious dedication and discipline amongst both clergy and laity. Gendered roles too were re-assessed, as large numbers of Catholic women all over Europe initiated religious changes that left distinctive marks on the organisation of religious
practise. These demonstrate that, although consolidation and continuity were vital elements in the survival of the Catholic church in the early modern era, significant changes were afoot. Alongside measures and movements developed on the continent proper, the extension of the Catholic faith beyond primitive frontiers through bold missionary enterprises constituted another monumental means of change. In these new regions, the agents of the faith came to test traditional boundaries and construct many new ones. In essence, this volume demonstrates that spiritual globalisation did not just transfer the faith and the church across the world, but gave rise to entirely new Catholic landscapes.

The missionary church came to strength in the period when the frontiers of European societies shifted significantly. Promotion of the Christian faith in new dominions, especially in America and Asia, was at first tied to the expansion of kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula. The Portuguese, spurred by the crusading spirit and the lure of gold in Africa, captured the city of Ceuta in 1415. They soon explored the western coasts of Africa, eventually rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and reached India by 1498. In 1500 they made their first landing on the east coast of South America, establishing their initial foothold in the colony of Brazil, a base that would soon form the cornerstone of a great overseas expanse. In quick succession, the united Spanish crowns of Castile and Aragon sponsored the famous voyage of discovery that would make landfall on the islands of the Caribbean. By the mid-seventeenth century, expeditions that had begun with Christopher Columbus’s venture in 1492 extended Spanish sovereignty over Mexico and Peru, and eventually over almost an entire continent. As the dominance of Spain and Portugal gradually waned, however, rival European powers sought their share of imperial riches. Holland, France and Britain, through their highly ambitious chartered associations of merchants, each garnered multiple footholds in Southeast Asia, India and North America. After hounding Portuguese ships in the Indian Ocean for

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