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*Catholic Orientalism: Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge, 16th–18th Centuries*


Though published in 2015, *Catholic Orientalism* remains salient today, in light of a deepening religious discourse that is rapidly reorganizing social life the world over.

The central argument of this book is laid out in an extensive prologue: the authors assert that Catholic Orientalism was an invisible and fragmented body of knowledge. This theme permeates throughout, so that one could read this book as an attempt to recover what might be referred to as a “vanished discourse.”

The setting is India in the 15th century. The authors begin with an elaborate reckoning of a heterogeneous group of Portuguese Orientalists, João de Barros and João de Castro, being the most notable of the earliest Orientalists who went about the task of locating those “archival rarities” that include, for example, a “big book written on palm leaves ... in what appears to be the Malabar script.” (p. 19).

In Part II, *The Catholic Meridian*, two chapters are devoted entirely to the handmaiden roles of the Jesuits and the Franciscans—two missionary orders within the fold of the Catholic Church. As active knowledge brokers and entrepreneurs, these missionaries oversaw the large-scale conversion of Indians into the Catholic faith through systematic education. A new creolized elite, well-versed in Portuguese and Catholic theology, emerged.

Resurfacing the discourse in fragments, the authors cite archives in remote convents and cloisters in Lisbon (pp. 164–165) to unearth treasure troves of religious manuscripts. In the most unlikely repositories (e.g., Third Order of Penitence in the Convent of our Lady of Jesus in Lisbon with some 29,000 books) Catholic Orientalism was rescued from obscurity. The book’s 35-page bibliography of 459 entries and on average 100 footnotes per chapter signifies scholarly depth, and pulled Catholic Orientalism out of the shadows, even though the authors conclude in the epilogue of the discourse’s tragic fading through history. Even its very disappearance has been made visible.

What are the other invisibilities that bear on Catholic Orientalism? I suggest the absence of two glaringly important historical forces that serve as the context for the formation, endurance, gradual demise and eventual disappearance of Catholic Orientalism. Two global historical forces are particularly significant: First, the *Reconquista* (Reconquest); and second, the Enlightenment. I discuss these two separately.
The Reconquista

The Reconquista was the Iberian Peninsula’s Catholic jihad—a long holy war against the Umayyad caliphate to recapture territory that was lost in 711, when the Muslim armies composed mainly of North African Berber soldiers with some Arabs, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and conquered the Visigothic Kingdom of Hispania. However, prolonged ethnic tension between Berbers and Arabs jeopardized Muslim unity on the Peninsula. In the 11th Century, the power of the Umayyad Caliphs began to wane and the Caliphate in Cordoba disintegrated into a series of separate Islamic Kingdoms known as ‘Taifas.’ Also, the Abbassid caliphate that relocated to Baghdad from Damascus embroiled the Umayyads in a trans-continental rivalry that would sap the energies of the Muslim rulers. Eventually, Moorish rule began to recede. The combined forces of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile finally conquered the last Islamic Kingdom of Granada in 1492. Thereafter, the overseas voyages began and continued their expansion and conquest. Vasco de Gama, then barely in his twenties, set sail and landed in India in 1498, earning him a place in history as the first navigator to round the Cape of Good Hope.

One of the effects of the Reconquista was the militarization of Spanish and Portuguese Christian society which in turn prepared it for a warlike role in the New World. Fresh from the victories of the Reconquista, Spain and Portugal embarked on a global mission to send sailors, soldiers and priests across the oceans. Thus the formation of a decidedly Catholic worldview was but an inevitable process. The formation of a discourse that was decidedly Catholic is best understood against the background of a long historical view from the time of the Muslim invasion in 711 till 1492.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment generally refers to an 18th-century intellectual and philosophical movement founded on the overarching principle of rationality as the sole criterion for establishing an authoritative system of ethics, aesthetics, and knowledge. For the Enlightenment thinkers, the Roman Catholic Church was viewed as the bastion of enslavement of the human mind.

In the 18th century, Portugal was in a state of decline. The golden age of maritime discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries was over. Portugal had lost

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