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## Missionaries in the Early Modern Spanish World

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Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History, Volume 20, Number 2, Summer 2019, (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2019.0019>



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## **Missionaries in the Early Modern Spanish World**

### ***Tongues of Fire: Language and evangelization***

**By Nancy Farriss. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

### ***To Sin No More: Franciscans and conversion in the Hispanic world, 1683–1830***

**By David Rex Galindo. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Oceanside, California: The Academy of American Franciscan History, 2017.**

### ***The Worlds of Junípero Serra: Historical contexts and cultural representations***

**Edited by Steven W. Hackel. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.**

### ***Frontiers of Evangelization: Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos missions***

**By Robert H. Jackson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017.**

### ***The Miraculous Flying House of Loreto: Spreading Catholicism in the early modern world***

**By Karin Vélez. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.**

Most missionaries were mendicants and Jesuits in the early modern Spanish world.<sup>1</sup> These men played key roles in the establishment of both the Catholic Church and Spanish rule, whether at home in the Iberian Peninsula or abroad in overseas contexts. As preservers of historical memory, they also wrote important histories, relations and letters about their evangelizing duties, Spanish and Creole activities, and Indigenous and African customs. But even though missionaries were leading authors and agents of religious and cultural change throughout the Spanish world, there are many aspects about their early life experiences, theological training and proselytizing strategies that have yet to be properly explored. Not only this, few have questioned the prevailing idea that only White men in religious habits were missionaries in the early modern period. What Edward E. Andrews suggests for the British Atlantic is just as relevant for the Spanish Empire: “We must first rethink missionaries from the inside out,” he says, because of the “tendency to assume that Christian missionaries were

Euro-Americans who entered into what they considered an exotic, unfamiliar world when they began missionary work.”<sup>2</sup>

The five books under review here force us to rethink missionaries in two unique ways. Some of these studies demonstrate how Natives and other ordinary Europeans contributed to the global spread of Catholicism. While these men and women were not given the same level of theological instruction as clergymen, were rarely ordained, and were almost never the subjects of colonial hagiographies, they nevertheless preached Christianity, taught Catholic doctrine, and even administered the sacrament of baptism. Natives and lay Europeans and Creoles were missionaries even if they were not officially given this title in the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> Other studies in this cluster of five books provide an important reminder that missionaries were also just as concerned with converting Catholics of all ethnicities as they were with non-Christians from various religious backgrounds. Officially licenced missionaries performed popular missions in urban centres and rural zones across the Iberian Peninsula and Spanish America. Mendicants and Jesuits often used the same materials and approaches when ministering to Native Christians as they did with Spanish Catholics.

These two ways of rethinking missionaries were only made possible by a recent shift in mission historiography. Some brief context here is necessary. From the colonial period to the first half of the twentieth century, most mission histories focused on the exploits of Europeans and Creoles clothed in religious habits. Whether the pious self-sacrificing men of hagiographic tales, the founding friars of Robert Ricard’s *Spiritual Conquest* or the civilizing agents of Boltonian histories, most assumed that evangelization was akin to a spiritual battle with clear victors and vanquished.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous peoples were relegated to minor roles as one-dimensional figures who largely accepted Christianity with limited reflection. With the rise of social history, quantitative history and ethnohistorical approaches from the 1960s onwards, many scholars turned their focus away from mendicant and Jesuit proselytizing activities. They were more interested in Native approaches to Catholicism, their engagement with Spanish institutions, and the demographic trends of their communities under colonial rule. Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson referred to these studies as New Mission History, an important scholarly development that brought greater balance to the study

of Catholic evangelization, especially considering that European and Creole missionaries were always outnumbered by Indigenous peoples.<sup>5</sup>

While New Mission History was a necessary corrective to the Eurocentric focus of traditional mission historiography, it is not without its own interpretive problems. One of its weakness is that missionaries are not always treated as ethnographic subjects in the same way as Indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup> We learn about mendicants and Jesuits only upon their arrival to a given mission, which means important context about their previous personal history and evangelizing experience in other regions is either superficially treated or outright ignored. This background information is extremely useful, especially considering our knowledge of colonial religious encounters and Indigenous peoples is often filtered through European and Creole writings. Put in another way, a fuller picture of the missionary has the potential to lead to a greater—albeit imperfect—understanding of the people they were trying to convert to Christianity, not to mention other aspects of mission history and colonial rule. The books under review here largely shift their focus back to mendicants and Jesuits with this goal in mind, but not without recognizing that evangelization was often a shared affair between the missionary and the missionized.

In *Tongues of Fire: Language and evangelization*, Nancy Farriss masterfully analyzes the work of European and Creole missionaries without losing sight of their collaboration with Native elites. She focuses on the difficulties of cross-cultural communication during the missionary campaigns of the first century of colonial rule in New Spain. But instead of offering yet another study of Franciscan activity among the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico, Farriss looks at the lesser-known work of the Dominicans in the southern region of Oaxaca where Natives spoke Zapotec and other Otomangue tongues. Her primary goal is to understand how the Blackfriars—with the help of Native elites—preached and taught the Christian message in the face of an extremely difficult language barrier, a task she characterizes as “the greatest intellectual challenge of the colonial encounter” (289). Translation, of course, was the only way to bridge this barrier, a topic that has received considerable attention in recent decades. While Farriss admires the linguistic accomplishments of the Dominicans and their Native collaborators, she still concludes that baptized neophytes in Oaxaca largely

misunderstood the basic tenets of Christian doctrine because of the dynamic relationship between language and culture.

*Tongues of Fire* is organized around the two-step process of evangelization in the New World: 1) the difficult work of learning a foreign language without written aids and 2) the even greater task of translating the soteriological message of Christianity into cultures with radically different religious concepts. Most studies quickly bypass the early stages of the first step, something Farriss outlines in fascinating detail by following the process of language acquisition from the role of signs and gestures to the use of images to the work of bilingual soldiers and Native captives. She dismantles the long-held idea of silent pictographic preaching, arguing that pictures and words are interdependent. Friars understood that paintings were insufficient forms of communication, which forced them to confront what must have felt like an almost insurmountable obstacle. The grammar and phonetics of Spanish were completely different from Native languages in Oaxaca and they lacked their diverse range of tones. Here is where Farriss makes a helpful distinction between active and passive proficiency. Most Dominicans spoke Native languages imperfectly, so even if they may have understood their neophytes it does not mean the reverse was true. There was a plethora of lexical gaps—like grace, sacrament and angel—rooted in cultural differences which could not be entirely overcome through loan words, periphrasis and circumlocution.

In describing Dominican approaches to missionary work in Oaxaca, Farriss rewrites the traditional binary of mission historiography. Like the Indigenous conquistadors of New Conquest History, in *Tongues of Fire* Natives are “noncommissioned officers in the spiritual conquest” (142) instead of mere allies.<sup>7</sup> It has long been known that mendicants were dependent on bilingual intermediaries and that they rarely went forth without Native aids. Much attention has also been paid to the ways in which friars, after having rejected Natives as suitable candidates for their religious habits, earnestly taught Native nobles to be church functionaries.<sup>8</sup> Farriss builds upon these studies by emphasizing the various missionary duties that could be performed without ordination. Dominicans delegated numerous tasks to their neophytes like drafting religious texts, performing emergency rites, maintaining parish records, helping with the liturgy and teaching Christian doctrine as catechists. Flipping

the traditional image of evangelization on its head, Farriss suggests the face of the Catholic Church in Oaxaca was normally not Spanish or Creole but instead was largely Indigenous. Native elites, after some training, were “often given great responsibility to serve as surrogate or deputy missionaries, delegated to go out and preach and indoctrinate on their own” (39–40).

Despite the existence of Native evangelists in Oaxaca, Farriss still acknowledges that Latin grammatical norms were a form of colonization that significantly altered Indigenous cultures. Her suggestion that translation cannot be separated from military conquest and colonial domination is always timely, but one that must be extended to the rest of the viceregal period. Even though sixteenth-century themes still dominate scholarly discussions of the missionary theatre, in *To Sin No More: Franciscans and conversion in the Hispanic world, 1683–1830* David Rex Galindo rightly emphasizes that the Enlightenment period also witnessed a major wave of Catholic expansion in the Spanish world. Turning away from the more common regional focus of mission historiography, Galindo takes a transatlantic approach by studying the Franciscan apostolic colleges of Propaganda Fide in New Spain, Peru and Spain. Much as Luke Clossey did with the Society of Jesus, Galindo takes a global approach to soteriology by arguing that we need to view conversion as it was understood in the early modern period.<sup>9</sup> By concentrating on both colonial and old Christian settings, he demonstrates that Franciscans desired to convert all of humankind, which included both non-Christians and nominal Catholics.

The first apostolic college of Propaganda Fide was founded in Querétaro in 1683 and by the 1820s there were twenty-nine across the Spanish world. This development is somewhat surprising given that Bourbon reformers secularized Indian doctrinas, criticized the number of friars in the empire and prohibited the establishment of new religious foundations. In the first chapter, Galindo explains Franciscan expansion by looking at the genesis and organizational structure of what he characterizes as a unique “Atlantic institution.” He contends that the grey friars received support from the Spanish crown for their colleges because they remained under royal patronage and, most importantly from a regal perspective, outside of the jurisdiction of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome. The remaining four chapters can be divided into two general parts: 1) the process of recruiting and

training missionaries and 2) the role of popular missions among Catholics of varying socioracial backgrounds. Galindo gleans what he can from hagiography while simultaneously moving beyond it with other archival sources, striking an appropriate balance between the rhetorical construction of missionaries and reality on the ground.

One of the most important elements of *To Sin No More* is its emphasis on popular missions, which are often neglected in mission historiography because they deal with people who are presumed to be already Christianized. Galindo demonstrates that the Franciscans saw things differently. The grey friars performed itinerant missions to Catholics in both urban and rural areas from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. After obtaining licences from local authorities, they directed religious processions on the streets, preached in the plazas, held confessions and blended the theatrical piety of baroque Catholicism with the individual piety associated with reform. Too often conversion is seen as a linear process through set stages with a definitive end. Galindo complicates this picture by showing that it is more often cyclical and incomplete, a major reason why clerics continually sought out spiritual renewal for their parishioners. Many mendicants—and this goes for the Jesuits as well—had experience performing itinerant missions to Catholics across both Europe and America before they found themselves working among Native peoples in remote regions of the empire. Galindo links the European peasant and the Indigenous subject by highlighting the precariousness of Christianity across the entire Spanish world.

Galindo's analysis of the apostolic colleges of Propaganda Fide is a fine example of thick description in the direction opposite to *New Mission History*. In “study[ing] missionaries with the same sensibilities as we now devote to Indians” (14), he wisely avoids stringing together a series of mini biographies to tell the broader story of an historiographically marginalized institution.<sup>10</sup> But sometimes concentrating on the life of one missionary is both desirable and necessary, especially when their evangelizing activities dominate the historical memory of a given region. Such is the case with the “founding father” of California Junípero Serra, one of the most famous yet controversial members of the apostolic colleges of Propaganda Fide. Serra is the sole focus of *The Worlds of Junípero Serra: Historical contexts and cultural representations*, the fruit of an academic conference held at the Henry E. Huntington Library marking the 300-year anniversary of his birth. Although several scholars have

written biographies of Serra, the volume's editor Steven W. Hackel argues that there are still periods of the Franciscan's life that have not been adequately explored.<sup>11</sup>

Serra was born in Petra, Mallorca, in 1713, arrived at New Spain in 1750, was assigned to California in 1769, and then died on the Mission San Carlos in 1784. Instead of following the last fifteen years of Serra's life, *The Worlds of Junípero Serra* primarily concentrates on his first six decades. The first section highlights his rural upbringing and interactions with students in Franciscan colleges in Mallorca. Serra's formation as a missionary is the focus of the second section, both his experiences in Mexico City classrooms and practical evangelical experiences in the Sierra Gorda. The third section provides a look at his artistic sensibilities, specifically his penchant for baroque painting and sculpture. Taken together as a whole, in these three sections Serra emerges as a humble and loving bilingual friar who understood rural agriculture and the importance of connecting to people in the vernacular. But he also appears as a stern man of discipline who believed in maintaining established hierarchies, a worldview he formed through his rigorous training and ascetic lifestyle in the apostolic colleges of Propaganda Fide. These earlier life experiences, as each contributing author is careful to stress, shaped Serra's approach to Indigenous peoples and the mission system he helped to create in California.

Beyond Serra's personal formation before his arrival to northwestern New Spain, *The Worlds of Junípero Serra* also offers a history of his life post-mortem. The final section is devoted to representations of Serra in historiography and popular culture in the past century and a half. We learn that the invention of Serra as a founding father of California took place during a "Spanish craze" in the United States in the last quarter of the 1800s. Californians increasingly engaged with their historical links to Spain all the way into the 1940s, a movement that was part of a larger reevaluation of Spanish heritage at the national level. But most histories—both religious and secular—and other paintings, statues and tourist souvenirs followed an uncritical and mythical view of Serra, which often mimicked the laudatory vision of him in the biography his friend and fellow missionary Francisco Palóu published in Mexico City in 1787. Of the thousands of tourists who visit the California missions on an annual basis, many of them still tour these sites with this largely inaccurate perception of the historical Serra.

Recognizing the staying power of colonial hagiography in popular and scholarly discourses goes a long way in explaining the erasure of Indigenous voices, both in the past and the present. Given the focus of *The Worlds of Junípero Serra*, Native views and experiences of mission life are only sporadically treated in the volume. Hackel is more interested in contributing to the public conversations about Serra's legacy by providing a greater understanding of the "worlds he inhabited and shaped" (3). An additional chapter on demography would have provided an even deeper appreciation for these worlds, a theme Robert H. Jackson takes up in *Frontiers of Evangelization: Indians in the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos missions*. Unlike the rest of the books under consideration in this review, Jackson primarily focuses on the role of disease in shaping missionary strategies and Indigenous experiences of mission life. His general conclusion is not surprising for those familiar with his work: the cultural and biological decline of Natives was "not intended, but it was intentional" (134) as missionaries and colonial officials moved forward with a program of evangelization despite their knowledge that Indigenous peoples were dying at alarmingly high rates.<sup>12</sup>

A major strength of *Frontiers of Evangelization* is its comparative focus. Instead of concentrating on one mission or even several from a given region, Jackson contrasts sedentary and non-sedentary peoples on Franciscan and Jesuit missions in dry zones and tropical rain forests. The first chapter reviews early evangelization campaigns in central Mexico before moving into the frontier regions of the eighteenth century in the Sierra Gorda of New Spain and the Chiquitos of colonial Peru. Urban planning, evangelizing strategies and mission economics are the focus of the second chapter while birth and death rates are the principal themes of the final chapter. Jackson concludes that the organizational strategies of the Franciscans and Jesuits shaped mission outcomes. The grey friars sought after a greater level of social control in the Sierra Gorda than the black robes did in the Chiquitos, where the latter provided a higher level of economic autonomy and shared governance with Indigenous leaders. Non-sedentary peoples, like the Pames and the Jonaces, were far more susceptible to disease when they entered Franciscan missions, a trend that was only accelerated by the order's social policies. While Chiquitos Indians also experienced devastating levels of mortality, Jackson points out that they had higher birth rates during periods of recovery. The comparisons in *Frontiers of Evangelization* demonstrate that while some broad

generalizations about mission life are still possible, local factors significantly shaped Indigenous experiences across the Spanish world.

Beyond his structural and demographic analyses of Franciscan and Jesuit missions, Jackson also addresses Native appropriations of Catholicism. Similar to Farriss, he argues that Indigenous converts in both the Sierra Gorda and Chiquitos had a limited understanding of Christian doctrine because of cultural differences. In his assessment, it is impossible to know what “individual natives living on the missions really believed, or if they had embraced Catholicism” (139). Understanding religion as primarily belief-driven is not entirely fruitful for interpreting processes of conversion in the early modern period. As Galindo points out in his study, many European peasants would not have passed as Catholics either if their Christianity was limited to a doctrinal checklist. But more problematic is Jackson’s false binary between missionaries evangelizing “on one side” and Natives appropriating a new religion “on the other” (67). Native aids, interpreters and catechists are all background figures in his study. Europeans and Creoles are the primary face of the Church with Catholicism moving in one official and predictable direction from Franciscans and Jesuits to mission neophytes. Karin Vélez offers a far more nuanced version of religious transmission in *The Miraculous Flying House of Loreto: Spreading Catholicism in the early modern world*.

The home where Mary raised Jesus played an important role in missions across the Americas. According to pious legend, angels miraculously transported the Holy House from Nazareth to Loreto in the thirteenth century, but not without making a few stops along the way. Although modern readers find it hard to take this story seriously, Vélez interprets such miracles as “historical records of reality” (26) and the pilgrim house of Loreto as a “lesson of how Catholics moved” (244) in the early modern period. Complicating top-down and bottom-up characterizations of devotional diffusion, she looks at how Jesuits and other ordinary Catholics spread Catholicism in both Europe and in frontier missions among the Hurons of Quebec, the Conchos of Baja California and the Moxos of the Peruvian Amazon. The first section of *The Miraculous Flying House* outlines the miracle story of Loreto while the second and third look at the principal historians of the Holy House, pilgrimages, replica houses in Europe and abroad, iconography of the Virgin and Catholic inventories of Marian shrines. Instead

of seeing Catholic histories, art and architecture as simply propaganda manipulated by a few conspiring priests, Vélez searches for signs of mass participation in a transatlantic context.

*The Miraculous Flying House* complicates traditional versions of mission history that treat Catholicism as solely a European export “carried outward in carefully regulated ways and imposed stiffly” (234). Vélez argues that Jesuits did not have a pre-planned project for Loreto in the Americas. They often followed the lead of laypeople and Native converts, which means that missionary strategies were usually accompanied by evangelical improvisation. Some of the people leading Jesuits in unexpected ways were Indigenous women, who are often ignored in mission historiography because missionaries—especially in Catholic contexts—are normally assumed to be men. While elite Natives emerge as “spiritual conquerors” in the other books under review here, Vélez rightly expands this category to include women like Marie Tsautenté. A Huron from the mission of Lorette in New France, Tsautenté “did the work of a Jesuit missionary” (188) in both her home and community as a catechist. There are many other examples of such women in mission contexts across Spanish America, but their stories are often buried in the archives. Vélez reminds us that they are not “an invention of the Jesuit mind” but historical actors who knew “how to speak in Christian terms” (190).

As is evidenced by the five books under review here, current mission historiography is challenging long-held assumptions about missionaries in the early modern Spanish world. The renewed focus on mendicants and Jesuits—specifically their training and early life experiences—provides a better understanding of their missionary strategies and interactions with ordinary Catholics and Indigenous peoples. This emphasis on European and Creole missionaries should naturally lead to a heightened focus on Native collaborators, especially considering that officially licenced missionaries were only a handful of men in robes unevenly scattered across the Spanish world. They may have represented themselves as tireless evangelical jacks-of-all-trades, but reality on the ground was much different as they relied on Natives for translation, preaching, teaching and many other missionary tasks. It is important to reconstruct how missionaries were understood in the early modern period, which means employing comparative methods, expanding our chronology beyond the sixteenth

century, and balancing our focus on missions to Natives with popular missions to Catholics in a transatlantic context. But it is just as important to complicate and expand early modern definitions, a strategy to avoid always assigning starring roles to the same set of mendicant and Jesuit actors in the missionary theatre.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the missionary work of the secular clergy, see John Frederick Schwaller, *The Church and Clergy in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Edward E. Andrews, *Native Apostles: Black and Indian missionaries in the British Atlantic world* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>3</sup> The term mission itself was a neologism of the sixteenth century. See Michael Sievernich, “La misión y las misiones en la primitiva Compañía de Jesús,” in *The Inflammate Omnia: Selected historical papers from conferences held at Loyola and Rome in 2006*, ed. Thomas M. McCoog (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2010), 255–73.

<sup>4</sup> For Robert Ricard, see *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An essay on the Apostolate and the evangelizing methods of the mendicant orders in New Spain, 1523–1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1933] 1966). For Boltonian histories, see Herbert Eugene Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), and John Francis Bannon, *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier 1513–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, [1963] 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson, eds., *The New Latin American Mission History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> There are some important exceptions to this rule. See Miguel León-Portilla, *Bernardino de Sahagún, First Anthropologist*, trans. Mauricio J. Mixco (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), and Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests:*

*Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of an expanding literature, see Susan Schroeder, “Introduction: The Genre of Conquest Studies,” in *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous allies in the conquest of Mesoamerica*, edited by Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk (Norman: Oklahoma Press, 2007), 5–27, and Matthew Restall, “The New Conquest History,” *History Compass* 10.2 (2012): 151–60.

<sup>8</sup> One important study is John Charles, *Allies at Odds: The Andean church and its Indigenous agents, 1583–1671* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> This historiographical marginalization has also recently been addressed by Cameron D. Jones in *In Service of Two Masters: The missionaries of Ocopa, Indigenous resistance, and Spanish governance in Bourbon Peru* (Stanford: Stanford University Press; Oceanside, California: The Academy of American Franciscan History, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Steven W. Hackel has written his own biography of Serra. See *Junípero Serra: California's founding father* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For his earlier work, see Robert H. Jackson, *Indian Population Decline: The missions of northwestern New Spain, 1687–1840* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).