

Takao Abé. *The Jesuit Mission to New France: A New Interpretation in the Light of the Earlier Jesuit Experience in Japan*.

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In recent decades, voices have emerged to evaluate the Jesuit missions on a global scale rather than investigating them for individual regions. However, drafting a global history of the Jesuits is not an easy task, because one must avoid simply creating separate and unconnected pieces of missionary history from different locations. This book investigates the Jesuit mission in New France well beyond the current limited perspectives seen in North America alone. Working in this broader approach, Abé creates a new picture of the New France mission by applying a reference for comparison: the Jesuit mission in Japan. The central proposition is not simply that the Japan mission may have influenced the evangelization of North America. Instead, Abé claims, “in a broader international framework . . . the Christian mission in Japan will be used as a tool to revise the currently accepted historical interpretations of the French Jesuit mission” (1). This revisionist perspective, Abé states, may result in a “diachronic” global comparison, as he attempts to argue for an observation gleaned from the Japan mission, as “hypotheses” being applied to reinterpret crosscultural encounters in New France. Utilizing such an approach,

this book achieves an intriguing narrative encompassing perspectives across boundaries and gaining insights into an unsynchronic relationship between missions. Abé thus expects this research to be “a first important step towards an international perspective of the French Jesuit mission” (12).

This book has five chapters, not including an introduction and a conclusion, and it is lucidly organized. Chapter 1 is a concise and critical review of literature on the Jesuit missions to New France and Japan, which Abé effectively synthesizes. Abé then poses three types of approaches used by missionaries, in which “the influence of the Japanese experience on the French Jesuits is most clearly seen” (8). These three approaches form the subjects of chapters 2 to 4, focusing on the interpretation of non-Christian cultures according to Jesuit biases, the methods of preaching and educating converts, and the establishment of mission communities. The evaluation of the comprehension of the Christian faith by indigenous cultures, the subject of chapter 5, is an especially noteworthy subject for discussion. The arguments in this book are systematically and comprehensively expounded. Abé usually sets enumerations and concludes with hypotheses to relate one thing in the Iberian mission of Japan to another homogenous one in the French mission of North America. Much akin to patterns employed in the social sciences, the advantage of this technique is to carry on this powerfully presented comparative framework.

The most fascinating discussions, however, regard two further points. The first is the argument in chapter 3 on the evolution of multifaceted missionary strategies in the international scene, and the continuity of the evangelic methods among both the Jesuits and the Franciscans. To overcome simplistic labels attributed to both orders, Abé states that the missionaries could “constantly” revise their methods in a single place, such as those of Japan who “Served as the prototypes for French missionary strategies” (81); second, Abé challenges critics who judged the authenticity of natives’ conversion to Christianity. He argues that native comprehension should be the vital factor for the extent of their acceptance of the new religion, even if that religion may also have become syncretic or distorted from the Euro-Christian lens.

I have two questions for consideration. The first is Abé’s use of various “hypotheses,” inferred from Japan, to observe similar (or supposedly similar) issues in New France. Although we can deduce certain commonalities from the global framework of the Jesuits, should one always apply the hypotheses gleaned from one place to another place where individual questions and conditions might have existed? Second, because Abé successfully focuses on native interpretations in order to understand the reception of Christianity, how can we also blame the Jesuits for imposing their “epistemological mistakes and cultural biases” onto those people (48)? Abé calls the Jesuits “masters of Euro-Christian knowledge” (8, 61), yet this competent and collective image becomes the reason for misunderstanding their epistemological constraints as “bias.”

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