

Zitierhinweis

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Understanding Global Catholicism in the Early Modern Era

Christian Windler's important Study on Catholic Mission in Persia

The central question of this study is not conversion. Rather Windler defines the central questions of this history of a Catholic mission „die nicht als Ausbreitungsgeschichte angelegt ist, sondern die Missionare als lokale Akteure im Spannungsfeld unterschiedlicher Normensysteme versteht“ (p. 11). Compared to Catholic missions in East and South Asia, and to the Iberian possessions in the Americas, the Persian mission won over very few converts to the Roman Church. Like the missions in the Ottoman Empire, conversions were restricted to members of the Eastern Christian churches, as proselytizing among Muslims was strictly forbidden in both Safavid Persia and the Ottoman Empire. In Persia, converts came from the Armenian community of New-Dschulfa, a suburb of Isfahan; and only a tiny percentage of the 30 000 Armenian Christians became united with Roman Catholicism. The interest of this missionary enterprise lies elsewhere. By cultural diversity Windler refers not only to the differences between Islam and Christianity, but also to the divergences between Roman Catholicism and Armenian Christianity, and between the different religious orders representing Portuguese, French, and papal interests. Normenkonkurrenz reflects the conflict between the norms of religious identity prescribed by Roman institutions (the Congregations of the Holy Office and the Propaganda Fide, the papacy and the cardinals, and the heads of the religious orders) and the actual local practices dictated by the reality of missionary life in Persia.

In 1602, the first Catholic mission to Persia was established by Portuguese Augustinians sent from Goa and which represented the interests of the Estado da Índia. The Portuguese friars were followed in 1607 by Italian Discalced Carmelites sent by Pope Clement VIII. While the Augustinian friars advocated the commercial interests of Portuguese India, the Carmelites conveyed the papal wish for an alliance with the Safavid against the menace of the Ottomans. Other religious orders followed in the 17th century: Capuchins, Jesuits, and the priests of the Missions Étrangères, all representing the interest of Bourbon France. To this mix came European merchants from the Dutch, English, and French East India Companies, making Safavid Persia a

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complex stage for a drama of Christian evangelization, diplomacy, and international trade.

The focus of Windler's study is the mission of the Discalced Carmelites, although he does not neglect the other religious orders. He has made a thorough investigation of the archive of the Italian Discalced Carmelites, which is considerably better preserved than those of the other religious orders. In addition, Windler has searched systematically through the papers of the Propaganda Fide regarding the Persian mission and has used a great variety of historical sources generated by diplomats and merchants. The result is an original, detailed, and systematic study of the Catholic Mission in Persia in the 17th and 18th centuries, the conclusions of which have important significance for understanding global Catholicism in the early modern era, both in its Roman center, as well as in its operations in other regions of Asia beyond Safavid Persia.

In the Introduction Windler discusses the research questions that animate this study and the sources that enable its undertaking. The results of the study are presented in seven chapters and a concluding reflection. Chapter 1 is entitled „Der kurze Arm Roms: Kurie, Ordensobere und Missionare“. Although the Discalced Carmelites were sent by the Propaganda Fide, the choice of this religious order called into question the conflict between the *vita contemplativa* central to the Carmelites and the actions expected of a missionary. This conflict was compounded by the double allegiance owed by the missionary to the superior of his religious order as well as to the Propaganda Fide, whose financial resources and support for the missions were severely limited. The actual mission itself is analyzed in Chapter 2, Safavid Persia as an arena of Catholic Mission. After describing Safavid rule as religiously inclusive, and open to European commercial and missionary presence, Windler introduces the Armenian mercantile diaspora and the community in New-Dschulfa. Chapter 3 describes the relationship between Catholic missionaries and Muslim scholars. A few missionaries became sufficiently learned in Persian to serve as interpreters for the Shah and were accepted as equals by Muslim scholars in learned conversations and disputations. One was the Carmelite Juan Thadeo de San Eliseo, a brilliant linguist in Persian and Arabic, and the author of Christian works in the first language, as well as a friend of the famous Italian scholar of Persian, Pietro della Valle. Another was the French Capuchin Raphael du Mans, who served for many of his nearly five decades in Persia (1647–1696) as interpreter at the court. In addition to shared linguistic and philosophical interests, some missionaries acquired reputations as physicians and healers, much sought after by the local Armenian and Muslim populations. The intimacy achieved over long years of residence resulted even in the conversion of two Portuguese Augustinians to Islam, to the shock of the Catholic mission.

The relationship between Armenians and missionaries is the subject of Chapter 4. The conflict between cultivating friendship and good relations on the one hand, and the upkeep of confessional boundaries on the other (in regard to confession, mixed marriages, attendance at mass, etc.) are recorded in the many *dubia* sent by missionaries to Rome for elucidation and instruction. Many questions arose over the

contact between Armenian Catholics with their brethren in the Armenian church, and to what extent this *communicatio in sacris* conformed to the guidelines of Rome. Many documents concerned the Sceriman, the leading Armenian convert family, who used their connections to Rome to consolidate a global network stretching from Italy to Iraq, Persia, and India. Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between Catholic missionaries, artisans, and merchants of different European nations. Mutual help and friendship practiced by a small minority in a Muslim country fostered a common European identity that transcended the Catholic-Protestant divide, as Catholic missions served also as hostels, postal and trading posts for European trading companies. In Chapter 6, „Lokale Verflechtung und Observanz“, Windler returns to the conflict between norms. Had missionaries become courtiers? Were their economic activities – undertaken for survival given the irregular and miniscule financial support from the Propaganda Fide – justifiable breaches of religious observance? For the community of the Discalced Carmelites in Basra, for example, funds from the Propaganda Fide constituted only 4 % of their income! The missionaries survived by devising an economy built on providing hospitality and middlemen service for the European merchants who frequented the port in the late 17th and 18th centuries, and by establishing a lucrative monastic economy in the brewing of spirits. In analyzing the above-mentioned questions, Windler adopts a broad perspective that addresses also the Controversies over Chinese and Malabar Rites. The congregations of the Holy Office and Propaganda Fide were keenly aware of the contradictions that could not be resolved; and the decision regarding many dubia was „non est respondendum“. The cardinals and secretaries of the congregations came to the realization that instead of issuing decretals based on principles that could not be observed, it was better to give instructions admonishing the avoidance of scandals while compromising with local realities. Far from being directed from a Roman center, global Catholicism in the early modern period demonstrated a great diversity and regional/local autonomy, as Windler argues persuasively in Chapter 7, which is a reflection on Catholic mission in the century of the Enlightenment. „Missionare in Persien“ is an important contribution to historical scholarship that is of great interest to all researchers who study global Catholicism and the Catholic missions.