

Sins from two worlds. Drunkenness and Gluttony in the Catholic Missionary Culture (16th-19th Centuries)

The current historiographical challenges of “world” or “global” history require us to deal with issues concerning the connections between individuals, ideas and things. As an historian of religions in general and Christianity in particular, I am stimulated to analyze the building and the development of cultural and religious horizons that allow to go beyond the geographical frontiers in the early modern and modern era.

Connected history is one of the possible responses to these challenges. World and connected history focuses on the relationships that human societies maintain with each other, on the joints and aggregations that human groups build on, but also on how these human organizations (economic, social, religious, political) resist to the homogenization. One of these responses is the adaptation or the re-interpretation of religious messages and beliefs, in the form of syncretism or patchwork religion. I try to explore these models of religious knowledge through the history of the catholic missions, in Europe and in America, and the history of the Society of Jesus, not only in the early modern and modern period.

My current research explores the historical concepts of syncretism and patchwork religion as spiritual experiences characterized by the coexistence of elements from different traditions, religions, exoteric and spiritual movements. In this field of research, I am especially interested in history of food and food habits (ecclesiastical fast, table behaviors, beverages and drunkenness) as essential features of the negotiation between individuals and cultural models.

Chronologically, my study is situated in the early modern age, in which attention to the rules related to table behaviors is of fundamental importance for Catholic preaching. Lutherans and Calvinists despise the rules that punish the sin of gluttony and condemn drunkenness. This disregard leads the Catholic missionaries, engaged in the European countryside and in various parts of the world, to devote a very special attention to sobriety and moderation and to export their convictions to the New World. We must keep in mind that the Catholic thought of the early modern period considered the discovery of America (and the subsequent so-called Spiritual Conquest) as a sort of compensation for lost territory in Europe for the benefit of Protestantism. It is not surprising that the transformation of the spaces of evangelization consequent to the European geographic expansion increased the interest in the rules concerning food habits. Some questions guiding this work are: how did the missionaries look at the food of the Others (in German speaking lands and Iberian-America)? How were nutritional habits established and told about in their writings? What foods and drinks were considered sinful? In my opinion, this is a relevant example of “connected history”.

This research can help us gain a clearer view of two particular issues: the first has mostly to do with the differences involved in determining the legitimacy of the “other’s” food and drink. An understanding of a different culture is also acquired over the table, and this can sometimes prove to be a place of insurmountable misunderstanding. The second refers more specifically to the struggle to curb the table behaviors of the “other’s”. In these

efforts we can detect the oft encountered disparity between an idea underpinning a precept and the possibility of implementing it: the anxious desire to regulate every aspect of daily life is very often doomed to failure and the hope of controlling a people's behaviors through rules points to a profound gap between what was sometimes an almost utopian faith in catechisms and rules and the actual ability to implement these. To acquire a better understanding of this gap we need to pay attention not just to how rules transformed between their compilation and reception, but also how models that had been developed in the Old World changed when they arrived in the New. In this regard, the historiographical concepts of "syncretism" and "patchwork religion" are very helpful to build the research framework.

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