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Why Have You Come Here? The Jesuits and the First Evangelization of Native America. By Nicholas P. Cushner

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Why Have You Come Here? The Jesuits and the First Evangelization of Native America.

By Nicholas P. Cushner. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Maps. Tables. Notes.

Bibliography. Index. xiii, 255 pp. Paper.

Nicholas P. Cushner is one of a long line of Jesuits who have produced histories of the Order and in particular of the Jesuit missions in America. He is best known for his economic histories of the Jesuit missions in Peru, Ecuador, and Argentina. In these empirical studies Cushner investigates the links between Jesuit missions and larger economic developments and patterns. The studies are notable for their unbiased approach in which the author does not attempt to explain away contradictions (between the Jesuits' vow of poverty and their enormous collective wealth, or their use of slaves, to give two examples). In the book under review, Cushner abandons economic history for ethnohistory and cultural analysis. His subject is the "clash of cultures" between the Jesuits and the American Indians they wished to convert. Instead of a tightly focused view, his approach in this work is broad and comparative. The goal is to determine the success or failure of the Jesuit missions to the American natives and to "explain how one belief system replaces another" (p. 1). These are broad questions indeed, but Cushner assures the success of at least part of his argument by defining success as "the development of sustained ecclesiastical institutions." There is no doubt that the Jesuits were successful in establishing lasting church institutions in most of the locations he includes in his study.

After an introduction in which the author lays out his argument, and a chapter providing background on the origin of the Jesuit Order and the religious conflict that characterized seventeenth-century Europe, the book begins with the Jesuit missions in Florida. These were established in 1566 at the request of Pedro Menendez de Aviles, Florida's first governor. Menendez vigorously lobbied the Order's general, Francisco Borgia, to send Jesuits to the new

colony. Later Borgia would learn that Menendez had also approached the Dominicans. They turned him down, and the Jesuits soon found out why. Florida was, in the words of one missionary “one long pile of sand” (p. 47). The Florida mission was not a success, but the Jesuits were successful in northern Mexico, where they went after abandoning Florida. According to Cushner’s definition, their missions in the Andes, Paraguay, Canada, and Maryland were also successful. Cushner gives a fine overview of the missions in each of these areas. In addition, chapter 7 is devoted to art, architecture, and theater as instruments of conversion. The author’s careful attempt to present both the native and the Jesuit views reveal a wide reading of the contemporary debates in the area of missions and cultural studies.

The book is not without its problems. A clearer explanation of Reformation-era Protestantism would be helpful in chapter 1. There were profound doctrinal differences between Luther and Calvin that should have been noted. The book is uneven in its treatment of the missions. The treatment of the Latin American missions is the most comprehensive, while the story of the Canadian missions is brief, focusing mostly on the remarkable experience of Paul LeJeune’s winter trek with a band of Montagnais. There are some errors: Mt. Desert Island is off the coast of Maine, not Nova Scotia. By misplacing its location, Cushner misses an opportunity to include mention of the first Jesuit mission in New England. The question of whether the Indians’ belief system was really replaced by that of the Jesuits is not answered. Another goal, stated at the end of the introduction, to explain how “Christianity became the dominant religion in the Americas” (p. 12) is not addressed and is probably outside the scope of the book. Finally, it is surprising not to see any reference to the 1571–72 Jesuit mission to Virginia, although the published documentary collection on that mission edited by Clifford Lewis and Albert Loomie is cited in the bibliography. The massacre of the Jesuits at this mission on the York River was

instrumental in the Jesuit's decision to pull out of Florida, and Cushner's explanation for that decision seems weak without its inclusion.

In a book of this scope some such errors are bound to occur. Overall this is a well-written overview of the Jesuit missions in America, based on recent work on cultural contact and missions. It is largely a reprint of a previous book by the author, *Soldiers of God: The Jesuits in Colonial America, 1567–1767* (2002), which was first published in Spanish in 2001 under the title *Los Jesuitas en America Colonial*. It is highly recommended for undergraduate classrooms and for the general public looking for an accessible overview of the early Jesuit missions in America.

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