

From the Roman Baroque to the Indian Jungle:
Francis Xavier's *Letters* from Goa, or the Construction of a God

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As soon as he left the European continent for Goa, the capital of Portuguese India since 1510, the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier started several epistolary relationships to remain connected with both Rome and Lisbon: outside of India, he exchanged descriptive correspondence with his beloved brethren, with his friend and master Ignatius of Loyola, with the King of Portugal John III, and with Simon Rodriguez, the Jesuit Provincial of Portugal. In these letters, Francis Xavier presented to his correspondents all the challenges he faced in his mission to evangelize Asia.

Biographers and historians of the saint have often used these epistles as a primary database. However, literary criticism has neglected to envision them as texts in which the sequence, the juxtaposition, the variety of tones, and the evolution of the writer's psyche would be worth analyzing. Yet Francis Xavier used the only form of communication with the civilization he had left to reinvent his persona in a dramatic situation, to envision himself as the Apostle designated by God to reconcile Rome with "the world" (a term traditionally used in this time period to designate the periphery around the Holy See, self-designated as *axis mundi*, or center of the world), and to prove to the three main recipients of his letters how worthy he was of such a mission. His accounts had to provide very precise proof of the competency he was to demonstrate to a triptych of powers: Loyola the General, John III the Monarch, and Rodriguez the Provincial. An aggressive-to-defensive tone can often be noted in his correspondence with the Portuguese Crown, through his descriptions of the development of Goa, the projection of Counter-Reformation urban design in the middle of the "heathen" jungle of India.

These letters also invite their readers to perceive a historical transcendence in which we can see Francis Xavier as a reconciler, but not necessarily in the way in which he intended to be. Today, when the remains of the Jesuit era in Old Goa (a World's Heritage site with very limited maintenance funding) are fighting the growth of the jungle, Xavier's letters can be read with a touch of irony: the location of the Jesuit buildings is still a populated place, but only on certain days, when most pilgrims celebrate the Jesuit saint as part of a rotation in which they also celebrate Ganesh or Shiva. Yet the ambitions of Xavier, a rather young Jesuit nuncio who landed in Goa on May 6, 1542 after a very long journey, were all centered around the elimination of Hinduism and Islam from the Portuguese colony. Unlike the common representation of Jesuit missionaries trying to teach Christian doctrine to the indigenous people by using the preexisting religious traditions they encountered, Francis Xavier had no appreciation whatsoever of these religions: he was a Papal Legate on a mission to eradicate other practices.

Historical cinema, since the crowning of Roland Joffé's *The Mission* in 1986 by the Cannes Film Festival, has had an interest in exploring the life and letters of Jesuit missionaries to find examples of transculturation, but it hasn't shown any interest in representing the complexity of Francis Xavier's encounter with India. Perhaps this is due to the nature of the data in his letters: his omnipresent disgust with local traditions, his negativity about converting the Indian tribes, his pessimism about restoring Catholicism within the Indo-Portuguese community living in Goa, far from the motherland of Rome, and, above all, his rejection of transculturation.

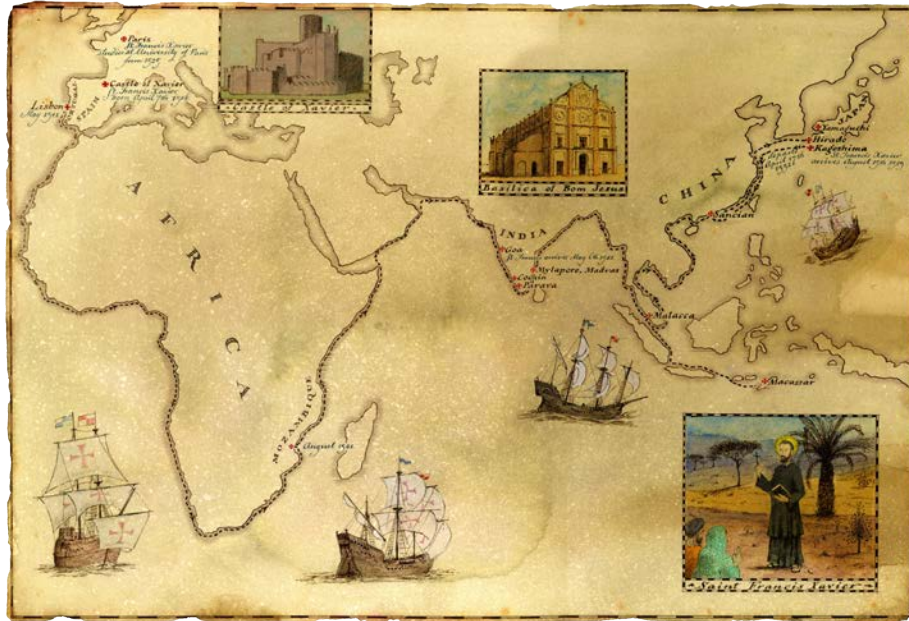


Figure 1: Itinerary of Francis Xavier with travel dates

Many letters show that Xavier had a strong desire to leave Goa, which developed very soon after his arrival, after his recognition of both the corruption around him and the impossibility of changing the culture. He was able to escape and visit other parts of Asia, but was somehow always obliged to return to the Portuguese enclave (Fig. 1). He had envisioned his stay in the Portuguese territory as a short chapter in his mission, a sort of purgatory that would enable him to access the Eastern paradise of Japan, where it was much easier to convert Buddhists to Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, the Jesuit meditation technique. Today, however, we tend to associate the Jesuit presence in China, Japan, and Korea with the figure and missionary success

of another Jesuit, Father Matteo Ricci. This missionary is a peaceful figure who is often remembered as a Western Confucianist, an example of a transculturated holy man closer to the fictitious Gabriel of *The Mission*.

Francis Xavier's destiny was distinct from Ricci's: ironically, he was to remain incorruptible, beyond death, in the very sanctuary of his worst disappointments, and to be worshipped as another deity of the Hindu pantheon. In the heart of Old Goa, his body is still visible: you have only to follow the line of pilgrims and it will lead you to the side chapel of the basilica where, all of a sudden, you will feel like you are in the vacant side chapels of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Lines of Pilgrims outside of Goa's *Bom Jesu*
on December 3rd

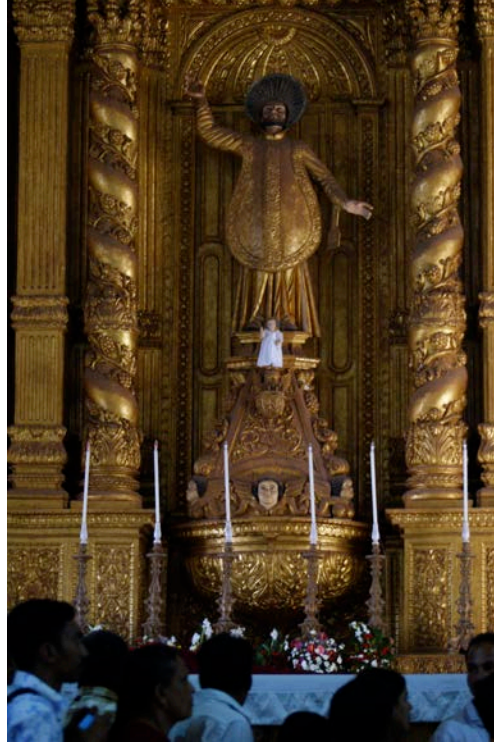


Figure 3: Main Altarpiece of *Bom Jesu* basilica

There you will find a golden casket seemingly floating above your head, rising toward the *trompe-l'oeil* ceilings that are one of the few well-maintained Catholic treasures in all of India (Fig. 3). As soon as you exit this displaced Roman structure, however, you know this place has failed to become the Rome of the East it was supposed to be under the young nuncio's administration. Under this Baroque architectural protection, the incorruptible body of Saint Francis Xavier resists the invasion of the jungle outside the walls of the Basilica of Bom Jesu.¹ Francis did not want to die in this Indo-Portuguese city that meant

nothing to him but constant disappointment, and he didn't. But somehow, his body made its way back to Goa, this ephemeral metropolis he dreaded, to sanctify and justify its construction and its decay.



Figure 4: *Arbol Petrófago* in Misiones, Argentina

The buildings of Old Goa today are like the body of the saint whose right arm was shipped back to Rome: they are still visible but mostly decomposed and incomplete. A few landmarks survived the passing of time but have lost their artistic treasures. Only with difficulty may one picture what the city and the body used to look like when they were at their apogee. Perhaps Xavier's sanctuary became the *locus reconciliatio*; that is, the justification Goa needed for the darkest period of its

Portuguese history, that of cultural imposition. If it weren't for his sacred body, this old city would have disappeared already, the surrounding jungle swallowing its last walls; or, the city would simply never have developed, as can be observed in the *misiones* of Argentina where the rainforest has reclaimed its territory (Fig. 4).

Yet these curious remains of a Baroque world that once wanted to display all the potential of its architecture are still preserved to sustain the memory of a young virgin Jesuit Apostle, who was chosen for the certainty of his chastity and sacrificed to the relatively unsuccessful Romanization of Asia.² Perhaps a new approach to this site and (hi)story needs to be taken, through a parallel reading of Xavier's letters to the three leaders mentioned above.

While Xavier remained close to the royal Portuguese court prior to his departure to India in May 1541, his letters were full of hope and projects for conversion. He shared this enthusiasm with Loyola very regularly: Xavier and Ignatius had spent so many years together since their years of university in Paris that their physical separation had to be overcome by an epistolary relationship. Xavier referred to Ignatius as "el padre de su alma," or *padre in visceribus Christi unico*, and Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* as "el libro de su vida" (Gutiérrez 17). In return, Loyola knew Xavier well enough to understand that their hopes and ambitions were the same, and foresaw that their dream to change the world had the potential to result in their eventual sainthood. Hopes of canonization were to abound in Counter-Reformation Rome among the first Jesuits who had invested all their energy in the cause of protecting the Pontiff and the Church since forming their Society as students in Paris. By 1622, both Loyola and Xavier would be canonized.

After the Council of Trent (1545–1563), there were two clearly defined ways for a motivated individual to become canonized: 1) through political consolidation of the Roman Church or, 2) through a missionary work with major repercussions in a remote and unevangelized part of the known world. Ignatius of Loyola picked the first option and stayed in Rome to exercise his function as General of the Society of Jesus, while his close followers, the early Jesuits such as Francis Xavier, Pierre Fabre, and Claudio Acquaviva, were assigned different functions to develop the Society throughout Europe and the world “to the greatest Glory of God.”³

Francis Xavier was Loyola's closest disciple, yet he would be shipped the farthest away from Rome, never to be seen again by his companions. Moreover, his assignment was not to evangelize the New World of the Americas, but rather a more challenging task: to convert Asia, a continent of ancient religious traditions, to Counter-Reformed Catholicism. The challenge of drawing these people away from the well-rooted belief systems of Hindu culture was, prior to his trip, perceived as formidable for this young and optimistic aspirant to sainthood: no one among the first Jesuits could dream of a greater cross to bear. Soon after his arrival, Xavier wrote to the Society in Rome:

All the sufferings of the long voyage, all the charge of bearing the sins of others while one has to bear the weight of his own, the having to live a long time together among unbelievers, and the extreme heat of the sun in this climate – all these trials, if borne as they ought to be borne for the love of God, turn out to be very great consolations and the subject of many and intense spiritual delights. (Coleridge I, 121)

Xavier was known to be an enlightened missionary, and he had the capacity to see this assignment clearly, as well as to envision

it as a Passion. His letters indicate that he understood his task as nearly impossible: to connect Rome with the unknown world of India through the corrupt political structure of Catholic Portugal and the growing metropolis of Goa, which it had recently established. It is obvious from his letters that the young man did not have a clear idea of what Goa was like, nor what it had become since the Portuguese had made it their territory 32 years prior to his arrival.

In many ways, to be shipped so far away from the Catholic epicenter, away from the companionship that gave full meaning to the Jesuit mission, was not part of the plan he had pictured for himself. However, his essential participation in the construction of a new urban epicenter for the Church of Rome in the East would suffice. Even before departing from Lisbon, Xavier knew it would not be an easy mission, but the Jesuit soldier remained optimistic. He envisioned innovative and motivating ways to stay in touch with the world he knew, the world of a politically drained and sacked city like Rome, about to be forever changed after the Council of Trent.

His way to survive this strenuous enterprise was to remain faithful to the very investment to which he had committed: the political development of the Society of Jesus, the strongest pillar of the Roman Church, present on all continents. Unlike the humble, Christ-like Father Gabriel of *The Mission*, Francis Xavier was the Papal Legate, one of the officers, the General's right arm, a man to be respected by the highest authorities. Far from his companions, he had full authority as Nuncio to practice Catholicism in the most Jesuit form: that is, to adapt the spiritual method he had received from Loyola, the *Spiritual Exercises*, to shape the political structure of India, and ultimately, to evangelize the whole oriental continent. In his view, the

temporal/political and the atemporal/spiritual could only be reformed and united through this meditation technique.

John III, the Portuguese monarch in 1540, had been exposed to this idea during his encounters with Francis Xavier in Lisbon, and had rapidly become a firm believer in the miracles deriving immediately from the Ignatian meditations. As Xavier wrote to Loyola on July 26, 1540, while still at the Court of John III of Portugal, the King showed great interest in understanding the method and “asked for the book of the *Exercises*” (I, 73). As Roland Barthes explains in his essay titled “Loyola,” the *Spiritual Exercises* project the exercitant into different narrative paths in order for him/her to envision which one will lead him/her to God (41-78). Through the guidance of a spiritual director, the exercitant is isolated for four consecutive weeks in order to envision and simulate various situations. At this point in time, very few copies of Loyola's book were available, since the method was still very recent; a personal copy would have to be made for His Highness. As P. Rayanna points out: “The King ... completely lost his heart to [the Jesuits] and their institute. ... Nobody else, no other crowned head, did ever do so much for the Society of Jesus. No wonder, then, the legend grew that he was a crypto-Jesuit” (65). Francis Xavier understood the kind of fascination he saw in the King.

With full support from the Crown and the Vatican, Francis Xavier was embarking on an adventurous narrative in which he was already designated as the protagonist, and he envisioned clearly himself as such: he was looking forward to a hellish reality in which he would be tested. The rest of his last letter from Portugal expressed great optimism regarding his plan to reconfigure the Government of Goa in accordance with Ignatian meditation on the Last Judgment in everyday life decisions: Francis Xavier would systematically opt for the

Exercises' visual representations of the hellish torments one might face if failing to honor one's decisions. Each king, governor, soldier, trader, peasant to cross his path would be faced with a highly detailed depiction of Satan's world, the world awaiting those who diverge from Roman Catholicism. His cosmological vision was absolutely nonnegotiable.



Figure 5: Palm Trees Growing and Pushing Church in Decay
(Goa, India)

At a time when Spain and Portugal were the two major ruling powers of colonization, the Holy See divides the world to be colonized in two, for the two nations to conquer, evangelize, and baptize. Like the unnamed Papal nuncio and omniscient narrator of the film *The Mission*, around 1540 Francis Xavier started his

long-distance correspondence with Ignatius of Loyola, his spiritual director in Rome, and with Simon Rodriguez, the Jesuit Provincial of Portugal, to which Goa belonged, constantly reporting and seeking their advice in the challenging choices he faced. Rodriguez knew Xavier well enough to understand that the Company's General, Loyola, could have chosen to switch their destinies, if only Xavier hadn't had his Call to mission years before his departure. While the two men were sharing a room at the Spanish Hospital, Xavier woke up Simon Rodriguez one night screaming, "more, more, more" and refused to admit to him what he was wanting more of. It was only years later that he admitted in his correspondence that he was asking the Lord for more sufferings, travails, travels, catastrophes, and persecutions on the part of the world he was about to go evangelize (Gutiérrez 17). Both Loyola and Rodriguez were familiar with this aspect of Xavier's psyche, and this intimacy shows through constantly in the letters.

Knowing that he was far from receiving an answer from them at the time of writing, his tone was always tainted with a certain fatalism and readiness for death, which might occur at any given time in Goa. In other words, he always wrote his letters fully aware that he could be producing his last piece of writing. The letters to Ignatius fulfilled the requirements of confession, spiritual diary, testimony, autobiography, and regularly updated will, all at the same time. This correspondence was never intended to be published or read by an audience, and given the very few editions and the nonexistent literary criticism about them, one can say that they reveal aspects of the saint's personality that have been kept out of the popular image of Francis Xavier as another "Saint Francis." Moreover, as John Patrick Donnelly, S.J., reminds potential readers of these epistles, "Xavier had little literary skill" (528). The future saint never

intended to use these letters as a demonstration of his mastery of rhetorical figures. Nonetheless, the images to which he constantly refers point to a unique imaginary on the author's part, a cosmological vision in which Goa, its jungle, and India are likened to the kingdom of Satan, and its inhabitants to the flying devils of the underworld. Simultaneously, the letters unveil the evolution of Francis Xavier's growing despair with the religious and political situations he encountered in India.

Now that we have described the context in which these letters were produced, let us turn to their literary substance. Over the course of the first eight years he spends in and around India, the initially enthusiastic tone of his writings vanishes, and frustration progressively takes control of his mind. On January 20, 1548, Francis Xavier writes the following lines to King John III of Portugal, the monarch who has granted him the authority to be the religious leader in India, along with the opportunity to simultaneously represent the Portuguese Crown and the Vatican. Xavier is well aware that no one else in Goa has been delegated comparable power, and it is easily noticeable in the tone of his letters to the King:

[I]here is nothing that prevents every living soul in India from acknowledging our Lord as God, and of professing His holy doctrine, except the fact, that the Governors and Commandants who have neglected to take care of the matter have not been severely punished by your Highness. (Coleridge II, 11)

In his letter to the Portuguese monarch, Xavier appears as a figure of authority who constantly justifies his implicit orders to the Crown. After all, he has been sent, first and foremost, to secure the Christian believers (both Portuguese and Indian converts) and verify that they remain virtuous, resisting the

many temptations of life in the tropics, a climate largely associated with evil, Hell, and its temperature.

Moreover, in such weather, nature is not controllable as it can be in Europe. It is challenging to build against the rapid growth of the jungle (Fig. 5). Well aware of this obstacle, Xavier has no hesitation in imposing himself as the middle-man between Rome and the Portuguese Crown to develop Goa and make culture prevail over nature. The following passage is a clear instance of his intention to remind everyone of his political mission as often as necessary:

And I say again that, as I hardly hope that it will ever be so, *I am almost inclined to repent having written what I have*, especially when I think that perhaps your Highness will receive a more inexorable judgment at the tribunal of God on account of the very fact that I have given you this warning. I know not whether at such a time the objection that your Highness may perhaps allege, that you are not bound to believe what I write, will be admitted; and I assure your Highness in the most perfect sincerity and entire truthfulness, that I would by no means have written what I have concerning the Governors and Commandants of these parts, if I had been able in any way to persuade myself that I could keep these things unsaid without sin. (Coleridge II, 11; my emphasis)

The tone of the letter clearly reflects Xavier's frustration with the political power in place, as well as his intention to clarify that his own authority is not to be questioned. The indirect threat made to the King in his letter is immediately followed by a brief theological overview of the risks John III might encounter if he doesn't take Xavier seriously. But what seems at first theological is actually rather legal: the word "judgment" is followed by "tribunal," "fact," "warning," "objection," "allege," "bound,"

“admitted”; all words pertaining to the judiciary world, but also to the general rhetoric of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. In this letter, Xavier clarifies the hierarchy of powers for the King of Portugal: Rome is above Portugal, Portugal is above the Governors, and the Governors are in charge of expanding Christianity in the multireligious land of India. Xavier’s rhetoric with John III is usually based on the presentation of a dilemma in which the Jesuit missionary systematically reaffirms his “sincerity” and the difficult choices he must make on behalf of the Crown.

As a good Jesuit, he projects in his letters the Ignatian image of the two roads symbolizing dilemma, echoing Ignatius’s own experience on the way to Montserrat, an image later recycled several times in Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. As we have seen in the previous passage, it is also through the implicit and voluntary erasure of his message (“*I am almost inclined to repent having written what I have*”) that Xavier reinforces his role as supreme mediator between Rome and the world. Constantly reinforcing that he is a bidimensional authority, both earthly and heavenly, he imposes himself here as the only possible spiritual director for King John III, a spiritual director quite displeased with the performance of his exercitant, and therefore compelled to report the latter’s bad performance to the Jesuit headquarters in Rome. At the same time, his letters continue to invite John III to envision himself as a delegate of Christ on earth and empower him as such, with all the responsibility that this entails.

Before reconciling Rome with Goa, Xavier must first reconcile Rome with Portugal; but he encounters much resistance in the process. Frustration and impatience are two defining characteristics of Xavier, according to Manfred Barthel: “his real failing was his lack of patience, a Christian virtue in which the Apostle of the Indies was almost totally deficient. He

shared in the restless, turbulent spirit of his age, and he had more the temperament of a conquistador than an apostle” (181). Regardless of whether or not Barthel’s assessment of Xavier’s emotional state upon arriving in Goa is accurate, one can certainly tell from his letters how frustrated and impatient the Jesuit was in his concurrent letter to Simon Rodriguez, now official dispatcher of missionaries appointed by the Vatican: “the King should severely and by an edict declare to all the Governors of India that he trusts no one in India so much as those who with all their might strive to advance the limits of Christianity” (Coleridge I, 20). Not only do we note frustration with the limits of his power, but also a fair degree of impatience.

It is indeed challenging to reconcile Rome with the world when a letter can take up to three years to reach the hands of John III, and his response up to seven years to return to Francis Xavier. No delegated measure can be taken rapidly in such a context. This is why Xavier’s letters often point to the dichotomy between the temporal and the eternal: what becomes transparent in the letter is Xavier’s will to translate the dynamics of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* to the realm of political affairs, to render the temporal eternal through the infallible meditation technique that the Apostle of India believes he has received. The letters therefore become a space in which Francis Xavier projects his various visions of a future for the Rome of the East he has come to develop. In this process, he also imagines the worst-case scenario: the city in ruins reconquered by nature, the surrounding jungle a metaphor for the chaotic and hellish nature of Hinduism as he perceives it. Xavier’s letters become a virtual space in which to continue his own spiritual exercises, superimposing two potential images for the city of Goa.

An exercitant of the *Spiritual Exercises* never ceases to pledge allegiance to his/her director since the exercises continue

beyond the initial required four-week retreat until the believer is faced with the Last Judgment. Ignatian meditation encourages the exercitant to pursue the exercises through the act of writing, particularly in the form of a spiritual diary that can be turned in regularly to the confessor and/or director. In other words, life beyond the retreat of the *Spiritual Exercises* is nothing but a continuation thereof during and beyond life on earth. Francis Xavier was, along with Pierre Fabre, the first Jesuit to ever receive the *Spiritual Exercises*; furthermore, he received them directly from Loyola, who was giving them for the first time. It all happened at the very foundation of the Society of Jesus, in a dormitory room of the University of Paris that the three men were sharing. It is therefore natural that Xavier continues to seek advice from Ignatius, “el padre de su alma,” his spiritual director, who now reigns over the Society of Jesus as Father General from the Casa Professa in Rome.

Francis Xavier uses the letters as a space to project his own victories and fears, where he decodes the temporal reality of Goa through the eternal nature of the Jesuit mission. His concurrent letters to King John III and to Loyola prove that the Jesuit missionary constantly needs to reevaluate the two positions in which he has been placed: director for the King, exercitant for Loyola. Furthermore, Xavier’s letters translate his need to depict India from the perspective of the *Spiritual Exercises*, that is, to envision the new land and its conflicting authorities as another battleground between Heaven and Hell, in which he has been placed as supreme referee. His insistence on the evil nature of the jungle and its people seems to reflect the need for antagonism in Loyola’s meditation techniques. In the *Exercises*, the Christian believer is trained to spend the rest of his life in the awareness of this cosmological war in which each

individual has the potential to fight for God, or to choose to join the Devil.

In his letters, direct invocation of the Divine Father would be written in Spanish instead of Latin, to create a linguistic community with his spiritual director, Ignatius of Loyola, as in the following example: “Y vos, mi Dios, me hicisteis a vuestra semejanza, y no los pagodas, que son dioses de los gentiles en figuras de bestias y alimañas del Diablo. Yo reniego de todos los pagodas, hechiceros, adivinadores, pues son cautivos y amigos del Diablo” (Zubillaga 84). At this point, Xavier’s aversion for Indian culture and nature has reached its peak. The tone of this passage simultaneously imitates that of confession and that of exorcism. It is puzzling to reconcile this writer with the saint whose compassionate and watery eyes still appear today as an icon of Christian virtue all around Goa. Once again, Francis Xavier remains largely associated with Francis of Assisi, a saint who chose poverty and made no distinction between peoples. And yet Francis Xavier confesses his lack of compassion many times in his private correspondence.

Missionary or conquistador? Perhaps the Jesuit is a bit of both, but he is mostly an exercitant and a reconciler. As Barthel suggests, the future saint’s ambition could be to become “the most important Christian evangelist since Paul” (178). According to Julia Reinhard Lupton in *Afterlives of the Saints*, missionaries like Francis Xavier who aspire to be canonized and write their own hagiography while they are still alive “do so by themselves recreating an earlier epoch’s universe of form and meaning” (8). Consequently, Xavier’s letters provide a wealth of detailed information that he reports in order to be recognized as a key reconciler by both Rome and Lisbon. He continues to perceive this unknown world as any other place on the globe, that is, as a theater where the Devil is omnipresent and putting him on trial

from which he will emerge to see clearly through the political games of Portugal. Now in a very similar position to that of Paul of Tarsus, his task is to solve political problems—and he shall do so in the light of the Ignatian meditation technique, in a land that has no affinity whatsoever with the core rhetoric of the *Exercises*, that of simulation and visualization of sin. In other words, Xavier seeks to apply spiritual meditation to political mediation with very little faith in the Indian potential to adapt to his agenda. Reconciliation as a theological concept appears to him as the only possible model for the government of India. As Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:

And all of this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are the ambassadors of Christ, as if God were appealing through us. (*New American Bible* 1310)

In India, Xavier finds himself in the role of the Apostle Paul, with the understanding that his mission also consists of controlling the functioning of the political authorities by deriving his authority from Rome instead of Jerusalem, and by writing Pauline “Epistles” to the Jesuit fathers of smaller missions all over Asia. Like Paul, he depicts a world where the presence of the Devil prevails rapidly once one travels away from Rome. In short, Xavier’s rhetoric reflects simultaneously that of Paul and of Ignatius: he has been placed in a situation in which Christians are persecuted, just like in the early times of Christianity, and his supreme mission is to reconcile the world with God— not an easy task, given the fact that this whole world is in the hands of Satan. From this moment onward, this narrative preconditions

all of his decisions. As his biographer, Henry James Coleridge, states:

The work was preeminently a work which called for an Apostle, a man who would combine the heroic self-devotion which was required for the full instruction of these poor natives, with the organizing power necessary for the establishment of a perfect system of religious teaching and administration of the sacraments among them, in so much completeness and fullness of growth as to stand by itself after he had left the spot for other fields of labour. (I, 165)

Just as Paul had brought Christianity, the Divine message of God coming from Jerusalem, to the lands north of the Mediterranean sea (all countries deprived of His presence), Xavier pictures himself as responsible for a mission superseding Paul's in terms of cultural reception and natural obstacles. Just as Peter had arrived in Rome, the city of the Heathen, and had turned it into the Jerusalem of the West through the martyrdom of his body, Xavier anticipates the necessity of sacrificing his body for the edification of Goa, in order for it to become a divine city. Whereas Paul had to "recycle" pagan temples and transform them into early churches, Xavier must turn the jungle into a Baroque city. The cosmology and the narrative of his letters continue to frame his mission within the narrative of the New Testament.

Fully inspired by the *Spiritual Exercises* and their logothetic vision for one's existence and the construction of a mental narrative to condition it, Xavier often refers in his letters to the four strict existential parameters he has established for himself—*four* being the number ruling the whole Ignatian system—in order to become the concentration (the *summa*) of Paul of Tarsus, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, and the Holy

Virgin: Poverty, Penitence, Virginity, and Devotion to Mary (García 231).⁴ These pillars frame Xavier's epistolary discourse, and project him at the same time as a figure uniting the masculine with the feminine. His guaranteed Christ-like virginity gives him an advantage over both Paul and Loyola, who had both known the sins of the flesh. Interestingly enough, his feminine attitude, gaze, and "purity" will become very appealing features for the Hindu believer, who is conditioned to perceive in some of the deities a merging of the feminine with the masculine, particularly in androgynous gods such as Shiva or Kali. For the Christian population already in place in Goa, Xavier's exemplarity remains essentially visual. He has constructed himself as a *summa* of several key actors in the Christian narrative in order to be seen as a live projection of them all in the streets of the city.

His person becomes therefore the very *locus* in which the two worlds (Rome and India) will fight against each other. On January 14, 1549, in a letter that he will sign as "your least and useless son," Xavier writes the following to Ignatius:

I will just touch on a few points relating to these parts of the world which are so distant from Rome ... Most of the Indians are of vicious disposition, and are adverse to virtue. Their instability, levity, and inconstancy of mind are incredible; they have hardly any honesty, so inveterate are their habits of sin and cheating ... Again, all the Indians, whether heathen or Mussulmans, as far as I have been able to make out hitherto, are very ignorant. (Coleridge I, 67-8)

The binary association of virtue with Christianity and vice with India grows stronger with each letter that the missionary writes. His fairly negative vision of India fits perfectly with the Pauline theological approach he has adopted to justify his own role as

Ambassador of Christ in the economy of reconciliation. But Xavier is a general without an army, and most of his letters (to John III, Loyola, and Rodriguez) have one common goal: he begs for obedient “soldiers” to be sent to India and fall under his rule. In parallel, Xavier admits that he places his hopes in the training of Japanese students in Goa, and often mentions his desire to leave India for Japan in order to deal with “people of virtue”: “We have three Japanese students ... They tell us wonderful things about Japan ... They are youths of very good virtue and extremely sharp wit; Paul in particular, who is sending you a letter of very good length. He is now making the Exercises, and with very good fruit” (Coleridge I, 71). Interestingly enough, Xavier’s favorite Japanese student has been renamed Paul through baptism. Xavier’s high regard for Japanese culture goes hand in hand with the solution he presents to Loyola: Japanese Jesuits will have the capacity to help him in his mission to fight the Devil in India, since their culture enables them to reconcile Rome with the world. In other words, Japan seems to be the mediating culture for the unresolvable conflicts and cultural discrepancies between Rome and Goa. Their input, enhanced by spiritual training, is the very seed that Xavier intends to plant in Indian land in order to lead his political mission correctly.

As I stated at the beginning, this task is twofold: Xavier has to evangelize those who seem impossible to evangelize, and then to keep the evangelized from falling back into the un-Christian. Maybe what is most striking in the tone of his letters is his own realization of the limitations of Christianity and the relativity of religion altogether. Even though it is never formulated as such, his insistence on a necessary and strategic religious invasion of India (or the alternative of a complete abandonment of it) reveals the lack of interest that local

spiritualities have for Catholics. The fact that Hinduism is an inclusive religion that can assimilate Christianity as another branch of its multiple worshipping system, along with the consequent fact that Christianity radically excludes the possibility of integrating Hinduism as part of its theological schemas, both complicate Xavier's task of radical and unilateral evangelization.

This is the major challenge that he chooses never to mention in his letters, an unspoken—in other words, Derridean—erasure. His most challenging obstacle remains the very distinct conceptions of time and narrative that Hinduism and Catholicism have, i.e., the circular versus the linear. In the greater continuity of Christianity of which the Jesuits are very fond (as we see for instance in the conflation of Xavier with Saint Paul), every event must be recorded in order to be envisioned within a larger historical perspective, which gives a meaning to the missionary work.

However, as Xavier notices with the converted Indians, “[I]he people are Christian in name rather than in reality, wonderfully ignorant and rude: they cannot read or write. They have consequently no records of any kind. Still they pride themselves on being Christians” (I, 118). It is therefore impossible to make them part of the greater narrative of Christianity, since they envision their conversion as a momentary experience without connection to a historical past or a spiritual future. Their illiteracy does not allow them to envision Christianity as the narrative in progress into which Xavier has been placed as intradiegetic protagonist.

Moreover, one cannot direct the *Spiritual Exercises* for an exercitant that pictures Christ and Krishna as interchangeable divinities. The mission of reconciliation does not find meaning among this population, and Xavier sees little hope for change in adults. Consequently, the Jesuit mission will start focusing on the

children, who can be formatted through a literate and linear conception of time through the free education dispensed by the Jesuit schools in Goa and other parts of India.

In spite of this major challenge and his frequent words of despair to Ignatius, Xavier remains a very determined missionary with a clear agenda that does not require daily approval from his superiors. The style and tone of his writings change radically over the years. The enthusiasm of his letters written from Lisbon gives way to the bitterness of failure to evangelize the masses in Goa in the same fashion that Christ, Paul, and Loyola had done in their own missions. Ironically enough, John III orders that each of Xavier's letters be read during Masses throughout Portugal each time he receives a new one from India, and continues to consider the Jesuit missionary as a spiritual director not only for his own person, but for the whole nation of Portugal. Yet the evolution of style, tone, and arguments in the future saint's letters emphasizes the growing impossibility of conveying the cosmological vision of the *Spiritual Exercises*, as well as translating them into a political framework.

We know now that the site of Old Goa today speaks for the victory of the jungle over the Jesuit mission. This victory of the vegetable over the mineral as a metaphor for the human is an aesthetic phenomenon from which we can draw a myriad of conclusions, both critical and personal (Figs. 5-6). Xavier's dream while in Rome's Spanish Hospital might have been premonitory, since it projected his desire for the natural obstacle, for an implicit battle with the vegetable world, for constant persecution by tropical evil. Goa served Xavier's need for a labyrinth that would justify not only his missionary work but also his canonization.



Figure 6: Ruins of the Church of Saint Augustine (Goa, India)

Today's Goa shows signs of weakness in its Roman Baroque architecture, overwhelmed by the climate of the former Portuguese province. On December 3, people converge from all over the province and the country to Xavier's sanctuary, lining up for hours in the sun to glimpse, for a brief moment, his body in the golden casket. Most people worship Xavier in his sanctuary as "another" deity (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Street Sign indicating Pilgrimage Line (Goa, India)

It is frequent to encounter his miniature plastic statue or that of Christ next to that of Ganesh in people's cars or houses (Fig. 8). Xavier has been integrated into cultural Hinduism as the reconciler between West and East, but certainly not in the terms that the saint established in his spiritual narrative and registered throughout his correspondence with Loyola, Rodriguez, and the King of Portugal.



Figure 8: Juxtaposition of Hindu and Christian Religious Figures

Xavier's binary cosmology was therefore interpreted against its own conditioning. But the abundant visual representations of the saint, combining a reassuring feminine gaze with a youthful man's body, have served to present another, partial aspect of the saint among many that complement one another. Xavier's image is another medium of the Hindu *darsan*, the direct communication with the image in which the deity expresses emotions and love, and then presents himself in order to bless the viewer. Perhaps the highly pictorial nature of the

Roman Baroque and that of Hinduism had too much in common.⁵ In spite of potential theological contradictions, the *darsan* is a Hindu practice compatible with the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In contrast to the abundance of visual representations of the Jesuit Apostle, his letters are little studied and almost impossible to find in Goa. The Bom Jesus Basilica publishes its own biography of the saint that tourists can buy at the door for 100 rupees (\$2). This book, written by an Indian Jesuit priest, concludes with a brief overview of Xavier's letters discouraging pilgrims from searching for answers in these texts "meant only for scholars and not for the reading public for their spiritual profit and edification" (Rayanna 266). I argue that, on the contrary, Francis Xavier's letters are a text that should be made accessible to the "reading public" for readers to envision the complexity of the saint's psyche. They contain his understanding of Indian cultures, and would facilitate the reconciliation of India with Goa's Portuguese history. They contain a partial explanation of why Christianity did not take root in Goa according to Francis Xavier's plans: his radical determination to reject Hinduism, instead of envisioning it as cultural heritage. Through the reading of his letters, one can evaluate the complexity of the man's cosmology, the spiritual narrative conditioning his path to sainthood, as well as the ironic construction of a Catholic saint into a Hindu god, against his own will.

 Notes

¹ Here I envision the term “Baroque” as traditionally defined by José Antonio Maravall in *La cultura del Barroco*, a critical work first published in 1975 in which the Baroque is defined as a historical structure in relation to the construction of a social reality. According to this definition, the Baroque is a structure that develops along with the Jesuit order in the post-Trent Catholic world.

² Virginity, although expected of all novices engaging in ministry, could never be claimed by the other founders of the Society of Jesus, especially by Ignatius of Loyola, who had had a rather promiscuous past before his conversion, and who was probably infected with syphilis, according to Manfred Barthel (113-114). Francis Xavier, however, was the epitome of the virgin Apostle: i.e., a perfected version of Paul of Tarsus who, like Loyola, had been sexually active before his conversion experience.

³ *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*, the motto chosen on the day of the foundation of the Society of Jesus.

⁴ See Barthes’s structuralist analysis in “Loyola,” in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Seuil, 1971).

⁵ I refer to the Baroque not only as it has been defined and discussed by Maravall in *La cultura del Barroco* (1975), but also the revised concept in consequent works such as Norman M. Klein’s *The Vatican to Vegas* (2004), Anthony Blunt’s *Roman Baroque* (1974), or Evonne Levy’s *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (2005).

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