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History 3029 Transnational History: A New Perspective on the Past

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## Book Review

Jerry H. Bentley. *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. viii, 220pp.

### Introduction

*Old World Encounters* is about the dynamics of cross-cultural encounters in pre-modern times which are specified to be the period from approximately 200 B.C. to Columbus' voyage to the Americas. The book analyzes the processes and cultural effects of the interactions of people of different civilizations with each other in Eurasia and Africa in pre-modern times. There are three cultural consequences of such encounters: cross-cultural conversion, conflict, and compromise. Among them, the book focuses on conversion as it has the largest potential to transform whole societies thoroughly. Bentley sets out a framework to theorize patterns of conversion into three categories: conversion through voluntary association; induced by political, social, or economic pressure; and by assimilation.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the cases he uses to explain conversion are nearly all about religious conversion while there are other types of conversion like the way of living, world views, and manners, which are not necessarily religious. He adopts the three-pattern framework to conduct large-scale analyses based on other historians' studies of individual cases or episodes of cross-cultural encounters.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the book is to understand and identify patterns of conversion, conflict, and compromise in cross-cultural encounters. It offers two central arguments. Firstly, powerful political, social, or economic incentives were essential for the occurrence of large-scale social conversion to foreign cultures. Secondly, the syncretic process of assimilating indigenous and foreign cultures was necessary to lead to conversion, and conversion was never achieved in full but always involved syncretism.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

The purpose of my book review is to evaluate how well Bentley helps readers understand the topic, supports his two central arguments, and the significance and implications of his book to the writing of world history on the theme of cross-cultural encounters before modern times. In general, it is an informative and insightful book with a well-established framework, a valuable interpretation, and strong arguments. However, if scrutinized, it also has some flaws in terms of the rigor of defining concepts, the consistency of arguments, and the expected scope of writing.

### Summary of the Book

There are five chapters in the book. The first one explains fundamental concepts, theories, approaches, and the timeframe of the book. The other four chapters are organized chronologically to cover four eras of intensive cross-cultural encounters: the era of the ancient silk roads from 200 B.C. to 400 A.D., the spread of the world religions from 600 A.D. to 1000 A.D., the age of the nomadic empires from 1000 A.D. to 1350 A.D., and the expansion of the three civilizations from 1350 A.D. to 1492 A.D.<sup>3</sup> Chapter two talks about the consolidation and preliminary expansion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity, empowered by long-distance trade. Chapter three concentrates on the spread of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity under state sponsorship. Chapter four illustrates the intensification of cross-cultural encounters facilitated by steppe nomads like the Mongols and Turks. Chapter five starts with the expansive ventures of China, Islam, and Europe and turns to account for the domination of the world by the European power. Its last two sections are devoted to argue for the significance of technology and epidemics to the rise of the Europe.

### Strengths of the Book

I am mostly impressed by two strengths of the book. Firstly, the framework it develops and adopts is very helpful in analyzing cross-cultural conversion. Secondly, it successfully substantiates its central arguments through abundant examples and logical interpretation.

### Explicit Framework to Analyze Cross-Cultural Conversion

In the first chapter, Bentley sets out a clear framework with three patterns of conversion, which lays an important foundation for conducting large-scale analyses throughout the rest of the four chapters. He explains key terms like the notion of conversion and categorizes its patterns so that they can be applied consistently later. The categorization of such diverse patterns into a sim-

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<sup>3</sup> China, Islam, Western Europe. *Ibid.*, 27.

ple framework makes the comparison of individual cases of conversion more manageable, since the concept is now less fluid and a scope of analysis has been defined. Furthermore, adopting a consistent framework can also ensure related cases are organized logically and systematically instead of being randomly drawn to demonstrate the transnational nature of the study. For instance, when illustrating cross-cultural dynamics in the era of the ancient silk roads, Bentley demonstrates the power of voluntary conversion of elites in the spread of some religions. He illustrates how Buddhism found a tentative footing in northern China by converting members of ruling elites<sup>4</sup> and how the prosperity of Rome attracted chieftains of less prosperous nomads to convert to Roman Catholic Christianity voluntarily.<sup>5</sup> Without the lens of world history, the pattern of voluntary association may not have been recognized as a significant mode of conversion across cultures. Without an explicit framework, historical phenomena in different regions with similar implications may not have been associated with each other and presented logically.

The framework Bentley develops not only contributes to the clarity of argumentation of the book, but also provides convenience for other scholars who are studying cross-cultural encounters. As mentioned by Bentley, there is a lack of common vocabulary and analytical categories for this field, which imposes difficulties on scholars seeking to build on others' studies and provide arguments with a shared understanding of basic terms.<sup>6</sup> Scholars can now leverage Bentley's framework when studying cross-cultural conversion in pre-modern times to provide new insights, or apply it to the study of other time periods. They can have common reference points when discussing related issues on this topic as well. A well-defined and examined framework is undoubtedly important to the progress of academic studies in world history with such an elusive theme.

### Two Valid Central Arguments

Bentley does not only develop a clear framework, but also makes two very valid arguments which are central to his thesis on the importance of political, economic, or social incentives and syncretism in conversion.

Firstly, Bentley argues that religious and cultural traditions are not likely to win foreign converts massively without firm support of the foreign ruling elites or the provision of political, economic, or social benefits after conversion. He supports this argument by illustrating historical

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

cases of both how those incentives contributed significantly to the success of large-scale social conversion and how some religions failed to induce mass conversion due to the lack of such incentives. On the one hand, in his narration of the early spread of Islam, Bentley points out that a broad range of incentives imposed by Muslim rulers greatly helped Islam attract converts as it expanded throughout North Africa and the Middle East. During the Umayyad dynasty, Muslim subjects had greater access to positions of power, while non-Muslim subjects had to live in specially designated neighborhoods which prevented their social integration to Islamic society. Non-Muslims also had to pay a poll tax called *jizya* levied specifically on them. The power of such material incentives of conversion can be evidenced by the fact that within a century of the Hegira<sup>7</sup>, new converts claimed so many tax exemptions that the Umayyad state experienced financial difficulties as a result. On the other hand, Bentley attributes the failure of Islam to induce mass and sustainable conversion in West Africa during the fourteenth century to the lack of state sponsorship and incentives in place. Islam was brought by Muslim merchants to West Africa instead of by military conquest. Most West African rulers adopted Islam mainly for economic and diplomatic benefits but allowed original pagan traditions to persist for the sake of effective governance. These royal converts did not have an interest in transforming the whole society to Islam in order to maintain stability. As a result, no attractive incentive for conversion was provided. In the end, Muslims only had very limited interaction with local inhabitants and very little influence in the West African society. After Muslim merchants departed, most societies returned gradually to paganism. With both affirmative and negative examples, Bentley convincingly illuminates the power of state sponsorship and a set of incentives in the inducement of large-scale social conversion.

Secondly, Bentley argues that any pattern of conversion must involve syncretism to some extent. Similar to how he supports the argument on the necessity of incentives, he presents cases to demonstrate the significant contribution of syncretism to the success of the spread of certain religions, and cases to show the failure of conversion due to the lack of syncretism. For example, Bentley attributes the success of Buddhism in China to its doctrinal flexibility and continuous efforts to accommodate Chinese interests and traditions.<sup>8</sup> During the early presence of Buddhism in China, it won very few converts because of its severe doctrine and the large difference between the cultural traditions of China and India. Later on, Buddhism developed a more accessible and flexible doctrine in China, blended traditional Chinese elements into Buddhist rituals, and even

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<sup>7</sup> The Hegira is the migration of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

adopted Daoist language to convey faith. As a result, Buddhism started to thrive in China along with the syncretic movement during the period from 600 A.D. to 1000 A.D.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Roman Catholic Christianity failed to induce large-scale conversion among Chinese and Mongols during its first sojourn in China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In fact, the Roman church in China vanished quickly after expatriate Christians left China. Bentley points out that Catholic missionaries were very strict on doctrinal precision, Latin language, and Roman liturgy. He suggests that a lack of doctrinal flexibility and syncretic movement has largely led to the failure of Roman Catholic Christianity to induce mass conversion in China.

Devoting most chapters to support his two central arguments, Bentley successfully provides and substantiates valuable theories in explaining cross-cultural conversion in pre-modern times. He uses abundant examples covering various civilizations and geographic locations and has insightful interpretations of the causes, processes, and results of these historical events. Such theories can be hard to prove without adopting a world history approach. On the one hand, world history encourages non-Eurocentrism and the inclusion of cases from a wide range of geographical locations, so that the commonalities drawn (e.g. the significance of syncretism and incentives) are more convincing to readers with sufficient evidence. On the other hand, world history emphasizes cross-border interconnectedness among human communities to shed light on the development of human civilizations under certain themes. I think world history is a very effective approach to study cross-cultural encounters given the nature of the transnationalism of cultures, especially religions, as well as the frequency and intensity of such encounters in most regions of the world. By merely looking at how a certain civilization interacted with others, we may lose the opportunity to discover more patterns of contacts and identify commonly significant factors in these contacts, such as syncretism.

### Shortcomings of the Book

Examining the scope and structure of the book more strictly, I have three mild instances of criticisms for it. They are the lack of a definition of culture, inconsistency of the last chapter in relation to the rest of the book, and the limited scope of the study given the various cultural consequences of cross-cultural encounters.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

## Lack of Definition of Culture

Bentley does not define what the fundamental concept of “culture” means to him, or the scope of “culture” in the context of the book. I noticed with surprise that the book turns out to be largely about the spread of different religions. Bentley also seems a bit too casual regarding the use of the terms “religion” and “culture.” When he defines the scope of “conversion” and identifies the three patterns of conversion at the very beginning,<sup>10</sup> he does not specify that “conversion” exclusively means “religious conversion.” However, in subsequent chapters, the majority of his narration is about religious conversion and he uses the two terms “culture” and “religion” often-times interchangeably. In my opinion, the legitimacy of the casual swap of the two concepts is questionable. Bentley does not provide any justification for his way of equating the notion of “culture” with “religion” which leaves plenty of room for readers to challenge how representative “religion” is among the components of “culture.” His practice may confuse or even mislead readers into thinking that the two concepts are interchangeable, which is not the case, especially when considering the broader and more complex nature of the notion of “culture.” Bentley would have been able to manage readers’ expectations better and avoid confusion if he had more explicitly explained his rationale of narrowing down his focus to one aspect of culture, namely religion.

Although the lack of clarity in these two concepts does not prevent Bentley’s book from providing valuable insights into religious conversion or undermine his central arguments, his work would have benefited in terms of both breadth and depth from clarifying the relationship between culture and religion. For example, he mentions in the last chapter that the expansive ventures of Islam and Europe in the early fifteenth century produced permanent cultural consequences while the Chinese expansion did not. It is a pity that he does not provide any interpretation on how this interesting contrast emerged and that his narration of the Chinese case remains mostly descriptive. After reading the cases of the three civilizations, two possible accounts come into my mind. Firstly, the sponsors of the Chinese expansive venture had no interest in promoting Chinese culture while the other two civilizations carried out their ventures with the purpose of strengthening cultural influences. Secondly, the Chinese venture involved no religious actions while Islam and Europe launched their ventures with strong religious zeal. To look at this contrast on a more abstract level, it is worth exploring whether cross-cultural encounters without explicit cultural purposes tend to remain without cultural consequence and whether the lack of zeal in spreading a certain religion in an expansive venture makes it harder to produce long-lasting cul-

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

tural consequences. However, it is hard for Bentley to be aware of the value of such questions if he does not distinguish the notions of “religion” and “culture.” He could have provided a more insightful interpretation of how religions impact the overall cultural effects of cross-cultural encounters. His book would have been able to present a more holistic picture of how economic, political, and cultural factors contribute to the process and consequence of cross-cultural encounters by seeing religion as an important element of culture, rather than equating the two.

### Inconsistency of the Last Chapter

The approach and argument in the last chapter, especially the last two sections, seem inconsistent with the preceding chapters and the central arguments. Bentley attributes Europeans’ domination of “all other people they encountered”<sup>11</sup> to their technological superiority and relatively stronger immunity to epidemics. His argument of the decisive role of technology and diseases is problematic. In relation to the book as a whole, it fails to support the central arguments of the book and even deviates from them, which may cause confusion to readers. For example, syncretism is not even mentioned when Bentley narrates the emergence of the West and the development of a new world order. The well-established framework and consistent approach seem to have been abandoned. The previously highlighted role of syncretism becomes invisible in the last two sections, which made me feel at a loss while reading. However, shifting the focus is not necessarily a problem as the role of syncretism may indeed have faded or receded to the background during this specific historical period, so that the previous approach no longer fits. The problematic part is the absence of a justification and reconciliation of the deviation of approach and emphasis in the second half of the last chapter. If the demonstration of syncretism is not important for examining the cross-cultural dynamics of this era, how did such change occur? How does this distinct era relate to the previous eras? All in all, I see the lack of accounting for the deviation from the central arguments and approach to be a more important issue than the deviation itself.

In fact, the inconsistent argument and approach in the last chapter have been mentioned by quite a few reviewers.<sup>12</sup> However, there seems to be no attempt of understanding potential causes of such inconsistency and putting them in the larger context of writing world history. The topic of cross-cultural encounters itself is complex, with lots of ambiguous terms like “culture,”

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Janet Abu-Lughod, and Aaron W. Godfrey. Janet Abu-Lughod, Review of *Old World Encounters*, by Jerry W. Bentley, *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 1 (February 1994): 188-189; Aaron W. Godfrey, “The roads well-travelled of trade and war – Old World Encounters,” *Cross Currents* 43, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 553.

intangible factors like people's spiritual experiences, and multiple players and consequences. Even when doing national history, it is already not easy to synthesize observations into clear-cut conclusions. When approaching the topic through the lens of world history, the multiplicity of both time and locations adds to the complexity of the topic. It is harder to develop and adopt a consistent framework and approach to address so many different dynamics of cross-cultural encounters in a way that makes sense. Different themes may have prevailed in different time periods on a global scale, just like how syncretism was forced to the background in the analysis of the cross-cultural encounters during the fifteenth century in the last chapter. One way to fix this problem would have been to adequately wrap up the common observations of the key role of syncretism in most of the eras before turning to the new emphasis on technology and diseases at the end of pre-modern times. This would have helped readers follow the logic of the book more easily.

### Scope Limit

Bentley's book successfully demystifies the extremely complicated process of cross-cultural conversion as one of three major results of cross-cultural encounters. However, he does not shed enough light on the other two results: conflict and compromise. I am not satisfied with only learning about one dimension of cross-cultural encounters. Insights into the other two results are also necessary to gain a holistic understanding of the topic. Bentley's book could have been more insightful if he had put more effort in theorizing these two aspects and made some attempt to illustrate the relationship between the three results. The issue is that the narrow focus of the book's content is quite different from my expectation based on the breadth implied in the book's title, *Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges*. Nevertheless, it is very understandable and also common practice to narrow down the focus while addressing a broad topic in world history. It may be necessary to narrow down the focus to a scale that is manageable to research and write, as does Philippa Levine, for example, in her fine work of world history concerning the legislation of venereal diseases in British colonies.<sup>13</sup> What I wonder about is whether the specialization of religious conversion in the book is achieved consciously or unconsciously. Bentley does indicate that the book makes a special effort to understand conversion, though without sufficient elaboration of his rationale. It just reminds me of the potential danger of undermining the ambitious

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<sup>13</sup> Philippa Levine, "Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism: The Contagious Diseases Ordinances in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements," in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette M. Burton (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35-48.

goals of a world history book set at the very beginning by unconsciously narrowing down the focus in the subsequent narration.

## Conclusion

In general, the book is a good work that provides abundant information and valuable insights about the topic of cross-cultural encounters in pre-modern times with the main focus on religious conversion. It achieves its goal of identifying and understanding patterns of conversion and argues convincingly for the role of incentives and syncretism. Putting it in the broader context of academic research in this field and the writing of world history, it makes a special contribution, especially through successfully establishing a theoretical framework and by developing two valid central arguments. However, if examined more strictly, some flaws of the book emerge. Firstly, the lack of a definition of culture and the ambiguous distinction of “culture” and “religion” may confuse and mislead readers. Secondly, the goals to identify patterns of cross-cultural conflict and compromise remain unachieved, which causes a limitation of the book’s scope. In this sense, it provides valuable yet only partial insights into a vast topic. Last but not least, the lack of explanation of the inconsistency of the last chapter makes it disconnected from the thesis. Bentley’s approach to narrow down his focus to one consequence of cross-cultural encounters, as well as to adopt a framework consistently, demonstrate feasible and even necessary ways to study a certain theme in world history. Meanwhile, the flaws of his book reflect some of the difficulties of doing world history, mainly due to the increased complexity. All in all, scholars’ ambition to theorize cross-cultural encounters on a global scale even just within pre-modern times is not easily achieved given the complexity involved.

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