# The Spread of Christianity and Islam in the Early Modern Period in Relation to Strategies for Localizing These Faiths

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**Abstract:**

Since the sixteenth century, Christianity and Islam have evolved into global religions through the efforts of missionaries, spreading throughout the world and gaining widespread acceptance among local populations. The wide spread of religion cannot be separated from the strategies for localizing these faiths. This article discusses in detail the application and impact of localization strategies in the early modern period spread of Christianity and Islam to enrich scholarly research on religious communication strategies.

**Keywords:** religion, early modern period, Christianity, Islam, localization strategies

'Mushrooms spring up in a night, while it requires years to ripen the fruits of the palm.'[1] Between 1500 and 1800, through the continued efforts of generations of missionaries, Islam and Christianity expanded as global belief systems to the Americas, Africa, Asia, and South East Europe. Firstly, this essay begins by arguing that strategies for localizing the faiths help to reduce resistance to the spread of religion in new contexts and facilitate its easier acceptance by the local ruling class and population. Secondly, this essay introduces that the strategies for localizing the faiths can promote the integration of missionaries into the local religious transmission mechanism and consolidate the effect of religious transmission. Thirdly, this essay explains that the strategy for localizing the faiths is conducive to enriching and perfecting religious teaching, promoting the acceptance of the belief in related areas with the same cultural foundation as the missionary places. This promoted the formation of regional communication circles and expanded the scope of religious communication. Finally, this essay critically emphasizes that while the strategy for localizing the faiths has largely contributed to the spread of Christianity and Islam, it is not the only factor driving the spread of religion. This strategy itself has limits to what it can do to promote the spread of religion.

Scholars have explored extensively the reasons why Islam and Christianity have spread so widely around the world and gained acceptance by people everywhere. At present, most academic studies on this topic start from a geopolitical perspective, using geographical location to delineate the scope of research and then analyze the transmission of Islam and Christianity in different geographical areas. In *Conflict and Conversion*, Tara Alberts described the missionary process in Southeast Asia, where the stakes and conflicts were complex. She first described the identity of missionary groups and the shaping process of related policies from a macro perspective. Then he explained the missionary strategies of individual missionaries from a micro perspective.[2] His work provides a meaningful reference for scholars studying the spread of Christianity in Southeast Asia. In *The Ottoman 'Wild West'*, Nikolay Antov, a historian of the pre-modern Islamic world, analyzes the formation of urban and rural Muslim communities in the north-eastern Balkans. By comparing the differences and trajectories of development in different regions, he explores the process of conversion to Islam and the emergence of religious identity among Turks.[3] These works, which analyze the process and impact of the spread of religion from a geographical perspective, make it easier for scholars to compare the characteristics of the spread of religion in different regions in their studies.

However, there is currently a lack of academic research on the spread of Christianity and Islam in the world from the factors that affect the spread of religion. These factors include strategies for localizing the faiths, improvements in transport conditions, and reforms within religions. This essay analyzed the role that the strategy for localizing the faiths played in facilitating the spread of Christianity and Islam in the early modern period. At present, there is still controversy in academic circles about the time limit of the early modern period. This essay followed Christopher Alan Bayly's view that the early modern period is defined as the period from the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.[4] The argument of this essay is that the strategies for localizing the faiths played essential roles in facilitating the spread of Christianity and Islam in the early modern period. However, these strategies were not the only important factors driving their spread.

Firstly, in the early modern period, the strategy for localizing the faiths served to reduce resistance to the spread of Christianity and Islam in missionary areas. The strategies for localizing the faiths refer to the spread of religious teaching into local culture in an appropriate way and the two-way collision and integration with various local cultures. Some scholars consider 'localization of faith' to be a synonym for 'cultural adaptation' or that 'localization' is a form of 'cultural adaptation.'[5] However, this essay does not fully share these views. The reason is that the localization of the Islamic and Christian faiths did not simply adapt their own religious teaching to suit the local society and culture in the process of transmission. On the contrary, this process of cultural influence and collision should be a two-way street. As religions refined their teachings to spread them, local cultures developed and progressed due to the influence of religious communication. For example, the Islamic culture of the Balkans was the product of this two-way integration. On the one hand, Islam in the Balkans showed its own distinctive regional coloring. These colors are not only a fusion of Balkan and Islamic cultures but also contain elements of pre-Ottoman religion and culture. On the other hand, when the Balkans are seen as an integral part of the Islamic world, the Islamic world is also characterized by its inclusiveness and pluralism.[6]

The localization of beliefs is an important part of the spread of religion. As different missionary regions have their own indigenous cultural traditions and political systems, the direct dissemination of orthodox Christian or Islamic religious ideas to the local area will not only cause great discontent among the local religious groups but will also make it difficult for the local population to fully understand and accept them in a short period of time. This will lead to the fact that for the local people, these religious ideas will always be foreign cultures. This view is strongly supported by comparing the history of the spread of Christianity in the Ming Dynasty of China with that of modern China. In *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age*, Charles H. Parker describes the missionary strategies adopted by Christian missionaries in the Ming Dynasty to localize the faiths. In the Ming Dynasty of China, Matteo Ricci, as a missionary of the Catholic Jesuits, studied the Chinese language and took a Chinese name. Incarnated as a Confucian scholar, he believed that Christianity represented a return to the purity of the Confucian classics.[7] He emphasized that Christianity and Confucianism were not conflicting presences as a way of appealing to influential people in China. The Jesuits also allowed Chinese Christians to participate in Confucian rituals which venerated their ancestors.[8] Matteo Ricci's efforts led to the start of the movement for the Sinicization of Christianity. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Chinese church had 120 priests and up to 500,000 lay Christians.[9] However, the process of the indigenization of Christianity in China was interrupted in the nineteenth century. This is because, with the invasion of Western powers, missionaries became a particular group in Chinese society. The strong cultural outlook they exhibited caused resentment among the Chinese people. On the one hand, they actively maintained the orthodoxy of the Christian faith. On the other hand, the West and Christianity at this time were in a strong position compared to traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, the national superiority shown by some Christians and their disdain for traditional Chinese culture interrupted the process of localizing the Christian faiths in China. (Sun, Xue-Yan, 2005) It can be seen that the localization of religion is conducive to alleviating the contradiction between it and local culture, making its religious teachings easier to be recognized and accepted by local residents and promoting the further spread of religion.

Not only in East Asia but also in Southeast Asia, Christian missionaries promote missionary work by finding cultural common ground and blending with local customs. For example, prayer beads are common devotional tools in Southeast Asia. The wise missionaries served the localization of Catholicism by giving these familiar objects, including prayer beads, a new, Catholic-relater strength.[10] These means of localization, using cultural homogeneity as a medium, can make it easier for local people to accept and understand Christian teachings. This approach reflects the missionary's skill in trying to find a culturally appropriate way of expressing the ideas he wanted to spread in the course of his missionary work.

In addition, Islam also adopted strategies for localizing the faiths to promote its spread in the early modern period. In West Africa, Islamic missionaries were concerned about the poverty and inequality faced by Nigerians. They have kept Islam rooted in today's Hausaland culture through careful management, annual jihadic campaigns, respect for local Christians, well-designed teaching methods, and patient explanations of the

teachings.[11] Nile Green argues that the essence of missionary attempts to localize religious teaching was a process of cultural negotiation. In this process, the missionaries need to find a balance between local customs and orthodox Islamic law.[12] It is precisely this balance that has been achieved, allowing Muslim and Christian communities to express the diversity of religious and cultural practices that has contributed to the spread of religions throughout the world. Therefore, the strategy of localizing the faith requires missionaries to adapt the content of teachings within reasonable limits and to choose a way of preaching that is easily accepted by the local people based on a complete understanding of local cultural customs, political structures, and ideological traditions. This strategy was a clear catalyst for the spread of Islam and Christianity in the early modern period.

Secondly, the strategies for localizing the faiths not only help to promote the acceptance of Islam and Christianity in more regions, but also help to consolidate the effects of the spread of religion in these regions. This is because the strategies for localizing the faiths allow missionaries to be fully integrated into the local mechanisms of religious transmission. In this regard, the actions of Sufis in Islam in localizing their faith provide a reference. In the 12th–14th centuries, Islamic Sufis achieved the transformation of their institutions of transmission from conceptual entities to concrete social organizations by developing codes of dress for initiation, curricula, local capital-accumulating institutions of pilgrimage, accommodation, and teaching in various locations. By the 15th century, a number of Sufi families were emerging as sizeable local religious institutions in Morocco, Anatolia, India, and South East Asia.[13] This outcome cannot be achieved without the appropriate application of the localization strategies of Islam. For example, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Naqshbandi brotherhood of Central Asia protected citizens who swore allegiance to its leaders from attacks and reduced their taxes.[14] When the missionaries are fully integrated into the local mechanisms of religious transmission, they formally become part of the local religious or socio-cultural sphere, achieving a transformation from an alien to an indigenous culture. The mechanisms of religious transmission in a region and the social organizations infused with capital tend to be more stable than those of conceptual entities. Thus, the stability of this mechanism was reflected in the ability to organize formal and orderly missionary activities systematically, and to provide stable missionary mites and material guarantees for missionary activities. The stability of the mechanism provides strong support for the continued spread of faith within the mechanism. The consolidation and protection of missionary achievements were thus achieved. Therefore, the integration of religion with local cultural transmission mechanisms, driven by the localization of beliefs, facilitates the further spread and development of religion.

Thirdly, the strategy for localizing the faiths is not only conducive to missionary work in the mission place, but also to promoting the acceptance of the faith in related areas that share the same cultural basis as the mission place, forming a regional transmission circle and expanding the scope of transmission. The history of the spread of Christianity in China and Korea is an important example to prove this point. Matteo Ricci brought Christian culture to China in the 16th century. China and Korea are geographically very close to each other, both located in East Asia. The dominant culture of both Chinese and Korean societies in the early modern period was dominated by the traditional Eastern Confucian culture. Catholicism was introduced to the Korean peninsula from China in the late 18th century. From Beijing, the Joseon emissary Yi Seung-hun brought a number of holy books, including *Tian Zhu Shi Lu*, written by Matteo Ricci and others, and studied them. Eventually, Christianity was understood in the Korean peninsula as a sect that could reconcile and refine Confucian doctrine. This was one of the earliest attempts to indigenize Christianity in Korea. [15] Through the process of the spread of Christianity in East Asia in the early modern period, it can be learned that the practice of localizing Christianity in China by scholars such as Matteo Ricci not only had a profound impact on the spread of Christianity in China, but also enabled Christianity to spread in the Korean peninsula, which had a similar cultural foundation to China, forming the Asia-Pacific regional circle of Christianity. It is worth noting that regions with the same cultural base are not always as geographically close as China and Korea.

Central Africans and Europeans also share certain cultural similarities in their outlook. Cécile Fromont argues that Central Africans and Europeans had common ground in their understanding of the stone cross. Thus, they were able to reach a mutual understanding in the sense of a gesture of conversion towards the king and to establish common ground regarding the nature of the supernatural and epistemological aspects of the world.[16] The similarity of cultural cognition makes the attempt of religious indigenization not only limited to influence the place of mission. This influence is widespread and far-reaching. The localization of the faiths enriches and develops the teachings of the religion itself and creates conditions for other regions with similar cultural foundations to accept the religion. The mainstream view in the academic circle divides the spread of Christianity and Islam in the early modern period into the spread of geography and the spread of demography. There are overlaps and differences between the two modes of transmission. The geographical spread refers primarily to the spread of religions from their place of origin to other regions. The demographic perspective of spread refers primarily to the increase in the number of adherents of the faith. The formation of regional communication circles promoted by the localization strategy for localizing the faiths has promoted the geographical expansion of

religious communication and the increase in the number of believers. In other words, this strategy facilitated the spread of religion from both a geographical and a demographic perspective. The establishment of such regional circles of transmission has enabled Islam and Christianity to form a complex network of religious transmission around the world. Islam is committed to having Muslims from different regions see themselves as part of a larger unit of connection, just as the Jawi Sufis from Southeast Asia are included in hagiographies written by Arabs in Yemen.[17] This genealogical branching structure of transmission has strengthened the sense of spiritual belonging and cohesion of Muslims around the world, and has given Islam an eclectic character. Therefore, the implementation of the localization of faith has further developed the teachings of Islam and Christianity and promoted the regional spread of religions.

Although the strategy for localizing the faiths played an important role in promoting the spread of Islam and Christianity in early modern times, its own role was also limited. Moreover, the localization of beliefs is not the only factor contributing to the spread of religions. This localization strategy is limited by the irreconcilable contradictions between the local culture of the mission area and the religious doctrine.

The existence of these contradictions reinforced the mistrust that missionaries and local inhabitants felt toward each other. The Christian missionary experience in Mexico exemplifies this. Although the Christian Indians of Totolapan accepted many of the extraordinary aspects of friar Roa, the testimonies of Roa's Indian assistants before the Inquisition reveal their unease with Roa's self-discipline and their ambivalence about participating in his rituals. Roa's assistants concluded from their missionary experience that the local residents did not place the worship of Christ at the top of their understanding of the Christian god.[18] Strategies for localizing the faiths show their limitations in the face of irreconcilable cultures and ways of thinking. Therefore, the reason why Islam and Christianity have become world religions is that apart from the application of localization strategies, they are also inseparable from the use of some tough methods and the help of some objective conditions when preaching. Some historians in the Balkans have argued that the formation of Muslim communities was the result of a series of state-organized punitive actions. This statement is in line with the general public's perception of the Ottoman role. Another popular historiographical view is that the formation of Muslim communities resulted in large part from indirect pressure provided by state organizations. Indirect pressure manifests itself through the imposition of higher tax burdens on non-Muslims and often by not allowing them access to the political and administrative sectors.[19] E. Radushev once calculated that the Ottoman Empire probably taxed Muslims half as much as non-Muslims.[20] The direct and indirect pressure on non-Muslims compensated for the limitation of the localization strategies and further contributed to the spread of Islam.

In addition, the maturity of some conditions also laid the foundation for the widespread popularization of Islam and Christianity. These conditions include advances in maritime technology, improvements in the level of teaching and literacy of the faithful, and reform of the religion itself. Firstly, the maturity of maritime technology created the conditions for travel. Through travel, missionaries brought religious teaching to distant lands. Travelers could also describe foreign cultures and ideas for audiences back home. Secondly, the improvement in the level of teaching by missionaries and the increase in the literacy rate of the social residents also played an essential role in the transmission of religious civilization. Nile Green argues that literacy is the most effective tool for the transmission and reproduction of culture over time. Whether in holy places, mosques, homes or gardens, Islamists realize the mechanisms of textual transmission through quality teaching. This mechanism allowed the classical texts of medieval Islam to circulate widely in India, Africa, China, and elsewhere.[21] Thirdly, the reform of religion itself played an important role in facilitating its spread. The strategies for localizing the faiths by Muslims and Christians around the world provoked criticism from some of those who uphold orthodox doctrine. These critics argued that the practice of mixing faiths undermined religious truth. Therefore, they tried to reform to root out all the additions introduced by Sufi and Jesuit missionaries. Whether it was the reform of the localization of religion or the reform of religion to maintain the doctrine of purity, they all endowed the religion itself was new vitality. These reforms also allowed Christianity and Islam to compete with ideas or cultures from the rest of the world. The clash of ideas brought about by these debates over religious doctrines and the reformation of religion itself created a wave of Islamization and Christianization in the early modern world.[22] Therefore, despite the vital contribution of localization strategies, due to their own limitation, the spread of Islam and Christianity in the early modern period was inseparable from the means of pressure used by believers. In addition, the advancement of navigation technology, the improvement of the literacy and education level of believers, and the reform of religion were all conducive to Islam and Christianity becoming world religions.

In conclusion, the spread of Christianity and Islam in the early modern period largely depended on the application of belief indigenization strategies. For missionary places, the localization of beliefs is not only a process of two-way integration of foreign religions and local culture but also a process of negotiation between the two parties. The strategies for localizing the faiths are based on the missionary's thorough knowledge of the culture, way of thinking, and social customs of the region. It helped to reduce missionary resistance and made

the teaching more acceptable to the local people. In addition, the practice of faith localization strategies has helped missionaries and religious communities to attract an infusion of local capital and to gradually integrate themselves into the local system of dissemination of ideas. This completed the transformation of the religion from an alien culture to an indigenous one. Moreover, this provided institutional guarantees for the stable spread of the religion and consolidated its missionary effect. For the countries or regions surrounding the mission area, the strategies for localizing the faiths allowed the influence of missionaries in one region to spread to other regions with the same cultural base or sense of cultural identity. This facilitated the formation of regional circles of transmission, which increased the efficiency and speed of missionary work and promoted the conservation of missionary achievements. However, in understanding the contribution of localization strategies to religious communication, scholars should also pay attention to the limitations of the strategies for localizing the faiths. This limitation is mainly due to the irreconcilable contradictions between the native culture and the Christian and Islamic cultural systems. To resolve these conflicts, missionaries and government agencies pushed for the naturalization of the native population through direct and indirect pressure. These measures also contributed to the spread of the religions. In addition to these initiatives, the development of navigational conditions, the improvement of the teaching methods and knowledge of missionaries, and the reformation within religions all contributed to the rapid development of Christianity and Islam in the early modern period. At present, with the increasing trend of economic globalization, exchanges and clashes between cultures and ideas around the world are becoming more frequent. Scholars can draw on strategies for localizing the faiths of Christianity and Islam to identify common features shared by different cultural identities and to promote their mutual learning. This has far-reaching implications for the intellectual flourishing of the academic community.

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