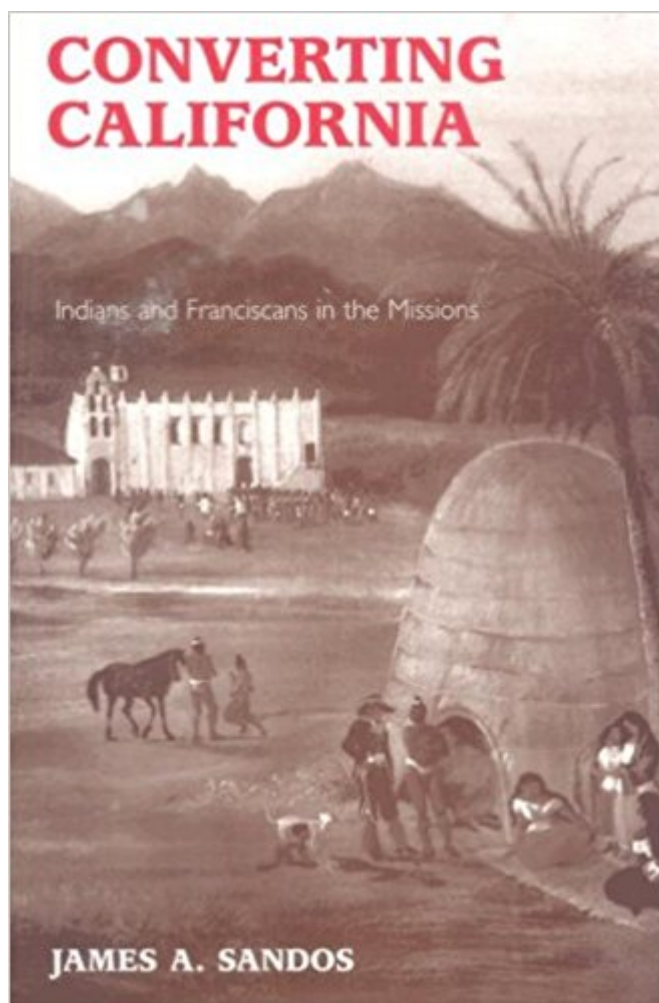


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# Converting California: Indians And Franciscans In The Missions



## Synopsis

This book is a compelling and balanced history of the California missions and their impact on the Indians they tried to convert. Focusing primarily on the religious conflict between the two groups, it sheds new light on the tensions, accomplishments, and limitations of the California mission experience. James A. Sandos, an eminent authority on the American West, traces the history of the Franciscan missions from the creation of the first one in 1769 until they were turned over to the public in 1836. Addressing such topics as the singular theology of the missions, the role of music in bonding Indians to Franciscan enterprises, the diseases caused by contact with the missions, and the Indian resistance to missionary activity, Sandos not only describes what happened in the California missions but offers a persuasive explanation for why it happened.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Generations of writers have defended or deplored California's fabled Spanish missions. Historian James Sandos takes us beyond the polemics, with fresh and convincing explanations of Indians and missionaries alike."

"Generations of writers have defended or deplored California's fabled Spanish missions. Historian James Sandos takes us beyond the polemics, with fresh and convincing explanations of Indians and missionaries alike." -- David J. Weber, author of *The Spanish Frontier in North America*; "This outstanding book will be indispensable in the continuing dialogue on the history of early

California."-Martin Ridge, Huntington Library --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

James Sandos's history of the California missions is a great read. The book is very balanced, describing the Franciscan mission activities sympathetically but pointing out that the missions brought European diseases to the Native Americans of coastal California, including syphilis. He also records the harsh treatment toward the Natives, which caused many to flee the missions and even to revolt. He suggests, however, that the Natives who were introduced to the Christian music of the era by the Franciscans were more likely to remain Catholics after the Franciscan missions were closed than those who had not been exposed to Christian music. His description of Father Junipero Serra gives the reader a glimpse into the Franciscan view of the world--and Serra is also described in a balanced way.

It was very interested in the way they treated the native people.

This historical monograph is a great account of the panoply of forces that surrounded the establishment and unlikely persistence of Alta California's missions. Sandos gives some detail to California Indian culture prior to Spanish arrival, but focuses on Serra's actions in founding the missions and how Indians, individually and collectively, responded to the Spanish encroachment. To this end, Sandos discusses population and disease dynamics and the central role music played at the Missions. His analysis is contextualized in the historiography of Christophilic triumphalists and Nihilists; he seeks to refrain from the role the missions have played in justifying Serra's recent canonization movement. Surprising emphasis is given to the ways with which Indians rebelled against Spanish society, as opposed to the canonical interpretation and its belief in banal conversion and subservience. Overall, Sandos really brings the Mission period back to life--although he doesn't romanticize the horrors of this period. This is a very fulfilling account of the period but its detail and serious subject matter might prove quite taxing for the uninitiated in California history.

Sandos' narrative of the California Mission system is a well researched, indepth study. Any student researching this topic will find this book indispensable.

The following review appeared in the February 2005 issue of CHOICE.42-3615 E78 2003-70398

MARC Sandos, James A. *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the missions*. Yale, 2004. 251p bibl index afp ISBN 0300101007, \$35.00 Historian Sandos (Univ. of Redlands) provides a richly contextualized history of the California missions from their inception under Junipero Serra in 1769 to the time of their secularization in 1836. The author deftly steers between sanctification and vilification of the California mission system by examining not only the material and political goals of the Franciscans, but also their theological and cosmological understandings of the world around them. Sandos applies this same interpretive agenda to the vast array of Native peoples in California. Chapters focus on often-ignored topics such as the role of music in the mission system, the devastating impact of syphilis on Native demographics, and the importance of Native resistance, accommodation, and acceptance of this outside force. The author concludes with the impact of the mission and a discussion of the moral legitimacy of the mission process. While some will not be happy that Sandos eschews partisan judgments against or exonerations of Franciscans and the Spanish system of colonization, his work clearly sheds considerable light on this highly controversial encounter while encouraging even further study, thus serving as a model for future research. Summing Up: Highly recommended. All levels and libraries. -- R. A. Bucko, S.J., Creighton University

I highly recommend this book as an introduction to the California Mission period. I bought this book because I have three children in the California schools. Two of them have been through the fourth grade, the grade where they intensively studied the missions. Having not grown up here, I was vaguely dissatisfied with the sanitized story they were getting. But I had no ideas about it myself except a default assumption that the story was really one of slavery and genocide. It was not slavery. I like how the author characterized it as something more like spiritual debt peonage. It was not genocide, though its impact on the Indians was horrific. (Genocide would wait for the goldrush and aftermath.) The priests were not evil men. On a strictly moral level, they were good men, most of them. But they were of a medieval mindset, reactionaries in an enlightenment world. They mostly did what they did out of love for "their" Indians and out of ignorance. Of course they had no doubt that they brought spiritual truth, life everlasting etc. to the Indians. So they had no compunction about suppressing the native culture. But they suffered greatly seeing that converted Indians in the missions tended to sicken and die, while their free living unconverted brethren were plump, vigorous, fertile and happy. They knew nothing of germs and not much about nutrition. So they could not understand the devastation the mission system was causing. His chapter on the Native peoples was an excellent introduction. I had no idea of the huge number of native people that lived

in California before contact and their vibrant culture and lifestyle. If the book has flaws, it becomes a bit repetitive in the chapter on Indian resistance. The author has really made those points already and well throughout the book. Also two chapters are excellent in themselves, but to my mind not as well integrated into the fabric of the book as they could be. The picture painted in the chapter on venereal disease is tragic. After that, it is hard to know how the amazing accomplishment of Indian musicians described in the chapter on music were possible. Of course I understand that events occurred over more than sixty years, up and down the coast of California, so there was doubtless regional and temporal variation. This is not a big deal. But I'd appreciate it, if he'd clarified a bit.

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