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Sacred Ambition, Secular Power: Jesuit Missions and the Rebalancing Authority of the Portuguese Empire, 1540–1759

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Abstract

This article treats the familiar triad “Gold, God, and Glory” as a heuristic to track how commercial, missionary, and reputational aims were configured within overlapping jurisdictions of the Portuguese world. Through three cases—the 1552 clash in Malacca between St. Francis Xavier and Captain D. Álvaro de Ataíde da Gama; the Gama family’s bargaining over offices and revenues; and the 1759 expulsion of the Society of Jesus—it argues that localized, negotiable frictions in the sixteenth century evolved into a structural confrontation by the mid-eighteenth century. Drawing on published Jesuit correspondence and secondary analyses of royal and municipal records, the study shows how missions initially supported metropolitan aims yet increasingly challenged them as Jesuit educational networks and revenue-bearing assets expanded. The Malacca dispute is read as a jurisdictional struggle over diplomatic access and rents, not merely a moral drama. The 1750 Treaty of Madrid and the Guaraní War further politicized perceptions of Jesuit wealth and influence, while the Lisbon-centered reform agenda after 1755 turned tension into rupture.

Keywords: Jesuit missions; Portuguese empire; sacred-secular dynamics; St. Francis Xavier; Gama family; religious agency



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1. Introduction

The familiar triad “Gold, God, and Glory” is often used to summarize early modern European expansion, yet recent scholarship treats it as a limited heuristic rather than a causal model. Works on law and empire, Jesuit networks, and polycentric governance show that motives tied to wealth, faith, and prestige were configured within specific institutions and overlapping jurisdictions, producing cooperation in some settings and sharp conflict in others (Benton 2010; Brockey 2014; Friedrich 2022; Xavier and Županov 2015). In this article, “gold” refers to commercial and fiscal imperatives, “God” to missionary projects, and “glory” to dynastic reputation and territorial standing. In the Portuguese cases examined here, tensions often surfaced where ecclesiastical authority intersected with mercantile interests and royal administration. The empire was heterogeneous across regions and periods, and this intersection still merits closer study despite classic treatments of Jesuit power and finance (Lockard 2008; Xavier 2022). Drawing on published editions of Jesuit correspondence and on secondary scholarship concerning royal and municipal records, the analysis traces how these tensions developed from local, manageable frictions into a structural confrontation. The article presents no new archival material; its contribution is a synthetic, comparative reading across established sources.

Portugal, a pioneer of oceanic ventures, began its expansion with the capture of Ceuta in 1415 and for decades extended its reach before the Treaty of Tordesillas¹ (1494) formalized

a longitudinal division between Portugal and Castile, later Spain. Following Alexander VI's bull *Inter caetera* (1493), the treaty conferred rights of navigation over particular maritime zones to the east of the demarcation line to Portugal and to the west to Castile, although subsequent diplomacy and practice complicated the scheme (Duve 2013). Navigators such as Bartolomeu Dias² and Vasco da Gama³ opened routes to Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Asia, facilitating a network of fortresses and *feitorias* that enriched the crown and its agents (Subrahmanyam 2012, pp. 1–9). Missionaries accompanied these ventures. Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as diocesan clergy, operated in Asia before the Jesuit arrival in 1542 (Paiva 2021, pp. 1–10). Royal officials and merchants prioritized economic and political gains, and in some settings agendas converged, while in others they conflicted (Abernethy 2000; Marks 2024).

This article employs a case study methodology to analyze the shifting relationship between sacred and secular power over the longue durée. Rather than presenting a continuous narrative, it examines three junctures that trace change from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. First, it considers the 1552 conflict between St Francis Xavier⁴ and Malacca's captain, D. Álvaro de Ataíde⁵ (hereafter D. Álvaro de Ataíde; variants include Álvaro da Gama), regarding a mission to China, which highlights the friction between spiritual and commercial priorities (Coleridge 2023, pp. 510–26). Second, it explores the Gama family's bargaining with the Portuguese crown, showing how metropolitan aims and the interests of overseas elites were negotiated rather than neatly opposed (Subrahmanyam 1997, p. 236). Third, it investigates the 1759 expulsion of the Society of Jesus from Portugal and its overseas possessions. The final case is treated as the cumulative outcome of two centuries of adjustment rather than a sudden break, reflecting the clash between a modernizing program of royal centralization and the Society's transnational authority (Burson and Wright 2015, pp. 117–38).⁶ Through these focused analyses, this research underscores how religious imperatives both complemented and challenged secular objectives, reframing the Portuguese imperial enterprise as a dynamic process shaped by context.

2. Mission, Jurisdiction, and Commerce: Francis Xavier and D. Álvaro de Ataíde

During early modern European expansion, the Society of Jesus emerged as a pivotal force in disseminating Catholic Christianity across Portugal's overseas territories, embodying the "God" dimension within the heuristic shorthand of "Gold, God, and Glory" (Casanova 2017, p. 109). Francis Xavier (1506–1552) co-founded the Society of Jesus and in 1540,⁷ at the request of King João III,⁸ was appointed by Pope Paul III as Apostolic Nuncio to the East (Brodrick 1952, pp. 17, 47; Paes 2007, p. 500). The Asian administration based in Goa was still developing and faced administrative challenges and moral tensions. European settlers, driven by economic ambitions, often clashed with local populations, creating complex social dynamics. King João III sought to address these issues by deploying Jesuit missions to reinforce Christian values and stabilize governance in overseas communities, aligning religious goals with imperial governance (De Mendonça 2002, p. 100; Xavier 2022, p. 88).

Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542 and launched an extensive missionary campaign, traveling to southern India, Ceylon, and Japan. His experience in Japan, beginning in 1549, highlighted the difficulties of evangelizing a society with deeply entrenched cultural and ideological traditions that resisted Christian teachings (Ellis 2003, p. 155).⁹ Recognizing China's cultural influence over Japan, Xavier strategized that establishing Christianity in China could amplify his mission's regional impact (Bruce 1983, p. 205). In a letter from Cochin on 29 January 1552 to European Jesuits he wrote, "I hope to go there [China] during

this year, 1552, and penetrate even to the emperor himself” (quoted in Coleridge 2023, p. 348). He believed that if the Chinese embraced Christianity, the Japanese might abandon Chinese-influenced doctrines, facilitating missionary success across East Asia (Coleridge 2023, p. 348).

In a letter to King João III from Goa on 10 April 1552, Xavier detailed his plans to travel to China via Malacca with Diogo Pereira,¹⁰ a merchant serving as royal envoy. He described their preparations, including valuable gifts for the Chinese emperor, funded partly by the king and partly by Pereira’s own resources. The plan brought Xavier into direct conflict in Malacca over who controlled the diplomatic and commercial channels required for the voyage.

Xavier’s missionary zeal encountered significant resistance in Malacca, a crucial Portuguese trade hub on the way to China. There, he and Pereira clashed with the city’s captain, D. Álvaro de Ataíde da Gama, son of Vasco da Gama.¹¹ Ataíde refused to recognize Xavier’s authority as Apostolic Nuncio and demanded that Pereira relinquish his role as royal envoy. By confiscating gifts intended for the Chinese emperor and blocking their departure, Ataíde effectively stalled the mission. After heated disputes, he permitted Xavier to proceed alone, excluding Pereira (Coleridge 2023, p. 511). Xavier’s frustration is evident in a letter from Malacca on 15–16 July 1552, to Kaspar Berzé (Barzeus),¹² rector of Goa’s Jesuit college: “D. Álvaro de Ataíde has acted towards me, in taking from me the means of sailing for China” (quoted in Coleridge 2023, p. 521). He expressed concern that Ataíde’s actions insulted divine will and might invite severe consequences, reflecting his belief that spiritual priorities should supersede temporal authority (Coleridge 2023, p. 521).

From Shangchuan Island¹³ on 22 October 1552, Xavier wrote to Pereira, lamenting that Ataíde’s control over Malacca would likely obstruct future missions unless divine intervention occurred. He feared that Ataíde’s actions might incur divine punishment, suggesting that such consequences may have already begun (Sousa 2006, p. 68). In a final letter from Shangchuan to Francisco Pérez¹⁴ and Kaspar Berzé, Xavier escalated his response, proposing Ataíde’s excommunication: “D. Álvaro de Ataíde. . . has violently opposed the formal authorization of the viceroy of India” (quoted in Coleridge 2023, p. 565). He argued that Ataíde’s defiance of his Apostolic Legate authority, the viceroy’s orders, and royal commands constituted rebellion and warranted ecclesiastical censure, including public separation from the Catholic Church (Coleridge 2023, p. 565). Xavier’s call for excommunication underscores his commitment to spiritual authority, framing Ataíde’s resistance as a moral and religious failing. The analysis here differs from biographical and spiritual framings by treating the Malacca episode primarily as a jurisdictional dispute over control of envoys, ships, and access to Chinese trade routes, read alongside studies of commercial and administrative practice.

Xavier’s portrayal of Ataíde’s actions as a betrayal of Christian values aligns with later Portuguese narratives that depicted Ataíde as a corrupt official (Gómez 1981, p. 42).¹⁵ However, Ataíde’s motives were likely rooted in pragmatic concerns. As Malacca’s captain, he sought to maintain control over lucrative trade networks with China and Japan, which were central to the enclave’s economy (Alves 2022). Pereira’s appointment as envoy, supported by Xavier and funded by Pereira’s contributions, threatened Ataíde’s authority and economic interests (Coleridge 2023, p. 523). The travel narrative attributed to Fernão Mendes Pinto reports that Ataíde did not oppose the mission itself but resisted Pereira’s elevated status, which challenged his dominance (Pinto 1891, p. 435). Some accounts speculate a personal dispute, possibly over a loan Pereira refused Ataíde, though this lacks corroboration. Others note Ataíde’s ambition to secure the role of ambassador to China himself, aiming to monopolize diplomatic and commercial ties with the region (Sousa 2006, p. 66).¹⁶

Malacca's socio-economic context differed significantly from Goa, where Jesuit influence and Catholic orthodoxy were prominent. In mid-sixteenth-century outposts such as Malacca and Cochin, commercial and security concerns often shaped decision-making among Portuguese residents, and missionary objectives competed with these priorities rather than consistently prevailing. These enclaves included networks of private trading enterprises that maintained delicate ties with Chinese merchants (Sousa 2006, p. 66). Ataíde likely feared that Xavier's evangelistic mission, with its emphasis on moral reform, could disrupt these trade relationships, particularly given China's cultural resistance to foreign religious teachings. The Portuguese presence in Malacca was precarious, relying on strategic alliances and economic leverage rather than religious hegemony, which further explains Ataíde's reluctance to support Xavier's mission. This approach goes beyond a moral reading of Xavier's letters by situating the conflict in the governance of diplomatic commercial channels that linked Malacca to China.

The episode shows how missionary objectives collided with commercial and fiscal priorities within royal administration. Xavier's mission prioritized spiritual conversion, often clashing with the socio-economic realities of East Asia, where trade and political authority were paramount. Ataíde's actions, while obstructive to Xavier's goals, safeguarded his political authority and commercial interests, reflecting the competing priorities within Portugal's imperial enterprise. The clash between Xavier and Ataíde illustrates the challenges of reconciling religious idealism with the practical demands of imperial administration in a region defined by cultural diversity and economic competition.

3. Crown, Officeholding, and Rents: The Gama Family

The tension between St. Francis Xavier and D. Álvaro de Ataíde illustrates one strand of conflict within Portuguese imperial politics. In the cases considered here, the monarchy's pursuit of centralization interacted with the economic ambitions of officeholders and merchants rather than mapping onto a simple binary. This dynamic, deeply intertwined with the religious mission of the Society of Jesus, reflects the complex interplay of power, faith, and commerce in Portugal's early modern empire. D. Álvaro de Ataíde, as the youngest son of Vasco da Gama—the renowned navigator who established the sea route to India—exercised considerable influence in Malacca, a vital Portuguese outpost. As discussed above, the Malacca episode provides background for this section's examination of how the Gama family translated navigational prestige into offices and revenues that both constrained and enabled metropolitan authority in Asia, with the appointments of 1519 and 1524 and the allocation of naval commands and captaincies as key mechanisms.

The Gama family's prominence, rooted in Vasco's foundational contributions to Portugal's Asian empire, amplified their ability to negotiate with the monarchy, shaping the governance of overseas outposts and their religious landscape (Dokras 2022, p. 168). In the early modern Portuguese world, relations between the crown and overseas officeholders are widely analyzed as negotiated, composite, and polycentric rather than strictly hierarchical (Disney 2009b, p. 1; Cardim et al. 2012, pp. 3–6). The crown provided initial funding for exploration ventures, with profits from conquered territories—such as spices, precious metals, and trade monopolies—distributed among explorers, officials, and the monarchy under agreed terms (Schwartz 1991). This framework afforded overseas agents room to maneuver in practice, but their authority remained contingent on royal favor and open to recall, removal, or sanction; figures like the Gammas leveraged this space to wield political and economic influence. Vasco da Gama's legacy as the pioneer of Portugal's Asian empire positioned his family as key players in imperial administration. In 1519, amid growing tensions with Spain over territorial claims in Asia, King Manuel I ennobled Vasco as Count of Vidigueira, granting him and his heirs extensive privileges, including land and titles

(Subrahmanyam 1997, p. 281). This elevation strengthened the Gama family's bargaining power, enabling them to secure favorable positions within the imperial hierarchy.

By 1524, the Portuguese crown faced increasing threats from Spain's ambitions in Asia, compounded by administrative challenges in Portuguese India. King João III appointed Vasco da Gama as governor to replace Duarte de Menezes, whose corruption had undermined Portuguese authority (Subrahmanyam 1997, p. 346).¹⁷ To further consolidate control, João III named Vasco's son Estêvão commander of the Indian navy, replacing Menezes' brother, and promised future appointments for Vasco's other sons, including D. Álvaro de Ataíde, as captains in strategic outposts like Malacca (Subrahmanyam 1997, pp. 343–45). These appointments reflect the crown's reliance on influential families to maintain imperial dominance, particularly in regions where distance and local complexities limited direct royal oversight. Malacca, a critical hub for Portuguese trade with China and Southeast Asia, required captains of noble stature and military expertise, enhancing their local authority (Desai 2018, p. 517). D. Álvaro de Ataíde's role as Malacca's captain, bolstered by his family's legacy, allowed him to challenge directives from both the governor in Goa and the crown in Lisbon, as seen in his obstruction of Xavier's mission to China.

The Gama family's negotiations with the crown highlight the delicate balance of power in Portugal's imperial system. By leveraging their navigational achievements and political influence, they secured significant concessions, including appointments and economic privileges. From the monarchy's perspective, such compromises were necessary to preserve imperial interests against external rivals and internal instability (Schwartz 1991, p. 725). However, this autonomy often led to tensions, as local officials prioritized personal gain over royal objectives. King João III's decision to invite Jesuit missionaries, including Francis Xavier, to Asia in 1540 was a strategic response to these challenges. Beyond evangelizing non-Christian populations, the Jesuits were tasked with reinforcing Christian ethics among settlers and royal administrators, whose pursuit of wealth often eroded moral standards (Hsia 2014, p. 49).

D. Álvaro de Ataíde's actions in Malacca exemplify the conflict between the crown's pursuit of centralized authority and the economic ambitions of overseas elites. His opposition to Xavier's mission, which included blocking Diogo Pereira's role as envoy and confiscating gifts intended for the Chinese emperor, prioritized local commercial interests over the crown's religious and diplomatic goals (Coleridge 2023, p. 511). D. Álvaro de Ataíde's authority in Malacca, enhanced by his family's prestige, allowed him to assert control over trade routes and political appointments, viewing Pereira's envoy status as a threat to his influence. D. Álvaro de Ataíde's actions reflected a contest over jurisdiction, rents, and status: the crown sought centralized control and fiscal returns alongside reputational aims, while overseas elites pursued local trading profits and office-based advantages.

The consequences of D. Álvaro de Ataíde's defiance were severe. Following Xavier's death from illness on Shangchuan Island in China in December 1552, his body was transported to Malacca and later Goa in 1553, sparking public outrage against D. Álvaro de Ataíde for obstructing the revered missionary (Coleridge 2023, p. 572). In 1554, Portuguese authorities arrested D. Álvaro de Ataíde in Malacca, transferring him to Goa and then Lisbon, where he faced charges of misconduct for defying royal and ecclesiastical authority. He was imprisoned and died in confinement a few years later, though details of his punishment remain uncertain (Pinto 1891, p. 312). This sequence demonstrates the crown's capacity to punish disobedience across distance through arrest, transfer, and confinement. Traditional Portuguese narratives, amplified in literary works, portray D. Álvaro de Ataíde as a corrupt official driven by avarice, though the historical figure in Calderón's *The Mayor of Zalamea* is a fictional namesake, not a direct depiction (Gómez

1981, p. 42).¹⁸ These portrayals oversimplify D. Álvaro de Ataíde's actions, which were shaped by the era's complex power dynamics, where overseas autonomy often clashed with royal ambitions.

This conflict underscores the intricate interplay of religious, political, and economic motives in the Portuguese empire. The crown's reliance on Jesuit missionaries like Xavier to reinforce spiritual authority aimed to mitigate the autonomy and greed of royal officials, aligning imperial governance with Christian ideals. However, figures like D. Álvaro de Ataíde, empowered by their family's legacy and local influence, prioritized economic gains, challenging the monarchy's vision of a unified empire. The Gama family's negotiations with the crown, securing titles and appointments, reflect the negotiated nature of imperial power, where concessions were necessary to maintain control over distant territories. D. Álvaro de Ataíde's downfall, fueled by his resistance to Xavier's mission, highlights the limits of local autonomy when it conflicted with the crown's religious and political objectives. This sixteenth-century model, characterized by negotiated authority and localized conflicts between individuals, would be fundamentally challenged over the next two centuries, as the Portuguese state itself underwent a radical transformation. From the later sixteenth century into the early eighteenth, three slow-moving shifts reconfigured the balance between missions and the crown: adjustments in imperial administration across Asia and Brazil, the expansion of Jesuit educational and revenue-bearing assets, and the formulation of a reform agenda in Lisbon. Taken together, these changes transformed local, negotiable frictions into a system-level confrontation.

4. The Culmination of Conflict: Crown Centralization and the 1759 Expulsion of the Jesuits

The Malacca dispute in the 1550s was an initial point of friction, but the clash that followed was not only triggered by episodes in the empire; it also reflected internal policies in the realm. Between the 1540s and about 1600, missions were implanted and began to operate alongside royal outposts. Between 1600 and 1750, Jesuit educational and revenue-bearing assets expanded and administrative arrangements in Asia and Brazil were recalibrated. In the 1750s, a Lisbon-centered reform agenda in the realm converted these tensions into confrontation and led to the decree of expulsion in 1759.

Phase one covers the period from the 1540s to about 1600, when missions were implanted and fiscal practices took shape. In parts of the Portuguese world and at specific moments, the Jesuits were instrumental in advancing certain royal religious and political objectives. In the early 1540s, following Paul III's 1540 approval of the Society of Jesus and in response to requests channeled from João III to Rome and Jesuit leadership, Francis Xavier and companions were commissioned for the East and reached Goa in 1542; Jesuit work thus unfolded alongside pre-existing Franciscan, Dominican, and diocesan structures (Paiva 2021, pp. 1–10; Xavier 2022, p. 88). In 1546, the first Jesuit province was erected in Portugal (Russo and Limpo 2013). The Jesuits became vital partners in this endeavor, fostering Christian communities in Goa, Malacca, and beyond. However, financial challenges in the late 16th and early 17th centuries prompted the Jesuits to engage in commercial activities to sustain their missions. They managed trade networks in key ports like Goa, Malacca, Macau, and Nagasaki, dealing in silk, spices, and other goods. Alessandro Valignano's¹⁹ 1583 report estimated an annual budget of 12,020 cruzados²⁰ for Jesuit operations, a figure that supported global activities but excluded unforeseen costs like wars or natural disasters (Boxer 1967, p. 114). In Brazil and Angola, Jesuits traded sugar, livestock, and other commodities, owning estates to fund their evangelistic work (Alden 1996, p. 306).

The Jesuits' economic engagement, while necessary for mission sustainability, introduced tensions with royal officials and with the crown. Their growing wealth and

independence, particularly in Asia and South America, positioned them as influential actors, occasionally at odds with the economic priorities of local administrators. In Malacca and Macau, Jesuit trade activities intersected with Portuguese commercial interests, creating competition that echoed earlier conflicts like Xavier's with Ataíde. This economic autonomy, coupled with their allegiance to the Papacy, began to challenge the crown's vision of a unified empire, setting the stage for later conflicts.

Phase two runs from 1600 to 1750, when administrative and property arrangements were reworked in Asia and Brazil. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, Jesuit institutional leverage remained strong, particularly in schooling, patronage networks, and revenue-bearing estates, even as royal oversight tightened (Dores 2024, p. 279). Simultaneously, the relationship between the Portuguese crown and royal officials overseas evolved. In the early phases of Portugal's oceanic expansion, explorers and officials like Vasco da Gama leveraged their contributions to secure autonomy, negotiating privileges with the monarchy. However, as the imperial system matured, the crown sought greater control. In Brazil, which the Portuguese reached in 1500 during Pedro Álvares Cabral's voyage,²¹ Portugal initially established 15 captaincies granted to 12 *donatários*, who held extensive political, economic, and judicial powers (Diffie and Perkins 1987, p. 232). These captaincies, designed to encourage settlement and defense, granted *donatários* authority to collect taxes, distribute land, and enslave indigenous populations, though they remitted one-fifth of their wealth to the crown. Over time, many captaincies reverted to royal control, particularly after Portugal's restoration from the Iberian Union (1580–1640). This shift reduced the autonomy of overseas elites, aligning governance more closely with the crown's objectives.

Phase three focuses on the 1750s, when the Lisbon reforms precipitated a break. What had been manageable frictions through the c.1740s accelerated into rupture only after 1750. By the mid-eighteenth century, the relationship between the Portuguese monarchy and the Society of Jesus had become increasingly strained. Under King José I (Joseph I),²² who ascended the throne in 1750, and Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo,²³ then serving as *Secretário de Estado dos Negócios Interiores do Reino*, Lisbon pursued reforms to centralize authority, modernize the economy, and align governance with Enlightenment principles (Pedreira 2016, p. 357). The Jesuits' supranational loyalty to the papacy and their influence in education, trade, and imperial administration made them appear to stand in the way of that program. Their institutional independence, accumulated wealth, and papal allegiance placed them in the sights of monarchs' intent on consolidating power (Roehner 1997, p. 165). By 1750, approximately 1760 Jesuit missionaries were active across the Portuguese empire, nearly half of them overseas, which heightened perceptions of their reach (Whitehead 2014, p. 450).

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake marked a turning point. Malagrida's (1756) pamphlet ascribing the disaster to divine judgment sharpened the confrontation in Lisbon, which Pombal then exploited in his broader campaign against Jesuit influence (Shore 2019, p. 124).²⁴ The 1758 assassination attempt on José I further escalated tensions. Pombal implicated the Távora family and, by extension, the Jesuits, alleging their involvement based on tenuous connections to the conspirators (Disney 2009a, p. 294). While evidence of Jesuit complicity was largely fabricated, the affair provided Pombal a pretext to weaken both aristocratic and ecclesiastical opposition.

Economic motives also underpinned the expulsion. The Jesuits' wealth, derived from trade and estates, made their assets attractive for confiscation. The 1750 Treaty of Madrid, which transferred seven Spanish Jesuit missions east of the Uruguay River to Portuguese control, sparked the Guaraní War (1754–1756), as indigenous communities resisted relocation (Ganson 2003, p. 41). Portuguese colonists accused Jesuits of inciting the

Guaraní, though resistance stemmed primarily from the harsh terms of displacement. The war, culminating in the 1756 Battle of Caiboaté, fueled perceptions of Jesuit disloyalty, further eroding their standing (Wilde 2015, p. 4). The crown's subsequent seizure of Jesuit properties in Brazil and Portugal reflects the economic incentives of expulsion, though historians caution against overemphasizing wealth as the sole motive (Treutlein 1968, p. 359).

On 3 September, 1759, José I issued a decree expelling the Jesuits from Portugal and its overseas dominions, labeling them “notorious rebels, traitors, opponents, and invaders” (Shore 2019, p. 1).²⁵ Their properties were confiscated, and missionaries were deported to the Papal States in 1760. This act, mirrored by France (1762), Spain (1767), and the papal suppression of the Jesuits in 1773, reflects a broader European conflict between monarchical and ecclesiastical power. For Pombal, crushing the Jesuits eliminated a key obstacle to centralized control, enabling reforms to strengthen the economy and promote manufacturing (Corredera 2021, p. 2).

The 1759 expulsion crystallized a confrontation between a program of metropolitan centralization and a translocal clerical body with its own educational networks, property regimes, and channels of appeal. Once vital allies in Portugal's imperial project, the Jesuits became adversaries as their autonomy clashed with the monarchy's reformist agenda. This event, rooted in political, economic, and religious dynamics, highlights the complex interplay of faith and power in shaping Portugal's empire, offering insights into the broader religious–political conflicts that defined the early modern period.

5. Conclusions

The history of the Portuguese empire reveals a complex interplay of wealth, faith, and prestige. This study argued that the tensions between religious and secular motives were not static but evolved significantly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The 1552 dispute in Malacca highlights a localized friction between evangelization and the economic interests of a powerful local captain. The Gama family's negotiations with the crown reveal a system of negotiated power, where the monarchy conceded privileges to influential elites to maintain control, using the Jesuits as a tool to reinforce centralized ethical and religious authority.

The 1759 expulsion of the Jesuits marks a decisive shift from these earlier dynamics. It represents the culmination of two centuries of growing tension, transformed into an irreconcilable conflict between two competing visions of power. The clash was no longer a localized dispute over trade routes but an ideological struggle between the absolutist, modernizing state envisioned by Pombal and the transnational, papal-aligned authority of the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits, once vital partners in the imperial project, came to be seen as a “state within a state” that fundamentally challenged the crown's pursuit of absolute glory.

This transformation from negotiated partnership to outright conflict resonates beyond Portugal, as other European powers grappled with similar religious–secular dynamics. Viewing monarchs, officials, and missionaries as distinct actors, shaped by evolving historical contexts, reveals the pivotal role of religious institutions. The Jesuits both supported and, ultimately, challenged imperial ambitions, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex and shifting nature of power in early modern empires. Two claims follow from the cases examined here. Where papal, royal, and corporate jurisdictions overlap, subsequent efforts at centralization face rising political costs. And when missions control education and revenue-bearing assets, reforming states tend to break stalemates through coerced reallocation. Together, these propositions place Portugal within broader

early modern patterns and explain the political costs of attempting centralization across overlapping jurisdictions.

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Notes

- ¹ The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed in 1494, established a line of demarcation 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, historically known as the “papal meridian.” Lands east of this line were allocated to Portugal, while those to the west fell under Spanish dominion. See [Duve \(2013\)](#), pp. 1–9.
- ² Bartolomeu Dias (c. 1450–1500), a Portuguese navigator, commanded an expedition in 1488 that reached the southernmost point of Africa, naming it the Cape of Good Hope. See [Ravenstein \(1900\)](#), p. 625.
- ³ Vasco da Gama (c. 1460s–1524), a prominent Portuguese explorer, achieved the first recorded voyage from Europe to India by sea. See [Subrahmanyam \(1997\)](#), pp. 8–18.
- ⁴ Francis Xavier, a Spanish Catholic missionary and co-founder of the Society of Jesus, was among the earliest Jesuit missionaries to Asia. He was canonized as Saint Francis Xavier by Pope Paul V in 1619. See [Coleridge \(2023\)](#).
- ⁵ D. Álvaro de Ataíde da Gama, the Malacca captain who obstructed St. Francis Xavier’s mission to China, was the youngest son of the renowned explorer Vasco da Gama. See [Gómez \(1981\)](#).
- ⁶ Portugal was the first nation to welcome the Jesuits in the 1540s but also the first to expel them in 1759. The Jesuit order was later restored in Portugal in 1814 with the backing of Pope Pius VII. See [Burson and Wright \(2015\)](#), pp. 117–38.
- ⁷ On 15 August 1534, seven scholars gathered in a crypt beneath the Church of Saint Denis (now Saint Pierre de Montmartre) in Paris to found the Society of Jesus. The group included Francis Xavier, Ignatius of Loyola, Alfonso Salmeron, Diogo Laínez, Nicolás Bobadilla from Spain, Peter Faber from Savoy, and Simão Rodrigues from Portugal. See [Brodrick \(1952\)](#), p. 47.
- ⁸ Juan III of Portugal (1502–1557), dubbed “The Pious,” expanded Portuguese territories in Asia and the New World, notably through the colonization of Brazil. His policies strengthened Portugal’s control over the spice trade, particularly cloves and nutmeg from the Maluku Islands. See [Paes \(2007\)](#), p. 500.
- ⁹ In India and Ceylon, Francis Xavier’s missionary efforts primarily targeted lower social strata, achieving modest success. He founded St. Paul’s College in Goa, which became the first Jesuit base in Asia. In 1549, with assistance from a Japanese convert named Anjirō, Xavier reached Japan, focusing his outreach on local elites, though with limited results. See [Coleridge \(2023\)](#).
- ¹⁰ Diogo Pereira, a wealthy trader and ally of Francis Xavier, resided in Goa for several years. Appointed in 1552 to lead a Portuguese embassy to China, his mission was thwarted by Malacca’s sea captain, D. Álvaro de Ataíde da Gama. Pereira later served as Macao’s sea captain from 1562 to 1570. See [Gupta \(2010\)](#), p. 222.
- ¹¹ During Francis Xavier’s final visit to Malacca, the city was governed by Pedro de Silva, D. Álvaro de Ataíde’s brother and Xavier’s friend. In 1542, Ataíde assumed the captaincy prematurely, displacing his brother. See [Coleridge \(2023\)](#), p. 511.
- ¹² Kaspar Berzé (Barzeus) (1515–1553), a Jesuit from Zealand, studied at Louvain before joining the Society of Jesus in Coimbra in 1546. A close companion of St. Francis Xavier, he was dispatched to Ormuz on the Persian Gulf. See [Coello de la Rosa and Melo \(2023\)](#).

- ¹³ Shangchuan Island, also known as São João or St. John's Island, lies within the Chuanshan Archipelago off Guangdong's southern coast. It was the site of St. Francis Xavier's death and a hub for smuggling between Chinese and Portuguese traders. See Coleridge (2023).
- ¹⁴ Francisco Pérez (1515–1578), a Jesuit missionary, co-founded St. Paul's College in Goa with St. Francis Xavier and Brother Roque de Oliveira in 1548, serving as a key base for Jesuit missions to China and Japan. See Cardon (1938, pp. 4–6).
- ¹⁵ Fernão Mendes Pinto (c. 1509–1583), a Portuguese adventurer and writer, chronicled his travels in his memoir *Pilgrimage* (Pinto 1614). His accounts, supported by records of his service to the Portuguese crown and Jesuit missionaries, are largely verifiable. See Almeida (2017).
- ¹⁶ The Republic of Venice began issuing gold ducats in the late 13th century, which served as a key trade currency across Europe from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. See Coleridge (2023, p. 511).
- ¹⁷ Dom Duarte de Menezes (before 1488–after 1539) served as governor of Portuguese India from 1522 to 1524. Accused of corruption, he was arrested by his successor, Vasco da Gama, and imprisoned for nearly seven years in Torres Vedras. See Subrahmanyam (1997, p. 346).
- ¹⁸ Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), a leading Spanish Baroque playwright, authored *The Mayor of Zalamea*, which features a villain named Don Álvaro de Ataíde, sharing the name of Malacca's historical captain. See Gómez (1981, pp. 42–59).
- ¹⁹ Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), an Italian Jesuit, played a pivotal role in advancing Catholicism in the Far East, particularly in Japan and China. See Campbell (1921, p. 173).
- ²⁰ The Portuguese cruzado, a silver coin, was used as currency from the 16th to 19th centuries.
- ²¹ Pedro Álvares Cabral (c. 1467–1520), a Portuguese nobleman and navigator, is recognized as the European discoverer of Brazil. See Greenlee (2017, pp. 1–12).
- ²² José I of Portugal (1714–1777), known as “The Reformer,” governed with the influence of Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the Marquis of Pombal. See Souza (2010, p. 359).
- ²³ Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, Marquis of Pombal (1699–1782), was a reformist statesman shaped by Enlightenment ideals. See Loveman (1999, p. 21).
- ²⁴ Gabriel Malagrida (1689–1761), a prominent Jesuit priest, was active in Brazilian missionary work and controversially attributed the 1755 Lisbon earthquake to divine retribution. He was executed in 1761 for his role in the Távora Affair. See Disney (2009a, pp. 301–2).
- ²⁵ See (Portugal 1759). “Law Given for the Proscription, Denaturalization, and Expulsion of the Regulars of the Society of Jesus in These Realms and Their Dominions” (3 September 1759).

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