

IN GOD'S EMPIRE

French Missionaries and the Modern World



EDITED BY OWEN WHITE AND J. P. DAUGHTON

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Contributors ix

Introduction: Placing French Missionaries in the
Modern World 3

Owen White and J. P. Daughton

Part I: French Missionaries in the Atlantic World

1. When Catholic Worlds Collide: French Missionaries
and Ecclesiastical Politics in Louisiana, 1803–1845 29
Michael Pasquier
2. Creating “The People of God”: French Utopian Dreams
and the Moralization of Africans and Slaves 47
Troy Feay
3. Bretons in Conquest of a Former Colony: French Catholic
Missionaries in Haiti, 1860–1915 67
Philippe Delisle

Part II: The Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and the Middle East

4. Charity Begins Abroad: The Filles de la Charité in the Ottoman
Empire 89
Sarah A. Curtis

5. Muslim Princes, Female Missionaries, and Trans-Mediterranean Migrations: The Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de l'Apparition in Tunisia, c. 1840–1881 109
Julia Clancy-Smith
6. Missionary Militarism? The Armed Brothers of the Sahara and Léopold Joubert in the Congo 129
Bertrand Taithe
7. Flourishing in Exile: French Missionaries in Syria and Lebanon under Mandate Rule 151
Jennifer M. Dueck

Part III: East and Southeast Asia

8. Measuring Catholic Faith in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Northeast China 173
Ji Li
9. A Colonial Sacred Union? Church, State, and the Great War in Colonial Vietnam 195
Charles Keith

Part IV: Africa and Oceania

10. When French Protestants Replaced British Missionaries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans; Or, How to Avoid the Colonial Trap 215
Jean-François Zorn
 11. The “Catechist War” in Interwar French Cameroon 233
Kenneth J. Orosz
 12. A Mission in Transition: Race, Politics, and the Decolonization of the Catholic Church in Senegal 257
Elizabeth A. Foster
- Afterword: The Missionary Experience in British and French Empires 279
Norman Etherington

Select Bibliography 303

Index 311

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Contributors

Julia Clancy-Smith is professor of history at the University of Arizona, Tucson. She is the author of *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900* (University of California Press, 2010), and *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800–1904)* (University of California Press, 1994).

Sarah A. Curtis is professor of history at San Francisco State University. She is the author of *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

J. P. Daughton is associate professor of history at Stanford University. He is the author of *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Philippe Delisle is maître de conférences at the Université de Lyon III and a member of the Laboratoire de recherches historiques Rhône-Alpes. He is the author of a number of works on the history of French missions, including *Histoire religieuse des Antilles et de la Guyane françaises* (Karthala, 2000), *Le Catholicisme en Haïti au XIX^e siècle* (Karthala, 2003), and *Spirou, Tintin, et cie.: Une littérature catholique* (Karthala, 2010).

Jennifer M. Dueck is the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in the Modern History of the Middle East and North Africa at the University of Manitoba. She is the author of *The Claims of Culture at Empire's End: Syria and Lebanon under French Rule* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Norman Etherington, professor emeritus and senior honorary research fellow at the University of Western Australia, has written extensively on the history of the British Empire/Commonwealth, Southern Africa, and Christian missions. His recent publications include *Missions and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and *Mapping Colonial Conquest: Australia and Southern Africa* (University of Western Australia Press, 2007).

Troy Feay is associate professor and chair of the history department at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina.

Elizabeth A. Foster is assistant professor of history and a member of the international relations faculty at Tufts University. Her current research interests include church and state relations in modern France and religious policy in the French Empire, particularly in West Africa.

Charles Keith is assistant professor of Southeast Asian history at Michigan State University. He is the author of *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation*, forthcoming from the University of California Press.

Ji Li is currently a postdoctoral research fellow in the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong. She works on Christianity in China, as well as social and cultural history of late imperial and modern China.

Kenneth J. Orosz is associate professor of history at Buffalo State College. He is the author of *Religious Conflict and the Evolution of Language Policy in German and French Cameroon, 1885–1939* (Peter Lang, 2008). His current research projects include the role of missionaries in World War One, Cameroonian resistance movements, and colonial tourism.

Michael Pasquier is assistant professor of religious studies at Louisiana State University. He is the author of *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States, 1789–1870* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Bertrand Taithe is professor of cultural history at the University of Manchester and director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute. He has written extensively on the history of medicine, war, and humanitarian aid. His books include *Citizenship and Wars* (Routledge, 2001), *The Killer Trail: A Colonial*

Scandal in the Heart of Africa (Oxford University Press, 2009), and most recently *Evil, Barbarism and Empire* (Palgrave, 2011).

Owen White is associate professor of history at the University of Delaware. He is the author of *Children of the French Empire: Miscegenation and Colonial Society in French West Africa, 1895–1960* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and articles on a variety of aspects of French colonialism. He is writing a history of the wine industry in French Algeria.

Jean-François Zorn is professeur associé at the Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires en Sciences Humaines et Sociales at the Université Paul-Valéry de Montpellier. He is the author of *La missiologie: Émergence d'une discipline théologique* (Labor et Fides, 2004) and *Le Grand siècle d'une mission protestante: La Mission de Paris de 1822 à 1914* (2nd ed., Karthala, 2011).

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In God's Empire

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Introduction: Placing French Missionaries in the Modern World

Owen White and J. P. Daughton

France has long had an uncomfortable relationship with religion. In the eighteenth century, many enlightened thinkers and revolutionaries turned blasphemy into a sport and made denigrating the power of the clergy a priority. In the hundred years after 1789, behind the rallying cry of secularism, prominent French voices deemed Catholicism the enemy of progress and the nation. Under the Third Republic (1870–1940), when debates over the place of religion in public life reached such a pitch as to result in a sort of “culture war,” many French Jews and Protestants sublimated their religious identities to adopt more completely the role of the modern citizen. Nor do struggles between nation and religion show any sign of abating in contemporary France. In 2003, remaining true to the principles laid down in France’s 1905 separation of church and state, French politicians were quick to insist that references to God should not appear in the European Union’s planned constitution. The following year, the French assembly passed legislation limiting the display of religious symbols and clothing in schools and other public spaces in France. While politicians cited a long tradition of republican *laïcité* that forbade religion in the classroom, many critics saw the legislation as aimed specifically at Muslim girls in headscarves and, by extension, Islam.

In spite of its secular reputation, the millions of travelers who are drawn to the country each year are given ample evidence of the workings of faith in France’s past. To be sure, many of the nation’s magnificent religious buildings, like the Rouen Cathedral or the monastery at

Mont Saint-Michel, evoke a distant age. But others, including the iconic Sacré-Coeur basilica in Montmartre, Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau synagogue in the Marais, and the Grande Mosquée de Paris, are at most barely over a century old. Most French businesses still take a holiday not only for Christmas and Easter, but for Ascension and Pentecost Monday as well. Even the nightly weather report on French television lists the saints of the day. No amount of secular zeal in the present can—or, from a historian's point of view, *should*—obscure the depth or longevity of France's religious traditions.

The legacy of French religious faith—especially Catholic, and to a lesser degree Protestant—is also evident far beyond France's boundaries. On other continents, one easily finds reminders that French religion radiated outward, often to very distant and distinct corners of the globe. Territories that used to be part of France's empire are full of such reminders. On a Sunday afternoon in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, local Catholics pass colorful Buddhist temples on their way to worship at the church on Rue de la Mission. Bells still call both Catholic and Protestant parishioners to small chapels across the Society Islands in the South Pacific. A cathedral stands in the highest part of Dakar in Muslim-majority Senegal. And the first president of independent Côte d'Ivoire bequeathed to his hometown of Yamoussoukro a near-replica of Saint Peter's that even exceeds the scale of the original in Rome.

The vestiges of France's religious history are not only to be found in formerly French-controlled lands. Hong Kong's highest court of appeal sits in what locals still know as the French mission building. Some of Malaysia's oldest and most prestigious schools, in places like Penang and Ipoh, were established by French teaching brothers. In the late nineteenth century, French priests oversaw the building of Seoul's Myeong Dong Cathedral, which became a center of South Korea's pro-democracy movement of the 1970s and '80s. Marist rugby clubs dot the New Zealand countryside, reminders of the congregation's erstwhile influence over education and sport. Tourists in Hawaii still visit the former leper colony of Molokai, once staffed by the French Pères des Sacrés-Coeurs de Picpus. Few nations have had a greater impact on the spread of global Christianity than France (fig. I.1).

The fact that missionaries represented a key aspect of France's engagement with and influence over the modern world has nonetheless scarcely been reflected in most historical accounts of modern France and its empire. This is all the more remarkable considering the unprecedented flourishing of literature on the global history of French cultural and political influence.¹ This history has been told, in part, as a story of conquests, of military invasions and lands colonized by force from North Africa to Tahiti. Other invasions were less brutal, if no less disruptive. French Enlightenment ideas inspired revolution



FIGURE I.I. A statue and totems commemorate the place where Marist brothers arrived in 1848 at the Baie de St Maurice, Île des Pins, New Caledonia. (Photograph by J. P. Daughton.)

and political reform in places as diverse as the American colonies, Haiti, and Vietnam. France's "civilizing mission" claimed to bring to the colonial world the achievements of French science and industry. Miscegenation put both indigenous and French identities into question. While scholars from a variety of disciplines have chronicled and studied these multifarious examples of France's global reach, they have largely overlooked the global impact of French Christian evangelization.

The task of evaluating the role missionaries played in modern French history seems especially worthwhile in view of the extensive research conducted on missionaries in the British Empire.² Long a mainstream interest among historians, especially in British universities, the study of overseas missionaries has occupied a more marginal presence in the French academy.³ The reasons for this marginalization are varied, ranging from anticlerical suspicion of missionaries among scholars to a preoccupation with state actors in recent colonial history.⁴ But the result is clear: missionaries have regularly been relegated to, at most, a few pages in studies of modern French colonialism and have often been portrayed as little more than handmaids of empire.⁵ This collection does

not aim simply to tell the stories of missionaries—a task many religious historians have performed, often with almost hagiographical deference⁶—but rather to explore the variety of ways missionaries and other religious workers complemented and complicated French engagement with non-European societies around the globe.

French religious workers—both men and women—were regularly at the forefront of their nation's expansion in the New World, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Not merely the carriers of a religious message, missionaries were often the first French men and women to work and live among indigenous societies in parts of the world that would eventually become possessions or protectorates. For all the celebration of France's secular "mission civilisatrice"—the civilizing mission that promised to bring education, health, economic progress, and security to indigenous populations—it was as often as not religious workers who actually fulfilled the daily tasks of running schools, orphanages, hospitals, and leper colonies. Very few French men and women had as close interactions with indigenous populations, for as sustained periods of time, as religious workers.⁷

While local in nature, these interactions had geopolitical implications. In many regions, from the Ottoman Empire to the Pacific Ocean, France used missionaries' long connections with local communities as justification for colonial expansion. In turn, the expansion of European empires in the nineteenth century created new opportunities for missionaries: modern empires begot more (and quicker) shipping lines and other forms of communication, promised a greater measure of security for European citizens, and encouraged efforts to conquer the diseases that had long felled missionaries in tropical regions. But the possibility of missionaries acting as ambassadors of France abroad was not universally welcomed in a society torn by religious conflict and steeped in secular Enlightenment ideals. Nor were missionaries, who often considered their vocation to be purely religious and therefore unsullied by the baseness of worldly politics, always eager to play the role of diplomatic envoy on behalf of the French government.

The studies presented in this volume show that historians have begun to address more fully the significance and complexity of the role missionaries played in shaping France's interaction with the modern world. The authors explore the ways in which the spread of religion by French men and women influenced local communities, French national prowess, and global politics in the modern period, taken here to begin roughly around the time of the French Revolution. Together, they cast new light on the important, if unique, position of religious missionaries in the story of the modern French empire and challenge scholars to interrogate the most basic suppositions about the topic

itself: namely, what was particularly modern, French, and imperial about the experiences of religious workers in the world?

Missionaries and “Modernity”

“Modernity” is a concept that looms large in many studies of colonialism.⁸ Scholars regularly see in the history of nineteenth-century “new” imperialism a story inextricably tied to the rise of the central features of the modern world: nationalism, state bureaucracy, industrial technology, and bourgeois aspirations and values.⁹ But where do nineteenth-century missionaries, who often saw themselves as walking in the footsteps of Saint Paul and Saint Francis Xavier, fit into this narrative? The paradox was not lost on commentators at the time. Critics regularly denounced religious workers as anachronistic zealots for their distrust of both nationalism and capitalism. Some missionaries, who saw in secular civilization only debauchery and irreligion, welcomed this criticism as a compliment. But defenders of the missions—Catholic and Protestant alike—countered by insisting that missionaries were valuable civilizing forces who were at the forefront of colonial science and medicine.¹⁰

While missionaries were often at odds with the values and enterprises of their own era, they nonetheless acknowledged that the world, and consequently their work, had changed at the end of the eighteenth century. For the faithful, the French Revolution upended old certainties; and as Thomas Kselman reminds us, the Revolution “destroyed a religious as well as a political regime.”¹¹ The decision whether to take the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was a wrenching one for many Catholic priests, of whom approximately two thousand perished during the Terror of 1793–1794; many thousands more fled the country. The end result of revolutionary upheaval was arguably not as dire for the church as had once seemed possible. The customary alliance of church and state was no more, replaced by a contractual agreement—Napoleon Bonaparte’s Concordat of 1801—that paid priests’ salaries but could be revoked at a ruler’s or government’s whim.

The experience of the Revolution was distressing for many Catholics. But in some ways it was also galvanizing, and the Concordat provided the necessary stability for the revival that occurred in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This revival did more than fill the shortfall of parish priests within France itself; it produced a surge in Catholic overseas missionary activity that was particularly visible from the time of Pope Gregory XVI’s coronation in 1831 through the First World War. A supporter of Catholic missions claimed in 1904 that about 4,500 French priests, 3,300 lay brothers, and 10,500 nuns were active in

the field; around the same time, another source estimated that French citizens made up two-thirds of the Catholic priests at work overseas.¹²

This missionary surge took shape in a period that, in C. A. Bayly's words, "encompassed the rise of the nation-state, demanding centralization of power or loyalty to an ethnic solidarity."¹³ Indeed, the Concordat had required all bishops and archbishops—appointed by Napoleon himself—to swear an oath of allegiance to the French government. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, most French missionaries in the field preferred not to identify themselves as representatives of a particular nation, defining their roles instead as emissaries of God and servants of their church. But by the end of the century they could no longer safely ignore the claims of national loyalty, especially (from the 1870s) under a republican regime that was easily roused to suspicion of missionary allegiances. Missionaries wishing to plant the cross had to adapt to an era whose first instinct was to plant a flag.¹⁴

In a world increasingly dominated by nation-states, some missionaries sought inspiration from France's premodern past. Such inspiration pushed late nineteenth-century missionaries to construct imposing neo-Gothic churches in unexpected places like Hanoi and Nouméa, New Caledonia. Religious periodicals regularly published reports from missionaries in the field who understood their work to be directly connected to the efforts of Saint Paul. As Bertrand Taithe's contribution to this volume shows, many missionaries in Africa were motivated to embrace a tradition of missionary militarism consciously rooted in the Crusades. Such fascination with a distant religious past also helps explain why missionaries in 1930s Gabon chose to name a new church after the medieval crusader Saint Louis.¹⁵

Yet as much as French missionaries worried about modern society, they were often quick to embrace the material trappings of modern life in the service of their vocation. A missionary at the post of Dabou, situated next to a lagoon in Côte d'Ivoire, welcomed the mission's new steamer in 1902 with the hope that it would "sail for a long time for the glory of God and the salvation of the poor blacks."¹⁶ Understanding well that modern technology could increase their efficiency and evangelical reach, missionaries could easily develop an affinity for the material objectives of secular colonial administrations; the latter's promotion of railroads and modern medicine, packaged as part of a "civilizing mission," was liable to benefit missionaries too. Even Charles de Foucauld, who famously lived as a hermit in the remote southern Algerian desert for the last decade of his life, was a committed supporter of the plan for a railroad across the Sahara, writing in 1912 that "a railway in this region would bring more civilization, and more civilization would mean more Christianity."¹⁷ For many contemporary anticlericals, no two concepts could be more antithetical; but, in

fact, religious organizations across France drew heavily on the tools of civilization to spread the word of God (fig. I.2). Late nineteenth-century pilgrimages to Lourdes, for example, embraced all that was modern—from advertisements and train travel to scientific study of the claimed miracles that attracted the faithful in their thousands.¹⁸

In their organization, too, missionaries and their supporters were often at the cutting edge of philanthropic innovation. The mission station was only the end product of an extensive operation of fund-raising, training, and coordination of resources that took shape early in the nineteenth century. Modern missionary activity was effectively a mass enterprise, tapping a French popular piety that grew throughout much of the nineteenth century and confirmed France's status as "the eldest daughter of the Church." No contribution was too small for the missionary support networks that emerged in France in the nineteenth century. Most important among them was the *Oeuvre de la Propagation*



FIGURE I.2. In 1912, Monsignor Alexis Lemaitre, a keen advocate of missionary uses of technology, rode his new motorcycle four hundred miles to the mission station in Ouagadougou with a fellow White Father in tow, then calculated how much time and money this new mode of transport could save his society. (Photo Library of the *Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique*, by permission.)

de la Foi, a lay organization founded in Lyon in 1822, which invited Catholics through the pages of its journal, the *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, to contribute at least “un sou par semaine” (a penny a week) in support of overseas missions. The strategy proved successful, and the bulk of the organization’s funds came from small contributions. Another association, the Oeuvre de la Sainte-Enfance, encouraged French boys and girls to find a sum of money each month to fund the “rescue” of Chinese children from circumstances of slavery or abandonment and raise them as Christians.¹⁹ The missionary reports that appeared in journals like the *Annales*—which by 1880 printed about 160,000 copies in French—enabled donors to visualize more clearly what their money was doing, and to feel that they, in their own way, were missionaries too.

The image of missionaries presented in the *Annales* and other publications could seem discordant in a country where positivism was the reigning secular faith. Sprinkling their reports from the field with biblical verses and fascinated by stories of martyrdom, miracles, and the workings of Satan, Catholic missionaries could appear starkly out of place. And yet the readership of missionary journals, illustrated with the latest printing techniques, blossomed in the late 1800s. French modernity was not nearly as exclusive of religion as anticlericals wished people to think. Nor were missionaries, with their commitment to a vocation they associated with Jesus’s call to “go forth and preach,” unwilling to embrace all the tools of their era to better spread the word.

The paradoxes associated with missionary work in the modern world are addressed in several chapters in this collection. Troy Feay’s “Creating ‘The People of God’” shows how a number of influential religious workers in the first half of the nineteenth century were inspired to become missionaries after experiencing divine visions and spiritual awakenings. But if such motivations seem to be the stuff of early saints’ lives, Feay also makes clear that missionary efforts to “moralize” slaves and free Africans resonated deeply with secular French utopian traditions of community building, which themselves were built on Enlightenment notions of humanity and liberation. Across the globe, the missionaries at the center of Ji Li’s chapter on Catholic practice in Northeast China were both in step and at odds with their era. Clearly following in the footsteps of the seventeenth-century Jesuits, workers from the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris relied on modern techniques of gathering statistical data in an effort to measure the piety of Catholics in Manchuria. Such apparent ironies of modernity—socialist appreciation of Catholic moralizing, mathematics as the measure of faith—are rife in the history of evangelizing. This collection renders even more equivocal the notion of modernity and offers an opportunity for further reflection on the usefulness of the term for historians of empire.

French, Christian, or Both?

If missionary work forces us to rethink the nuances of the modern, it is equally difficult to generalize about religious workers' commitment to the French nation. Their relations with empire-builders in France's turbulent nineteenth century were intricate and liable to change, as different political regimes placed different emphasis on missionaries' value in promoting French interests. Napoleon, for example, viewed their utility through a decidedly unspiritual lens. Approving the reestablishment of France's oldest missionary organization, the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, he asserted in 1804 that "these secular priests will be very useful to me in Asia, Africa, and in America; I will send them to gather information on the state of countries. Their robes protect them and serve to conceal political and commercial designs."²⁰ In a different mode, the Restoration king Charles X implied a key role for Catholic missionaries in his March 1830 proclamation that the conquest of Algiers would "turn, with the help of the Almighty, to the profit of Christianity."²¹ Later, the protection of French missionaries already in the field would serve as a pretext for colonial expansion, as in the conquest of Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) beginning in 1858, and even in the award of Syria to France as a League of Nations mandate in 1920.²²

Missionaries often welcomed the support of the French state, though they remained wary of direct oversight of their efforts. Missions benefited from the security the state could afford both French religious workers and local Christians who might fall vulnerable during antiforeign uprisings.²³ In many cases, missionary societies actively encouraged the French state toward further expansion. As synergy between government and religious (or ecclesiastical) objectives is particularly evident in the founding of the French protectorate in Tunisia in 1881. Charles Lavigerie, archbishop of Algiers and superior-general of the Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique (the "White Fathers"), played a leading role in this development, which both forestalled the designs of the Italian government on the territory and enabled Lavigerie to usurp the authority of Italian Capuchin friars there.²⁴ In the rather different environment of the Pacific, missionaries were often the only resident Frenchmen on islands from Wallis and Futuna to the Marquesas and became *de facto* representatives of the metropole, to the dismay of republican politicians back home.²⁵

Most historians would question the idea that missionaries used their influence to "soften up" colonized peoples, the better for colonial states to exploit them.²⁶ There is no doubt, however, that missionaries brought with them significant cultural change. Missionary education, for example, varied widely in

terms of quality and usefulness, but even the least effective schools created new networks of patronage that might challenge traditional social structures. The most successful schools, such as the Saint-Jean seminary in Libreville, Gabon, shaped new elites; indeed, Gabon's first president at independence, Léon Mba, had a French missionary education.²⁷ Similarly, the president of Muslim-majority Senegal for two decades after independence in 1960 was a Catholic, the philosopher-politician Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor's teachers in his early life, members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, would doubtless have taken satisfaction from the fact that Senghor acknowledged the influence of the writings of their congregation's founder, François Libermann, in his development of the philosophy of *négritude* (fig. 1.3).²⁸

There is a risk that such examples may obscure the fact that missionaries operated according to a rationale that bore little relationship to those of conventional nation- or empire-builders. While missionaries and secular imperialists traveled similar geographical routes around the world, philosophically they moved on different planes. Pope Gregory XVI, who oversaw a significant expansion in Catholic missionary activity during his pontificate between 1831 and 1846, could sound like an imperialist himself when he aspired to "envelop the

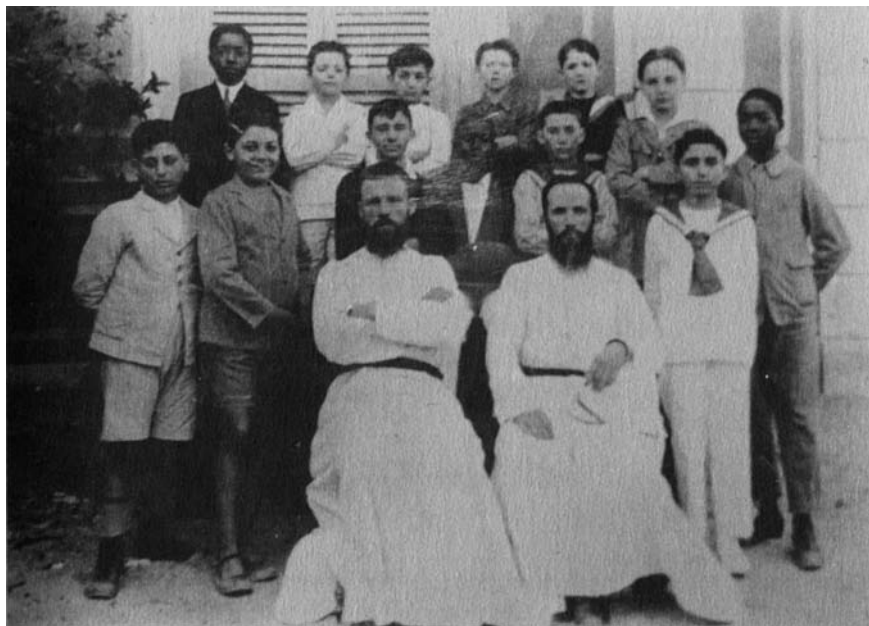


FIGURE 1.3. Seventeen-year-old Léopold Sédar Senghor, at far right, with teachers and fellow pupils at the Libermann Seminary, Dakar, Senegal, 1923. (Photo Library of the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, by permission.)

earth in a network of missions.”²⁹ But the Catholic vision of empire differed significantly from what most French officials and businessmen had in mind. Secular French imperialists indexed their successes based on material criteria: the quantity of goods imported or exported, taxes collected, men recruited, even locals “civilized”—all in a context where rival nations were doing comparable things in empires of their own. Missionaries, on the other hand, regarded themselves first and foremost as servants not of a temporal—and therefore temporary—empire, but of God’s eternal empire. To serve this immaterial realm, the task of missionaries could be summarized much more simply. In the words of Monsignor Guébriant, superior-general of the Société des Missions Étrangères in 1931, “in the colonies, as elsewhere, the missions have only one goal, exclusive of any other: to convert pagan lands to Christianity.”³⁰

While there was no doubt honesty in Guébriant’s observation, other supporters of the missions found it more politically savvy to emphasize those efforts where evangelizing and secular colonizing overlapped. In a book originally written during the tumultuous debates over the separation of church and state in the first decade of the twentieth century and republished throughout the interwar years, the Catholic historian Valérien Groffier extolled the value of missionary work in the building of France’s empire, insisting that religious workers always knew how “to reconcile [their] patriotic obligations with the obligations of their sacred ministry.”³¹ By the time of the colonial exhibition held in Paris in 1931, this view had established itself as a kind of orthodoxy, and was given a concrete form in the pavilion dedicated to missions on the exhibition’s Grande Avenue des Colonies Françaises (fig. 1.4).

Given the tendency of secular and evangelical goals to overlap, it is often almost impossible to extricate those aspects of missionary work that were fulfilled for “nation” from those that were accomplished for “God” alone. As Sarah A. Curtis shows in her chapter in this collection, “Charity Begins Abroad,” the secretary general of the Pères Lazaristes, Jean-Baptiste Étienne, was an official representative of the French government in the Middle East in the 1840s. While French “official” power grew slowly, the following years witnessed a blossoming of Catholicism in the region, as Étienne oversaw the placement of French *religieuses* in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Ostensibly deployed to do charity work in schools, orphanages, and hospitals, these missionary sisters were essential tools of evangelization, coming into close, daily contact with Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

As France extended its power in predominantly Muslim lands, from North and West Africa to the Middle East, the missionary desire to evangelize among Muslims was liable to generate unease on the part of secular French authorities. To justify their concern, these authorities could point to the precedent set



FIGURE I.4. Catholic mission pavilion at the 1931 Exposition Coloniale in Paris. (Postcard, collection of O. White.)

by armed Muslim resistance to French control of Algeria, as Bertrand Taithe notes in his chapter. But in those parts of Africa where it was thought that Islam and Christianity were in direct competition for souls, such as in the early twentieth century among the Mossi people in what is now Burkina Faso, missionaries sometimes reached the conclusion that colonial administrators did not want them to succeed, and instead actively favored the spread of Islam. It was this perception that led the apostolic vicar of the Sahara and the Soudan, Monsignor Bazin, to write portentously in 1908 that “Islam is the sin of Europe in Africa. She may well pay a high price for it.”³²

The relationship between Catholic religious workers and Muslims was not automatically antagonistic, however, and neither were secular authorities always opposed to a Catholic presence in largely Muslim territory (fig. I.5). Julia Clancy-Smith’s contribution, “Muslim Princes, Female Missionaries, and Trans-Mediterranean Migrations,” reveals that the rulers of precolonial Tunisia did not perceive Catholic sisters as a threat; indeed, they were willing not only to assist in their establishment, but also to celebrate the charitable services they provided. Meanwhile, the French state, even under the Third Republic, championed Middle Eastern Catholics and used them to assert political and economic rights both in the Ottoman Empire and in the Ottoman successor states. As Jennifer M. Dueck explains in her chapter, “Flourishing in Exile,” the long



FIGURE I.5. The central market in Timbuktu, French Soudan, a town with a long Muslim tradition, with the White Fathers’ mission in the background, c. 1900. The bell tower collapsed in 1906 and the mission was abandoned the following year. (Postcard, collection of O. White.)

tradition of evangelizing in the region was considered beneficial by many French administrators, who relied heavily on religious workers to solidify French rule in Syria and Lebanon between the wars. The question as to whether missionaries in the Middle East were motivated by religion or patriotism therefore proved to be less important to the French state than the fact that evangelization complemented diplomatic efforts to spread French influence.

The importance of context is revealed time and again in the chapters that follow. While Dueck suggests that missionaries in the Levant enjoyed relatively good relations with French officials, other possessions witnessed serious disputes. As Charles Keith shows in his chapter, "A Colonial Sacred Union?" even the outbreak of war in 1914 was not enough to assuage the distrust secular officials had for religious workers in Vietnam, many of whom actively avoided mobilization.³³ Critics of the missions in Cameroon perceived a similar apparent lack of patriotism shortly after the war. As Kenneth J. Orosz's contribution, "The 'Catechist War' in Interwar French Cameroon," tells us, French members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit had shown themselves sympathetic to the French effort during the Great War, but in 1922 they abruptly ended their commitment to a secular "civilizing mission." In addition to returning to evangelizing, the missionaries became outspoken critics of French rule, knowing that the government could do little to punish them as Cameroon, due to its status as a mandate, was under the watchful eye of the League of Nations.

Claims to patriotism could be further complicated by whether the missionaries in question were Protestant or Catholic.³⁴ While the conflicts between Catholics and anticlerical colonial officials were built on a tradition of animosity that stretched back to the eighteenth century, Jean-François Zorn's chapter demonstrates how the presence of French Protestants greatly complicated religious politics in the Pacific and Madagascar. As French Protestants worked with and often replaced British missionaries in Tahiti, New Caledonia, Madagascar, and elsewhere, they had to avoid appearing too cozy with the "English" lest French critics question their allegiances. As imperial rivalry heated up toward the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries of all denominations came under increased scrutiny from officials and colonial supporters concerned about the security of their expanding overseas possessions.

Defining the Boundaries of Empire

If the role that religious workers played in the French colonies has been neglected by scholars, the place missionaries occupied in the history of regions beyond the empire has been almost completely ignored. Missionaries

were to be found in almost every modern French colony, but they also traveled to places well beyond the boundaries of the empire, from the American Southwest to New Zealand. As Norman Etherington has observed, “a map of worldwide missionary activity . . . does not resemble the map of formal Empire in any era.”³⁵ And yet it is impossible to extricate missionaries’ colonial activities from their experiences in regions not under the imperial banner. By placing the history of French missionaries within a global framework—rather than limiting their projects to an imperial history—the following chapters both question a number of suppositions at the heart of colonial studies and place missionaries in discussions about global history and the rise of civil society.

While empires could help or hamper evangelization for particular missions, the distinction between colonial and non-colonial regions of the world was not always at the forefront of missionary ideology. Missionary experiences abroad informed French relations with the wider world, not simply the empire. Indeed, many French supporters of evangelizations, perusing the pages of religious publications, would not have noticed a qualitative difference in the religious news reported from French possessions and that from regions beyond the boundaries of *la plus grande France*. The bimonthly *Missions Catholiques*, the most popular missionary journal in late nineteenth-century France, interspersed images and text from disparate corners of the world. In one volume, for instance, an image of the Casamance region of Senegal in French West Africa appeared below an article about anti-Catholic violence in China, and a picture of a fort in Hanoi adorned a page describing pre-mandate Syria.³⁶ Editors of missionary journals regularly formatted their publications in such a way as to erase distinctions between often very different regions. The effect emphasized that religious workers encountered similar difficulties and challenges—from political opposition to inclement climates—whether in South America or Southeast Asia. For missionaries, as well as their supporters, nonbelievers needed to receive the “good news of Christ” regardless of where they lived.

On the ground, evangelization often spread French beliefs, practices, and language to people who had no other formal links to the nation. Not surprisingly, religious work kept connections alive with regions that had once been under French influence. Michael Pasquier’s chapter, “When Catholic Worlds Collide,” examines how a group of French missionary priests left their mark on Catholic culture in New Orleans, the Gulf Coast, and the Lower Mississippi Valley in the four decades after the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. While working on what was then the American frontier, Pasquier’s religious workers not only embraced their French identity; they also infused the early American

church with principles and practices that came from a proudly Gallic tradition of Catholicism.³⁷ Philippe Delisle's "Bretons in Conquest of a Former Colony" tells a similar story of continued involvement in an erstwhile French region. As Delisle shows, the former Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue—now an independent Haiti—remained attractive to French missionaries, notably those from the traditional Catholic stronghold of Brittany, throughout the long nineteenth century. Through their preaching and pastoral work, these religious workers kept Gallic Catholicism alive and taught French ideals and cultural norms to the Haitian faithful for generations after the end of French rule.

The multiplicity of experiences captured in the following chapters is powerful evidence that French missionaries cannot be understood purely in the context of religious and imperial history. Instead, the influence of French missionaries, whether exercised in this volume in Delisle's postcolonial Haiti, Ji Li's late Qing-era China, or Dueck's League of Nations mandates of Syria and Lebanon, was shaped by a host of political, cultural, and even spiritual forces at both a local and global level. In this way, the present collection contributes to a growing body of scholarship on civil society—especially "global civil society"—in the modern period.³⁸ Inspired no doubt by the proliferation in recent years of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), much of the current multidisciplinary interest in global civil society has focused overwhelmingly on the part played by secular clubs, associations, and institutions in the rise of globalization.³⁹ And yet their strong associational lives and regular involvement in education and health services makes it difficult to exclude missionaries from a notion of global civil society founded on independent organizations engaged in "humanitarian relief, cultural exchange . . . and developmental assistance."⁴⁰

French missionaries, with their evident suspicion of republican political objectives, discomfort partnering with nation-states, and overtly spiritual sensibilities, greatly complicate the narrative of global civil society as a liberal, secular project. As Clancy-Smith shows in her chapter on Tunisia, to understand the complexities of evangelization it is necessary to examine missionaries in terms of a number of transnational processes, including migration, networks of communication, imperialism, and local ruling elites' motivations. Other chapters draw out these complications even further, exploring the ways in which missionary work had constantly to respond to local practices, such as the degree of latitude accorded to women in different social settings, as well as to geopolitics, be they defined by competing empires in the eighteenth century or the emergence of internationalism in the early twentieth century.⁴¹

Decolonizing Missions

Examining missionaries as independent actors brings out the myriad struggles for power that often took place around them. Such struggles were particularly acute during World War Two and in the two decades that followed, as more and more colonized territories moved to independence. These conflicts often proved to be internally divisive among religious workers, too. That the sympathies of some wartime missionaries lay with the collaborationist Vichy regime is not perhaps surprising, particularly in the upper reaches of the Catholic hierarchy. But further research may show that the missionary who expressed his support for General Charles de Gaulle's Free French movement by displaying the Cross of Lorraine next to his church in southern Gabon was not as untypical as we might assume.⁴² The conflicts in Indochina and then North Africa that shortly ensued seemed, to many French Christians, to offer an unpalatable choice between potentially interminable counterinsurgency operations or surrender to either Marxist or Islamically inspired regimes. French tactics during the bloody war in Algeria between 1954 and 1962, in particular, posed moral problems that led many Christians, including those in Algeria itself, ultimately to embrace the possibility of Algerian independence, a prospect that had hitherto barely seemed thinkable.⁴³

The tensions and transitions of this period also played out in the realm of missionary and ecclesiastical strategy. As Elizabeth A. Foster argues in her chapter, "A Mission in Transition," many French missionaries, whether due to the influence of racial thinking or other reasons, were not pleased at the prospect of handing over key positions in the Senegalese Church to African priests. Such a stance among missionaries on the ground echoed, as Claude Prudhomme has pointed out, the tendency of colonialists to question whether colonized peoples had reached a sufficient degree of "maturity" to be ready for independence.⁴⁴ As Foster demonstrates, however, the Vatican looked toward a postcolonial world where Catholicism in Senegal would be in direct competition with Islam for followers and insisted that an indigenous church was essential to its survival. On the eve of decolonization, therefore, less than a century after Pope Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864 had condemned "progress, liberalism, and modern civilization," the Vatican seemed to advance certain "progressive" positions more forcefully than many secular French republicans.⁴⁵

Postcolonial states have not always proved hospitable to foreign missionaries, as the French religious workers expelled in 1967 from Sékou Touré's Guinea—ostensibly due to the slow pace of "Africanization" of Christian churches in the country—could testify.⁴⁶ Yet some missionary societies adapted well to changing circumstances and benefited from no longer being compromised by

association with unpopular colonial regimes.⁴⁷ French men and women continue to evangelize in many locations across the world, though this fact tends not to receive public attention unless they are caught up in some local conflict—as was the case with the sixteen French Catholic religious workers who were killed between 1994 and 1996 in the chaos of civil war in Algeria.⁴⁸

No missionary society was ever wholly a “French” enterprise: each one always contained a minority presence of Belgians, Germans, or other nationalities. In the postcolonial era, the trend for missionary organizations to become truly multinational endeavors proceeded ever more rapidly. As of 2010, men from thirty-seven different countries belonged to perhaps the quintessential modern French missionary society, Lavigerie’s Société des Missionnaires d’Afrique (the “White Fathers”), founded in 1868. Frenchmen still represented the single largest national contingent, at around 20 percent of the total. But with the society’s overall numbers in steady decline, and almost the only signs of growth coming from sub-Saharan Africa, in May 2010 the society elected a Ghanaian, Father Richard Baawobr, as its superior-general—the first African to attain that position.⁴⁹ Though the society no longer seems “French,” its history, along with that of many similar missionary ventures, testifies to a long-term process of global engagement that is nonetheless intimately bound to French origins.

Modern European nations frequently carried with them a sense of destiny in their foreign affairs. From the soldiers of the revolutionary Year II to Napoleon’s conquests, through the Third Republic’s “civilizing” ideology and Gaullist notions of “grandeur,” France’s engagement with the world was consistently, if not always successfully, pursued with a zeal that at times seemed to merit the adjective “missionary.”⁵⁰ The religious men and women to whom this description more clearly applied often struggled to calibrate their priorities and methods with those of the modern world in which they sought to spread their faith. French missionaries were always conscious of serving some higher power, be it temporal or spiritual. Yet they had power enough of their own to leave a lasting mark on people and places across the world.

NOTES

1. On the resurgence of interest in French colonialism, see Alice Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith, “Introduction: Writing Colonial Histories,” *French Historical Studies* 27 (summer 2004): 497–505.

2. See for example Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester

University Press, 2004); Andrew Porter, ed., *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

3. The first book by Roland Oliver, the first holder of a position in African history in a British university, was *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London: Longmans, 1952). The tradition of missionary study continued through the work of leading British scholars of empire like Terence Ranger and Andrew Porter.

4. The Sorbonne professor Charles-André Julien, a key figure in the development of French colonial historiography in the mid-twentieth century, may have captured a typical attitude when he judged missionaries to be one of three forces that had “disintegrated Africa.” (The other two were “governmental administration” and “the new economy.”) Charles-André Julien, *Histoire de l’Afrique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944), 123. For an overview of writing about Catholic missionaries in French universities since the 1950s, see Claude Prudhomme, “Cinquante ans d’histoire des missions catholiques en France: l’âge universitaire,” *Histoire et missions chrétiennes* 1 (March 2007): 11–30. Prudhomme is one of a small number of French scholars who have consistently asserted the importance of historical study of missionaries; since the 1990s in particular these scholars’ influence has become more visible.

5. General histories that give short shrift to missionary work are too numerous to list. A few of the more well-known titles include Christopher M. Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, *France Overseas: The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981); Denise Bouche, *Histoire de la colonisation française*, vol. 2, *flux et reflux (1815–1962)* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).

6. For uncritical assessments of French missionary work, see Georges Goyau, *La France missionnaire dans les cinq parties du monde*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948); Mgr S. Delacroix, ed., *Histoire universelle des missions catholiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Librairie Grond, 1957).

7. For such reasons, in addition to the fluency many French missionaries achieved in local languages, they were often well placed to produce ethnographies of the societies they encountered. On this theme, see for example Jean Michaud, “Incidental” *Ethnographers: French Catholic Missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan Frontier, 1880–1930* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l’Afrique? La construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878–1930* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2002), 117–20; John M. Cinnamon, “Missionary Expertise, Social Science, and the Uses of Ethnographic Knowledge in Colonial Gabon,” *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 413–32; Martine Balard, *Dahomey 1930: Mission catholique et culte vodoun. L’oeuvre de Francis Aupiais (1877–1945), missionnaire et ethnographe* (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 1998); James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

8. For an incisive critique of the concept of “modernity” in studies of empire, see Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 113–49.