
H-France Review Vol. 13 (May 2013), No. 59

Owen White and J.P. Daughton, eds., *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 324 pp. Contributors, notes, photos, select bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-539644-7.

Review by Roger B. Beck, Eastern Illinois University.

Editors Owen White and J. P. Daughton note quite rightly in their introduction that the “study of overseas missionaries has occupied a more marginal presence in the French academy,” when compared with the “extensive research conducted on missionaries in the British Empire...especially in British universities”(p. 5).[1] That being said, there are many outstanding works on French missions but these are still too often ignored, or accorded only passing mention, in mainstream French histories.[2] The reasons for this range from “anticlerical suspicion of missionaries among scholars to a preoccupation with state actors in recent colonial history”(p. 5). Yet, as the essays here demonstrate, French mission studies are second to none in quality of research, breadth of topic, degree of analysis, and significance of findings. These findings simply need to be integrated into mainstream texts.

Owen White, history professor at the University of Delaware, and J. P. Daughton, history professor at Stanford, propose to “explore the variety of ways missionaries and other religious workers complemented and complicated French engagement with non-European societies around the globe” (p. 6). Taken together, these essays highlight “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” (pp. 6-7)? The tensions and conflicts between church and state in the metropole were duplicated and perhaps even amplified as French Catholic missions and secular colonial authorities contested the meaning and implementation of the *mission civilisatrice*. Indeed, for all the celebration of France’s secular civilizing mission, “it was as often as not religious workers who actually fulfilled the daily tasks of running schools, orphanages, hospitals, and leper colonies” (p. 6).

The editors have divided the collection by geographic region into four parts: the Atlantic World; the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and the Middle East; the East and Southeast Asia; and Africa and Oceania. These divisions demonstrate the global nature of French missionary activity, not only within the widespread French empire, but also in areas not under French control, particularly the Ottoman Empire and Middle East.

Michael Pasquier’s study of French missionaries and ecclesiastical politics in Louisiana following the purchase of this territory by President Thomas Jefferson from the French in 1803 opens the collection. Unlike many missionary fields where Christianity was being newly introduced, Louisiana, and particularly New Orleans and its environs, had long had an institutional Catholic Christian presence. Pasquier seeks to demonstrate “what happened when French missionary conceptions of Catholicism collided with the accumulation of over one hundred years of local religious customs and traditions in New Orleans” (p. 30). Missionaries freshly arrived from France had their “romantic and triumphant notions of the missionary life” (p. 30) swept aside as they came face-to-face with the exceptional ethnic and cultural diversity of New Orleans.

In the second essay, Troy Feay studies the efforts of French missionaries and colonial officials alike to fulfill their utopian dreams in French slave colonies in the Caribbean in the 1840s and 1850s, just before and after France's abolition of slavery in 1848. He believes the utopian dream was an underlying element uniting "administrators and missionaries while locking them into conflicts over motivation and authority" (p. 47). Feay illustrates the contentious collaboration between colonial authorities and missionaries by looking at the activities of three religious orders that operated in the Caribbean during these years. One, the Sisters of Saint-Joseph de Cluny, had become by 1810 the primary religious order recognized by the French government to educate and provide religious instruction to women in the French slave colonies. A second order, the Frères de l'Instruction Chrétienne, was designated the official government-sponsored congregation to educate slaves and former slaves in the French colonies. The French government charged the third religious order, the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (the Spiritans, or Holy-Ghost Fathers), with the selection, training, and assigning of clergy to the French colonies. Feay argues that the disagreements between religious orders and the colonial administrators over the nature of social transformation, "allowed slaves and former slaves space to use religious experience as the basis for the creation of communities that remained independent of both religious and secular authority" (p. 63).

In 1860, the Haitian Republic's rulers and the Holy See negotiated a Concordat that officially recognized Catholicism as the country's religion and created an archdiocese headquartered in Port-au-Prince. Haitian intellectuals considered Catholicism a key component of modernity and indispensable if Haiti was to rise to the ranks of "civilized" nations. In the third essay Philippe Delisle shows how, following the Concordat, Haiti turned to France for the secular priests and *congréganistes* needed for this effort, and how the majority of these French clergy came from Brittany, beginning with Haiti's first archbishop, Martial Testard du Cosquer of Quimper. This connection led to the Haitian government financing a seminary in 1872 at Pontchâteau (relocated in 1894 to Quimper), to train clerics. Haiti was soon dominated by a "Breton Christianity," that was imbued with a "profound religious fervor" and displayed a "quasi-military spirit of conquest" that referred to souls to conquer and cities to take (p. 73). The Bretons' authority was challenged by Haitian anti-clerical elites who sought greater modernization, by Haitian Voodoo practices, and by the arrival of Protestantism, particularly following the American occupation of Haiti in 1915. By this time the dream of "a little Brittany in the Caribbean" (p. 81) had grown more and more distant.

Sarah Curtis's essay on the Filles de la Charité in the Ottoman Empire addresses two intriguing questions: how did Christians carry out their missionary work in lands that were predominantly Muslim, and what role did women play in Christian mission? Curtis successfully demonstrates how the two questions were closely intertwined. By the late nineteenth century, missions were finding that successful evangelization combined "real services with the least appearance of proselytization," and "women missionaries, especially those sisters dedicated to the provision of charity, personified this strategy" (pp. 102-103). The Filles opened their first mission outside of Europe in 1839 in Constantinople, providing charitable work such as "education, alms distribution, health-care provision, taking care of orphans and abandoned children, and home visits to the ill and poor" that were services not offered by male religious orders (p. 92). Through their work, the Filles were able to "model Christian behavior, and, if necessary, engage in clandestine baptism," and thereby "provide a way to extend Catholic influence in a multi-faith society that did not depend on overt proselytization or direct conversion" (p. 103). Curtis concludes that, by the end of the nineteenth century, "women missionaries were no longer rare pioneers in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere but essential partners in Catholic evangelization" (p. 104).

In chapter five, Julia Clancy-Smith also focuses on Catholic female missionaries in a Muslim state, the Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de l'Apparition (SSJ) in Tunisia from approximately 1840 to 1881. Clancy-Smith seeks to "examine the origins of the SSJ and the founder's role in shaping the congregation's missionary

praxis and ideology” (p. 110). Soon after founding the order, Émilie de Vialar established a mission in Algeria in 1835, but had to relocate to Tunisia in the early 1840s after being expelled by a new (after 1836) bishop in Algiers who felt threatened by Vialar’s independent spirit, social class, and gender. This action, Clancy-Smith observes, represents “one of the most extreme examples of antagonistic relationships between male and female religious” (p. 113). In Tunisia the SSJ received the ruling family’s support and Ahmad Bey’s protection. Unregulated immigration from Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean had created in Tunisia a very pluralistic society that was poor, unruly, and difficult to control. Various treaties with European states limited the Bey’s authority over foreigners, and the foreign consulates had neither the will nor financial means to address the problem. For this reason, Clancy-Smith notes, the “Husaynid state elites and foreign consuls viewed the SSJ...as unpaid social workers and guardians of moral order” (p. 115). The SSJ’s primary role, however, was as health providers for cholera victims as the epidemic swept through the Mediterranean world in the nineteenth century. The sisters instituted the novel practice of making home nursing visits to patients too ill to come to them. Vialar also organized schools and pharmacies attached to health clinics. In return for the free services, the sisters preformed secret baptisms on deathly ill Muslims and Jews, often infants or children.

While missionaries often adopted martial language to describe their spiritual conquests of foreign fields, Bertrand Taihe in chapter six relates how, “within the colonial revival of the nineteenth century, missionary work and military intervention occasionally shared the same imperialistic drive” and “military comparisons were not always merely a matter of vocabulary” (p. 129). In particular he looks at the missionary militarism of Charles Lavigerie (Bishop of Algiers in 1868, of Tunis from 1881, and Cardinal Primate of Africa in 1882), who created the Society of Missionaries of Africa (the White Fathers). It is Lavigerie who undertakes two militaristic enterprises: forming an Armed Brotherhood (*Frères armés*) to combat slavery and promote religious freedom in the Sahara, and an armed unit under the command of a former French soldier, Léopold Joubert, to assist the White Fathers in ending slavery in Central Africa. Joubert, an ex-Zouave, raised an army in the 1880s to stop Tippu-Tip’s slaving activities, and then went to the Congo in the 1890s as an agent of the Belgian anti-slavery society. In 1888, Joubert married a Congolese woman, and eventually gave up his role as a Christian soldier to become a model colonist. Later in life he raised a large Catholic family, and was eulogized following his death in 1927 as both a “knight and an apostle” (p. 142).

Following the Great War, the French occupied Syria and Lebanon under the League of Nations’ mandate system. In chapter seven, Jennifer Dueck observes that “the historiography of French imperialism in the twentieth century has often overstated the extent of missionary disenfranchisement in the empire” (p. 152), and precedes to untangle the both close and conflicted relations between French colonial officials and French Catholic missionaries in Syria and Lebanon to prove her point. As the French took control of the territories there were three factors that made them reliant upon the missionaries: “the extensive history of French Catholic activity in the Middle East; the missionaries’ substantial role in education and language instruction; and their strategic importance as a counterweight to the influence of foreign missionary enterprises” (p. 153). Despite the militant anticlericalism in France, French officials in the Levant recognized the many benefits to be gained from the missionary presence. Consequently, they subsidized missionary activities, particularly the schools, while the missionary societies “became a pillar of French political authority” (pp. 154-155). As a result, Dueck concludes, “it seems that pragmatism and necessity, rather than anti- or pro-clerical dogma, were the factors that defined and determined government-missionary interaction in the empire” (p. 165).

Although there had been a Christian presence in China since the seventh century, Christianity had made few inroads in Manchuria in northeast China. In 1846 the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) dispatched two missionaries to the region to launch a mission. In chapter eight, Ji Li “explores how MEP missionaries of the Manchuria Mission translated indigenous religious experiences into missionary explanations, and how and why, in particular, measuring faith became an essential part of

their work in nineteenth-century China" (p. 175). To measure faith and ritual practice, the missionaries used statistical methods and quantitative language to obtain data, techniques that were widely employed across China by Catholic missionaries. Through the constant measuring and assessment of Catholic faith in rural Manchurian communities, the missionaries sought to strengthen "the practice and routinization of Catholic sacraments," restore orthodox Christian ritual, and thereby "transform traditional Chinese villages into faith-based communities with a distinctly Christian identity" (pp. 190-191).

When Raymond Poincaré called for a *union sacrée* at the beginning of the Great War, nearly all the political and religious factions in French society rallied together around the *Tricolore*. Charles Keith in chapter nine takes Vietnam as a case study to argue that no such sacred union existed in the colonies between church and state; local colonial power struggles continued to shape mission-state relations throughout the war. By war's end, church-state relations in Vietnam had undergone profound changes, partly resulting from the significant drop in the number of Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris missionaries in the country, "from 391 in 1914 to 345 in 1919" (p. 209), the result of younger missionaries returning to France during the war and not returning. Keith also describes how, by 1945, the missionary-led church had been transformed into one led by Vietnamese priests who had replaced the young French missionaries. This transition created new church-state tensions, as the colonial authorities and the remaining French missionaries were "intent on maintaining their respective powers," while Vietnamese Catholics imagined "not only a church freed from its missionary past, but a church in a nation freed from its colonial past" (p. 210).

Jean-François Zorn discusses in chapter ten the limitations placed on French Protestant overseas missionary activity in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the royal navy, controlled by Catholics, refusing to transport Protestants to colonies. During the colonial era, however, French Protestant missionaries began "to replace troubled foreign missions in territories that came under French control following conflicts or deals between colonial powers" (p. 216), particularly British missionaries in various locations in the Pacific and Indian oceans. Zorn's thesis is that these Protestants managed to avoid the "colonial trap," "that at times assimilated missions and at other times fought them," by not limiting its "apostolic activities to those territories where the French presence was already established" (p. 230). Using Tahiti, the Loyalty Islands, and Madagascar as case studies, Zorn describes how the Paris Mission adopted a non-colonial posture, and by "defying national and even ecclesiastical borders," guaranteed its future. In the 1950s and 1960s, as colonies were gaining independence, the Paris Mission could "present itself as a model of North-South relations based on equity and sharing..." (p. 230).

In 1916, the French captured Germany's African colony of Cameroon and immediately begin to institute its "civilizing mission," and policy of economic development (*mise en valeur*). Catholic priests belonging to the Congrégation du Saint-Esprit (the Spiritans) were ardent supporters of these policies following the war and later when France was awarded Cameroon as a mandated territory from the League of Nations. The "Spiritans willingly threw themselves into attempts both to Gallicize and economically develop the newly acquired territory through the creation of schools, vocational training, and French-language instruction" (p. 233). This spirit of mission-state cooperation was broken in 1922, however, when the newly-arrived apostolic vicar, François-Xavier Vogt, redirected the mission's focus to evangelization. This touched off the so-called "Catechist War," from 1930 to 1933 between Vogt and the French colonial authorities, which is the subject of Kenneth Orosz's essay in chapter eleven. On the one hand, the missionaries now rejected French-language instruction in favor of local languages, actively opposed polygamy, promoted native catechists as rivals to traditional chieftains, and criticized forced labor policies. Colonial officials in turn denied land grants, made arbitrary arrests, and even destroyed converts' homes. In the end the Spiritans and the colonial authorities resolved their disputes, but the Catechist War revealed how deep the tensions and fissures were between mission church and colonial

state, and illustrate that, “contrary to the Third Republic’s claims, anticlericalism was indeed exported to the colonies” (p. 251).

The final essay, by Elizabeth Foster, considers the question of how “French Catholic missionaries confronted the ‘decolonization’ of the Catholic Church in the French empire”(p. 259), specifically in Senegal. She organizes her study around the figure of Joseph Faye, first prefect of the new apostolic Casamance prefecture, and the first African to hold a position of authority in the Spiritan-directed Catholic Church in Senegal. Faye, a Spiritan priest, served as prefect for seven trying and troubled years, “and his experiences reflect the great challenges inherent in the transition from a missionary church to an indigenous one in a colonial setting” (p. 258). Ultimately, neither Faye nor the priests could “divorce themselves from the colonial context and the race relations that shaped their world” (p. 259). Foster concludes that the white Spiritan clergy remained rooted in their limited worldview and out of touch with the “broader goals of the Catholic Church hierarchy and the possibility that French rule in Africa might eventually come to an end” (p. 259).

Norman Etherington contributes a valuable and enlightening afterword that compares the missionary experience in the British and French empires. While there were obvious differences, such as “anticlerical forces never seized control of the state in Britain as they did in France” (pp. 298-99), both British and French missionaries were often decades or even centuries ahead of the colonial presence, and remained after independence. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, “sometimes subtly, sometimes crudely, missions of all stripes adapted to the racial and nationalist agendas of the time” (p. 297).

In God’s Empire is a welcome addition to the Christian missionary literature. It is essential reading for anyone interested in missionaries, French or other, and relations between colonial state and mission.

NOTES

[1] In the past couple of decades there has appeared a succession of consistently outstanding studies of British mission, in particular many of the volumes in the excellent “Studies in the History of Christian Missions” series published by Wm. B. Eerdmans. See, for example, in this series, John Stuart, *British Missionaries and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011); Andrew Porter, *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003); and Brian Stanley, *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

[2] See, for example, Sarah Ann Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: women missionaries and the revival of the French Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Elisabeth Dufourcq, *Les aventurières de Dieu: trois siècles d’histoire missionnaire française* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1993); Catherine Marin, *La Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris: 350 ans à la rencontre de l’Asie: 1658-2008: colloque à l’Institut Catholique de Paris* (Paris: Karthala, 2011); and Jean-François Zorn, *Le grand siècle d’une mission protestante: la Mission de Paris de 1822-1914* (Paris: Karthala, 1993).

LIST OF ESSAYS

Owen White and J.P. Daughton, “Introduction: Placing French Missionaries in the Modern World”

Part I: French Missionaries in the Atlantic World

Michael Pasquier, “When Catholic Worlds Collide: French Missionaries and Ecclesiastical Politics in Louisiana, 1803-1845”

Troy Feay, “The People of God’: French Utopian Dreams and the Moralization of Africans and Slaves”

Philippe Delisle, “Bretons in Conquest of a Former Colony: French Catholic Missionaries in Haiti, 1860-1915”

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

Sarah A. Curtis, “Charity Begins Abroad: The Filles de la Charité in the Ottoman Empire”

Julia Clancy-Smith, “Muslim Princes, Female Missionaries, and Trans-Mediterranean Migrations: The Soeurs de Saint-Joseph de l’Apparition in Tunisia”

Bertrand Taithe, “Missionary Militarism? The Armed Brothers of the Sahara and Léopold Joubert in the Congo”

Jennifer M. Dueck, “Flourishing in Exile: French Missionaries in Syria and Lebanon under Mandate Rule,”

Part III: East and Southeast Asia

Ji Li, “Measuring Catholic Faith in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Northeast China”

Charles Keith, “A Colonial Sacred Union? Church, State, and the Great War in Colonial Vietnam”

Part IV: Africa and Oceania

Jean-François Zorn, “When French Protestants Replaced British Missionaries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans; Or, How to Avoid the Colonial Trap”

Kenneth J. Orosz, “The ‘Catechist War’ in Interwar French Cameroon”

Elizabeth A. Foster, “A Mission in Transition: Race, Politics, and the Decolonization of the Catholic Church in Senegal”

Norman Etherington, “Afterword: The Missionary Experience in British and French Empires”

Roger B. Beck
Eastern Illinois University
rbbeck@eiu.edu

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.