

## BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth A. Foster. *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2019. 369 pp. Photos. Maps. Tables. Bibliography. Index. \$49.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9780674987661.

*African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* ends with a reflection on how “decolonisation helped to precipitate Vatican II and shaped its outcome” (257). This encompassing approach is indicative of Elizabeth A. Foster’s convincing argument, that the history of African Catholicism in the mid-twentieth century is not a parochial topic. Rather, it is deeply intertwined with the contemporary trajectory of the universal Church and with post-Second World War geopolitics. It has become commonplace to observe that the future of human demographic growth, and of the Catholic Church, lies in the African continent. According to the World Christian Database, by 2050, 32 percent of the world’s Catholics will be African. Foster offers a richly documented study of the intellectual foundations of this new reality, charting the ideas and actions of key clerics, scholars, and politicians who spearheaded the decolonization and transformation of the Church in Africa.

Several narrative threads run throughout the book. The first is the institutional transition from a missionary Church in Africa to an indigenous African Church. Foster examines the debates and practical difficulties in replacing the European clergy with African priests and bishops. How to recruit these new clerics? What formation should they receive? How quickly to usher in the change? In some cases, political events forced the Church’s hand, such as when all French priests and consecrated men and women were expelled from Guinea in 1967.

The second narrative concerns how this new clergy interacted, and sometimes overlapped, with the emerging political leaders of independent African states. Depending on the time and place, the Church was either treated as a useful partner in the forging of these new societies or as a scapegoat for dissent and underdevelopment.

The third narrative examines the evolving relationship between France and Africa, as France lost its formal colonial holdings while maintaining its presence through the *Françafrique* policy. Here, Foster details the role of FIDES in channelling French subsidies to Francophone Catholic schools in order to shore up its influence on the continent through the Church. (It is worth noting that the 1959 Debré law allowed for the state funding of Catholic schools in metropolitan France from the same period; alongside its deep-seated anticlericalism, the French Republic has often shown itself to be pragmatic in its application of the principle of *laïcité*.)

The fourth narrative concerns how African Catholic intellectuals perceived, and were received by, their European peers. Familiar names appear here, such as Leopold Senghor, but it is the chapter on Alioune Diop that is the most original contribution, including a long passage on his reception and adaptation of Personalism. However, sometimes Foster seems to attribute opinions to Diop which are mainly supported by hearsay and her own outlook, such as his supposed irritation with Emmanuel Mounier's paternalistic haughtiness (74–76).

Another narrative thread in the book is the management of interfaith relations and the approach to Islam in particular. This is of particular interest because it serves as a bridge between the period of missionary disappointment during Cardinal Lavigerie's tenure as Primate of Africa and the period of inter-religious dialogue following *Nostra aetate*. Finally, the book also considers the role of the African diaspora in Europe, with a particular focus on the African Catholic Chaplaincy in Paris, and the social role played by its headquarters in rue Thibaud and its magazine *Tam-Tam* in forging a distinctive African Catholic identity.

The focus is very much on high-level actors. Thus, we do not learn much about the effect of decolonization on the vast majority of African Catholics; their opinions of these monumental changes are largely peripheral to this study, as are their evolving religious beliefs and practices. The author approaches her topic from an intellectual and political perspective rather than from a sociocultural or theological perspective. Although there are detailed discussions of the politics of mission and inculturation, we gain little insight into the contributions of this emerging African Catholicism on missiology, let alone dogmatics, apologetics, or daily pastoral theology. While Marcel Lefebvre plays an important role throughout the book (mainly as a villain), there are some important characters left out. For example, Joseph Malula, who was ordained as Auxiliary Bishop of Léopoldville (Belgian Congo) in 1959 and later, as Cardinal in Zaire, had run-ins with Mobutu. Also absent is Léon-Étienne Duval, Archbishop of Algiers, whose sympathy for the independence movement earned him the moniker "Mohamed Ben Duval" among colonists, and who was naturalized an Algerian citizen in 1965. The role of the CCFD (*Comité catholique contre la faim et pour le développement*) and left-leaning *tiers-mondisme* would also have been relevant in examining the ties between the French Church and former African colonies in the 1960s, highlighting the transnational networks of development and non-governmental aid. Finally, there is no stand-alone bibliography, which is a glaring omission.

The book draws on numerous archival sources from France, Italy, and Senegal, as well as extensive quotations from a range of contemporary periodicals and correspondence. Almost all of the source material is in French, translated by the author. Elizabeth Foster makes a strong case for the relevance of Catholicism as an object of study for social and political historians of twentieth-century Africa. The book will also be a valuable resource for social scientists interested in the historical background to contemporary transnational exchanges between Catholics in France and in various African counties. Overall, this is an excellent piece of scholarly research and historical writing, both minute in detail and engaging in its narrative development. It complements existing work on the history of

French Catholic missions, such as that of Claude Prudhomme, while opening up this field to a new Anglophone readership.

Artaud de la Ferrière   
Royal Holloway University of London  
Egham, UK  
[alexis.artauidelaferriere@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:alexis.artauidelaferriere@rhul.ac.uk)  
[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.10](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.10)