

Introduction

The historiography of missions in Southern Africa has not treated Protestants and Catholics equally. There is a qualitative and quantitative gap between the literature on each type of Christianity. In formerly English colonies, the difference is quantitative: there are much fewer works on Catholicism. Two recent comprehensive surveys of the literature on Christianity in the region illustrate the point: they hardly cite any studies on Catholicism at all.¹ Similarly, one of today's standard works on the history of Christian institutions in South Africa has only one article on Catholicism, out of 25 contributions!² It is true that a few scholars did excellent work on Catholicism in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in Zimbabwe and Malawi.³ But the imbalance was not redressed and it remains today.

One reason why secularly-oriented scholars have shown less interest in the Catholic Church and its missions in English-speaking countries of Southern Africa has to do with the fact that Catholics constitute a minority in those countries; interest for the Roman Church was therefore reduced. Another reason is that the Roman Church was marginal politically in colonial times. Hence, when a debate emerged in the 1960s and 70s about the political role of religious institutions in colonisation and imperialism, this Church was less an object of research and debate. Interest focused instead on Protestant organisations which had been close to the state, if not state institutions. Over the last two decades, a new generation of scholars, among whom Philippe Denis for South Africa and Brendan Carmody for Zambia, has started to fill in some gaps.⁴ But holes remain, particularly in countries such as Namibia, Botswana and Lesotho.

¹ N. Etherington, "Missionaries and the Intellectual History of Africa : A Historical Survey", *Itinerario*, VII (2), 1983, pp. 116-143; "Recent Trends in the Historiography of Christianity in Southern Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22(2), June 1996, pp.201-219.

² R. Elphick & R. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Social & Cultural History*, Oxford, James Currey ; Cape Town, David Philipp, 1997. The article is by J. Brain, "Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream: The Roman Catholic Church", pp.195-210.

³ I. & J. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants & Chewa resistance in Nyasaland, 1889-1939*, London: Heinemann, 1974; A.J. Dachs & W.F. Rea, *The Catholic Church & Zimbabwe, 1879-1979*, Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1979; I. Linden, *The Catholic church & the struggle for Zimbabwe*, London: Longman, 1980.

⁴ Ph. Denis, *The Dominicans friars in Southern Africa. A social history (1577-1990)*, Leiden: Brill, 1998; J. Brain & Ph. Denis, *The Catholic Church in Contemporary Southern Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1999; B. Carmody, *Conversion and Jesuit Schooling in Zambia*, Leiden: Brill, 1992; and B. Carmody, *Education in Zambia. Catholic perspectives*, Lusaka: Bookworld Publishers, 1999

In the former Portuguese colonies of Southern Africa, the dynamic of the historiography has been different. But there is a weakness in the research on Catholicism all the same – a qualitative one. The reason here is, paradoxically, that the Catholic Church was a *quasi* state institution in colonial times. Indeed, this led the literature to be mostly apologetic before 1975 and, when independence came, to be very critical if not dismissive – the Church was not analysed, but denounced for its past actions. Framed within the “political debate” mentioned above, the post-colonial literature came to contrast the Roman institution, presented as a willing ally of the Portuguese colonial State, with Protestant missions which were said to have been the cradle and ally of African nationalism. Over the last ten years, research has begun to show that this vision is simplistic and leaves much to be desired.⁵ But more research on the history of Catholicism still needs to be carried out, to confirm the insufficiency of the old explanatory model and to formulate an alternative one.

With this issue, our aim is to reflect on the historiographic changes under way, to fill in some gaps and suggest new avenues for research on the role of Catholicism in Southern Africa. Put together, the four articles point to a series of novel ideas and lines of inquiries. They show for example the importance of women in the development of religious institutions. Much has been done on this aspect for Protestantism, but more needs to be done for Catholicism. Similarly, the articles show that Catholic missions impacted on African societies in ways similar to their Protestant counterparts. This calls for a (re-) evaluation of the differences between these two types of institutions. Moreover, the papers point to the crucial role played by Christian missions in educating an African elite and they remind us of the many unintended consequences of the educational discourses and practices of religious institutions. Here too, comparing Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards education would bear interesting fruits. Finally, the articles highlight the need for comparison not only across denominations, but between countries. The

⁵ Among others, see E. Morier-Genoud, “Y a-t-il une spécificité protestante au Mozambique ? Discours du pouvoir postcolonial et histoire des Églises chrétiennes”, *Lusotopie* 1998, Paris, Karthala, 1998, pp. 407-420; M. Cahen, “Le colonialisme tardif et la diversification religieuse au Mozambique (1959-1974)”, *Lusotopie* 1998, pp.377-395; B. Schubert, *A guerra e as igrejas. Angola, 1961-1991*, Basel, P. Schlettwein Publishing, 2000; D. Péclard, “Religion and Politics in Angola : The Church, the Colonial State and the Emergence of Angolan Nationalism, 1940-1961”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXVIII (2), 1998, pp. 160-186; E. Besson, “Autour du procès de Joaquim Pinto de Andrade. L’Eglise catholique et l’Angola colonial, 1960-1975”, *Le Fait Missionnaire*, n°12, juillet 2002, 126p.

situation described in this issue about Catholicism shows stark differences yet surprising and interesting parallels.

In the debates on the role of Christian missions as harbingers of colonialism, missionaries have sometimes been portrayed as almighty agents of Western civilisation imposing their will on African societies. In the first article, Andreas Eckl clearly shows that the balance of power between foreign missionaries and local chiefs often favoured the latter, and that missionaries were heavily dependent on local political dynamics for their successful establishment in a “new mission field”. Indeed, when Catholic missionaries tried to set up missions in the Kavango region in Northern Namibia, they became entangled in rivalries and wars between different Ovambo chiefs, and, after several failed attempts, finally succeeded only when they came to be considered as potential allies by certain chiefs in the context of growing pressure exercised by the German colonial administration (and the Portuguese on the northern banks of the Kavango river). The author thereby not only gives a first scholarly account of the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Namibia, but he also produces an analysis which takes full account of the complexities and subtleties of the colonial encounter.

The second article, by Marja Hinfelaar, deals with a seriously under researched topic in Southern Africa, namely Catholic lay women’s organisations. Specifically, the author studies the *Chita ChaMaria*, a movement which was created in 1940 and is today the biggest female Catholic organisation in Zimbabwe. In a first section of her paper, Marja Hinfelaar reviews the literature, and situates the movement in the historiography on women and religion in Southern Africa. She then describes the organisation and its characteristics. She shows that, unusually for a Catholic institution, the *Chita ChaMaria* was built from the bottom-up. As an organisation it was, and remains, autonomous from the Church hierarchy. Dealing thereafter with the public role of the *Chita ChaMaria*, the author describes how, born in an urban environment, the movement created an elite over the years. She examines the latter’s actions and she notes a paradox. While the movement was conservative socially, its leaders developed a “progressive and influential” role in the public sphere. To illustrate her point, Marja Hinfelaar discusses, in a final section, the role of the female organisation in African nationalist politics up to 1965.

Switching to the Portuguese-speaking world, the article by Zélia Pereira looks at the Jesuit fathers’ role in educating an elite in Mozambique. The

author focuses on the years between 1961 and 1974 when, on the one hand, the religious field was still structured by a Concordat and Missionary Accord (which made the Catholic church hegemonic) and when, on the other hand, the structuration of the religious field began to decompose because of the divergence between church and state resulting from Vatican II and the beginning of the liberation war. The Jesuits' decision to focus on the elite came after two decades of evangelisation in the rural areas which brought few results. It was a return of the Society to its traditional activities. But it took place just when the state decided to take control of the instruction of the elite of the colony to counter the effects of the war. Hence the Jesuits' move was neither easy nor unproblematic. The author describes all the activities deployed by the missionaries as well as the contradictions and failures of these endeavours, not least because of a lack of support on the part of the state. Overall however, the Society of Jesus adapted and evolved and, the author concludes, it eventually succeeded in various spheres.

Jesuits are also at the centre of the fourth article. Nicholas Creary studies their perspectives on the formation of African clergy and religious men and women in colonial Zimbabwe (1922-1959). From the 1920s, the Vatican strongly favoured the formation of indigenous clergy as a means of supporting the missionary effort world-wide. Jesuit missionaries in Southern Rhodesia proved very reluctant to adopt this new method of evangelisation. They strongly resisted the promotion of Africans and delayed the transfer of leadership within women's religious orders and diocesan structures to African nuns and priests until after the Vatican II Council. The main reason for this, the author argues, was the Jesuits' own inculturation into White Rhodesian culture, or at least their adoption of its attitudes with regard to race. In that, he concludes, the Southern Rhodesian Jesuits' perspective was not very different from that of the Catholic Church in the USA.

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