
H-France Review Vol. 19 (November 2019), No. 254

Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 384pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0674987661.

Review by Charlotte Walker-Said, City University of New York—John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Many histories have examined the complicated relationship between Church and State that produced tensions in French society and politics. Some, like J. P. Daughton, Charles Keith, and Alice Conklin, have expanded the focus of this line of inquiry to address the question of how this complex relationship shaped French colonial expansion. In *African Catholic*, Elizabeth Foster asks a radically new and important question: how did the fraught relationship between Church and State in France and the relationship between the Church and France's African colonies shape decolonization? This inquiry is paired with investigations of the ideas, arguments, and assertive political acts of African Catholics who were central not only to processes of decolonization in French Africa, but also in the reorientation of the Catholic Church as a whole at midcentury. As Foster states, this book is principally a history of "decolonization, black internationalism, and reform of the Catholic Church in the 1960s" (p. 8). But in so many ways, this book contributes to many fields beyond history, including African philosophy, theology, global cultural and religious studies, and to the humanities broadly speaking, as it delicately and sensitively reveals the convictions, ideologies, and even personal feelings of a range of European and African agents who struggled to influence and be constituted within the Catholic Church's vision of *humanity*.

In portraying three simultaneous processes/emerging movements: decolonization, negritude/black internationalism, and the reform of the Catholic Church, Foster argues persuasively for the divisions and unstable alliances within the Church, State, and French and African society that shaped the slow-moving and oftentimes contradictory actions of their leaders and constituents. The first chapter uncovers the contradictory aims of the postwar maneuvers of Catholic missions, the Vatican, and the French administration as the French government funneled greater amounts of money to French missions to act in the service of the State's goals, while the Vatican pushed for African missions and dioceses to localize the faith and move away from colonial practices. Africans on the ground—political leaders as well as everyday believers—longed to see racial hierarchies dismantled in the Church and greater political autonomy for Africans, but found in the postwar decade that Catholicism's relationship to European colonialism was beset by compromising obligations and alliances that prevented it from fully sharing spiritual or political authority.

The rest of the book's chapters continue to convincingly demonstrate the divided camps within both the Catholic Church in France (and Europe) and the Catholic Church in Africa (which still had French ecclesiastical leaders in the decades before and after decolonization but who were joined by increasing numbers of African clergymen who were followed by millions of African consecrated and lay members). Throughout the book, Foster rightly notes that even individual missions could be divided between French friars with universalist or Europeanist leanings, and local African dioceses could be divided between conservative and progressive bishops, and between obedient and revolutionary African seminarians. She confirms, "In France, Africa, and many other places, institutions of the Catholic Church have served both as pillars of a conservative ruling order and a source of radical dissent—often simultaneously" (p. 57) and this was "particularly true" of the church in Africa in the years following World War II.

In noting this, Foster leads into her critique of an intellectual and analytical blind spot of many scholars of black internationalism and negritude, who have heretofore largely neglected to analyze or even recognize the "avowedly Catholic strand of negritude" (p. 12) or the profound Christian faith of many black intellectuals. The most devastating oversight resulting from this blind spot has been the lack of attention to how these intellectuals' faith not only inspired their own scholarly production, but also influenced the Catholic Church's theological and organizational reform movements, most notably Vatican II. Chapter two, which highlights the contributions of Alioune Diop, a sorely neglected Senegalese Catholic scholar who founded the intellectual journal *Présence africaine*, as well as other members of the negritude movement, richly illustrates the social world of black intellectuals in Paris and in African cities, who shared meals, homes, and published works with French theologians and philosophers. Foster gives Diop his due as a major contributor to the philosophy of Catholic personalism and a pivotal influence in the Church's turn towards a new commitment to universality. Samuel Moyn's recent work on Catholic personalism and its contribution to human rights confirms that this philosophy inspired movements beyond socio-religious debates within the Church, demonstrating that language on the "whole person" and "human dignity" were embedded in political and economic rights debates on the world stage.[1] But Foster's conclusion here is more pointed and she demonstrates how personalist philosophy anchoring "the dignity of the African person" was taken up by African evangelists, politicians, seminarians, and everyday believers to argue for the end of colonial rule and the recognition of African rights via a "restoration" of human values (p. 71). As Engelbert Mveng, the Cameroonian Jesuit noted, colonialism was a form of subjugation that caused "death to the human essence." [2]

Foster's unique research skills are demonstrated throughout this book, but it is in chapters two through five that she truly shines as a historical portraitist—telling the stories of individuals in life. She demonstrates that through their scholarly production, dinner table conversations, letter chains, and assertive lobbying, Alioune Diop, Leopold Senghor, African Catholic students and seminarians, African bishops like Raymond-Marie Tchidimbo and Bernardin Gantin, and many others contributed to a Catholic modernity that developed Christianity in Africa and around the world from a missionary religion to a framework for liberation. But Foster also goes farther than this in her portraiture. She is also able to tease out from the archives these individuals' emotions—including shame and indignity, revealing how racism *felt* to African Catholics. And she shows how these feelings instructed their philosophical and theological works of scholarship *and* motivated their demands that white institutions like missionary societies, fraternal religious orders, and the Vatican craft a more inclusive and anti-racist

Church. Foster also reveals Africans' recognition of the hypocrisy inherent in white Catholics' actions and behaviors toward their African co-religionists and how it was Africans like Diop and Senghor and their partners in the high clergy who held up a mirror to this "sin" and worked to exorcise it from the Church via reforms like Vatican II.

The book ends with an examination of the philosophical debates surrounding "universalism" at the highest levels of the Catholic Church and how decolonization and Africa's numerous and influential constituents made their cases for a more "open" Church, responsive to a modified culture of accepting Jesus Christ in localized contexts, with indigenized clergy and recognizably Christian and indigenous family and social practices. Foster demonstrates that opponents like Marcel Lefebvre decried that this was a slide into "relativism," but Foster demonstrates how the decolonization moment paved the way for a reorientation of the Church away from absolutism and toward dialogue and engagement for mutual comprehension.

Foster's study opens a wealth of avenues for further research and also presents a radical innovation in how to approach Global History. She demonstrates clear evidence of global interconnectivity—not in terms of trade, exchanged goods, technological feats, or mass migration, but rather through the integrative mechanisms of shared faith and loyalty to the institution of the Church.^[3] Foster also provides concrete evidence for the "networks" and "circuits" so often referred to in global and imperial histories. Here, uniquely, the reader is immersed in a "network" that is not nebulous or vague, but has explicit leaders (clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy), members (baptized believers), official representatives and agents (missionaries, emissaries, and consuls), and ideological influencers (theologians, philosophers, writers, and scholars). And Foster convincingly demonstrates how this network shaped the Franco-African world in the last decade of the colonial empire and the decade following its dissolution. The Catholic Church was not an "imagined community" of interconnectivity—it was an explicit membership-based institution, with representatives and constituents who spanned the globe and were continually communicating with each other. This book is rare in that it demonstrates a global *institution* which fostered real, tangible networks—such as missionary networks, groups of trained clergy, lay brotherhoods, and others who acted on behalf of the faith and the institution. These networks also created tangible circuits—i.e. movements of Africans and French between Africa and the metropole to study, evangelize, and train; and circulations of theology, philosophy, and other ideas between mentors and students, clerical superiors and acolytes, missionaries and seminarians. Indeed, this is not imperial or global history that uses spatial metaphors. These "linkages" (another commonly used term in global and imperial history) are tangible and Foster brings them to life in a highly illustrative and deeply convincing way.

African Catholic is thus a significant contribution to the history of modern France and Africa, to the history of world Christianity, and to global history. But as stated before, it is also a noteworthy contribution to the humanities, or learning concerned with human culture and humanistic knowledge. Because African Catholics were so committed to the concept of a "human culture" in which they knew they belonged, recognizing their legacy in politics, religion, literature, and philosophy is essential to fully realizing breakthroughs in humanities research.

NOTES

[1] Samuel Moyn, "Personalism, Community, and the Origins of Human Rights" in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 85-106.

[2] Engelbert Mveng, *L'art d'Afrique noire: liturgie cosmique et langage religieux* (Yaoundé: CLE, 1974), 43.

[3] For discussions of what constitutes a contribution to Global History, see: Martin Thomas and Andrew Thompson, "Empire and Globalisation: From 'High Imperialism' to Decolonisation," *International History Review*, 36 (2014): 142-170 and Bruce Mazlish, "Comparing Global History to World History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28 (1998): 385-395.

Charlotte Walker-Said
City University of New York - John Jay College of Criminal Justice
cwalker-said@jjay.cuny.edu

Copyright © 2019 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 redistribution/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.

ISSN 1553-9172