

JOHN T. MCGREEVY · CATHOLICISM

Chapter 6: Empire

Missionaries, Converts, and Imperialism

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I

AT THE 1888 GERMAN CATHOLIC CONGRESS (Katholikentag) in Freiburg, a teenage boy garnered unusual attention. Recently brought to Germany from Cameroon by missionaries for instruction at a Benedictine school near Munich, Mbange Akwa mingled with attendees. Mbange came from an elite Douala family—an uncle was a chief—and he was one of the first Africans educated in Germany. His presence was applauded by the German-speaking world’s most celebrated Catholic, Ludwig Windthorst, leader of the Catholic Center Party, or Zentrum. As Windthorst explained:

We can clearly see that [Black Africans] are capable of developing, and because they are our fellow men, because, like all of us, they have God-given souls, we must do everything we can to make them see the light of the Gospel.¹

Windthorst was not alone in seeing missionary work as an opportunity. Compared with Britain and France, German colonialism was belated, and early in his career, Windthorst had opposed imperial projects proposed by Germany’s (largely Protestant) leaders. By 1888 [p. 136] his opposition had weakened. Beyond converting young Africans, he thought the shared project of colonial missions might weaken divisions between Protestants and Catholics, so bitterly evident during the Kulturkampf of the 1870s. Even Roman newspapers approvingly noted how Germans would now “support priests abroad” if they promised to “evangelize barbarian peoples.” Protestants and Catholics could agree that such work was “essentially patriotic and national.”²

Mbange’s successes at school and in the workplace (as an apprentice baker) were chronicled in the German Catholic press. They seemed to justify colonialism through “civilizing” Africans. When Mbange requested to be baptized as a Catholic, his sponsors made it an event. The papal nuncio to Bavaria performed the ceremony, Windthorst served as godfather, and the prominent Catholic writer Emilie Ringeis served as godmother. Mbange’s German baptismal name was Andreas Ludwig (after Windthorst) Mbange.

Mbange returned to Cameroon after three years in Germany. The church there needed him. In the first thirteen years of the Cameroon mission, seven German priests, thirteen German brothers, and two German sisters died from tropical diseases.³ These missionaries arrived in Cameroon without a word of language training and resented having to communicate at first in the “pidgin English” known by Cameroonians through contact with British traders. According to one account, Mbange did a “wonderful job translating [into the Indigenous language of Douala] the catechism and the Gospels.”⁴ He became the leader of the lay catechists, who did most of the work to establish Catholicism in the region. German clergy running the missions admired his work, even if one regretted that Mbange was “not able to replace a priest.”⁵

II

IN 1910, Europe remained home for two-thirds of the world’s 290 million Catholics, with only one million Catholics in sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps fifteen million Catholics in Asia (most of whom lived in the Philippines). These ratios would flip over the course of the twentieth century; by its end, most Catholics lived in the Global South.

This process began in the late nineteenth century with a renewed [p. 137] missionary effort. Pope Leo XIII placed great emphasis on missions and reorganized the Propaganda Fide in Rome to better financially support missionary schools and centers. Curial officials regulated—or attempted to regulate—marriage controversies and liturgical disputes and convened synods of missionaries and local clergy to develop common procedures. Synods, once vehicles to oppose Roman authority, as in the Synod of Pistoia in 1786, became mechanisms for Roman control.

Priests and nuns founded dozens of new missionary societies, including the first such societies in North America.⁶ In 1868, sixty-eight foreign missionaries, almost all from France, worked in Vietnam, but by 1900, there were four hundred French missionaries and dozens more from Italy and Spain.⁷ In China, the number of priest missionaries increased from two hundred in 1860 to nine hundred in 1899.⁸

Protestant missionaries still outnumbered Catholics, but the competition spurred Catholic efforts. One priest founded a seminary to train missionaries in Portugal. He wanted to ensure that the version of “European civilization” encountered by Indigenous people in Angola would be filtered through a Catholic lens, not through Protestants or secular colonial officials. Colonial officials horrified him by soliciting contributions for a new “statue of Voltaire.”⁹

The ethos remained impeccably ultramontane. Lourdes grottoes proliferated, as did devotions to the Sacred Heart. In China’s Shanxi Province, missionaries organized Corpus Christi processions in the 1880s up and down the paths of Catholic villages, with clergy in their robes, clouds of incense, and men and children in line. (If their feet were bound, Chinese women could not march in the procession, and Catholic clergy were among the first foreigners to try to abolish this practice.)¹⁰ In Uganda, converts took to wearing

miraculous medals and credited such medals with protecting them during civil wars, just as French Catholics wore such medals in times of peril. French missionaries described Ugandan Catholics dipping the medals into water and then drinking the water for its healing effect or using the medals to ward off lions and leopards on the way to church.¹¹

Missionaries incessantly encouraged Catholics to form their own associations. While the term “Catholic milieu” typically refers to Europe and North America, it applies as well to Asia and Africa. [p. 138] Everywhere Catholics built dense networks of organizations and nurtured self-segregation. They also became more likely to see their institutions as exclusively Catholic. Catholic schools in the United States had long welcomed Protestant students, and now in South Asia they welcomed Hindu students and in North Africa Muslim students. But Vatican officials began issuing cautions about admitting too many non-Catholics—“infidels” and “heretics” in the vocabulary of the time—even in societies where Catholics remained a tiny minority.¹² Italian missionaries in Shanxi Province became less willing than their predecessors to approve marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics or to permit Chinese Catholics to attend ancestor rituals or non-Catholic funerals.¹³



White Father missionary instructing students in German, probably in East Africa, c. 1900. (*Archiv Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*)

The most rapid Catholic growth in the early twentieth century occurred in Africa. Isolated missions had long existed on Africa’s Indian and Atlantic Ocean coasts, along with Catholic communities dating from the sixteenth century in regions such as the Kongo. But

only in the late nineteenth century did the opening of the sub-Saharan interior of the continent to Europeans produce, in the words of one missionary, a “true enthusiasm.”¹⁴

The most important instigator was French bishop (and then cardinal) François Lavigerie. Lavigerie founded the Missionaries of Africa in 1868, commonly known as the White Fathers for their distinctive robes, and dedicated them to work in Africa. (A painting of Lavigerie now in Versailles shows him in his scarlet cardinal robes, pen in hand, his hat resting on a map of Africa.)¹⁵ In reports urging Vatican officials to take greater interest in Africa, he warned against the maneuverings of “German and English Protestants” and “free thinking” French.¹⁶ He judged social and political conditions in the interior of Africa with local tribes and princes “precisely in the state where Europe was in the Middle Ages” and hoped to establish an African Catholic civilization.¹⁷

Other men’s religious orders—including Spiritans in East Africa and Holy Ghost clergy in West Africa—initiated major missionary programs. The work of Daniele Comboni, a priest (and then bishop) from Verona, is typical. Comboni made several voyages down the Nile into what is now Egypt and Sudan. He shopped his “plan for the regeneration of Africa” to Pius IX and various curial cardinals, urging coordination and focus in Catholic efforts. Cheerfully terming himself a “hustler and a mendicant,” he made fundraising trips to Germany, where a committee to support missions in Africa had already formed, as well as to Austria, France, Belgium, and England.¹⁸ He saw the fundamental problem for the continent as the “yoke of fetishism” and the continued “invasion of Islam.” The haphazard Catholic response, with dozens of religious orders beginning work on the continent with little overall direction, dismayed him.¹⁹

The day-to-day workings of Lavigerie, Comboni, and other missionaries who descended on Africa remain little studied. In Africa, especially, but also in East and South Asia, missionary efforts began with priests or nuns struggling to learn Indigenous languages, and their work almost always depended on the training of native-born catechists such as Mbang Akwa, who in turn translated devotional practices and basic catechetical points. In the southeast of present-day Nigeria, Holy Ghost Fathers catalyzed the work of the missions, but only when Igbo men and women became catechists did a significant number of their friends and neighbors convert. In 1906, thirty-one missionary priests, brothers, and sisters worked in the region; in 1918, thirty. During the same period, the number of native-born catechists grew from 33 to 552.²⁰

[p. 140] Here, too, the desire for a Catholic milieu became evident. Some missionaries built almost self-enclosed worlds, fueled by a grandiose sense of purpose. Belgian missionary (and bishop) Victor Roelens served in the northern Congo for over forty years. Given the fragility of the Belgian colonial state, he exerted tremendous control over the schools and municipal governments of the region. He once informed his superiors that he planned to “constitute a little republic, and I will be its president.” He even printed his own currency.²¹ In Uganda, the Christian God was treated as a king of kings, and when chiefs of various tribes converted to Catholicism, they spurred entire villages to follow them. Marian devotions and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament became especially popular,

particularly as they were absorbed into Indigenous religious practices. The reverence shown to church workers—catechists as well as priests and nuns—made families eager to have a son or daughter enlist in church work. After five years of intensive evangelization in Buddu (near Lake Victoria), the number of annual adult baptisms rose from 147 in 1891 to 2,729 in 1896. By World War I, the pace of conversions was accelerating, more from African-to-African contact than from direct encounters with European missionaries.²²

III

AT THE BEGINNING of their evangelization efforts, Lavigerie and other Catholic missionaries insisted on their independence from nation-states. As Lavigerie stressed, “We say ‘Christians and Apostles,’ not ‘Frenchmen or Europeans.’ It would make no sense to turn Africans into Frenchmen or Europeans, since such a metamorphosis would unfit them for the task they have to fulfill.”²³ Other French missionaries, contemporaries of Lavigerie, focused on converting Muslims, but also conveyed respect for Africans as innately religious even if they had not yet accepted Catholicism as the true faith.²⁴

Leo XIII made similar observations when he addressed the emperor of China, explaining that missionaries from “very diverse” Catholic countries would make no “distinction of country or race.”²⁵ Writing to Catholics in India, the pope insisted that “indigenous clergy” must not be limited to “aiding [European] missionaries” but “replacing them.”²⁶

[p. 141] This cosmopolitan sensibility had waned by 1900. The great era of imperial expansion overlapped with and reinforced the great era of Catholic expansion, and lines between imperial and religious ventures often blurred. As early as the 1840s, in Tahiti, when a British Protestant missionary helped persuade the queen to expel two Catholic missionaries, a French admiral immediately arranged for more Catholic missionaries to take their place in order to forestall Protestant influence. French bishops successfully pleaded with Napoleon III to send ships and troops to the Vietnamese coast to protect missionaries.²⁷

The identification of missionaries with colonial officials often had sociological dimensions. Belgian Catholics in the Congo, Portuguese Catholics in Mozambique and Angola, Dutch Catholics in Indonesia and the Caribbean, and Spanish and then American Catholics in the Philippines worked with colonial administrators, educating their children and sharing the travails of expatriate life. The most influential alliances were struck between colonial officials and Catholic missionaries working in the French Empire, which stretched from Lebanon to Madagascar to Senegal to China to Vietnam. Even former French colonies depended on the mother country. In Haiti, every bishop and archbishop in the late nineteenth century trained in a seminary dedicated to providing clergy for Haiti but located in the French region of Brittany.²⁸

This French missionary empire rested on a paradox. As in so many countries, Catholics in late-nineteenth-century France battled hostile government officials eager to close Catholic schools and limit Catholic influence. As late as 1901, after conflicts between liberals and

Catholics in most of Europe and North and South America had subsided, a deeply anticlerical government banned men's religious orders in France, with the intended result of closing ten thousand French Catholic schools and the unintended result of sending thirty thousand priests, brothers, and sisters out of France, deepening missionary networks around the world.²⁹ In 1905, the same government separated church and state. Only such a step, according to the French senator and future prime minister Georges Clemenceau, could save the country from becoming "the France of Rome" as opposed to "the France of the revolution."³⁰ Clemenceau became so identified with attacks on Catholicism that Catholic [p. 142] groups disrupted his visit to Brazil, organizing protests against his pretensions to "teach Brazil the principles of democracy."³¹

Some of this hostility between government officials and Catholics transferred to the empire. In Tahiti, administrators expelled Catholic nuns from the local school in an effort to create "education outside the missions."³² In Rufisque, a Senegalese port town, a colonial mayor in the summer of 1884 ordered a local priest to hang the tricolor French flag on the church building on Bastille Day. The priest refused. The mayor attached the flag himself. The priest tore it down and threw it in the mud. The mayor took the occasion of Bastille Day to praise the education offered in the local school for breaking down "the old ramparts of superstition and intolerance."

These tensions are not the dominant story. Even in Rufisque, nuns and the occasional priest on state payrolls taught elementary school children, providing an inexpensive and irreplaceable labor pool for colonial administrators tasked with educating future citizens. When colonial administrators pondered firing all of the Catholic nuns in Senegal, African Catholic parents devoted to the nuns would not permit it. "There is not a single woman in the assimilated population of St. Louis [in Senegal]," one administrator complained, "who did not attend this [Catholic] school and does not ardently desire that her daughter do the same."³³ The same France where one politician could declare in the Chamber of Deputies that "ultramontanism or clericalism" was the "all-powerful" enemy was also the France described by Catholics as the eldest "daughter of the church."³⁴

On balance, imperial competition between France and Britain and Catholic enthusiasm for the French language commended missionaries and their work even to anticlerical officials. Jules Ferry, the French prime minister, Freemason, and scourge of Catholic schools, made a pilgrimage to the cathedral of Cardinal Lavigerie in Algiers to offer his support for Lavigerie's work in Africa.³⁵ French Protestants, formally granted equality with Catholic missionaries, repeatedly complained of favoritism toward Catholics and, among colonial administrators, indifference to principles of religious freedom. Meanwhile, in Madagascar, colonial prefects congratulated Catholic clergy for "the work of patriotism that you have pursued for long years."³⁶

[p. 143] This reconciliation between Catholic and imperial interests was obvious across the world by the early twentieth century. Bitter divisions between Belgian liberals and Belgian Catholics in the 1870s over education policies, for example, dissolved in the early twentieth century as they joined forces to support colonial ventures in the Congo.³⁷

German Jesuit missionaries in Shanghai, banned from working in Germany itself, welcomed Prince Heinrich, brother of Kaiser Wilhelm II, on his tour of East Asia.³⁸ The German government, not the church, funded the first scholarly chair in Catholic mission studies at the university of Münster. When its first occupant published an account of German Catholic missions in Africa, he dedicated it to Kaiser Wilhelm II.³⁹

In the United States, Catholics and Protestant allies rewrote biographies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century missionaries, such as the Jesuit Jacques Marquette (in the Midwest) and the Franciscan Junipero Serra (in California), so as to place them alongside the Pilgrims and Puritans as the founders of Western civilization on the continent. Statues of Marquette (nominated by legislators from Wisconsin) and Serra (nominated by legislators from California) were placed in the US Capitol Building in Washington, DC.⁴⁰ American Catholic missionaries sent to the Philippines after the American military took control of the islands in 1898 found themselves dining with Governor General (and future president) William Howard Taft. The vice president (and another future president), Theodore Roosevelt, flattered these missionaries by encouraging them to make Filipinos “better Catholics and better citizens.”⁴¹

Ironically, Vatican officials found it especially easy to establish unfettered lines of communication between Rome and Catholics in the Protestant British Empire. A significant percentage of the soldiers in the British army were Catholic, typically Irish Catholic, and required spiritual sustenance. As early as the 1820s in India, James Mill, an official with the East India Company, agreed to pay the salaries of Catholic priests, since, as he sardonically put it, “they have, at least, as strong a claim upon our bounty as the Hindoo and Mahomedan priesthood.”⁴²

Irish Catholics in settler colonies such as New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa developed close ties to British colonial authorities, with Leo XIII himself acknowledging that “it cannot be doubted that [p. 144] the well-being of Ireland is connected with the tranquility of the whole [British] Empire.”⁴³ In turn, British Foreign Office officials hoped to persuade Vatican officials to tamp down nationalist Irish priests.⁴⁴ In British-controlled South Africa, Irish bishops supported the British in the war against the Afrikaner Boers, silencing a Dutch priest who voiced his opposition.⁴⁵

IV

ALONG WITH bringing Catholicism, missionaries in the late nineteenth century began to stress that they brought “civilization,” a user-friendly imperial concept. One dimension of civilization where Catholics played a leading role was the effort to eliminate slavery in Africa. This was surprising. Ultramontane Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century had been conspicuous for their reluctance to recommend the abolition of slavery, so opposed were they to the individualist (at times anti-Catholic) rhetoric they associated with liberal Protestant or secular abolitionists. Beginning in the 1850s and 1860s, though, French and Italian Catholic missionaries frequently encountered enslaved people in Africa, and they saw in these men and women not simply vulnerable human beings but potential Catholics. Unlike West Africa, where Portuguese Catholics had taken a leading role, the slave trade in eastern and northern Africa was dominated by Muslims, which made it easier for these Catholic missionaries to mount a critique.

On-the-ground distinctions between slavery and other forms of coerced labor were hard to parse, and Europeans often struggled to understand the status of the men and women they encountered.⁴⁶ But the advantages of claiming to rescue enslaved people from the clutches of Islamic slave traders were clear. Such ransoms meant allying Christianity with “civilization” while linking Islam to barbarism. Or as Daniele Comboni explained after describing markets for enslaved people in Khartoum and Cairo, “Only Catholicism will be able to restore full freedom to a large part of the human family which is still groaning under the shameful yoke of slavery.”⁴⁷ He added later that Muslim rulers of cities such as Zanzibar would cheerfully agree on paper to abolish the trade in enslaved people to please English diplomats, but would actually [p. 145] do nothing, since for them “the Koran is the word of God and does not forbid but permits the trade in human flesh.”⁴⁸

In missions near Lake Victoria and Tanganyika, White Fathers detailed the activities of Islamic slave traders and ransomed enslaved women and children. In Zanzibar, priests carried bags of coins in order to purchase enslaved people at auction and grant them their freedom.⁴⁹ Cardinal Lavigerie (in North Africa) and Daniele Comboni (along the Nile River) even organized informal armies to try and protect Indigenous villages from raids by slave traders.

The same 1888 meeting of the Katholikentag attended by Mbange Akwa included a rousing endorsement of the efforts of Cardinal Lavigerie to eliminate African slavery. The next year, in Brussels, diplomats from almost every European nation invoked Lavigerie as they signed a treaty in support of slavery’s abolition. Lavigerie sparked the formation of Catholic antislavery organizations in France, Belgium, and especially Italy and encouraged Leo XIII to address the topic.⁵⁰ The leading Brazilian abolitionist, Joaquim Nabuco, long dismayed by ultramontane hesitation on the issue, met with Leo XIII in 1888 and was delighted when the pope promised to say “a word” against slavery. (Leo XIII allegedly added: “when the Pope has spoken, all Catholics have to obey.”)⁵¹

The pope directed his 1888 encyclical on the topic, *In Plurimus*, to Catholics in Brazil, which had just abolished slavery. In an act of creative amnesia, Leo XIII described the church as continually working toward slave emancipation. Using a resonant phrase that would echo down through Catholic social thought in the twentieth century, he declared slavery a violation of “human dignity.”⁵²

V

AFRICAN STUDENTS studying in Europe, such as Mbang Akwa, drew considerable attention, but formerly enslaved people offered the most powerful testimony of a multiracial religious community. Daniele Comboni brought twelve freed Sudanese girls to the Vatican to meet Pius IX himself in 1867. He arranged the girls in a row along a wall near the Vatican library, and Pius IX arrived at 5 p.m. Captivated by their [p. 146] presence, the pope strolled through the Vatican gardens with the girls. Cruelly, he made a reference to Africans as “ungrateful” and, in his experience—a single trip as a young priest to South America where he met some Africans—potentially “thieves and liars.” Comboni immediately responded that Europeans would be thieves and liars, too, “if they found themselves in the sad condition of slavery.” Pius IX agreed and then expressed delight as the girls spoke of their belief in the pope as the “representative of Jesus Christ” and of their determination to evangelize their homelands. He awarded them medals and thanked them.⁵³ Twenty years later, Cardinal Lavigerie brought another group of formerly enslaved people to Paris to rally Catholic antislavery activists, and to Rome to visit Leo XIII.⁵⁴

Sister Josephine Bakhita became the most prominent of these men and women. Her own recounting of her story, a document she dictated at the wish of her mother superior in 1910, is a gripping narrative.⁵⁵ Other formerly enslaved Catholics from East Africa and elsewhere composed similar accounts, and these stories were used as fundraising tools and to raise awareness among Europeans about the plight of African Catholics.⁵⁶

Bakhita was born in about 1869 in a village southwest of Khartoum. Her family were members of the Daju people. When Bakhita was about nine and playing in a field, two men armed with knives kidnapped her. “I was petrified,” she remembered, and she shrieked for her mother and father as she was carried away. Her captors gave her a common Arabic name, Bakhita. She was sold at auction, managed to escape her first owner, but was captured and sold again to a Turkish general. She assisted the general’s wife and mother, but the two women beat her mercilessly when she inadvertently touched their hair while dressing them. They ordered tattoos to be carved into her breasts and stomach to identify her as their property.

When the general decided to return to Turkey, a friendly Italian diplomat ransomed her, and two years later—just before the Mahdi (or Islamic) armies captured Khartoum in 1885 after a long siege—the diplomat took her back to Italy. He almost certainly knew Fr. Comboni and was influenced by the priest’s efforts to free enslaved people. “I can still taste the joy I felt at the time,” Bakhita recalled. After journeying with the diplomat and

his family through the Suez Canal and [p. 147] across the Mediterranean, Bakhita found work as a nanny with an aristocratic family in the Veneto region of Italy. The family did not encourage Bakhita to learn about Catholicism. Still, when a local Catholic gave her a tiny silver crucifix, she hid it in her room. The family placed Bakhita in a home run by Canossian nuns while they returned to Sudan for business. Upon their return to Italy, the wife of the family decided to take Bakhita with her on yet another trip back to Sudan, to the port city of Suakin, and put her to work in a family-owned hotel. Bakhita refused to return to her homeland and asked to live in the house run by the Canossians, where she was preparing to convert to Catholicism. She could not be forced to leave, since, as she put it, in Italy “the slave trade is not allowed.”⁵⁷

Her furious employers appealed to local officials and even Venice’s cardinal, all of whom sided with Bakhita. A month later she was baptized. She immediately decided to enter the Canossians, and four years later, in 1896, another Venetian cardinal, Giuseppe Sarto, attended the ceremonies as Bakhita took her final vows. Sarto would be elected as Pope Pius X in 1903 and would support efforts to mobilize Catholics against slavery in Africa, personally blessing each delegate at an antislavery conference held in St. Peter’s in 1907. Bakhita settled into life as a Canossian religious woman assigned to a convent in the mountain town of Schio, mastering the local dialect and developing a regional reputation for holiness.

VI

BY THIS TIME, Catholic missionaries collaborating with imperial officials faced a problem: the closer the alliance between the church and imperial states became, the more likely they were to alienate Indigenous Catholics by propagating racist assumptions of superiority. This dynamic had existed from the beginning of the missionary effort. As early as 1865, Comboni regretted that a French Catholic bishop in Dahomey did not believe that native-born Africans could serve as “catechists, teachers, artists and least of all Priests.”⁵⁸

Catholics rejected the most appalling versions of scientific racism, such as polygenesis or the idea that separate races might be separate species. One Mississippi bishop urged local Jesuits to criticize the [p. 148] “abominable idea of the plurality of races,” and the Holy Office in Rome rejected any notion of a curse on peoples of African descent. All people were members of the “great human family.”⁵⁹ The very act of encouraging conversions presumed commonality, and the first German Catholic missionaries to Cameroon stressed that they did not see Africans as “objects of exploitation” but instead as “companions of humanity, a brother loved by God.” The piety these missionaries found in converts in Cameroon was “incomparably greater” than among some “tired” and “civilized” Catholics in Europe.⁶⁰

Still, missionary efforts to “civilize” people of color almost inevitably assumed a racial hierarchy. In New Orleans and in Capetown, South Africa, for example, Black and white Catholics worshipped together until the end of the nineteenth century. Catholic churches were much more likely to be integrated than their Protestant counterparts. But Catholics

eventually conformed to segregationist patterns. In New Orleans they did so against the wishes of French-speaking Creole Catholics, some of whom were then challenging state laws mandating segregation in public institutions. In both South Africa and the United States, white bishops, priests, nuns, and laypeople acquiesced in—or furthered—what Baltimore’s Cardinal Gibbons ruefully termed the “caste system.”⁶¹

Racial hierarchies also became visible in the evangelization of Indigenous or aboriginal peoples. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholic missionaries worked with Indigenous peoples in North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Polynesia. Maori people in New Zealand, Dakota people on the American Great Plains, Tahitian people on Pacific islands, and Bororo people in the Amazon all encountered the ultramontane revival.

The pattern in South America was typical. After a long hiatus, missionaries in the late nineteenth century reached Indigenous peoples in all corners of the continent. These missionaries used familiar strategies, holding parish missions, urging penitents who had not seen a priest in years to attend confession, and erecting crosses in villages. Just as missionaries built educational and social welfare institutions among German and Italian Catholic immigrants clustered in coastal cities of Brazil, so, too, did they take on similar roles with Indigenous peoples, some of whom had been Catholics since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. [p. 149] Salesian priests from Italy and Claretian priests from Spain helped establish schools and missions among Indigenous peoples in Brazil, and government officials relied on missionary clergy to calm local rebellions. Dominican priests from Spain did similar work among Indigenous peoples in Colombia. When the Spanish lost control of the Philippines after the war with the United States in 1898, a group of Dominicans stationed there traveled back across the Pacific Ocean to begin work with Indigenous peoples in Peru.⁶²

In Canada, Australia, and the United States, competition with Protestants for Indigenous converts was an added variable. Catholics in the United States resented governmental attempts to equate Protestant with American. They bristled when the US commissioner of Indian Affairs described Catholic requests for public funding for their Indian schools as “un-American, unpatriotic, and a menace to our liberties.”⁶³ The founder of the secular and government-funded Carlisle Indian school in the United States complained about a priest “speaking against the Indians sending their children to Carlisle, or away to school.”⁶⁴

Over time, Catholics became charged with operating their own schools, often boarding schools, with the explicit goal of detaching Indigenous or aboriginal peoples from their traditional way of life. Priests and nuns running the schools separated children from their families, often with little notice. They trimmed hair on boys and mandated unfamiliar foods. They banned traditional dress. In Australia’s isolated northwest coast, German priests and Irish nuns sent any son or daughter of an aboriginal woman and a Malaysian or Indonesian man away from the child’s parents, so convinced were they that mixed-race children could not thrive in their home villages.⁶⁵

The same missionaries often did defend the prerogatives of Indigenous peoples, and genuine Indigenous or aboriginal Catholic communities did form. Catholic missionaries were more likely than Protestant counterparts to permit the use of (and learn) Indigenous languages, although even Catholic missionaries occasionally punished students for “talking Indian.”⁶⁶ Salesian priests in the Amazonian state of Mato Grosso saw themselves as protecting Bororo people from “persecution” by government officials even as they tried to “eradicate the numerous, erroneous, and immoral superstitions of their tribe.”⁶⁷ In British Columbia [p. 150], Oblates of Mary Immaculate missionaries fought to keep traditional fishing lands under the control of the Dakelh people.⁶⁸ In the United States, Joseph Pawnee-no-pah-she, a Catholic Osage tribal governor, traveled to Washington to make the point that tribes, too, possessed sovereignty and should be able to welcome Catholic missionaries and schools if they chose to do so. “Religion among the whites,” the Osage delegates wrote, “is a matter of conscience and voluntary choice ... why should it not be so among the Osages?”⁶⁹

Underpinning the idea that Indigenous culture must be transformed was a profound sense of racial superiority. Present from the beginning, this racism had been submerged in the early nineteenth century beneath a romantic, if also condescending, understanding of Indigenous peoples as uncorrupted by modern mores. In 1850, a Swiss missionary in Maine spoke with awe of the “savage eloquence” of Penobscot people uncontaminated by “overwrought civilization.” One French priest hoping to work with Indigenous peoples in the Rocky Mountains was disappointed to learn he had been assigned to a mission of lesser “prestige”: French-speaking Catholic Louisiana.⁷⁰

By 1900, hierarchies were more clear. An Italian missionary in the Pacific Northwest of the United States described the Blackfeet people as inhabiting an “uncivilization.” Another missionary described the Coeur d’Alene people as debilitated by “degraded habits” and “foolish superstitions.”⁷¹

Asian Catholics issued some of the first challenges to European and North American assumptions of racial superiority. In the majority Catholic Philippines, armed resistance to the American occupation of the islands after 1898 was crushed in a brutal military campaign, but both Spanish and American Catholics recognized that a growing number of Filipino Catholics desired political independence. Filipino antagonism toward Catholic leaders for their alliance with American occupying forces—one American priest in Manila thought independence for the Philippines plausible “only after the present generation is in the grave”—helped spur the formation of a popular schismatic church led by a former Catholic priest: the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, “established in the Philippines for Filipinos.”⁷²

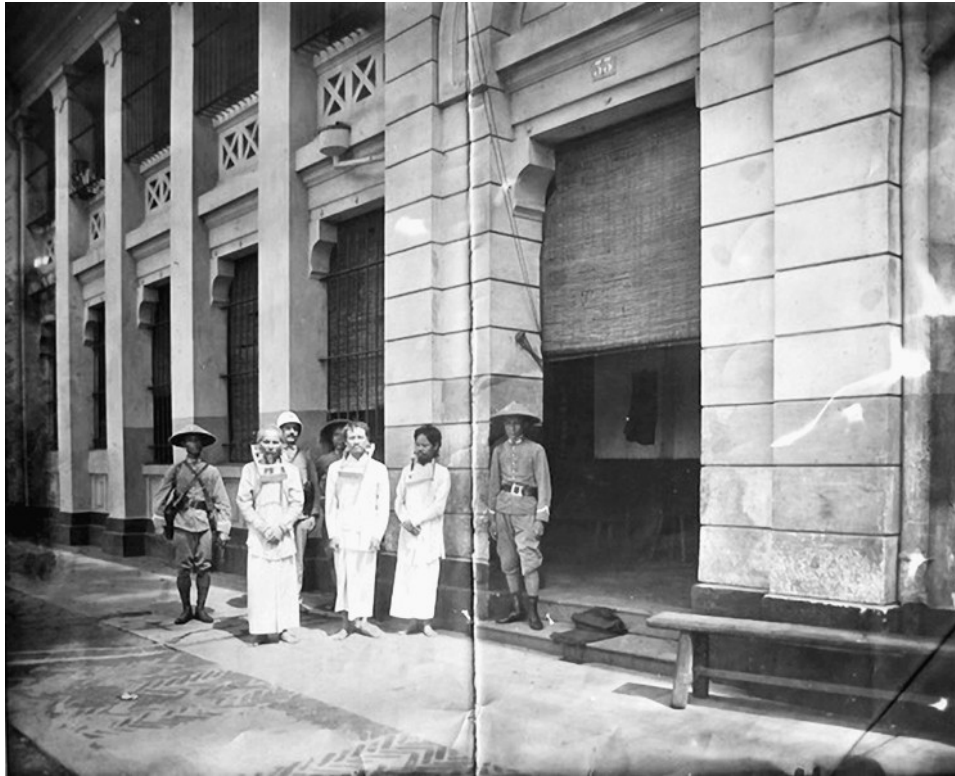
In China, nationalists directed their animus at all Christians during [p. 151] the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, but Catholics with international ties and European-style churches came under especially savage assault. The just constructed French neo-Gothic Cathedral in Beijing endured a two-month siege as over three thousand European and Chinese Catholics, fearful for their lives, huddled inside the structure. Mobs murdered thousands of

Catholics, perhaps tens of thousands, including three bishops and over thirty priests. The Jesuits saw their parishes decrease from 674 to 58 and their schools from 221 to 49. Numerous Franciscan missions were left in shambles. Even tiny Catholic villages were occupied, with captives tortured and demands made that villagers renounce Catholicism. After the European powers quashed the rebellion, they squeezed indemnities out of the enfeebled Chinese empress. By using the funds to rebuild and expand Catholic churches and facilities, local Catholic leaders heightened tensions between Chinese Catholics and their non-Catholic neighbors.⁷³

Underwriting these tensions were a more self-conscious and aggressive Chinese nationalism, on the one hand, and Western assumptions of cultural superiority on the other. French missionaries in China, for example, explained to skeptical Vatican officials that, “The native priest, apart from some honorable exceptions, is not equal to the European in efficiency, intelligence, administrative ability, [and] reliability. Giving these mission churches too much independence too soon is not desirable in their own interest.” When a German Catholic missionary met with the alleged seventy-sixth descendant of Confucius, Kong Lingyi, in 1902, he dismissed him as knowing “almost nothing of the situation and learning of Europe.” The Chinese sage, he noted sadly, “lived a thoroughly Chinese existence.”⁷⁴

Shocked by the Boxer Rebellion, Léon Joly, a French priest immersed in the missionary literature, published a widely discussed assessment of Catholicism in China in 1907. Joly never visited East Asia, but even from his Parisian study he knew that some missionary priests refused to eat at the same table with their Chinese clerical colleagues and over time had become more cloistered within European compounds in China’s cities. He asked missionaries to reflect on the fact that some converts seemed eager for baptism only to gain access to Church funds, while priests and nuns enrolled these “rice Christians” in order to inflate their [p. 152] convert totals. He deplored low numbers of Indigenous clergy and the complete absence of Indigenous bishops.

Joly acknowledged that most missionaries possessed good intentions. But he concluded that Chinese Catholics attached to a European Catholicism will always seem “renegades to the homeland, traitors allied with the foreigner.”⁷⁵ Another missionary sympathetic to Joly was more blunt: “Our duty and honor is to work to render ourselves redundant.” He went further: “The Chinese are in practice treated as inferiors, *by reason of race*.” European-led Catholicism in China risked becoming a “spiritual colony.”⁷⁶



Three Vietnamese priests arrested for anti-French activities, 1909. (*Institut de recherche France-Asie/MEP*)

A few other European Catholics—notably the Belgian Jesuit Arthur Vermeersch when writing on the Congo—irritated colonial authorities by wondering whether “civilization” could be brought by governments intent on exploiting local resources.⁷⁷ Bengali and Vietnamese Catholics took matters into their own hands. Working out of Calcutta, Brahmabhadhav Upadhyaya published a series of blistering editorials criticizing British rule, even as he urged European Catholic missionaries to adapt their evangelization strategies to local mores. Upadhyaya himself dressed as a Hindu monk and defended traditional caste distinctions. He described himself as at once Catholic and “emphatically Hindu.”⁷⁸ In the Tonkin region of Vietnam, a French bishop writing from Hanoi worried that “indigenous priests and catechists” did not have “the deference nor the cordiality of the past.” In 1907, three Vietnamese priests were sentenced to long prison terms [p. 153] for rallying Vietnamese Catholics to “contribute by any means, labour or property, in the struggle against the French, so as to show patriotism and love of the Lord.” A French missionary priest had turned them in.⁷⁹

VII

MISSIONS AND IMPERIALISM structured the lives of Mbange Akwa and Josephine Bakhita. The work in Cameroon that Mbange helped jump-start had achieved significant success by 1914. Ninety-three missionaries staffed dozens of mission stations, and a much larger group of catechists ran schools for over twelve thousand pupils.⁸⁰

During World War I, French and British troops expelled all German citizens from Cameroon, including the Pallottine priests and nuns overseeing Mbange's work. The departing priests handed the keys to mission churches to Mbange and other catechists, advising them to marry couples and give instructions in the faith.⁸¹

This wartime interlude of African leadership presaged the future. When Cameroon became governed through a League of Nations mandate in 1919, French Catholic missionaries maneuvered colonial officials into pressuring the Vatican to replace German missionaries with French missionaries. The cardinal in charge of the Propaganda Fide erupted in anger at the "misplaced patriotism" infecting French Catholics, but as a compromise he nominated as bishop in Cameroon a priest from Alsace fluent in both German and French.⁸²

Over the next decade, the unwillingness of French colonial officials to consider democracy and self-determination in Cameroon provoked resistance to the colonial state.⁸³ At the same time Catholics in Cameroon and elsewhere began to press for native-born clergy. The number of such priests from missionary lands in Africa and Asia increased in the 1920s and 1930s from 2,670 to over 7,000.⁸⁴ Vatican officials also pressured bishops in the racially segregated southern United States to train African American men for the priesthood—encountering much resistance—and connections were occasionally drawn between evangelization in Africa and evangelization in communities of the African diaspora. Some European missionary orders, such as the Society [p. 154] of Divine Word, sent priests to work in Togo and in African American communities in Chicago. One French priest squabbling with his German colleagues over ecclesiastical boundaries in Africa suggested to curial officials, who disregarded him, that all Germans be sent to work for "the conversion of blacks in the United States."⁸⁵

Native-born African catechists, such as Mbange, kept working. When Mbange died at the age of fifty-nine in 1932, his life was celebrated in German Catholic missionary publications as someone "who had no aberrations for which to repent and who served as a perfect example of true missionary service for forty years."⁸⁶ Mbange's son Benedict pledged to "continue the work begun by his father."⁸⁷

Josephine Bakhita unexpectedly became a public figure at the same moment. For three decades she had worked as a cook, nurse's aide, and doorkeeper with the Canossian sisters. Her biography—a repackaging of the oral history she had dictated in 1910—was published in 1931 to acclaim and indicates how ties between Europe and Africa were deepening during this period. Benedict XV had recently beatified twenty-two Ugandan young men burned to death for their faith in 1885–1886. The ceremonies marking the event had drawn huge crowds, including two men spared execution by chance in Uganda almost forty years before.⁸⁸

With reluctance, Josephine Bakhita obeyed the request of her religious superiors to make extended tours of Italy in order to raise funds for Catholic missions in Africa. Over a period of years, Bakhita journeyed from town to town and to every major city. Escorted by

priests and nuns active in missionary work—her primary traveling companion was a Canossian nun recently returned to Italy from thirty-five years of work in Shanxi Province in China—she nonetheless became the campaign’s primary attraction. Bishops and cardinals requested audiences. She also met—at their request—with both Benito Mussolini and his rival and occasional negotiating partner, Pius XI.



Sr. Josephine Bakhita, n.d. (*Courtesy of Canossian Daughters of Charity*)

Bakhita’s was often the first African [p. 155] face residents of villages and small cities had seen, and her presence in a religious habit guaranteed large crowds. At these public events, Bakhita would make a short speech and respond to questions about her enslavement and life in the Sudan. When she finished speaking, she reluctantly allowed people to touch her and to kiss a miraculous medal around her neck. Others in the audience thrust babies and sick relatives toward her for a blessing. Her uneasiness in these moments perhaps reflected her vulnerability as an African Catholic in a church long dominated by Europeans. Privately she complained that “everyone looks at me like a nice beast. I want to work, to pray for everybody, and not to look at people.”⁸⁹

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