

Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press (hb US\$45/£41.95 – 978 0 6749 8766 1). 2019, vii + 369 pp.

Elizabeth A. Foster's book presents a distinctive perspective on the interconnected histories of religion, missions, politics and the decolonization of the French Empire. While scholars have often used a political lens to analyse decolonization, *African Catholic* introduces a fresh approach by examining this process from a religious perspective. This unique angle effectively underscores how decolonization impacted state foundations and private institutions such as the Catholic Church, making it a valuable addition to the literature on religion and politics.

Foster impartially navigates the complex debates surrounding decolonization, giving equal weight to the diverse voices, 'prominent and obscure', discussing the future of the Catholic Church, the French Empire and Africa. She includes the perspectives of white missionaries in Africa, their superiors in France and the Vatican, the growing African clergy, African Catholic students and elites in France, and French donors to Catholic undertakings in Africa. On the one hand, conservative white Catholics saw political decolonization, de-Occidentalizing of the church and the embracing of indigenous clergy over Frenchmen as a rejection of Western civilization. Lefebvre, one of the prominent historical figures in the book, and like-minded French missionaries feared that decolonization would slow or forestall the growth of Catholicism in Africa. On the other hand, African elites and progressive French missionaries such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Alioune Diop, Léopold Senghor and Father Joseph Michel criticized the church for being Eurocentric and insensitive to African cultures. By considering these varied viewpoints, Foster provides a comprehensive understanding of the decolonization debate, offering a thorough and nuanced analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in decolonizing Africa. The balanced treatment of diverse voices undergirds the book's strength and analysis.

The book is meticulously organized thematically, focusing on four key developments that shaped the Franco-African world in the post-war period: the immanent dissolution of the empire, the emergence of progressive Catholic currents demanding political and religious change, the rise of the French African Catholic elite advocating for decolonization of the church and the empire, and the tensions within the church itself (pp. 8–10). This thematic organization offers a clear road map for the reader, guiding them through the complex historical narrative and mapping the connections among the raft of historical actors whom Foster follows.

Chapter 1 sets the whole narrative in motion by locating the root of the tensions. Beginning in 1946, under FIDES (Fund for Economic and Social Development), the French government channelled funds to Catholic institutions, especially schools and hospitals. The funds enabled the expansion of Catholic endeavours in French Africa. The collaborative relationship was controversial and a source of conflict. Educated and politically conscious African Catholics saw the state–church relationship as the Vatican's endorsement of the colonial order and support for a

Eurocentric Catholic Church, which stood in stark contrast to the Africans' call for independence.

The rise of a French African Catholic political and intellectual elite played an integral role in shaping conversations and debates against the Catholic Church's Eurocentric approaches to Christianity. Focusing on the African Catholic elites enables Foster to examine the intertwined histories of Catholicism, Black Internationalism, Negritude and decolonization. She offers a fresh perspective on Catholic Negritude; instead of centring on the well-known Senghor, she devotes an entire chapter to the lesser-known Alioune Diop, a convert from Islam, an intellectual and a vocal African Catholic living in predominantly white France. Diop founded the journal *Présence Africaine*, a publishing company and a bookstore that helped publicize African Catholic intellectuals' thoughts and promoted the Negritude movement. By following the different articles published in *Présence Africaine*, Foster shows how it became a critical platform to respond to Eurocentric prelates, and by the time of Vatican II, the journal and Diop's thoughts had gained traction within the church hierarchy.

Foster extensively makes use of available archival material in France, Senegal and Italy. Her use of private correspondence provides a window to understand the feelings of some Catholic priests and officials towards their African colleagues and congregants. More importantly, Foster uses this correspondence to expose the paternalistic and racist impulses of some of the white missionaries who considered themselves superior to Africans. For instance, although Henri Prouvost believed in the training of indigenous clergy, his correspondence with his friend and Paris Foreign Missions colleague Father Joseph Jean-Baptiste Cueno reveals his racial prejudices and belief in the superiority of French civilization. Also, the progressive left-wing Father Joseph Michel, who worked with and helped African Catholic students to challenge the conservative right-wing Catholics, sometimes could not escape the grip of European paternalism. His writings reveal his belief in the superiority of the Europeans to civilize the colonized (p. 102). Foster's extensive use of varied archival sources helps the reader understand the equivocal nature of many historical actors who populate the pages of *African Catholic*.

Readers, however, might have benefited from a discussion of the connections and conversations among ordinary African Catholics, the elites and the clergy. While Foster does a brilliant job of narrating the debates by the African elites, a brief analysis of how their message was received or resonated with ordinary Catholics in French Africa would have further strengthened this well-argued narrative. Also, the book is androcentric – understandably so, because of the patriarchal, hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church's leadership. The role of African nuns is mentioned in passing in the last chapter. Despite these minor critiques, *African Catholic* is a well-researched and well-presented book and a must-read for anyone interested in the intertwined histories of Christianity, Negritude and decolonization.

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