

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Africa in the Global Church?

Jean Luc Enyegue, SJ

Hekima University College, Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa (JHIA)
Email: director.1@jhia.ac.ke

John McGreevy's *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* hinges on seismic events that shook the foundations of the Catholic Church: the French Revolution, its aftershocks in many European nations, and the devastating effects of the Napoleonic Wars that followed. The episcopalism of Catholicism that arose from the ashes of the revolution seemed to reject the pillar of its globalism, namely the papacy. Pius IX paid for this with his life. Eternal Rome suddenly became mortal, overtaken by the revolutionaries. Catholic schools were nationalized. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy enacted an agenda for the secularization of society, the church itself, and its institutions. Notre Dame became a "Temple of Reason," and the chalices and ciboria of Saint-Sulpice were melted down to make cash. The damage done to the church by this revolution was paralleled only by the communist revolutions of the twentieth century.

But the revolution, according to the author, also seems to have awakened a sleeping giant. While between twenty and thirty thousand women—a gender the revolution did not treat in the same way as men—were expelled from their convents, others, with the support of bishops and priests, created 571 religious congregations in the nineteenth century alone. In postrevolutionary France, the number of nuns rose from 12,300 in 1808 to 135,000 sixty years later. The women left behind by the revolution thus became the backbone of reborn Catholicism. The ultramontane triumphalism proclaimed by Mauro Cappellari (1799) and Joseph de Maistre (1819) was on display with the proliferation of overseas missions and the explosion of devotions and miraculous apparitions of all kinds in Europe and Latin America.

While a certain medievalism was observed in the architecture of new cathedrals, the church, the author shows, did not return to Caesaropapism. By 1829, twenty-four of the world's 646 bishops had been appointed by the Holy See, while sixty-seven were elected by local clergy and 555 appointed by presidents and monarchs, including the presidents of the newly independent countries of Latin America. The Vatican's attempt to limit this right to certain newly independent states ended up sapping the pastoral work and even the presence of the church in these regions. Monasteries became bastions of important liturgical reforms. Medievalist overtones of priests' personal lives, including a certain Nicolaitism, sometimes enjoyed discretionary treatment, even popular support, as if within the borders of this rather conservative postrevolutionary Catholicism blurred a certain liberalism—Protestantism, others would say—with regard to clerical discipline.

In the deliberations in Cadiz, for instance, one-third of the members of the Assemblies were clergy. To the great dismay of Protestants, who called for a new

Reformation, the restoration of the Ancien Régime was not long in coming. It was comprehensive. In Pernambuco, the Revolution of 1817 became known as the “Revolution of the Clergy,” while other nations such as Haiti, Venezuela, Mexico, and even Portugal made the Catholic religion the state religion and criminalized the practice of other religious denominations (64). The Congress of Vienna (1815) heralded a new era of restoration within the church in a sacred union between monarchy, altar, and papacy. The church had succeeded in overcoming the winds of the revolution alongside a populist pietism that continued well into the twentieth century with the Eucharistic Congresses.

Africa was also a battleground for revolutionaries. The old churches of Kongo, Angola, and Senegal were almost extinguished by revolutionary and Napoleonic flames. Like Latin America, the continent also became a refuge for missionaries expelled by state persecutions in Europe, as well as a land of choice for missions. In Senegal, a colonist demanded a missionary priest to hoist a French flag in his church on Bastille Day. This priest and his fellow missionaries were not expelled, thanks to the revolt of native Senegalese. Later, in the middle of the twentieth century, persecution continued under the communist regimes and dictatorships of independent Africa. In Uganda, Amin’s regime tortured and murdered Christians, a scenario similar to that in Sékou Touré’s Guinea.

Even though Bismarck often persecuted Catholics in Germany, he authorized their entry into Cameroon in 1890. McGreevy highlights the waves made by African students such as Akwa and Mbange. Mbange’s success at school and in the workplace was reported in the German Catholic press. His baptism was widely publicized, with a ceremony presided over by the papal nuncio in Bavaria. Having completed his Christian training, Mbange returned to Cameroon. The church needed him to evangelize his own people. For the emperor and his missionaries, though, colonialism became a project to civilize Africans.

A form of Africanization was thus born, supported by an African clergy trained in Western values, undeterred by the disdain of ecclesiastical authorities. The author tells the story of Daniele Comboni who had to push back against Pope Pius IX, who was rather glib in his public expression of racist prejudice against Africans. Yet it is on likewise former slaves, à la Bakhita, that His Holiness wanted to build his African Ultramontaniam, whereas the Primate of Africa, Lavigerie, hoped to establish “an African Catholic civilization” (139). Likewise, Belgian missionary bishop Victor Roelens vowed to create his own “little republic” in the Congo, with its own currency, of which he himself would be president (140).

McGreevy credits this evangelization by Africans with notorious successes. In Cameroon, where Mbange worked, the large number of Cameroonian catechists outnumbered the ninety-three missionaries, and they ran schools for over 12,000 pupils. Following the expulsion of missionaries from German protectorates in Cameroon, the departing priests handed over the keys of the mission churches to Mbange and other catechists, advising them to marry couples and instruct them on the faith (153). When Mbange died at the age of fifty-nine in 1932, his life was celebrated in German Catholic mission publications. Mbange’s son, Benedict, pledged to “continue the work begun by his father” (154).

McGreevy speaks of a “reconciliation between Catholic and imperial interests” worldwide in the early twentieth century: “Bitter divisions between Belgian liberals and 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” (143). This alliance on the cradle of colonialism could not ignore, for long at

least, that missionary efforts to “civilize” people of color almost inevitably presupposed a native agency. In New Orleans and Cape Town, South Africa, “black and white worshipped together until the end of the nineteenth century” (148).

McGreevy points to the pope’s silence during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, despite the missionaries’ appeal not to support Mussolini. It was often the mission that trained the political elite who fought for African independence. New African leaders, like Léopold Sédar Senghor, did not hesitate to assert their Catholicism and promote its Africanization—a topic not sufficiently developed in the book, other than to assert that Senghor understood that the Africanization of political leadership was inseparable from leadership in the church.

In moves that seemed to negotiate decolonization in favor of the colonists, McGreevy notes the French government’s enormous financial support for the bishops (French, it must be said) of Guinea Conakry in 1954, even as the Vatican accelerated a certain indigenization/Africanization of the clergy and leadership of the church. He also alludes to Marcel Lefèbvre’s resistance to this new Vatican approach, and his hand behind *Fidei Donum*, which, as Elizabeth Foster has shown, urged sending European missionaries to Africa as the last chance to save civilization. European diplomats in Africa were under the same impression, much to Joseph Ki-Zerbo’s dismay, that the pope seemed more concerned about the damaging influence of communism than colonialism as such. This reaffirmation of the power of the European missionary church in Africa was echoed in the resistance of South African laymen to the (nameless) first black bishop appointed by the Vatican in 1954 (251). In 1956, African students in Paris reacted strongly and asserted that Catholics had a duty to decolonize and take seriously their history with slavery. A photo of nameless Africans is placed in the book!

McGreevy effectively points to the great omission of the Second Vatican Council, which, in its project of *aggiornamento* and its push for the inculturation of the liturgy, had neglected the weight of outdated ecclesial structures. Further, Pope Paul VI withdrew the debate on sexuality, birth control, and even priestly celibacy. More impressive in the book is the quoted reaction of Catholic and sociologist Mary Douglas, not at all a Lefèbvrst. She expressed the risk of disintegration of sacred symbols, rites, and devotional culture. The council, which paid little heed to the plight of the world’s poor, unwillingly created an environment where, for example, the Friday fast could be relativized under the pretext of feeding the poor. If Catholics stopped being ritualists, Douglas argued, they would cease to be Catholics.

McGreevy shows that this sentiment was later shared not only by the French Dominican, Yves Congar, but also by Paul VI himself. Increasingly empty parishes coincided with loss of membership in congregations and monasteries. The inculturation of the liturgy was “Beatles”-cized, as Catholic unions and even the Boy Scouts secularized (344). If in Africa the number of priests increased after the council—unfortunately the author does not say why—elsewhere, the decline in pastoral personnel led the Brazilian bishops to vote in favor of ordaining married men for the Amazon missions. Bishops from Zambia, Cameroon, and South Africa joined their colleagues from Canada, the Netherlands, and Belgium in support of the end of compulsory celibacy for priests. Yet, one who reads this wonderful book is left wondering if these voices calling to end priestly celibacy were European in Africa or African in Africa. Maybe the former? The author points out that only one-third of the 311 bishops who represented Africa at the council were African and that Joseph Kiwanuka, the very first African bishop, was trained in Rome and had written his thesis in Latin on Christian marriage. Back to Africa, Kiwanuka’s pastoral practices seemed to confirm that he

was as much, if not more, Roman than Rome. This Romanizing approach contrasts in the book with that of Bishop Emmanuel Milingo of Zambia, ostracized today by Rome. The Next Christendom might not be that right-wing after all!

As one reads the book, beyond the cases of Kiwanuka and Milingo, and references to Senghor and Alioune Diop, nothing serious seemed to have taken place in Africa in the 1970s. A recurrent question is how exactly did Africa become a Christian majority? Failing to answer that important question, in addition to a number of nameless references on Africa, gives the impression that the author is a global historian with focus on North America, a good knowledge of Europe, and some knowledge of Latin American and Asian church history. However, his approach to Africa, the growing force in global Catholicism, could have been a bit more detailed and enriched with the diverse voices of African Catholic scholars in the 1970s–1990s and their pluralistic views on Africanization. Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI's view of this African church as the “spiritual longs” of humanity, with Sister Josephine Bakhita, not only as a slave turned Christian but as the opening character of *Spe Salvi*—saved by hope—could have given a more hopeful appreciation of the rising African church. That being said, one barely breathes as he/she reads a rather daring book: to write a history of global Catholicism.