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Competing Catholicisms: the Jesuits, the Vatican, and the making of postcolonial French Africa

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Book Review

Jean Luc Enyegue, SJ. ***Competing Catholicisms: The Jesuits, the Vatican, and the Making of Postcolonial French Africa*** (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2022). Hardcover, 9781847012715. Paperback, 9781847013774. Ebook, 9781800102910.[133]

In *Competing Catholicisms: The Jesuits, the Vatican, and the Making of Postcolonial French Africa*, Jean Luc Enyegue, a Jesuit priest and director of the Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa in Nairobi, examines the role that the Jesuit missions played in shaping the development of Catholicism in Cameroon and Chad – a much narrower geographical scope than the book title suggests – between roughly the end of the Second World War and the end of the Second Vatican Council. Over the course of nine chapters, Enyegue shows how competition between the Vatican and Jesuits over their divergent visions for the future of Catholicism hindered the Africanization of the church in Chad and Cameroon and "secured the survival of Christianity as a missionary movement" (8). While the Vatican was actively trying to indigenize the church throughout Africa, Jesuits sought to preserve European control of the church.

Enyegue develops his argument over three parts. Part 1 analyzes the foundation and development of the Jesuit mission in Chad between 1935 and 1946. In this section, Enyegue argues that the Jesuit mission in Chad, founded by Frédéric de Bélinay and then led by Joseph du Bouchet, was engaged in a process of "Frenchification" by which they sought to reassert France's imperial ambitions in Chad following the nation's "humiliation" during the second world war and the collapse of its colonial empire" (25, 28). The alignment between the Jesuit mission and France's strategic ambitions in Africa meant that all of the mission's personnel were citizens of France, thereby hindering the Vatican's objective to advance "clerical Africanisation" (90).

Part 2 analyzes how the Jesuits deployed "popular education" as a form of evangelism in Chad in order to foster the emergence of "loyal auxiliaries" to the colonial government and prevent the development of a nationalist Christian elite that would ultimately displace European leadership (98). This section also shows that, unlike the Protestants, Jesuits were willing to accommodate local cultural rituals, specifically the Sara male initiation rite of the *yondo*. The potent combination of cultural syncretism and the absence of a targetable Catholic elite made the Jesuits less vulnerable to persecution during Chad's Cultural Revolution (1973-1975) than the Protestant churches whose lack of tolerance for indigenous rites that were not Christian made them easy targets for Chad's president, Francois Tombalbaye, as he went about trying to make Christianity "distinctively Chadian" by stripping it of "its Western, civilising,

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cultural and imperialistic components" (156).

In Part 3, Enyegue explores how the Jesuit mission functioned in both Chad and Cameroon following independence. He shows that while Europeans continued to dominate the church in Chad, the "creation of the Jesuit Region of Cameroon and the appointment of a Cameroonian as its superior" in 1968 represented a successful example of "Africanisation, as envisioned by the Vatican and demanded by Africans themselves" (195). But within five years, the Jesuits changed tack – the Society of Jesus again hindered the Vatican's Africanization agenda by creating the Vice-Province of West Africa in 1973, which displaced Cameroonian leadership with Europeans who rejected Cameroonian Jesuits' vision for the Africanization of the church.

Enyegue marshals an impressive range of archival sources. He not only conducted research in Jesuit archives located at Vanves, Rome, Doula, and Nairobi, but diocesan archives in Yaoundé as well. In N'Djamena, Enyegue visited the archives at the Jesuit Centre for Studies and Training for Development and the archives of the Christian Assemblies of God. He also reports in his introduction that he conducted interviews with a "dozen lay and Jesuit Interviewees who were witnesses of part of this history," but only two interviews are cited in the bibliography at the end of the book (19, 273). One thing that is not clear from this book, however, is whether Enyegue would have been able to access these Jesuit sources if he were not a member of the Society of Jesus himself. The answer to this question is important because it determines whether a historian who does not share Enyegue's same position as a Catholic priest could build on this project.

Enyegue's reliance on archival sources is not without its shortcomings. The chapters on the history of Catholic church in Chad, for example, privilege the voices of European Jesuits, such as Frédéric de Bélinay, Joseph du Bouchet, and Paul Dalmais, because the "[e]nforced delay in recruiting Chadian Jesuits accentuated the lack of African Catholic voices in Chad" (19). When African voices are incorporated into the narrative where Enyegue shifts his focus from Chad to Cameroon, the dominant voices are those of Cameroonian Jesuit "theologians and philosophers," including Engelbert Mveng, Fabien Boulaga Eboussi, and Meinrad P. Hebga, whose perspectives, some would argue, might not be representative of the Catholic African experience in Cameroon (19). To correct for this limitation of his sources, however, Enyegue includes a chapter on Emmanuel Teguem, "a working class Jesuit brother," in which he demonstrates that the concerns of working-class Cameroonian Jesuits aligned with that of the Cameroonian Jesuit leadership—specifically on "the need to build an Africanised Church that responded to the actual cultural, spiritual, and material needs of their people" (252). Thus, Enyegue demonstrates that there was some commonality in the Cameroonian Jesuit experience from the bottom up.

Competing Catholicisms is an important book for three reasons. Firstly, Enyegue's monograph reminds us that the study of Christianity in postcolonial Africa should not neglect the historical mission churches. In recent years, scholars of Christianity have primarily been focusing their efforts on understanding and explaining the rapid growth of Pentecostalism across Africa for the past twenty years or so, but mission churches have remained important religious players since African nations achieved their political

independence and ought to be studied in their own right and not simply in relation to Pentecostalism (for example, see J.D.Y Peel's *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* [2016]). Secondly, *Competing Catholicisms* makes a strong case for researching and writing institutional history, which has fallen somewhat out of fashion. Thirdly, at a time when studies of religion in Africa are predominantly focused on locating instances of discontinuity—in part because Pentecostal and Charismatic forms of Christianity seek to create rupture in the lives of adherents—Enyegue shows that cultural and institutional continuity remain powerful forces in the shaping of the history of—and probably also the contemporary dynamics in—Christianity in Africa.

Competing Catholicisms also adds to scholarly debates about aid and development in postcolonial and contemporary Africa in two significant ways. First, Enyegue argues that "nongovernmentality" (see Gregory Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* [2015]) actually preceded "the rise of humanitarian NGOs on African soil" (11). Before non-governmental organizations began popping up across independent Africa, the Catholic Church had been facilitating "transnational networks of solidarity and aid" in French Africa for decades (11). Second, Enyegue challenges the idea that "the social commitments of Catholicism in Africa … diminishes true evangelism" (12), as Paul Gifford has argued in *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa* (2016). For progressive Jesuits in the 1970s, "evangelism was synonymous with being a living witness to the gospel by serving the poor" (12).

A minor point of criticism of *Competing Catholicisms* is that Enyegue missed an opportunity to connect his discussion about "tensions within Catholicism" with the work of historians studying similar tensions within Catholicism outside of French Africa (9). In his monograph, *Catholicism and the Making of Politics in Central Mozambique, 1940-1986* (2019), for example, Eric Morier-Genoud, a reader in African history at Queen's University Belfast, analyzes the relationship between religious orders, including the Jesuits, Franciscans, White Fathers, Marist Brothers, Burgos Fathers, Pipcus Fathers, and the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, and the church hierarchy in the Diocese of Beira in Mozambique to make sense of how politics are made in the Catholic Church. By placing his own research into dialogue with work of Morier-Genoud, Enyegue could have helped us better understand what insights about church tensions he analyzes in Chad and Cameroon are generalizable to the Catholic experience across African geographies, and which are specific to Cameroon and Chad.

Nevertheless, *Competing Catholicisms* is a thoughtful study of the Catholic Church in postcolonial Africa that will be of interest not just to historians of Christianity in Africa, but also historians of Chad, Cameroon, European decolonization, and imperial France.

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