

Call for papers: Religion, Colonisation and Decolonisation in Congo 1885-1960

Religion in the Democratic Republic of Congo has many faces, from the overflowing seminaries and marian shrines of the Catholic Church to Islamic brotherhoods, from the Jewish community of Lubumbashi to the “African” churches of the Congolese diaspora in Brussels or Paris, from the healers of Kimbanguism to the televangelism of the booming Pentecostalist churches in the great cities, from the Orthodox communities of Kasai to “invisible” Mau Mau warriors in the brousse of Kivu. During the colonial period, religion was no less central to people’s lives than today. More surprisingly, behind the seemingly smooth façade of missions tied closely to imperial power, it too was marked by diversity and dynamism, tying the Congo into broader African and global movements. At the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence and the 125th anniversary of the Congo Free State, KADOC, KULeuven’s Centre for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society, organizes a major international conference in order to take a fresh look at religion, colonisation and decolonisation in the Congo between 1885 and 1960.

To say that a lot of good work remains to be done on religion and colonisation in the Congo is an understatement. The subject was long considered synonymous of ‘mission history’, and as such it attracted above all the attention of fellow missionaries who wanted to serve God rather than Clio. Anti-clerical ‘debunking’, inevitably, followed in the 1980s. More recently, scholars like Jean-Luc Vellut and Ruth Kinet have produced more balanced and insightful studies. They had been preceded, on the Protestant side, by scholars like Ruth Slade and David Lagergren, detailing the history of English-speaking and Swedish missions in Leopold’s Congo. In the past few years, Kevin Grant and Pagan Kennedy have added depth to our knowledge of missionaries’ roles in the ‘Red Rubber’-campaign of the early 20th century.

While the historiography is not exactly a wasteland, then, it has been marked by an overly strong, sometimes polemical focus on the early years of the Congo Free State. For the fifty-odd years of the Belgian colony after 1908, the only comprehensive account of religion and colonisation remains the study of Marvin Markowitz from...1973. With the notable exception of Jean-Luc Vellut, it is also fair to say that for both the periods before and after 1908, attention has been concentrated on relations between Christian missionaries and colonial officials, with African converts above all as wall decoration. Africans figured as protagonists only in the separate niche of the study of ‘prophetic movements’ and their role in resistance to colonisation. In the last fifteen years, the most innovative insights into the place of religion in Congolese colonial society have often come, obliquely, from work that was primarily concerned with gender, medicine or architecture, such as that of Nancy Hunt, Bambi Ceuppens, Bruno Demeulder or Johan Lagae.

In the meantime, the subject of religion and colonisation itself has become a ‘hot topic’ elsewhere, especially in the English-speaking world. The influence of anthropology and the establishment of African history as a respectable academic subject prompted a fresh look at the ‘transcultural space’ created by the interaction between world religions and indigenous creeds in the colonial period, one in which Africans moved centre stage. The trail-blazing study of anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff on South-Africa triggered a broader, ongoing debate on the entanglement of

missions in the 'hegemonic' modernizing project of imperialism, and the degree of agency this left to Africans in accepting and appropriating the Christian message. At the same time, there is a growing awareness that, if missionaries were bent on exporting their model of religion, their overseas experiences played a critical role in reshaping metropolitan Churches. The rise of global and transnational history has opened vistas onto such surprising mechanics of cultural transfer.

The international conference planned by KADOC aims to bring the history of religion, colonisation and decolonisation in the Congo up to date. It intends to unite and complete the *membra disiecta* of our knowledge on the subject; it wants to renew our insight by connecting with the main trends of historiographical debate. Contributors are invited, in particular, to integrate the African perspective and to explicitly discuss the role of Africans (or lack thereof). While Christianity will inevitably be central to the conference, experts on other religions like prophetic cults, indigenous traditions, Islam or Judaism, are especially encouraged to apply.

Proposals for contributions should address one of the following four themes, detailed below: religions and the colonial state, religions in colonial African society, religions in metropolitan Western society, religions and Independence. These will constitute the four parts of the conference, corresponding to major current debates in the broader historiography on religion and colonisation.

1. Religions and the colonial state

The first part of the conference focuses on the institutional (including legal) political framework of the interface between religion and colonisation. It is closest to traditional, long-standing concerns of the historiography. However, contributors are invited to reconsider the relationship between missions and the state as a triangle, drawing in African converts and catechists. Was there more conflict than the famous image of the 'colonial trinity' (state-business-mission) suggests, and if so, what does this tell us about the relationship between missionary and colonial projects? Were Africans merely the stakes of such power games, or could they also actively affect them? What was the role of 'outsiders' in the colonial order, whether Protestant missionaries, prophetic cults, Muslim communities or Western anti-clericals? How did the imperial settlement relate to Church-State relations in the Belgian metropole?

2. Religions in colonial African society: inculturation and transformation

This part of the conference is centrally concerned with the complex interaction between 'imported' non-African and indigenous African religious beliefs and practices, as it played out in the broad field of colonial society and everyday life. Examples include (but are not limited to) gender and race relationships; rites of passage; architecture and sacred landscapes; art and religious imagery; education; science, health care and medicine; labour migration and urbanisation; ethnic identity and conflict. To what extent were different forms of Christianity, Islam and the Jewish diaspora harbingers of modernisation, and if so, what kind of 'modernity' are we speaking about? How were world religions and indigenous belief systems affected by their interface? Did their encounter result in a genuine 'transcultural space', or were they lost in translation? What repercussions did the rise of an indigenous clergy

have on religious institutions? How did native religious specialists deal with the challenge represented by Christianity and Islam?

3. Religions in metropolitan Western society: missionary cultures

A third, smaller part of the conference is meant to complement the second part. It looks at the impact of the colonial religious encounter on Churches in Western metropolitan societies. Catholicism in Belgium comes first to mind, of course, but contributions on Protestant echoes of the Congo in Britain, America, Sweden or (French-speaking) Belgium are also welcomed. In how far did the African missionary experience transform the self-understanding and the practices of religious communities in Belgium and elsewhere? How did missionary culture stimulate new models of voluntary organisation and associational life, from fund-raising through missionary journals, to funfairs and film evenings? Did it ingrain prejudice, or did it also open a window onto the world for even the humblest believers? How did the “mission civilisatrice” affect the standing of religious institutions in Belgian society? Did the official Belgian Church restyle itself as an imperial religion in its perennial desire to affirm the nexus between Catholic and national identity? Or did the mission movement rather become associated with emergent Flemish nationalism?

4. Religions and Independence

The last part of the conference will zoom in on the part religions played in the independence movement and on their reaction to independence itself. What is the relationship between prophetic cults, resistance to colonial rule and the (early) independence movement? Did the missions (Catholic and Protestant) anticipate on and prepare for independence in the 1950s, and if so, in what ways? What was the role of the emergent indigenous clergy, both in Congo and at seminaries or universities in the West? How did religious communities deal with the tumultuous sequence of events in 1959-1961?

The conference is scheduled to take place in Leuven from 8 to 10 November 2010. The conference languages will be English and French. Travel costs and accommodation of speakers will be covered by the organisers. Proposals for papers (min. 500 to max. 1000 words, including a draft structure) should be addressed to Vincent Viaene (vincent.viaene@kadoc.kuleuven.be) before March 15th 2010. Replies will follow no later than April 15th. The proceedings of the conference will, subject to peer review, be published by Leuven University Press in the series KADOC-Studies on Religion, Culture and Society.