



Nicholas M. Creary. *Domesticating a Religious Import: The Jesuits and the Inculturation of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, 1879-1980.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. Illustrations. xv + 339 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-3336-6.

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Published on H-Africa (September, 2011)

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Over the last few decades, historiography on Christian missions in Africa has moved from depicting the institutional histories of churches to something much more ambitious. Works from the 1990s emphasized the economic implications of mission life.[1] Recent works have gone even further and used rich mission documentation to explore questions of consciousness, agency, community, aspiration, and culture raised by Africa's conquest, colonization, and nationalist struggles.[2] Beyond such social and cultural histories, scholars have responded to the obvious centrality of Christianity in contemporary Africa by connecting careful archival work with oral history and anthropological questions and in some cases fieldwork. These analyses have revived histories of belief and mentalité, allowing readers insights into just how thoroughly Christianity and churches have become the intellectual and cultural property of their local adherents, with or without the assent of missionaries from outside the continent. Recent monographs on Catholic experiences have demonstrated how girls and women, whether from Fipa and Maasai communities in Tanzania or from within urban sodalities and prayer societies in Congo, have been a part of this.[3] Catholic men have been less central to these discussions of

changing identity, but thoughtful works by John Mary Waliggo and Ronald Kassimir in Uganda suggest that, like women, men have at times found more in Catholic theology and practice than their sponsors intended.[4]

Nicholas M. Creary's book thus emerges within a dynamic and rapidly changing field that has been producing some of the most creative social, cultural, and intellectual history of colonialism and its legacy in the field of African history. It was, though, researched, written, and revised as Zimbabwe was becoming difficult as a site for life, let alone research. This has produced major problems with sources. Creary notes that while he "wanted to study Africans adapting and taking charge of the church, making it their own," his experience was very different (p. xi). Research on "inculturation" and the making of local faith would be, at best, challenging in contemporary Zimbabwe. Interviews with lay Christians were not possible. Basic fieldwork through the observation of church ritual, institutions, and associations seems to have been seriously constrained. The book hints at problems with access to the National Archives, as none of their materials are referenced in the notes. What emerges, therefore, is an oddly archaic

church institutional history rather than the more fluid exploration of Zimbabwean Catholicism that Creary set out to write. Creary's work draws on central Catholic archival materials from the Jesuit archives and the archdiocese and uses these to track the church's expansion, rather than exploring broader questions of what people were up to in becoming Catholic. Ironically, despite his ambitious agenda, Creary thus finds himself following very closely the well-worn depiction of the Catholic Church's first century in Zimbabwe of A. J. Dachs and W. F. Rea's centennial church history *The Catholic Church and Zimbabwe, 1879-1979* (1979), and lacking the sorts of evidence other scholars in Zimbabwe and elsewhere have used to discuss, or challenge, ideas of inculturation.

Creary's study begins with basic chronology, offering a sketch of nineteenth-century mission failure drawn mostly from Dachs and Rea's overview. He then proceeds into the twentieth century through thematic chapters, each centered on a concern or controversy documented in the Jesuit archives of Zimbabwe. The chapter on Zimbabwean girls' and women's efforts to become nuns focuses on the relations between a succession of bishops and Southern Rhodesia's Native Department, with its emphasis on patriarchal power and order. Creary delineates an intense debate as documented in official Jesuit files. From this perspective, debates over African women's ability to become nuns was centered not on their faith or intellectual and spiritual capacity, but on their fathers' need for bridewealth, an issue that remained sensitive into at least the 1960s. Creary's limited interviews with surviving nuns enliven the discussion, but the emphasis remains on institutional aspects of their vocations, rather than on sisters' insights into how their faith allowed them to understand the gendered and segregated world of their families and the Rhodesian state. A chapter on the male religious is likewise centered on formal institutions, examining seminaries and their crises, rather than exploring the theological issues raised

by race and hotly debated among theologians developing ideas of black or liberation theology.[5]

A chapter on lay Catholic associations raises a more interesting and political set of questions as it suggests congregations that acted and pushed for their own versions of Catholic faith and community rather than just taking sacraments and following orders. But instead of seeing this as central to Catholicism in an increasingly mobilized Rhodesia, or investigating the government's attitude toward such a potentially popular association, Creary documents how authorities dismissed its significance to the point of discarding its communications and failing to protect the organization from government suspicions. Discussions of such articulate and important organizations as Mambo Press (and its Catholic magazine *Moto*) and the Catholic Peace and Justice Commission are notably missing.

The final three chapters are explicitly on sacramental and theological issues that have their own files in official Jesuit archives: marriage, translating "God," and debates over ancestral rites. Each chapter is interesting, but limited in its ability to shed light on questions regarding what Catholicism meant to people beyond the church hierarchy and religious leadership, whose perspectives are mostly missing. As Creary demonstrates, the Jesuits of the time understood that in regulating marriage, translating the word for "God," and deciding whether specific rites honored one's father and mother, or constituted idolatrous spirit worship, they were shaping the experience of Catholicism in Southern Rhodesia. Absent, though, are discussions of the input and experience of the laity, the specific and increasingly contested Rhodesian context that had escalated to war by the 1970s, or a sustained exploration of faith and belief as opposed to simply sacrament and hierarchical practice. Other historians of Zimbabwean Catholicism, such as Janet McLaughlin (*On the Frontline: Catholic Missions in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* [1996]) and Ian Linden (*The Catholic*

Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe [1980]), have gone further to explore hierarchy, theology, and practice, especially in the volatile years of the second Chimurenga.

Creary's conclusions, therefore, point less to the "domestication of a religious import" announced in the book's title, or to a crisis of inculturation as discussed in the preface and conclusion, than to Jesuit-sponsored Catholicism's failure to become a meaningful part of Zimbabwean life. Instead of a dialogue, Creary notes, clerical efforts at inculturation acted as "ecclesiastical imperialism." Creary concludes that "if inculturation is to be ... a conversation between equals ... there must be [a] parity between church and culture that the church thus far has not allowed to exist" (p. 253).

It is in struggling with the idea of inculturation and the realities of church history in Zimbabwe that Creary is most interesting. In his title, introduction, and organization, he has suggested the sort of book that demonstrates the agency of believers, and the vitality of Africans' culture and faith. His evidence, though, has failed to support such a celebratory reading. The study's tone thus darkens as it moves from stories of struggles by nuns and priests to descriptions of both institutional stalemate and lethargy over lay Catholicism and a dramatic, increasingly grim cooptation or dismissal of indigenous symbols, beliefs and sacraments of marriage, God, and ancestors. His conclusion rejects the idea that inculturation can reconcile global Catholicism and local culture. Ideas of Catholic liberation and humanism fade in this depiction of Jesuits in Rhodesia or Zimbabwe as Vatican II era institutions, such as the Catholic Peace and Justice Commission, fail to become part of the story. Ironically, the Zimbabwean Catholic Church that emerges here is one that fits unexpectedly well with the condemnation of alien impositions, and cooptation of hierarchical authority characteristic of that former Catholic mission pupil President Robert Mugabe.[6]

Notes

[1]. An early example is T. O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-Historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). Important 1990s era works were centered on the experience of Tswana Christianity, including Paul Landau, *Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995); and Jean Comeroff and John Comeroff, *Of Revolution and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[2]. Examples include J. D. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002); and, more recently, Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004).

[3]. Kathleen R. Smythe, *Fipa Families: Reproduction and Catholic Evangelization in Nkansi, Ufipa, 1880-1960* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006); Dorothy Hodgson, *Church of Women: Gendered Encounters between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Phyllis Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[4]. John Mary Waliggo, "The Catholic Church in the Buddu Province of Buganda, 1879-1925" (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1976); and Ronald Kassimir, "The Social Power of Religious Organization: The Catholic Church in Uganda, 1955-1991" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1996).

[5]. For an alternative approach, see David Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

[6]. See, for example, Peter Godwin, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

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[6]. Ian Linden, *The Catholic Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe* (London: Longman, 1980); and Janice McLaughlin, *On the Frontline: Catholic Missions in Zimbabwe's Liberation War* (Harare: Baobab, 1996).

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Citation: Carol Summers. Review of Creary, Nicholas M. *Domesticating a Religious Import: The Jesuits and the Inculturation of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, 1879-1980*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

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