

The White Fathers

DATE 1871-1914

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE French

DESCRIPTION

In Algeria in 1868, Charles Lavigerie established the *Missionnaires d'Afrique* (MAfr – Missionaries of Africa), better known as the White Fathers (see D. Sarrió Cucarella, 'Charles Lavigerie', in *CMR* 18, 934-58). From 1875 onwards, Lavigerie became interested in expanding the work of the mission into sub-Saharan Africa. Two missions started in the late 19th century, in East Africa from 1879, and in Francophone West Africa from 1891.

East Africa 1879-1914

With an interest in the freeing of slaves, Lavigerie followed events closely in sub-Saharan Africa. Henry Stanley's 1875 letter to the *Daily Telegraph* with its call for Christian missionaries to go to Uganda gave Lavigerie the impetus to plan for work in East Africa. In a 'Secret Memorandum on the evangelisation of Equatorial Africa', dated 2 January 1878 and addressed to Pope Pius IX (r. 1846-78), Lavigerie presented his ideas on organising Catholic missions by 'promoting the transformation of Africa by the Africans, training a plentiful number of auxiliaries, and fighting against slavery and the slave trade' (Pawliková-Vilnahová, 'White Fathers, Islam and Kiswahili', p. 202).

On 24 February 1878, the new pope, Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903), ratified the decree of Propaganda Fide entrusting the organisation of missions to sub-Saharan Africa to Lavigerie, who arranged for the first ten missionaries to go to Equatorial Africa (Lamey, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, p. 223). 'Hoisting the flag of the abolition of African slavery by the Cross, in the name of the Church' became Lavigerie's slogan when seeking the means of launching a crusade against East African slavery and the slave trade (Pawliková-Vilnahová, 'White Fathers, Islam and Kiswahili', p. 202). The party, led by Siméon Lourdel (1853-90) and Auguste Simon Léon Livinhac (1844-1922), arrived in Buganda in 1879 shortly after the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries, including Alexander MacKay. The White Fathers were given permission to establish a mission at Rubaga.

In discussions at court, Mutesa, the *kabaka* (ruler of the Buganda Kingdom), set the White Fathers off against the CMS missionaries and the Muslim traders in order to gain the most benefit in terms of goods and support. In January 1880, Livinhac wrote to Lavigerie about the White Fathers' reception:

Like all travellers who have visited Uganda, we have been deceived by the appearance of civilisation of the king and the leaders of the kingdom, and especially by the great desire that they wanted to know and to embrace our religion. [...] It took us several months to know the real dispositions of the people around us. [...] We have been deceived by the accounts of Stanley, and also deceived, all along the road, by the negroes and the Arabs whom we asked for information. (20 January 1880, *Chronique de la Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique*, no. 84, I. de 1879-1885)

At court, the White Fathers were called Bafransa (the French), the CMS Bangereza (the British) and the Muslim traders Baarabu (the Arabs). The White Fathers were able to evangelise, but found that many of the 'readers' (catechists), eager to learn, moved readily between them and the CMS. Lourdel complained of the 'readers' visiting the 'heretics' (Nicq, *Vie du Vénérable Père Siméon Lourdel*, pp. 135-42). The 'readers' were mainly drawn from the young *vigalagala* (page boys) who were spending time at court (Robinson, *Muslim societies*, pp. 161-2).

Mutesa initially showed an active interest in Christianity, but then wavered between traditional religion and Islam. Having made some converts before November 1882, both missions had to withdraw for security reasons. This led to the White Fathers establishing a new mission in south Nyanza at the southern end of Lake Victoria, led by Livinhac. Rivalry with the CMS and competition for influence with the *kabaka* had shaped the White Fathers' experience in Buganda. Lavigerie clearly kept close control of the mission and its work. His refusal to allow baptism until converts had spent four years as catechumens was certainly a factor in their not being able to persuade Mutesa to become a Christian. The White Fathers' attitude towards Islam in this context was thus shaped by the competition between the Muslim traders and the two Christian parties.

Following Mutesa's death in November 1884, Lourdel wrote to Lavigerie that Mutesa was inclined to Islam at the time he died: 'Mtésa! Poor Mtésa is dead, the Koran on his chest, blinded more and more since our departure by the Muslim Wanganas [with] whom he liked to talk' (Lourdel to Superior, 1 December 1884. *Chronique Trimestrielle* 26, April 1885). With Mutesa's demise, the White Fathers felt that it was safe to return, as they

regarded his successor, Mwanga, as being favourable to them. However, in June 1886 Mwanga had 150 of the mostly Catholic 'readers' executed at Namugongo (see J. Faupel, *African holocaust. The story of the Uganda martyrs*, Nairobi, 2007). There followed a period of open warfare between the various factions. Mwanga was deposed and replaced by Kiwewa, another of Mutesa's sons, who was soon himself deposed and replaced by the genuinely Muslim Kalema. Mwanga took sanctuary with the White Fathers at Bukumbi and Lourdel wrote of his concerns about Muslim Arab influence leading to unrest:

When in Europe will we understand the evil that Muslims do in Africa? We should not think of abolishing the slave trade as long as we leave the Arabs in the interior. The Europeans have no enemies more bitter and opposed to civilisation, to their trade and to their religion. [...] Their success in Bouganda will exalt them even more and I would not be surprised if they do not manage to expel all Europeans from these countries. (Lourdel to Superior General, 11 November 1888: *Chronique Trimestrielle* 42, April 1889)

The Muslims were initially victorious in driving out both the White Fathers and the CMS by the end of 1888. However, civil war ensued until Mwanga was reinstated as ruler in 1890.

Lourdel died in 1890, the same year as Alexander MacKay, his main CMS rival. Lourdel's successor was Jean-Joseph Hirth (1854-1931). That year Captain Frederick Lugard of the British East Africa Company arrived in Buganda to establish order (see J.A. Mbillah, 'Lord Lugard', in *CMR* 19, 436-9). His actions in agreeing to the return of Muslims to Buganda and apportioning land to them led in 1892 to a civil war between Protestants and Catholics. In a letter to Livinhac, Hirth reveals his views about Islam and Lugard's partiality towards the Muslim element:

European agents were negotiating the return of Muslims to the country. For two years, these, always beaten and discouraged, had lost much of their prestige; they even began to disperse in the surrounding countries, [...] without making any more propaganda. The moment was judged favourable to throw them in the melee. [...] To these implacable enemies of all civilisation, was given the administration of three beautiful provinces of Uganda, while the Catholics, five times more numerous, hardly have one province for them. [...] One could hope for some time, to have brought to Islamism in Africa a fatal blow, by stopping at the limit of the equator its invasions towards the south: Protestant heresy came to lose everything. (15 June 1892, in *L'Ouganda et les agissements de la Compagnie Anglaise 'East Africa'*, p. 124)



Illustration 13. A party of White Fathers, with three Africans who trained in Malta, one of whom is Adrien Atiman, before the seventh caravan travelled from Bagamoyo to Lake Tanganyika in 1888

Buganda became a British protectorate in 1894. British mistrust of a French missionary congregation led to the arrival of the Mill Hill Fathers (Shorter, *Cross and flag*, pp. 12-14). In 1897, Mwanga led a rebellion against the colonial authorities with some support from Muslims; he was finally defeated and exiled by the British in 1898 to the Seychelles, where he was baptised as an Anglican and died in 1903.

Language in Buganda became an issue, as Kiswahili from the coast was seen to be associated with Islam, which was regarded as a rival and 'inferior' religion and viewed with suspicion. Lourdel used biblical texts translated by the White Fathers, who used Kiswahili in their other East African missions but eventually turned away from Kiswahili in Uganda and increasingly favoured the use of Luganda (Pawliková-Vilnáhová, 'White Fathers, Islam and Kiswahili', p. 212).

An example of Lavigerie's desire to train auxiliaries to work with the priests is Adrien Atiman. He was originally from Mali, enslaved by Tuareg nomads as a child and ransomed in 1876 by the White Fathers, who sent him to Malta, where he trained as a doctor. In 1888, he went to East Africa and worked at Karema on Lake Tanganyika, serving the community there until 1956.

When Charles Lavigerie died in 1892 and Livinhac (r. 1892-1912) became Superior General of the order, based in Algiers, he handed over the work in East Africa to Hirth. White Fathers established missions in north and south Nyanza, Tabora, Upper Congo and Upper Nile. In time, these became apostolic vicariates. The main focus of the White Fathers here was initially

among African traditionalists, rather than among Muslims. In this they were eventually very effective; Lavigerie's strict rule of four years' preparation before baptism was only applied to adults. However, an awareness of the competition from Islam continued, such that:

The 'conversion' of a negro to Mohammedanism is a very easy matter. He need not abandon the superstitions of his pagan life, and may indulge his vices, and have as many wives as before; besides making the profession of faith [...] he merely submits to circumcision, and performs a few external rites. Thereafter he looks down with contempt on pagans and Christians alike. (Bouniol, *White Fathers*, p. 218)

West Africa 1891-1914

In the wake of French colonial expansion in Africa, the White Fathers extended their missionary work to the French Sudan in the last decade of the 19th century. Previous attempts in the 1870s to start missionary work in the Sahel had failed, due to fierce Tuareg opposition (Shorter, *Cross and flag*, p. 147). The widening of French colonial control, and the colonial protection and support this implied, enabled the White Fathers to establish themselves in the western Sudan (Kobo, *Unveiling modernity*, p. 91).

In 1895, a group of White Fathers headed by Prosper-Augustine Hacquard opened a mission station in Timbuktu. There, as elsewhere, they focused on education, medical work and establishing orphanages for children who had been freed from slavery. From Timbuktu, the work expanded further south. In 1901, the White Fathers established mission stations among the Mossi in Kopèle and Ouagadougou (present-day Burkina Faso) and from there extended their range of operations to northern Ghana (Kobo, *Unveiling modernity*, p. 91). In Ghana, as in Burkina, they mainly focused on non-Muslim communities. In northern Ghana, this was the result of the British colonial policy that discouraged Christian mission among Islamised groups such as the Gonja, the Dagbani and the Wale. From their centres in Navrongo and Lawra (est. 1906), the White Fathers gradually expanded their missionary work to other parts of Ghana (Dah, *Women do more work*, p. 89).

The White Fathers invested in two main 'strategies' vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims in West Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In predominantly Muslim areas, they established ministries of presence, often acted out by services to the community, such as teaching and medical work. Henri Marchal (1875-1957), Assistant General of the White Fathers

between 1913 and 1947, further developed the congregation's approach to mission among Muslims. Based on his personal experiences as a missionary in the Sahara and influenced by his relationship with Charles de Foucauld (see B. Bürkert-Engel, 'Charles de Foucauld', in *CMR* 18, 997-1002), Marchal emphasised a ministry of presence. He justified this theologically by distinguishing between conversion to God, conversion to Jesus and conversion to Christianity. He recognised that Muslim conversions to Christianity were rare, not least because of social pressure and apostasy laws. He therefore considered it to be the White Fathers' primary calling to work with the Holy Spirit in inviting all people to convert to God, which he interpreted as moving 'away from a ritualistic conception of religion to a level of inner surrender' (Gaudeul, *Encounters and clashes*, p. 318). In order to conduct this mission effectively, Marchal emphasised the need for comprehensive training in Arabic and Islam.

In non-Muslim areas, such as among the Mossi in Burkina and the non-Muslim communities in northern Ghana, the work of the White Fathers entailed evangelisation, often supported by educational and medical work. Also, the evangelisation of non-Muslims was part of a wider strategy vis-à-vis Islam since, in the words of Ousman Kobo, the aim of establishing Christian communities among the Mossi and non-Muslims groups was 'to act as a fortress against Islam's expansion further South' (Kobo, *Unveiling modernity*, p.91).

SIGNIFICANCE

The White Fathers began (and have continued) as a leading Catholic missionary group engaging with Muslims on the African continent. This contrasts to a considerable degree with Protestant missions that for the most part 'focussed on the potential conversion harvest to be gained from the vast field of African traditional religions and cultures' (D. Pratt, *Christian engagement with Islam. Ecumenical journeys since 1910*, Leiden, 2017, p. 142). Awareness of the continued spread of Islam inland from the coast was reflected by Joseph Bouniol in 1928:

[When the Arab traders] saw that European nations were gaining more and more influence in Africa, they set themselves to win their ascendancy by converting the Africans to Mohammedanism. [...] At the present time, every Mohammedan in Africa, be he merchant, soldier or official, is an ardent worker on behalf of his religion, and hides his propaganda so successfully that it attracts little notice and so the danger goes unrecognised. [...] Many European residents and political officers look upon Mohammedanism as 'a suitable religion for negroes', a stepping-stone to Christianity. Whoever holds such an opinion does not know Islam. (Bouniol, *White Fathers*, p. 218)

In more recent years, many White Fathers have studied at the Pontifical Institute for the Study of Arabic and Islam (PISAI) in Rome before engaging with Muslim communities in parishes in East and West Africa. They include Jean-Marie Gaudeul and Peter Smith, who both became involved in dialogue with Muslims in Tabora, western Tanzania. Reflecting the twin concerns of bearing witness to one's faith and engaging openly and respectfully with those of another faith, the experience and literature of the White Fathers provides a significant resource and insight into the development of relationships, including the foundations of a more dialogical *modus vivendi* between Christians and Muslims in African contexts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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