Church, State, and "Native Liberty" in the Belgian Congo

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In February 1931, the Congo Protestant Council (CPC) formed a committee to investigate the topic of "Religious Freedom, Native Liberty, and Roman Catholic Aggression." These missionaries were diverse in their theological commitments, denominational affiliations, and national origins. Yet, as in many other mission fields, they spoke together as Protestants against their common rival, the Roman Catholic Church. Centuries after Portuguese Jesuits first launched missionary work in the region, Protestants and Catholics had entered the Congo shortly before the advent of Belgian rule in the 1880s. Belgian law as well as international treaties guaranteed the freedom of religion, but the CPC had complained for years that colonial authorities granted special privileges to the schools and hospitals operated by so-called "national" Catholic missions, while denying the same privileges to their "foreign" Protestant counterparts.[1] Now they proclaimed a humanitarian crisis. Examples of harassment by "certain Catholic priests," included the "cruel flogging of men and women, kidnapping women and children, [and the] destruction of Protestant houses of worship and other property." They demanded that the Belgian government

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[1] The one British Catholic mission in the Belgian Congo was also considered a "national" mission, indicating the degree to which the distinction of national versus foreign matched sectarian divisions. The Belgian Protestant missionary organization had missions in the Belgian colony of Ruanda-Urundi but not in Congo.

ensure religious freedom for both missionaries and the Congolese Protestants they served.[2]

These missionaries grounded their religious freedom appeal in the humanitarian principles of international law, and also in the interests of the colonial regime. They affirmed "the right of liberty of conscience and religious worship on the part of the Natives" along with "the right of missions to fair and impartial treatment." They belonged to the liberal Protestant international described by David Hollinger and others, yet unlike some of their missionary peers in South and East Asia, they did not turn against imperialism. Instead, their rhetoric of rights and liberty sought to reinforce Belgian authority.[3] The CPC denied Catholic allegations that "foreign" Protestants were "sowing the seeds of independence" and placed blame for anti-colonial stirrings on the Catholic missionaries instead. Catholic cruelties "menace[d] the peace and welfare of Congo Belge," they charged, and were bound to "diminish the respect for the government and its laws and its authority in the minds of the Natives." It was not Protestants, they argued, but their persecution by Catholics that would undermine the legitimacy of Belgian rule.[4]

This outcry was neither the first nor the best-known dispute between Protestant missionaries and the colonial government in the Congo. Thirty years earlier, British and U.S. Protestants had helped publicize the systemic violence used against Congolese laborers by the rubber concessionaries and the colony's military police, the Force Publique. That campaign, which initiated the Belgian authorities' skepticism towards Protestant missionaries, has garnered significant attention from historians of humanitarianism, missions, and empire.[5] Other than a few specialists in the region, however, historians have not examined the religious freedom appeals that followed. Philippe Kabongo-Mbaya's *L'Eglise du Christ Au Zaïre* recounts much of this history as a backdrop to the development of independent Congolese churches. Building on that work, we focus on the interwar debates among missionaries in the Congo to show

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[2] Minutes from the Congo Protestant Council Meeting, 13–19 Feb. 1931, p. 7, box 289, fiche 93, Papers of the International Missionary Council-Conference of British Missionary Societies, SOAS, London (hereafter, IMC-CBMS, SOAS).

[3] David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[4] Minutes from the Congo Protestant Council Meeting, February 13–19, 1931, p. 7, box 289, fiche 93, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.

[5] Martin Ewans, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State and Its Aftermath* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Kevin Grant, *A Civilized Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884–1926* (London: Routledge, 2005), 39–78; Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement, 1896–1913* (London: Routledge, 2016). All of these focus on the turn-of-the-century humanitarian campaign against Leopold's abuses. Even Dunn's longer history of the Congo skips from that campaign, the focus of his first chapter, to Congolese independence in 1960 and the crisis that followed.

how humanitarian discourses of religious freedom could subtly reconfigure colonial models of church and state.[6]

Our analysis also builds on Paul Johnson, Pamela Klassen, and Winnifred Sullivan's recent call to rethink the study of church and state by examining the "messy alternative patterns of conjoined religious and political power."[7] Through the early 1900s, a series of indigenous Congolese movements swept the country with messages of spiritual renewal and liberation. Both Protestant and Catholic missionaries reacted by elaborating models of church and state that were meant to quell anti-colonial sentiment. Protestant missionaries argued that a clearer separation between church and state—and with it more freedom for their missions—would reform and preserve the colonial order, facilitating their work of spreading Christian civilization. In contrast, Catholic missionaries and most Belgian authorities blamed Congolese rebellions on a Protestant theology of individualism and the related ideas of religious freedom. To ensure that Belgian power remained intact, the colonial government of the 1920s expanded the cooperation between (Catholic) church institutions and state power. The CPC responded in the 1930s with religious freedom appeals that once again framed Protestant missions as a way to bolster Congolese loyalty to the regime. In other words, the exigencies of empire shaped competing configurations of church and state.

Christian missions varied widely in their aims and their consequences, both intended and unintended, and in their relationships with European and U.S. empires. Most European and North American missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries held ethnocentric and sometimes explicitly racist views. Yet by the 1950s and 1960s, many missionaries actively supported anti-colonial movements around the world. Meanwhile, many colonized peoples claimed and interpreted the Christian tradition for themselves, often finding in it a revolutionary potential that transcended and sometimes directly countered the missionaries' aims. For good reason, then, historians in recent years have moved away from earlier historiographical preoccupations with missionary imperialism towards more complex and diverse accounts.[8] These

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[6] Philippe B. Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre: Formation et Adaptation d'un Protestantisme En Situation de Dictature* (Paris: Karthala, 1992).

[7] Paul Christopher Johnson, Pamela E. Klassen, and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries in Church and State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 12.

[8] The vast literature on missions and imperialism includes John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonization, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Ryan Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity," *History and Theory* 41, 3 (2002): 301–25; Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Amanda Barry, ed., *Evangelists of Empire? Missionaries in Colonial History* (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre in collaboration with the School of Historical Studies, 2008); and Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

more nuanced histories, however, run the risk of obscuring the imperial systems and structures in which colonial missions necessarily operated. Both Protestant and Catholic missions in the Belgian Congo were part and parcel of the imperial enterprise. While they could and sometimes did criticize the most egregious "abuses" of colonial authority, if they were to maintain government favor, missionaries had no alternative but to proclaim their support for the regime. As they struggled to serve and to save the people of the Congo, these missionaries helped formulate the "civilizing" mission and the humanitarian policies—against slavery, for free trade, and for religious liberty—that more often bolstered than challenged imperial regimes.[9]

Rather than judging missionary complicity with Belgian imperialism, this essay uses their interwar disputes over religious freedom to explore colonial models of church and state. Describing these church-state arrangements as competing forms of secularism allows us to see how the colonial administration delineated "religion" in the interests of Belgian rule. Saba Mahmood helpfully distinguishes between political secularism, which "pertains to the modern state's relationship to, and regulation of, religion," and secularity, "the set of concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterize secular societies and subjectivities."[10] Political secularism in its various forms seeks to manage religion and subordinate its authority to that of the state. In some contexts it has also enhanced colonial control, introducing and enforcing religious-secular distinctions that can undermine indigenous systems of governance and authority by relegating them to the realm of the religious.[11] These forms of

Many colonized people claimed Christianity as their own, with consequences that missionaries could not have anticipated. See especially Lamin O. Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993); J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); David Maxwell and Ingrid Lawrie, eds., *Christianity and the African Imagination Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); and David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Athens: Ohio University Press, and Harare, Zimbabwe: James Currey/Weaver Press, 2006).

[9] On humanitarianism and colonialism, see Margaret Nicola Abruzzo, *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Talal Asad, "Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism," *Critical Inquiry* (3 Sept. 2013), https://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/reflections_on_violence_law_and_humanitarianism/#_ftnref31; Penelope Edmonds and Anna Johnston, "Empire, Humanitarianism and Violence in the Colonies," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 17, 1 (31 Mar. 2016), https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2016.0013; and Fabian Klose, ed., *The Emergence of Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas and Practice from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[10] Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

[11] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Tisa Wenger, "'A New Form of Government': Religious-Secular Distinctions in Pueblo Indian History," in Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald, eds., *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 68–89; and

secularism do not necessarily view religion as a threat to the state. More often, religion of the right kind (good religion) is construed as an ally that legitimizes the state.[12] In the Belgian Congo, the governing model of secularism delegitimized both Protestant and indigenous movements by calling them illegitimately "political," outside the legitimate bounds of religion. This approach might seem inconsistent with the wide scope of authority granted to the Catholic Church. But Belgian authorities claimed fidelity to international law and to their own guarantees of religious freedom because, in their eyes, any group that undermined or directly challenged the legitimacy of colonial rule was not real religion at all.

Protestant missionaries, Catholic missionaries and colonial officials, and Congolese religious leaders each configured the religious and the political in different ways. The ecumenical Congo Protestant Council called for a firm separation of church and state to defend the legitimacy of their schools, hospitals, and other institutions as well as their own rights and those of Congolese Protestants. They called upon principles of international law that asserted religious freedom as an attribute of modern governance and a chief humanitarian concern. Meanwhile, Belgian authorities privileged Belgian national unity over religious difference, structurally privileging Catholic missions while recognizing limited rights for "foreign" churches under Belgian and international law. They developed a Catholic-inflected colonial secularism that drew on strands of Belgian political tradition and on Catholic theology to address the challenges (or threats) they faced from Protestant missions and indigenous prophetic movements. And finally, indigenous Congolese prophets called out the injustices and brutality of colonialism. Like other African religious movements that white missionaries derided as a corrupted Christianity, or "Ethiopianism," the Congolese prophets rejected the authority of the colonial church and the colonial state, and with them the religious-political distinctions that colonial secularisms made. They drew instead on the Bible and on indigenous traditions to reimagine their own worlds and demand their own freedom.

Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

[12] On global varieties of secularism, see Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); and Nilüfer Göle, *Islam and Secularity: The Future of Europe's Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). On the historical imbrications of secularism with imperial power, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd, eds., *Race and Secularism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); and Wenger, *Religious Freedom*.

I. HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROTESTANT MISSIONS, 1870–1918

An international contingent of Protestant missionaries was integral to how Belgium's King Léopold II justified his purportedly humanitarian interests in creating the Congo Free State. In the 1880s, as he sought to secure control against competing interests from France and Portugal, the king cultivated support from missionaries who were to engage in the work of "civilizing" Africans and ending the slave trade. Protestant missions in central Africa began with the legendary journey of the missionary-abolitionist-explorer David Livingstone, well publicized by journalist and missionary advocate H. M. Stanley, inspiring the Livingstone Inland Mission in 1878. Léopold correctly surmised that the new missions would be valuable allies, and indeed Stanley became a key advocate in his bid for the Congo. The king also fostered sympathetic Catholic missions. First to arrive was a French order, the Society of the Missionaries of Africa, better known as the White Fathers, which sent ten missionaries to Central Africa in 1878. Their founder, the French archbishop Charles Lavigerie, initially resisted Léopold's advances because he hoped for a fully Catholic African state, but the king successfully negotiated with Lavigerie, providing funds to ensure that Belgian clerics would be recruited and trained to replace the French fathers. Léopold then persuaded the Vatican to open a missionary training school in 1884 specifically to supply Belgian Catholic missionaries for the Congo.[13]

With all of these plans in place, Léopold arrived at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 ready to claim the resource-rich land and invaluable Congo River ports. At this conference, European powers notoriously "carved up" the African continent and proclaimed that the results would benefit the colonized as well as the colonizers. Parts of Central Africa were divided into the French Congo, the Portuguese Congo (Angola), and the soon-to-be-named Congo Free State with Léopold as its sovereign king. Léopold convinced the international community that he shared in the humanitarian goals asserted by other imperialists at the time, including the benevolent aims of Christian missions and the elimination of slavery. These benevolent goals helped convince the assembled powers to recognize his authority over the Congo. One British Baptist missionary who arrived in the Congo in the mid-1880s later recalled

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[13] Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884–1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 42–45. On Stanley and the figure of the explorer, see Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). On Catholic missions in the Congo, see Richard Dane Lokando, *Le Saint-Siège et l'État Indépendant Du Congo (1885–1908): L'organisation Des Missions Catholiques* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016). On the White Fathers, see David Northrup, "A Church in Search of a State: Catholic Missions in Eastern Zaïre, 1879–1930," *Journal of Church and State* 30, 2 (1988): 309–19.

that he had welcomed the announcement of "a power founded upon the principles of philanthropy … as a real godsend to the Congo."[14]

Like abolitionism and Christian missions, the humanitarian ideal of religious freedom could serve as a benevolent rationale for colonialism. It also became a negotiating point between imperial rivals. British delegates at Berlin had Protestant missionaries in mind when they advocated for the General Act of Berlin, an international treaty among European colonial powers that provided ground rules for colonial acquisition and governance.[15] The Berlin Act specifically guaranteed the "Freedom of Religious Worship" for "natives as well as to other subjects and to foreigners," and protected "[t]he free and public exercise of all forms of worship, the right of erecting religious edifices, and of organizing missions belonging to all creeds." But indigenous traditions were not generally included in these protections. Another provision granted special protections to "all religious, scientific, philanthropic establishments or enterprises" that aimed "to instruct the inhabitants and make them understand and appreciate the advantages of civilization."[16] Thus the Berlin Act identified Christian missions and "religious worship" with an imperial project that declared "religious freedom" as proof of its own benevolence.

The initial harmony between Protestants, Catholics, and Léopold's regime quickly evaporated. In the 1890s, some U.S. and British missionaries went public on what they described as atrocities in the Congo Free State. Rubber concessionaires and the colony's Force Publique routinely shot, maimed, and tortured laborers who failed to meet rubber quotas. British and American activists created Congo Reform Associations to lobby their governments to politically pressure the Belgian king. Léopold retaliated by denying permission for new Protestant mission stations; in 1906 he signed a concordat with the Vatican granting special privileges to Catholic missions in the colony. At the same time, he enacted some reforms in the colony's labor practices. But the criticisms continued, and in 1908 he ceded authority over what had been his personal colony to the Belgian government. More reforms followed and the

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[14] C. H. Harvey, "Recollections of Twenty-Five Years: Beginnings of the Training School," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (Sept. 1909): 319; Kevin Grant, *Civilised Savagery*. On humanitarianism as a rationale for empire, see Mairi MacDonald, "Lord Vivian's Tears: The Moral Hazards of Humanitarian Intervention," in Fabian Klose, ed., *The Emergence of Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas and Practice from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 121–41; and Michael Salman, *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
[15] International law arguably emerged as a way to mediate between competing imperial powers. See Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).
[16] U.S. Senate, Article 6 of the General Act of the Berlin Conference, 26 Feb. 1885, S. Misc. Doc. 49–68 at 5 (1886).

humanitarian campaign declared itself victorious, even as the practices of forced labor in the renamed Belgian Congo continued.[17]

These events initiated a persistent dynamic in which the colonial government viewed Protestant missionaries as disruptive foreign agents, while categorizing the Catholic endeavors as "national" missions aligned with Belgian rule. Catholic missionaries bolstered this image with an expanding network of colonial schools that taught the virtues of piety and submission to authority. Meanwhile, memories of the campaign against Léopold's regime allowed many Belgians to see all Protestants as possible American or British agents. Feeding this dynamic were the cultural, linguistic, and political divisions within Belgian society, which had three "pillars"—Catholic, Liberal, and Socialist—each with its political party, trade unions, newspapers, charities, and clubs.[18] All three parties sought to heal the nation's internal divides by inviting Belgians to unify behind the national project of colonization. The Catholic Party, which held the balance of power between the two world wars, exploited the suspicions of Protestant missions to strengthen its own position. In Belgium, Catholic missionaries raised money by contrasting their pro-Belgium "national" efforts against allegedly subversive "foreign" Protestants. In this way, Belgian domestic politics along with colonial imperatives shaped church-state arrangements in the Belgian Congo.[19]

Hoping to avoid further trouble, Protestant missionaries in the colony turned inward and followed the recommendations of the ecumenical missions movement to tackle common concerns across denominational and national lines.[20] In 1910, the Congo Continuation Committee (CCC) replaced the loosely organized Congo General Conference. After the formation of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1920, the CCC became a member and was renamed the Congo Protestant Council (CPC). While their members had considerable denominational and theological differences, these organizations forged a unified "Protestant" position that prioritized the problem of anti-Protestant bias and government favoritism toward Catholicism in the Congo. Familiar polemics against Rome helped create a sense of unity. Under the system of "priestcraft," one missionary claimed at the 1909 CCC conference, "the Rosary was [simply] taking the place of Fetichism [*sic*]." Missionaries

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[17] Grant, *Civilised Savagery*; Ewans, *European Atrocity*; Dean Pavlakis, "The Development of British Overseas Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Campaign," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 11, 1 (9 Apr. 2010), https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.0.0102.

[18] Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1889–1930: Peace, Progress, and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 82–85.

[19] Marvin Markowitz, *Cross and Sword: The Political Role of Christian Missions in the Belgian Congo, 1908–1960* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1973), 55; Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[20] Minutes of the Meeting of the International Missionary Committee, Lake Mohonk, New York, 1 Oct. 1921, box 4, folder 2, Papers of the International Missionary Council, Missionary Research Library, Union Theological Seminary (hereafter, IMC Papers, MRL, UTS.)

also invoked racist stereotypes of African passivity and naiveté, depicting the Congolese people as innocent savages who easily fell prey to priestly deceits.[21] Kabongo-Mbaya has argued that Congolese Protestants in this period rejected denominational distinctions and emerged with a sense of essential unity that would later inform the anti-colonial movement for independence.[22] Missionary ecumenism was more strategic and geared towards the survival of the missions. Faced with persistent Belgian suspicions, Protestant missionaries in the Congo avoided any challenge to Belgian rule and instead lobbied to improve the status of their missions and churches within the colonial system.

Protestant missionaries called for "native rights" and "native liberties" when indigenous agency seemed likely to serve their own goals. At a 1918 CCC meeting, missionaries fretted over the power held by "large concessionaire companies … over the native population and over their lands." The Belgian government had granted these companies virtually free rein over Congolese labor in the rubber industry. By privatizing the industry, the government had washed its hands of the direct burden and blame for colonial exploitation. But the missionaries were not primarily complaining about the oppression of Congolese workers or the theft of their land. Rather, they wanted to ensure that they were free to "give religious instruction" in areas controlled by the rubber concessionaires. They stressed their "utmost loyalty to Belgium" and their care in teaching the same loyalty to their converts. Granting these rights, they argued, would vindicate "the good name" of the colony and facilitate its "peace and tranquility." Despite the travails of the missions and the upheavals of war, the CCC could celebrate the addition of five new missionary societies, ninety-two new workers, and thirty-three new mission stations in seven years. Continued growth depended on avoiding the wrath of the colonial regime.[23]

Another complaint involved the "medal chiefs"—local Congolese leaders approved or even designated by colonial authorities—who claimed the right to determine which missions, if any, could work within their territories. Belgian authorities generally followed the French model of direct imperial control rather than the indirect rule favored by the British, but they made the medal chiefs responsible for collecting taxes and granted them some discretion over

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[21] *Congo Missionary Conference 1909: A Report of the Fifth General Conference of Missionaries of the Protestant Societies Working in Congoland Held at Kinchassa, Stanley Pool, Congo State, September 14–19, 1909* (Bongadanga, Congo State: Congo Balolo Mission Press, 1909), 3–4, 8.

[22] Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre*, 25.

[23] *A Report of the Seventh General Conference of Missionaries of the Protestant Missionary Societies Working in Congo, Held at Luebo, Kasai, Congo Belge, February 21–March 2, 1918* (Bololo, Haut Congo, Congo Belge: "Hannah Wade" Printing Press, 1918), 11, 115–16, 147–48.

tribal affairs.[24] This approach cultivated the allegiance of local leaders while delegating the trivial, messy details of governance. Medal chiefs owed their authority more to colonial officials than to local communities, and a chief's efforts to assert local autonomy and build cultural cohesion could fade easily into corruption and personal gain. Medal chiefs who used their authority to exclude unwanted missions may have been guarding against new colonial incursions, protecting their own power, or perhaps both. In any case, Belgian authorities recognized their right to determine which missions could operate in their communities, especially when they preferred Catholicism.[25] The CCC decried this prerogative as a threat to religious freedom and attacked the Catholic Church and the Belgian officials who favored it. A priest had actually "ordered the medal chief to bar us from the work," one Protestant missionary reported; the governor general had refused to intervene on the grounds that medal chiefs, "as representatives of the native community," must have the right to decide whether any "edifice destined for a religion" could be erected "upon the sacred land of the village." The governor general presented the chief's denial as a native prerogative, in keeping with the constitutional principle of religious freedom. The Congolese community should decide its own religion. In Protestant eyes, though, this policy violated the freedom of missionaries to evangelize, of Congolese individuals to choose their own religion, and the principles of international law.[26]

These complaints reveal how religious freedom claims and the larger complex of humanitarian appeals could exert pressure for increased colonial control. Arguing that the government was betraying the "civilizing" goals announced in Berlin, the CCC petitioned the colonial minister to reverse the "greatly increased authority which is being given to medal chiefs and sub-chiefs." Other resolutions endorsed at the 1918 conference called for forceful government

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[24] As in other parts of Africa, colonial officials co-opted local leaders by bolstering the authority of those who supported colonial rule. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Gordon, "Owners of the Land and Lunda Lords: Colonial Chiefs in the Borderlands of Northern Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, 2 (2001): 315–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/3097484. On European debates over indirect rule, see Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[25] For a detailed account of Congolese chiefs who navigated between traditional authority and the demands of Catholic missions and the colonial regime, see Reuben Loffman, "In the Shadow of the Tree Sultans: African Elites and the Shaping of Early Colonial Politics on the Katangan Frontier, 1906–17," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 3 (Aug. 2011): 535–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.611668. Historians studying the same dynamic in the British colony of Bechuanaland (now Botswana) have found that some local chiefs chose to allow one (and only one) Christian mission in order to foster cultural cohesion and, ultimately, to facilitate anti-colonial nation-building within the territories they governed. See Bruce S. Bennett and Maitseo Boloaane, "The BaKhurutshe Anglicans of Tonota Religious Persecution in the Bechuanaland," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43, 2 (2010): 319–40.

[26] *Report of the Seventh General Conference*, 122–23.

action against native practices of polygamy and marital infidelity. Around the world, many Protestant missionaries supported indigenous appeals for greater leadership roles both in church and state. In theory, most missionaries affiliated with the CCC agreed. But they found it difficult to apply the principle of indigenous self-determination when it came to practices and traditions that they considered superstitious or immoral. As the CCC saw it, if native Congolese leaders and traditions remained in place, then the people of the Congo were not being "civilized." By advocating new limits on the already circumscribed authority of Congolese leaders, they threatened to expand the reach of colonial control.[27]

After the war, these missionary ideals and interests helped shape the new global order that emerged through the League of Nations and the treaties negotiated at Versailles in 1919. Despite the concerted efforts of various Jewish and Protestant organizations, the League of Nations Covenant included no universally applicable religious freedom guarantees, mostly because the major powers would not approve anything that might enable others to intervene in their internal affairs. But the covenant did follow the precedent set in Berlin by mandating humanitarian treatment for colonial populations, who were judged unready to govern themselves. First on the list of the protections guaranteed to colonial subjects was the "freedom of conscience or religion, subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals."[28] The U.S. Federal Council of Churches, which sent several representatives to Versailles, had advocated for this provision in hopes of safeguarding "the interests of foreign missions, particularly in colonial territories that were the subject of discussion" at the conference.[29] Thus the complaints of Protestant missionaries like those in the Congo had filtered up through the FCC into the negotiations at Versailles to ensure that religious freedom would once again appear prominently among the protections guaranteed to colonial subjects under international law. And once again these protections functioned less to challenge the colonial system than to stabilize it and provide a humanitarian rationale for its continued existence.

II. PROTESTANTISM, PROPHETS, AND THE COLONIAL LIMITS OF "RELIGION"

Beginning in the early 1920s, a controversial new religious movement known as Kimbanguism, or the Prophet Movement, emerged in the Belgian Congo.

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[27] Ibid., 123, 151–52.

[28] On the League of Nations and the broader history of human rights protection in international law, see Alfred William Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 91–156; Mazower, *Governing the World*; and Pedersen, *Guardians*.

[29] Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America and Samuel McCrea Cavert, *The Churches Allied for Common Tasks: Report of the Third Quadrennium of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1916–1920* (New York: Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1921), 252.

In 1921 the Baptist Simon Kimbangu led a brief healing ministry in the western Bas-Congo region, where the British Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) had been active since the 1890s. Kimbangu had been a member in good standing of the British Baptists' mission for six years when he heard the voice of God command him "to help his people by preaching and healing in the name of Jesus Christ." In April and May he traveled from village to village, healing people and gaining followers who believed him to be "a prophet and savior." His followers testified that he had resurrected a girl from the dead. Kimbangu interpreted Protestant missionary refrains into an African-led religious movement that implicitly and sometimes explicitly challenged colonial rule. He urged everyone to read the Bible and obey the Ten Commandments, and he often preached on Exodus and the story of David and Goliath in ways that his audiences reportedly applied to their own circumstances. Colonial officials viewed Kimbanguism as part of a continent-wide revolt against Europeans; in Catholic eyes it proved how dangerous Protestant influence could be. Protestant and Catholic missionaries held quite different views of the Prophet Movement, but both groups distinguished "religion" from "politics" in ways that supported Belgian colonial rule.[30]

The government crackdown on the Prophet Movement heightened sectarian conflicts, emboldened Catholic leaders, and once again forced the Protestant missions to reinforce their loyalty to the regime. Catholic writers in the Belgian and colonial press associated Protestant missionaries, or Protestantism in general, with anti-colonial revolt. Although they disagreed on other points, Catholic government officials and church leaders tended to agree that the good of the colony required some restrictions on these "foreign" missions. Belgian Catholic missionary churches, schools, and hospitals insulated the Congolese people from subversive influences, they believed, and fostered their loyalty to Belgium. By categorizing Protestants and their activities as dangerously political, colonial officials dodged charges that they were violating the freedom of religion. As a consequence, Protestant missionaries constantly needed to prove that their activities were *not* political but properly within the sphere of religion. Neither approach took African interests seriously. Indeed, their need to distinguish legitimate religion from potentially revolutionary politics intensified when Africans dared to exercise religious leadership for themselves.

Many Protestant missionaries were initially optimistic about the Prophet Movement, seeing it as evidence of an emerging indigenous Christianity.

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[30] W. B. Frame, "Prophets on the Lower Congo," *Congo Mission News* (Oct. 1921): 6–9; Aurélien Mokoko Gampiot and Cécile Coquet-Mokoko, *Kimbanguism: An African Understanding of the Bible* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 62–79, 65–66. See also Wyatt MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets: Religion in a Plural Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); and D. J. Mackay, "Simon Kibangu and the BMS Tradition," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 17 (June 1987): 113–71.

In 1921, British Baptist W. B. Frame told his colleagues at the Congo Continuation Committee meeting about the "strange and widespread upheaval" in his church and in neighboring towns. While some of his colleagues proved "skeptical," Frame interpreted these events as "what must have been in the days of the Son of Man." He hoped Kimbangu would draw more people into Protestant churches. "Fetishes and charms were discarded," he reported, "polygamists put away their extra wives and the services in our villages became crowded." Another Baptist missionary, a physician, testified that Kimbangu had healed a "cripple." Here, perhaps, was the long-awaited work of the Holy Spirit. But over the next several months new prophets, some of whom had strong ties to mission churches, proclaimed that they too had heard God's voice. Interrupting one such "performance" in Ki-Kongo, Frame called for the crowd to "disperse" and for the "prophets to give up their fooling." While he maintained that Kimbangu had done nothing "indicating conspiracy against the authorities," Frame conceded that some of the new prophets "had wild dreams and may have said something about freedom from taxes and a return to Garden of Eden conditions when work would be no more." He feared that the movement could spiral out of control.[31]

Missionary views of the Prophet Movement can be understood in part through the lens of "Ethiopianism," a concept with a complicated history. Some black-led churches proudly claimed the language of Psalm 68, "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." But white missionaries applied the term to a wide variety of African, African American, and transatlantic black Christian movements that all featured black leadership and generally advocated African independence from colonial rule.[32] In keeping with the larger ecumenical movement, which increasingly favored the indigenization of Christianity, most missionaries viewed Ethiopianism as a valid but immature expression of Christianity.[33] A missionary in South Africa explained that government restrictions on African preachers only gave "thoroughly loyal natives good ground for feeling

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[31] Frame, "Prophets on the Lower Congo," 6–9; Cecilia Irvine, "The Birth of the Kimbanguist Movement in the Bas-Zaïre 1921," *Journal of Religion in Africa/Religion En Afrique; Leiden* 6, 1 (1974): 23–76, 68.

[32] John Higginson, "Liberating the Captives: Independent Watchtower as an Avatar of Colonial Revolt in Southern Africa and Katanga, 1908–1941," *Journal of Social History* 26, 1 (1992): 55–80; James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[33] See, for example, A. L. Warnshuis, "The Major Issues in the Relations of the Younger and the Older Churches" (London and New York: International Missionary Council, 1928), 5, box 3, folder 11, IMC Papers, MRL, UTS. On the broader debate over indigenization, see William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Dana Lee Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008); and Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad*, 60–65.

aggrieved."[34] Few condemned Ethiopianism outright, but they saw in it the racial immaturity, lack of moral discipline, and categorical confusions that they attributed to African and African American Christians.[35]

Catholic missionaries were far more hostile to a movement they saw as a threat to the colonial order and further proof of the dangers posed by Protestantism in the Congo. In 1920 Pope Benedict XV had reiterated instructions, first promulgated in 1880, that missions were to avoid meddling "in any kind of political or temporal interests" and "banish any idea" among colonized populations "paving the way to a political awareness of their nationhood." The Catholic missions were advised to quell any "political" activity, a term placed here in opposition to the "religious" and associated entirely with anti-colonial agitation. At the same time, colonial catechisms and hymnody taught that the biblical curse of Ham had doomed Africans to racial inferiority and that Belgium had freed them from their "heathenism" and the Arab slave trade.[36] This missionary pedagogy—transparently justifying colonial rule—was not considered to be "political" in the sense proscribed by the pope. It was through this lens that Catholic missionaries judged the Prophet Movement. Redemptorist father J. F. Cuvelier, working in Kimbangu's home region, called Kimbanguism "none other than Garveyism or the pan-African movement," a "foreign" and "hostile" influence that must immediately be outlawed. "To allow the prayers of this movement," he wrote, was to allow the spread of hostile propaganda that would "deliver the whole country to Kimbanguism."[37]

Belgian authorities similarly came to see Kimbanguism as a serious threat to the colonial order. The first investigating official saw the movement as a religious delusion that could be medically managed. Attributing the excitement to "religious mania or some form of faith healing," he suggested that the prophet be given a "rest cure" in the hospital. But like the missionaries, authorities grew more and more alarmed. Within a few weeks, officials had arrested and imprisoned four women prophets whom they suspected of stirring up trouble. When reports arrived of prophets preaching that "the people … should not pay their tax," the government responded with fines and further arrests. In June 1921

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[34] Frederick Bridgman, "The Ethiopian Movements in South Africa," *Missionary Review of the World* (June 1904): 434–45, 443.

[35] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). On dominant cultural representations of African and African American religion as embodied and emotional, see Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Such fears led many colonial governments to refuse to grant visas to African American missionaries in the early twentieth century.

[36] Mokoko Gampiot and Coquet-Mokoko, *Kimbanguism*, 28, 37–40.

[37] "L'Avenir Colonial, dans un article … écrit que le Kimbanguisme n'est autre que le garvéyisme ou le movement hostile surtout aux Belges. Laisser prier ce mouvement, c'est laisser s'organiser ce mouvement hostile, c'est permettre la propaganda, c'est livrer tout le pays au Kibangisme." Quoted in Augustin Bita Lihun Nzundu, *Missions Catholiques et Protestantes Face Au Colonialisme et Aux Aspirations Du Peuple Autochtone à l'autonomie et à l'indépendance Politique Au Congo Belge (1908–1960): Effort de Synthèse* (Roma: Pontificia Università gregoriana, 2013), 421.

Kimbangu himself was arrested but escaped amid a rioting crowd. His escort of soldiers shot into the crowd, killing a woman and a child, and several of the arresting soldiers sustained stab wounds. The military descended in force to occupy the district.

Kimbangu turned himself into the authorities that September and was sentenced to death the next month. Thousands of his followers were jailed or deported. The presiding judge at his trial charged that Kimbangu had labeled "the Whites, your benefactors, as abominable enemies" and initiated "an uprising against the colonial government." Against the wishes of Governor-General Maurice Lippens, but in keeping with Protestant missionary requests, the Belgian monarch commuted Kimbangu's sentence to life in prison in Elisabethville, where he died three decades later. After his imprisonment, Kimbangu's wife Marie Muili took leadership of a movement that, according to historian Aurélien Mokoko Gambiot, "triggered national awareness among the Congolese." Three decades later, after a new round of protests and petitions that coincided with the developing independence movement in the Congo, the colonial government would officially recognize the Kimbanguist Church.[38]

The Prophet Movement interpreted the Bible and employed charismatic authority in ways that directly or indirectly challenged colonial rule. Some of Kimbangu's apostles called him a new David who would challenge the Goliath of colonialism, or even a "savior for the Black race" who would lead them out of captivity. Accused at his trial of prophesying that "the White man shall become black and the Black man shall become white," Kimbangu insisted that this prophecy could not be taken literally and that "God [would] reveal its meaning later, when the time has come." At his trial he insisted that he had not incited the people to violence, but only followed Christ's mission "of proclaiming the news of eternal salvation to my people." The good news of the gospel, however, shifted easily into the good news of liberation from colonial rule.[39] Prophetic movements in colonial contexts around the world had often brought messages of liberation, in this world and in prophesied worlds to come. Scholars writing about such movements have too often replicated colonial discourse—illustrated here by the interpretive contrast between Protestant missionaries and Belgian authorities—by categorizing them as either religious *or* political. Congolese historians writing about Kimbanguism

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[38] Mackay, "Simon Kimbangu," 145–56; MacGaffey, *Modern Kongo Prophets*, 33–43; Mokoko Gampiot and Coquet-Mokoko, *Kimbanguism*, 76–78. On the role of women in this movement, see Yolanda Covington-Ward, "'Your Name Is Written in the Sky': Unearthing the Stories of Kongo Female Prophets in Colonial Belgian Congo, 1921–1960," *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, 3 (2014): 317–46.
[39] Mokoko Gampiot and Coquet-Mokoko, *Kimbanguism*, 72–74.

have largely avoided this trap, honoring the historical realities of colonized peoples whose religious movements spoke to the entirety of their lives.[40]

The Prophet Movement and its suppression served to chasten these Protestant missionaries, shaping them into still more compliant agents of Belgian rule. A formal statement from the Congo General Conference on the Prophet Movement, given several months after Kimbangu's imprisonment, revealed the tightrope that these missionaries had to walk. They stressed their support for Belgium while also reiterating the long-term goal of native church leadership. Arguing that colonial authorities had misunderstood "the purely religious character of certain manifestations," they nevertheless acknowledged that the government "had to take severe and immediate measures to check the 'Prophet Movement' which [had become] rapidly favourable soil for propaganda hostile to all white men, endangering civilization itself." Thus, they granted legitimacy to the government's concerns while still placing Kimbangu (and the missions) clearly on the religious side of the religious-political divide. The statement went on to urge all native Christians to repudiate the errors of Kimbanguism and expressed "deep sympathy" for those missions that had suffered "calumnious attacks," either from Congolese people who blamed them for turning on the movement or from government officials who considered them responsible for it. This was a resolution aimed at defending the reputation of the Protestant missions and assuaging the concerns of the ruling regime.[41]

Tensions between Protestants and Catholics in the Congo continued to deteriorate in the years that followed. In 1923 the anti-clerical Liberal, Maurice Lippens, resigned as governor general, in part because of his clashes with Catholic missionaries. Lippens had proposed a restructuring plan that would have placed all villages, even those effectively managed by Catholic missions, under direct government control. Catholic missionaries had firmly opposed this idea because it would have ceded some of the church's authority; Protestants had endorsed it as a needed step toward religious equality in the Congo. While they had not always agreed with Lippens, the Protestants were sorry to see him go. As the *Congo Mission News* explained, he had taken "pains to make the Government attitude understood and appreciated by missions of other nationalities." A year later, when the Liberal Louis Franck stepped down from his post as the Minister of the Colonies, the Catholic Party gained control over colonial policy. These regime changes reflect the tension within Belgium between a liberal secularism—one that could be anti-religious, akin to the French *laïcité*, but also relatively friendly to Protestants

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[40] Ibid.; Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre*, 28–34. On these broader colonial discourses, see Tiffany Hale, "Hostiles and Friendlies: Memory, U.S. Institutions, and the 1890 Ghost Dance," PhD diss., Yale University, 2017.

[41] *Congo Missionary Conference: A Report of the Eighth Congo General Conference of Protestant Missionaries, Held at Bolenge, District de l'Equateur, Congo, Belge, October 29–November 7, 1921* (Haut Congo, Congo Belge: Baptist Mission Press, 1921), 201.

because it did not overtly favor Catholics—and a Catholic-inflected secularism that defined the constitutional principles of religious freedom and church-state separation in distinctly Catholic terms.

From their chastened and defensive position, Protestant missionary leaders made even sharper distinctions between religion and politics, the affairs of the church and those of the colonial state. The *Congo Mission News* explained that, as Protestants, they did not seek to dictate the system of government but asked only that the "native Christian" could be assured "a quiet spot in the village for the purpose of reverent and uninterrupted worship" and guaranteed "justice against oppression." In this articulation of native liberty, the mission churches would not infringe on the concerns of the government—indeed they advocated a greater degree of colonial control—as long as the government treated the various missions equally and protected their members' right to worship.[42] The international ecumenical movement responded in much the same way. A 1924 statement from the IMC advised missionaries in the Congo to be patient, noting that Belgium had "consistently given complete freedom to Protestants as well as to Roman Catholic Missions," and interpreted the new "restrictions" as a necessary response to the Prophet Movement.[43] Protestants should do whatever they could to demonstrate "loyalty to the government," the IMC advised, including switching over to the French language in mission schools, if they had not already done so.[44] The same statement warned missionaries to avoid traveling to other colonies, even when their agencies had stations across colonial borders, so as to avoid "everything that may arouse suspicions of political motives." This was especially important if a missionary's home country governed the neighboring colony. Missionaries had to prove to the Belgian government that their interests were purely religious and not at all political, or in other words that they would loyally uphold the colonial status quo.[45]

Catholic fears of Protestants' influence were confirmed once more in the case of Mwana Lesa, a Watch Tower preacher who entered into the eastern Katanga region from the British colonies of Nyasaland (now Malawi) and Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Mwana Lesa, or "Son of God," was born Tomo Nyirenda in Nyasaland and educated at Livingstonia, a Scottish mission school, before converting as an adult to the Watch Tower movement, the southern African iteration of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Nyirenda traveled as an evangelist of the millenarian sect, preaching against witchcraft and

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[42] "Notes and Comments," *Congo Mission News* (Apr. 1923): 2.

[43] "Missions in Belgian, French, and Portuguese Colonies, IMC Paper 'A,'" box 3, folder 6, IMC Papers, MRL, UTS; "Relations of Missions and Government," *Congo Mission News* (Jan. 1924): 13.

[44] "Congo Continuation Committee Meets," *Congo Mission News* (Jan. 1924): 12.

[45] "Missions in Belgian, French, and Portuguese Colonies, IMC Paper 'A,'" box 3, folder 6, IMC Papers, MRL, UTS.

encouraging baptisms. After convincing a local leader of his ability to detect witches, he began to execute them in public drownings and drew a sizable following. "The notorious Mwana Lesa," explained the *Congo Mission News*, killed upwards of fifty people in the mineral-rich Katanga region before being caught and tried in Rhodesia and hanged on 6 March 1926.[46] By painting Mwana Lesa as the "new Kimbangu," the colonial administration and Catholic missionaries continued associating Protestantism with violence and disorder. The colony's daily, *L'Avenir Colonial Belge*, initially described Mwana Lesa as a convert to Protestantism "whose murders were the result of religious fanaticism." Beginning with its original revolt against Rome, Protestantism led to chaos in both religious and political spheres. The title of an article in the Flemish *De Standaard*, "A Politico-Religious Danger: Protestantism in the Congo," said it all.[47]

This challenged already anxious Protestant missionaries, and they responded differently than they had to the Prophet Movement. Kimbangu had been defensible in their eyes as a religious and not a political actor. Mwana Lesa was not. Although CPC affiliates tried to distance themselves from the Jehovah's Witnesses, they knew that Catholic authorities framed this heterodox movement as simply an iteration of Protestantism. Missionaries and their allies dissociated themselves from this new movement and its witchcraft accusations and executions. The CPC agent in Belgium, Henri Anet, tried to strip Mwana Lesa of both religious and political motives, labeling him "a common criminal" who operated "without a trace of mysticism," "serious religious fanaticism," or "Pan-African nationalism." By categorizing him as a criminal—neither prophet nor revolutionary—Anet sought to protect the Protestant missionaries from the inevitable criticism that their Christianity fostered such "fanaticism."[48]

Like Kimbanguism, Mwana Lesa's movement hints at the range of Congolese responses to colonial rule. These responses cannot be located neatly within the categories of religious or political, spiritual or secular. As in other colonial contexts, identifying and executing witches could become a way to purify the community by purging those, especially women, who seemed to threaten a desired or anticipated order. Nicole Eggers has argued that witchcraft controversies in the Belgian Congo reflected deeply rooted models for

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[46] "'Protestantism in the Congo,'" *Congo Mission News* (July 1926): 1; Terence O. Ranger, "The Mwana Lesa Movement of 1925," in T. O. Ranger and John C. Weller, eds., *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 45–50.

[47] Noting the newspaper's popularity and reach among "the middle classes in the Flemish provinces," the CPC circulated the article to all of its members so they could respond to the "untruth," which most Belgian papers had already retracted, that Mwana Lesa was affiliated with the Protestant missions. "'Protestantism in the Congo.'"

[48] Henri Anêt, "Le Massacreur du Katanga," *Congo Mission News* (Apr. 1926), back of cover, translation by the authors.

addressing imbalances (or perceptions of them) in Central African society. Mwana Lesa and others like him took "moral action" to rectify social imbalances, she writes, through violence against those they believed wielded power immorally—witches—and sometimes through assaults on the colonial order as well. Mwana Lesa's followers accused some of the alleged witches of complicity with the Belgian regime. Attributing communal crises to witches, and executing them, provided a means of resolution that did not directly challenge the authorities but attempted instead to purify the colonized society from within.[49]

Mwana Lesa's violent campaign against witches targeted vulnerable people. At the same time, the missionaries' and the authorities' horror at witchcraft executions provided a rationale for a new crackdown on purportedly "primitive" colonial subjects. "Witchcraft" was a colonial discourse as well as an indigenous category. While Belgian missionaries and government officials debated what qualified as "religion," scholars and colonial authorities around the world sought to clarify the lines between religion, witchcraft, magic, and sorcery. Ethnographic accounts, missionary narratives, and travelogues from colonial and neocolonial contexts served as raw material for the emerging disciplines of anthropology and *Religionswissenschaft* (the science of religions) in the imperial centers of Europe and North America. This developing colonial scholarship invoked early modern constructs of witchcraft alongside twentieth-century forms of ethnographic and criminological knowledge. It served to classify and control indigenous practices, traditions, and peoples; ranked human societies on a hierarchical scale from "savage" to "civilized"; and rationalized the racial hierarchies and disciplinary violence of European imperialism.[50] Mwana Lesa's anti-witchcraft crusade was a

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[49] Nicole Eggers, "Mukombozi and the Monganga: The Violence of Healing in the 1944 Kitawalist Uprising," *Africa* 85, 3 (2015): 417–36. For related analyses in other colonial contexts, see Reinaldo L. Román, *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles, and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Matthew Dennis, *Seneca Possessed: Indians, Witchcraft, and Power in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[50] We are grateful to an anonymous *CSSH* reviewer for the interpretive suggestions informing this paragraph. As our reviewer noted, it seems germane that Evans-Pritchard's classic study of witchcraft among the Azande, whose Central African homelands overlapped with the Belgian Congo, appeared in 1937, just a decade after this controversy (Jack E. Nelson, *Christian Missionizing and Social Transformation: A History of Conflict and Change in Eastern Zaire* (New York: Praeger, 1992). On magic, sorcery, and witchcraft as colonial discourses, see Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Román, *Governing Spirits*; Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Stephan Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For a critique of contemporary humanitarian discourse on witchcraft in Ghana, see Shelagh Roxburgh, "Empowering Witches and the West: The 'Anti-Witch Camp Campaign' and Discourses of Power in Ghana," *Critical African Studies* 10,

product and a symptom of colonial violence. The humanitarian outrage against this movement had a compelling rationale and Congolese support on the ground. Yet that outrage functioned simultaneously to obscure and excuse the systemic violence of the Belgian Empire, as many colonial officials and missionaries saw Mwana Lesa as one more piece of evidence that the Congolese required Belgium's "benevolent" rule.

The Mwana Lesa controversy further confirmed Belgian suspicions of Protestant missions and, in the process, helped solidify the Belgian Congo's particular configurations of church and state. Catholic critics attributed these problems to Protestant theology and its challenge to external authority. They summed up these themes in the phrase *libre examen*, translated in the *Congo Mission News* as "the doctrine of private judgment." The phrase traced back to, and indeed had shaped the founding ideals of the religiously unaffiliated Université Libre de Bruxelles in the early nineteenth century. Now it reemerged in the power struggles between Protestant and Catholic missions in the Congo, and between the Liberal and Catholic parties in Belgium. *Libre examen* was a threat because it challenged the proper relationship between church and state, that is, the role of the unified Catholic Church in supporting a unified state. By encouraging individuals to interpret the Bible themselves, making it fit their "personal and intimate desires" rather than learning from it "the immortal truths of Christianity," Protestants blurred religion and politics and fomented a rebellion against the church that could extend to a rebellion against the state.

In the eyes of colonial administrators, *libre examen* was even more deadly among Africans, who allegedly lacked whites' capacity for reason and self-government. Under Protestant tutelage, the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* opined, "The converted Negro will constantly follow after all his fancies and drift along after all his lusts." The principle of *libre examen* would encourage "primitive" converts to interpret the Bible in dangerous ways. "The thriving of Protestantism in mission countries is always accompanied by the rising desires towards liberating independence," the editors warned. Any misguided "Negro prophetess" could simply "open her Bible and show a picture representing little David slaying the giant Goliath."[51] Belgian missionary G. Dufonteney similarly warned that Protestants fomented a "spirit of pride and independence,"

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2 (2018): 130–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1415155. On the colonial imbrications of the study of religion, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); David Murray, "Object Lessons: Fetishism and the Hierarchies of Race and Religion," in Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, eds., *Conversion: Old Worlds and New* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 199–217; Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West*; and David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[51] "Protestantism in the Congo," 1.

and "this independent spirit born of *libre examen* results in a rebellious mentality [*une mentalité de révolte*] among the primitives turned against all authority whether religious or political."[52] This was a Catholic view of church and state suffused in the racist hierarchies of empire. From this perspective, Protestantism propagated a religion that also mobilized political violence and was therefore self-evidently dangerous for the racialized subjects of colonial rule.

In response, Protestants in Belgium and in the Congo identified the freedom of conscience as a necessary condition for human progress and for the modern state. Commenting on a series of letters exchanged between a Protestant pastor and a Jesuit priest, the Belgian Protestant newspaper *Paix et Liberté* explained, with reference to Galileo, that *libre examen* was necessary for scientific thought and modernization. Far from sparking chaos, this freedom enabled the formation of the self-disciplined modern subject, the building block for a modern society that could be both orderly and free.[53] We identify competing Protestant and Catholic models of political secularism in this dispute because—in ways that reflected both their theological differences and their contrasting positions in the colony—each group mapped distinctions between the religious and the political and posited ideal ways to govern the relations between them. While Catholics identified Protestantism as inherently political and saw no problem with state support for their own "national" missions, Protestants argued that the state must ensure complete equity among religious groups and the freedom of each individual to choose between them. Imperial exigencies and imperatives shaped these competing secularisms— and they operated dialectically together to bolster Belgian rule.[54]

III. COLONIAL SECULARISMS AND THEIR UNRAVELING IN THE BELGIAN CONGO

Conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in the Congo exerted disciplinary pressures on all sides, but most powerfully on the Protestant missions. In the early 1930s, under the leadership of its American secretary, Emory Ross, the CPC initiated a new round of investigations and protests on religious freedom grounds. Despite the anti-racist intentions of some affiliated missionaries, the CPC continued to stress Protestant loyalty to the regime. The need to guard against Catholic attacks and colonial suspicions made these Protestants

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[52] G. Dufonteny, C.S.R., "La Méthode d'Evangélisation chez les Non-Civilisés," *Le Bulletin des Missions* 10, 1 (Mar. 1930): 30–31. Translation by the authors.

[53] "Le libre examen et ses consequences," *Paix et Liberté*, 25 Feb. 1927, box 4, folder 4, Emory Warren Ross Papers, MRL, UTS. For more on the expansion of Catholic privileges in this period, see Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre*, 42–43.

[54] On the Protestant secular in the United States, see Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). On the Protestant secular in U.S. imperialism, see Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, especially chapters two and three.

equally compliant and sometimes even eager agents of the Belgian Empire. The other side of the equation is subtler but significant. In response to Protestant critiques, Belgian officials asserted their loyalty to the principles of international law, including the freedom of religion, even as they built a structure that favored the Catholic Church.

The Prophet Movement, the Mwana Lesa scandal, the Catholic Party's dominance, and the anti-Protestantism pervading the Belgian and Congolese press all fostered an expansion of the privileges already granted to Catholic mission schools and hospitals. After Minister Franck left office in 1924, a succession of Catholic Party colonial ministers and governors-general strengthened government support for these institutions, claiming they built loyalty to Belgium. These policies did not generally support Catholicism per se, but rather those institutions that the government designated as "national." Government funds and favors flowed to a newly formed Catholic medical missionary organization, L'Aide Médicale aux Missions Catholiques. The government paid the salaries of its doctors and nurses and granted it permission to build new clinics and hospitals, even in locales already serviced by Protestant institutions.[55] Meanwhile, a newly ambitious program of "Belgicization" focused on educational reforms in the "national" schools, which were invariably Catholic. The designation "national" opened many doors. Students at these schools could sit for exams that qualified them for desirable government jobs, for instance, while those enrolled at the "foreign" Protestant schools were ineligible for the exams and shut out of those jobs. "Foreign" missions and mission schools were seen as a source of disorder and a direct threat to the colonial project.[56] This was a colonial secularism that honored the principles of international law by granting formal equality to all churches while using the designations "national" and "foreign" to structurally privilege Catholic institutions.[57]

While colonial authorities claimed neutrality, Catholic polemicists made the case for these policies by continually attacking Protestants as threats to colonial order. The most scathing attack came in 1929 from the fiery Jesuit priest Jean-Félix de Hemptinne, who would become Apostolic Vicar of the Katanga province in 1932. In a widely circulated pamphlet, Hemptinne presented Protestant discussions of "native" rights and liberties as political insurrection. He warned that Protestants taught the dangerous idea that "the individual liberty of the natives must be respected" (*La liberté personnelle des indigenes doit être respectée*) and that they should have the freedom to

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[55] Starting in the late 1920s, some Protestant hospitals also became eligible for government subsidies. See Sokhieng Au, "Medical Orders: Catholic and Protestant Missionary Medicine in the Belgian Congo 1880–1940," *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 132, 1 (2017): 62–82.

[56] Dunkerely, "Education Policy," 96.

[57] For examples beyond the U.S. and Belgian contexts, see Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); and Akeel Bilgrami, ed., *Beyond the Secular West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

assemble and build churches and schools. He conflated the emerging Protestant missionary international with anti-imperialism to argue that Protestantism represented an existential threat. Quoting the papers from the recent International Missionary Council meeting in Jerusalem, Hemptinne suggested that the Protestant missionaries endorsed the "Wilsonian principle of self-determination" and desired an "honest conversation" between colonizers and the colonized that would result in the overthrow of Belgian colonial rule. Colonial policy must favor Catholic missions not as a matter of religious favoritism, he said, but because the Protestants encouraged revolution.[58]

Hemptinne grossly exaggerated Protestant support for African independence. While some attendees at the IMC Jerusalem meeting had indeed called for devolution, or turning Asian missionary churches over to national leaders, the delegates overall agreed that African churches still required European and American tutelage. Despite their complaints about Belgian rule, few if any missionaries in the Congo believed that the native Christians were prepared for independence or even for autonomous churches. That pressure was instead coming from Africans themselves. Not until 1938 would the CPC even allow Congolese delegates to attend its annual meetings—initially as observers only—and the "findings and recommendations" of the assembled missionaries that year decried the "immature and excitable nature of an animistic people" who were so susceptible to "mass movements" like Kimbanguism.[59]

Meanwhile Ross consulted IMC leader Joseph Oldham in London for tactical advice. Oldham sympathized with the CPC and advocated privately with British and Belgian leaders.[60] But as the newly appointed director of the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures, Oldham valued good relations with European colonial powers, including Belgium, and he warned Ross against any public exposé. He favored quiet "persuasion," or speaking directly to government officials who might adjust policies behind closed doors over a public campaign that would try to "force" Belgium's hand "by means of public opinion." The missionaries should exercise a "large Christian statesmanship" and show Belgian officials how their work as evangelists, teachers, and medical missionaries benefited the colonial government. If they could do this without compromising their "central and primary missionary aims" then they were more likely to succeed, while a public campaign similar to the earlier outcry against King Léopold could backfire.[61]

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[58] M. de Hemptinne, "La Politique des Missions Protestantes au Congo" (Elisabethville 1929), Missionary Research Library Pamphlets, UTS (hereafter, MRL Pamphlets, UTS).

[59] H. Gray Russell and Herbert Smith, eds., *After Sixty Years, 1878–1938: Report and Findings of Conference* (Leopoldville, Congo Belge: Conseil Protestant du Congo, 1938), 52.

[60] CPC Circular reporting on London Conference held on 7 July 1932, 22 Aug. 1933, box 289, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.

[61] J. H. Oldham to Emory Ross, 23 Oct. 1931, box 289, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.

Following Oldham's advice, Ross and his colleagues proceeded quietly with a series of meetings and memoranda sent directly to Belgian officials. CPC committees convened in 1930 and 1931 gathered two kinds of evidence: documentation of favoritism toward Catholic institutions and accounts of physical violence and discrimination against Congolese Protestants.[62] Yet again, they invoked the language of "native rights" and "native liberties" not to protest colonialism, a move that would have ensured their failure, but instead to secure their own position as partners in Belgium's civilizing mission. Their initial memorandum to Governor General Maurice Tilkens warned that these unfair conditions would only create more Kimbangus and Mwana Lesas, and that religious freedom was essential to the stability and the civilizing mission of the colonial state. Rather than directly blaming the government, Ross and his committee praised Belgian laws that promised equality for all religions. The problem, they believed, rested in the Catholic missionaries who exploited the "excessive nationalism" in Belgium on behalf of their own church. Hinting that it was the Catholics rather than Protestants who had foreign loyalties, they warned that the "missionary pope," Pius XI, desired "a Catholic state, a Roman enclave" in Africa. Motivated by Pius, the CPC alleged, the Catholic Party in Belgium was manipulating the Ministry of the Colonies to gain "religious domination, even monopoly, in Congo."[63]

Finding no sympathy from Tilkens, Ross and his colleagues set their sights on a higher target: Minister of the Colonies Paul Tschoffen, set to visit the Congo in 1932. Ross and his CPC colleagues took six months to prepare a new memorandum, which they circulated to all CPC members, mission boards, and the IMC. This deliberately "moderate statement" toned down their critiques by presenting fewer examples of "Roman persecution" and de-emphasizing any charges against colonial authorities.[64] It reiterated ongoing Protestant demands for government neutrality toward Protestants and Catholics, arguing that it made no sense for the government to favor Catholic schools and hospitals when Protestant missions had been the first to establish such institutions in the Congo, and had never discriminated based on "religion or nationality" as Catholic institutions often did. The memorandum stressed that both hospitals and schools were "public services" that should not depend on a person's religion. In the field of education, for example, the colony ought to implement what "most modern states consider to be a

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[62] CPC Meeting Minutes, 13–19 Feb. 1931, Records of the Conseil Protestant du Congo, HR006, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven (hereafter, CPC Records, Yale).

[63] Emory Ross to Governor General, 18 July 1932, box 289, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.

[64] CPC Circular, "Memorandum to Colonial Minister," 24 Feb. 1933, CPC Papers, RG432, box 81, folder 2, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia. This is the French version of the memorandum, which is slightly different and dated two months earlier than the English translation cited below.

duty … a system of public, neutral education accessible to the children of all its citizens."[65] Thus the new memorandum located the Protestants on the side of the secular modern, as guardians of equality and freedom for all.

The final section turned to humanitarian violations at the hands of Catholic priests. Following Oldham's advice, the committee cut down on the number of sensational accounts and included only two of the twenty-six cases documented in the earlier version. The remaining cases dramatized the need for "secular authorities" to provide "even-handed justice and restrain the activities of ill-advised individuals." They described priests who "beat Protestant catechists, seize and destroy their identity cards, tread under foot and burn their Bibles, and threaten them publicly with imprisonment, just as if they had the police authority of the State."[66] This memorandum strategically presented Catholicism as a problem not only for Protestants but also for the future of Belgian rule in the Congo, suggesting a clear distinction between the interests of the colonial government and those of the Catholic Church. Naming these incidents as "Roman persecution," Ross and his colleagues also invoked a rich collective memory of martyrdom stories. They placed the Congolese in the role of the early Christians, persecuted not by the Roman Empire but instead by the Roman Catholic Church.[67] The memorandum walked a fine line to expose the injustices faced by Protestants while exonerating the colonial government. Along with the Catholic priests, it blamed the misapplication of colonial law by a few bigoted officials.[68] Implicitly, the CPC identified any Congolese anti-government and anti-Church attitudes, which Catholics attributed to *libre examen*, as an understandable reaction to brutal treatment at the hands of the priests. The government was not following its own stated policies of religious neutrality; indeed it was allowing priests to meddle in the affairs of the state. The result could be revolution.[69]

These Protestant proposals aimed to reform the governing model of church-state relations without undoing Belgian power. The CPC had no "political" aims, the memorandum claimed, but sought only to pursue "the task of evangelization, education, and the relief of human suffering to which all good Christians should devote themselves."[70] The same evidence could easily have been marshaled on behalf of a nascent movement for Congolese independence. But, at least in these negotiations with colonial officials, the

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[65] Memorandum to the Colonial Minister (English translation), 27 Apr. 1933, 2, 15, 10–11, 6, MRL Pamphlets, UTS.

[66] Ibid., p. 19.

[67] Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[68] J. H. Oldham to Emory Ross, 31 Oct. 1931, box 289, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.

[69] Memorandum to the Colonial Minister (English translation), 27 Apr. 1933, 28, MRL Pamphlets, UTS.

[70] Ibid., 29.

CPC maintained its faith in the humanitarian need for European rule. These missionaries merely presented themselves, in contrast to the Catholics, as the more benevolent civilizing force. Their goals were to constrain the extrajudicial violence of colonial officials and Catholic missionaries, and to gain equal status for their own missions in the civilizing work of the Belgian Empire. In service of these aims, they clearly located themselves as "religious" actors, safely away from the dangerous realms of the "political." Thus the exigencies of colonialism shaped the scope of the religious in the Belgian Congo.

These protests had little immediate effect, but they did force the Belgian authorities to reexamine and defend their policies on missions. Governor-General Tilkens replied curtly to the CPC's first memorandum, repeating standard anti-Protestant arguments about *libre examen* and suggesting that the Protestants were just as guilty as the Catholics when it came to persecuting Congolese of the other faith. Tilkens affirmed the neutrality of Belgian laws in matters of religion. In keeping with Catholic views of *libre examen*, he held that Protestants could not have the same privileges as the Catholic missions because they posed a *political* threat. In strictly religious matters, he insisted, the Belgian government did not play favorites. Any persecution that occurred could be blamed on bigoted individuals, who existed on both sides of the Protestant-Catholic divide.[71] Similarly, in response to the second memorandum, Colonial Minister Tschoffen explained that while the government would continue to honor the principle of religious freedom and to show "goodwill" toward the Protestant missions, no treaty required the government to grant these "foreign" initiatives the privileges reserved for the "national" missions.

The disciplinary impact of these ongoing controversies on the Protestant missions is clear. To give their protests any hope of succeeding, the missionaries stressed their underlying loyalty to Belgian rule. In 1934, a Congolese Methodist named Vanda Ekanga broke away from the Southern Methodist mission to launch a new movement that openly challenged colonial rule and "the churches of the white man." Authorities viewed the Vandist movement as a new Kimbanguism, and Methodist missionary leaders worked closely with Catholic and colonial officials to suppress it.[72] In 1936, the CPC sent a letter to Protestant pastors in Belgium flatly denying a Belgian senator's claim that the Protestant principle of *libre examen* promoted subversion. The CPC's new secretary, British missionary H. Wakelin Coxill, insisted that Protestant missionaries would readily sign a pledge of allegiance to the government and faithfully ensured their church members' allegiance to Belgium: "Far from teaching our people to put personal judgment over all authority, we try to teach them to respect all authority, and to 'Render unto Caesar the things that

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[71] Ross to Governor General, 25 July 1932, box 289, IMC-CBMS, SOAS.
[72] Michael Kasongo, *History of the Methodist Church in the Central Congo* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 50–55.

are Caesar's.'" Anyone who knew "our Christians," he claimed, would find them every bit as "respectful to the white races and to law and order than [any] others." Coxill clearly offered the missions as an instrument of colonial control, so much so that the CPC avoided circulating this letter outside of Belgium in order to avoid aggravating some U.S. Protestants, especially African Americans, who had been complaining about missionary complicity with colonial regimes.[73]

Coxill's statement was in no way exceptional for the CPC of this era. Its annual Council Meeting in 1937 included no Congolese church members and welcomed the colony's Vice-Governor General P. Ermens to give a special address. The meeting's minutes applauded the "tendency in official Belgian circles to give further recognition and support to our Protestant work" and the determination of "our missions … to be more worthy of such recognition."[74] The CPC also continued to condemn independent Congolese churches, denouncing "separatist movements" at its annual meeting in 1940. "While we desire to see the Native church advance in autonomy and self-government as rapidly as it is able to do so," they wrote, "we recognize that no body of Christians in Congo is yet able to stand alone without the counsel and nurture of a mission body … In view not only of the gravity with which the Belgian Colonial Government regards separatist tendencies, but also of the paralyzing effect of such movements on the spiritual growth, power, and witness of the church itself, we urge the missions to do all they can to avoid these tendencies appearing in their midst."[75]

The impact of the Protestant appeals on the colonial government was subtler but perhaps equally profound. When missionaries asked Belgian officials to honor the principles of "native liberty" and religious neutrality, they invariably explained that this policy would be fully consistent with Belgian law and the best impulses of the Belgian people. Even in rejecting these demands, government officials constantly stressed their fidelity to the ideal of religious freedom and other principles of international law. Tschoffen denied that Belgium was favoring Catholics *qua* Catholics and insisted that the government simply had no choice but to work with the "national" missions that naturally instilled loyalty to the colonial regime. Such denials and clarifications exerted subtle disciplinary pressures on a colonial government that was constantly constrained—not only by foreign missionaries but by Protestants

[73] Conseil Protestant du Congo, "A Protestant Protest," 16 Apr. 1936, G 3 A 11/1, Special Collections, University of Birmingham Library. At: http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/A%20Protestant%20Protest (accessed 9 Sept. 2019).
[74] Conseil Protestant du Congo, "Minutes- Meeting 15, Léopoldville" (22 Jan. 1937), CPC Records, Yale.
[75] Conseil Protestant du Congo, "Minutes-Meeting 18, Léopoldville" (11 Feb. 1940), CPC Records, Yale.

and Liberals in Belgium as well—to prove that it honored the secular principles of Belgian and international law.

After the Second World War, as global anti-colonial pressures intensified, Belgium along with other imperial powers experienced ever-stronger pressures for reform. Like colonial subjects around the world, Congolese people wanted greater leadership roles (and ultimately independence) in both church and state. The Belgian government responded with a variety of reforms, including providing greater equity for Protestants in the colony. In 1946, a new liberal-socialist coalition government acceded to missionary and Congolese Protestant demands and granted the Protestant mission schools and hospitals access to government subsidies. As Patrick Boyle has argued, the new Belgian administration was convinced by Protestant arguments for "freedom of conscience" and challenged the virtual Catholic monopoly over education in the colony with a system of "secular" schools. The government did not intend such measures as a step towards independence but rather as a way to prevent it. More freedom for Protestants, and more opportunities for individual natives in the Congo, would in this view prevent a revolutionary eruption.[76]

Whether in the guise of Protestant or Catholic colonial secularism, the ideal of religious freedom had served in the Belgian Congo as a humanitarian discourse that set the bounds of "religion" in ways that affirmed rather than opposed the imperial system. In his 1953 survey of church and state in Africa, George Wayland Carpenter—a former Baptist missionary in the Congo and CPC educational secretary, now serving as secretary for the Africa division of the National Council of Churches—identified the source of church-state conflicts in the colonial world by contrasting "Anglo-Saxon" and "Latin" conceptions "of the Church itself." In the midst of a rising African anti-colonial movement, Carpenter praised the Belgian government's newfound "spirit of fairness" and defined religious freedom without any critique of the imperial order. Far from an anti-colonial call for independence, this was a colonial secularism and a vision of "freedom" that accepted the racial hierarchies and obscured the violence of colonial rule.[77]

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[76] While most Protestant missionaries eagerly accepted the school subsidies, others declined them on the grounds that they violated the separation of church and state. This issue caused significant conflict in some missions. Subsidies brought improved resources and opportunities to Congolese Protestants, but also brought the missions more closely into the orbit of the colonial government. In the longer term, as the independent Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaïre) continued the policy, educational subsidies helped keep Congolese Protestants close to the government and made it difficult for them to criticize the abuses of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. See Nelson, *Christian Missionizing*; Anicka Fast, "Sacred Children and Colonial Subsidies: The Missionary Performance of Racial Separation in Belgian Congo, 1946–1959," *Missiology* 46, 2 (2018): 124–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829618761375; Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre*; Patrick M. Boyle, "School Wars: Church, State, and the Death of the Congo," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, 3 (1995): 451–68.

[77] George Wayland Carpenter, *Church and State in Africa Today* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1953), 525, 530–32; see also George Wayland Carpenter, *Highways for God in Congo;*

But that was not the end of the story. While missionaries equivocated, Congolese Protestants increasingly demanded the right to leadership positions in their own churches. When the conservative Baptist missionaries in Kivu refused government educational subsidies, which violated their commitment to church-state separation, Congolese Baptists protested that their communities desperately needed the practical benefits that subsidies provided. This issue inspired a broader Congolese push for leadership in the Baptist churches, which escalated into a permanent church split in 1959, just a year before national independence. A similar dynamic played out in the CPC as Congolese Protestants, frustrated by their marginal position in the council, formed their own national ecumenical organization in 1946, L'Association des Amis des Missions Protestantes du Congo (AMIPRO). Some missionaries accepted this organization as a healthy move toward African leadership in the churches; others feared AMIPRO would threaten the tentative acceptance they had gained from the colonial government. Congolese church leaders gradually took more active roles in the CPC and finally, in 1959, gained the status of full members with equal leadership opportunities. These changes were consistent with broader transformations in ecumenical Protestant networks that had been reshaped by Asian and African critiques and could no longer countenance colonial rule. By the late 1960s, the World Council of Churches would adopt openly anti-colonial and anti-apartheid stands.[78]

Congolese demands for leadership in the churches had corresponded to and arguably helped foster the national independence movement. Members of both Catholic and Protestant lay associations, including AMIPRO, were active in the anti-colonial struggle and took key government positions in the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo.[79] Congolese Christians took full advantage of the educational and leadership opportunities that church affiliation provided under the colonial system. Often, they worked against the expressed wishes of the missionaries and took church teachings in directions the latter had never anticipated.[80] As in many other instances of colonial

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Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of Protestant Missions 1878–1953 (Leopoldville: La Librairie Evangelique au Congo, 1952).

[78] Nelson, *Christian Missionizing and Social Transformation*, 66–102; Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Église Du Christ Au Zaïre*, 97–103.

[79] Kabongo-Mbaya, *L'Eglise du Christ Au Zaïre*, 100–2; Bita Lihun Nzundu, *Missions Catholiques*.

[80] Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). On the role of foreign missions and Congolese Christians in this postcolonial turbulence, see Jeremy Rich, "That They All May Be One?" *Social Sciences and Missions* 29, 1–2 (2016): 66–92, https://doi.org/10.1163/18748945-02901017; and Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

humanitarianism, the missionary campaigns for religious freedom had served more to bolster than to challenge colonial rule in the Congo. This history demonstrates how the dynamics of imperialism constrained the meaning of "native liberty" along with the possible models of church and state. When prophetic movements like Kimbanguism or Vandism broke away from the mission churches, or when Congolese Baptists declared themselves independent from missionary rule, they rejected not only missionary authority but also colonial models of political secularism that had isolated the issues of religious freedom and church-state relations from the struggle against colonial rule. Yet these Congolese movements and institutions, too, were formed in an imperial crucible and could not entirely escape its grasp. The colonial secularisms tracked in this essay thus set the stage for the complexity of church-state relations that would persist in the turbulent postcolonial history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Abstract: This essay describes a religious freedom controversy that developed between the world wars in the Belgian colony of the Congo, where Protestant missionaries complained that Catholic priests were abusing Congolese Protestants and that the Belgian government favored the Catholics. The history of this campaign demonstrates how humanitarian discourses of religious freedom—and with them competing configurations of church and state—took shape in colonial contexts. From the beginnings of the European scramble for Africa, Protestant and Catholic missionaries had helped formulate the "civilizing" mission and the humanitarian policies—against slavery, for free trade, and for religious freedom—that served to justify the European and U.S. empires of the time. Protestant missionaries in the Congo challenged the privileges granted to Catholic institutions by appealing to religious freedom guarantees in colonial and international law. In response, Belgian authorities and Catholic missionaries elaborated a church-state arrangement that limited "foreign" missions in the name of Belgian national unity. Both groups, however, rejected Native Congolese religious movements—which refused the authority of the colonial church(es) along with the colonial state—as "political" and so beyond the bounds of legitimate "religion." Our analysis shows how competing configurations of church and state emerged dialogically in this colonial context and how alternative Congolese movements ultimately challenged Belgian colonial rule.

Key words: Congo, secularism, church and state, colonialism, religious freedom, humanitarianism, Belgium, missionaries, religion