

*Decolonizing Christianity. Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria.* By Darcie Fontaine. Pp xiii + 251 incl. 5 ill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. £64.99. 13 9781107118171.

Darcie Fontaine's *Decolonizing Christianity* is a fascinating addition to the growing literature on the relationship between global Christianity and decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Fontaine tells the story of the minority of French 'progressivist' Christians in Algeria who, following the onset of the Algerian war of independence in 1954, felt impelled by their Christian convictions to transfer their loyalties from the colonial regime to the Algerian resistance – even, in some cases, to the point of suffering torture at the hands of the French authorities. As Fontaine shows, this was often a case of radicalization-by-degrees, as in many cases disenchantment with the French regime only slowly led to full advocacy of Algerian independence. After the French withdrawal in 1962, many of this 'progressivist' Christian minority, which included Léon-Étienne Duval, Catholic archbishop of Algiers, the Catholic social worker Denise Walbert, and the Catholic Abbé Jean Scotto, refused to join the *pied-noir* exodus, and dedicated themselves to the construction of the new Algeria. In practice, this usually entailed renouncing colonialism, embracing Algerian identities, returning Islamic religious buildings appropriated during French rule, closing much of the remaining parish infrastructure, accepting the Catholic Church's financial dependence on the Algerian state, abandoning aspirations to a western European standard of living, participating in social development projects, and maintaining the routines of Christian worship with as much cultural sensitivity as possible. The central significance of this story, in Fontaine's view, is that these 'progressivist' Christians successfully developed a new 'postcolonial Christianity', which, unlike most previous Christianities, was well-adapted to 'the realities of a postcolonial world' (p. 6). This new form of Christianity, she contends, played a crucial role in assuring

the survival of Christianity in nationalist Algeria, and an important role in the wider radicalization of Christian theology associated with Vatican II and the World Council of Churches during 1950s and 1960s.

*Decolonizing Christianity* is a detailed and excellently-researched book, which clearly succeeds in demonstrating the importance of Christianity to debates about Algerian independence on a whole host of levels. Its range is, quite simply, impressive: it moves seamlessly between Algeria, France, Vatican II, and the World Council of Churches, covering Catholics and Protestants, metropole and periphery, pro-colonial and anti-colonial Christians. Its scholarship is equally strong: the large quantity of archival evidence is supported by twenty oral interviews, and extensive reading of the relevant Anglophone and Francophone historiography. Whereas existing work on French Christians' reactions to the Algerian crisis has tended to concentrate on metropolitan intellectuals, *Decolonizing Christianity* focuses on the actions of European Catholics and Protestants on the ground in Algeria. It is especially good on individuals, networks, and political stances.

If such a strong debut has a limitation, it might be in its theorization of the relationship between the social and the cultural, as exemplified in its approach to theology. *Decolonizing Christianity* offers a 'social history of theology' (p. 11), which apparently involves the assumption, attributed to the book's 'progressivist' protagonists, and endorsed by the author, that each social context has a single authoritative meaning, to which Christian theology should and does adapt. On this account, 'ideologies and practices of religion' are 'dependent' on their historical context, rather than being active interpreters of that context (p. 223). This 'social' methodology is, of course, different from 'cultural history of theology' approaches, which emphasise the inherent ambiguity of all situations, and which therefore prioritise the

active and contingent role of theology in framing Christians' culturally-specific responses to their social situations. Consequently, although *Decolonizing Christianity* sets out to map the interaction between Christian beliefs and people's 'everyday lives' (p. 11), in practice the social context is given much more explanatory weight: the book's protagonists have a recurring tendency simply to 'realize' or 'recognize' the 'realities' of their situation, rather than creating their own culturally-specific understandings of it (pp. 6, 10, 106, 192, 211). This subtle downplaying of the cultural particularities of the 'progressivist' response to decolonization allows a certain universality to seep into the narrative: the book's protagonists sometimes slip from inventing *a* kind of postcolonial Christianity (which is true and important) into helping to develop *the* necessary new kind of Christianity for the postcolonial world in general (pp. 8, 10, 13, 220, and chapter 5, which is entitled 'Inventing Postcolonial Christianity'). Yet this formulation seems to normalize and universalise the Algerian case in ways that neglect the great diversity of postcolonial Christianities practised elsewhere. As David Maxwell's chapter on 'Post-colonial Christianity in Africa' notes (*Cambridge History of Christianity*, Volume 9), the number of Christians in Africa rose from about 75 million in 1965 to about 350 million in 2000, and many of these Christians are in some sense Pentecostal, charismatic, or 'born again'. In this wider perspective, the 'progressivist' Christianity practised in Algeria begins to seem like a fascinating and valuable story, but also a relatively minority one, and indeed, in some respects, a relatively conservative one.

In the wider context of the global Pentecostal/charismatic revival, similarly, the overarching claim that 'French theology and the Algerian war' played 'key roles in transforming global Christianity in the 1950s and the 1960s' (p. 13) seems slightly too strong. *Decolonizing Christianity* rightly and importantly argues that the Algerian crisis influenced the theological ferment of the 1960s, but given the many other such influences (including the Cold War

context, the Apartheid context, and, especially, the rise of radical Christianities inspired by re-readings of Christian eschatology, as described in Gerd-Rainer Horn's *The Spirit of Vatican II*), the book's contention that its 'progressivist' protagonists 'altered the course of French, Algerian and global Christian history' (p. 21) might be pushing an excellent argument slightly too far.

Despite these quibbles, which may themselves be open to criticism, *Decolonizing Christianity* is a strong debut, which tells an interesting and important story with great technical skill. It is essential reading for anyone interested in French decolonization or European Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s.

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