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Encounters between Catholics and Protestants in Africa

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Viewed largely as European phenomena, the sixteenth century events and the historical and theological novelty that they set in motion might easily pass uncelebrated in Africa. Yet, that omission would amount to a missed opportunity, for the third wave of missionary evangelization in Africa, though starting in late 18th century, cannot be understood without a proper appreciation of the impact of the Reformation on global Christianity and on human encounters in general.

The history of Christianity in Africa is as old as Christianity itself. The first wave of evangelization touched mainly on the northern parts of the continent that were under the Roman Empire and lasted until the 8th century. After this date, Christianity endured in Africa only in pockets, mainly in Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. The second wave occurred when Africa became part of Portugal's eastern empire towards the end of the 15th century and later on when the Dutch settled in South Africa in the 16th century. Together with the privileges they enjoyed in protected trade, the Portuguese were expected to facilitate missionary work in those places that they controlled. With a further streamlining of missionary work through the establishment of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622, significant missions were opened or continued in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola and the Congo, largely manned by the Jesuits, the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Some of these Catholic initiatives lasted for over two centuries, but, by the end of the 18th century, they too had disappeared. It is only Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa that have roots in the second wave of evangelization.

To a large extent, Coptic Egyptian and Orthodox Ethiopian Churches preserved themselves at home, making the first two missionary attempts in the rest of Africa overwhelmingly Catholic. Apart from the Dutch Reformed Churches in Southern Africa, it is the third wave of evangelization, which begun in the middle of the 19th century, that is of interest to the Reformation and its legacy to African Christianity. The first initiatives in this period were Protestant, which clearly communicated the fact that now missionary alternatives existed. In 1792 we find the beginnings of the Baptist Missionary Society; in 1795 the London Missionary Society started with the ambitious task of bringing together Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists for missionary purposes; in 1799 the Church Mission/Missionary Society started; in 1804, the British and Foreign Bible Society; and in 1857, the Universities Mission to Central Africa—the same year that David Livingston's hugely influential book, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, appeared. These Protestant initiatives seem to have triggered unprecedented Catholic enthusiasm for Africa. Missionary religious congregations sprung up with an unusual regularity: in 1802, the Holy Ghost Fathers, previously suppressed by the French Revolution, were restored by Napoleon with a view to educating a clergy for French colonies; in 1807, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, to serve in Africa and Asia; in 1814, the Jesuits, under suppression since 1773, were restored; in 1841, the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary was founded specifically for the conversion of "Negroes"; in 1856, the Society of African Missions; in 1866, the Mill Hill Fathers; in 1867, the Comboni Missionaries, with their eyes on the Sudan; in 1868, the

Society of Missionaries of Africa (the White Fathers) and, in 1869, their female counterparts, the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa. In 1823, the periodical *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* was established to publish edifying letters from missionaries.

The impact of the 19th century variegated and concerted missionary focus on Africa was both unprecedented and decisive. Among Catholics, for example, one could hardly count more than 15 ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Africa between the 1st and the 18th centuries, but between 1818 and 1906 up to 66 jurisdictions under different titles (Mission, Prefecture Apostolic, Vicariate Apostolic, Bishopric or Archbishopric, Diocese) could be counted, manned by 21 different missionary groups. More generally, the number of Christians in Africa had reached about 9 million, constituting 6 percent of the continent's population. The upward trend of African Christianity has never changed ever since. Today, well over 50 percent of the 1.1 billion people on the continent profess Christianity in one form or another.

Besides the Coptic in Egypt and the Orthodox in Ethiopia, therefore, much of the Christianity celebrated in Africa today is a post-Reformation phenomenon. The 500th anniversary is an occasion to learn more about the imprint of the Reformation on African Christianity. First, it is an opportunity to ask questions about the Reformation itself: Why did it take so long to have a direct impact on Africa? Is there evidence of post-Reformation culture in Africa today, say in art or ideas? Second, it is an opportunity to look at actual historical encounters between Catholics and Protestants in Africa: How did 19th century missionaries, who would have left home separately, interact in the African mission field, and what could be the impact of their mode of interaction on subsequent African Christianity? How did colonial politics shape denominational boundaries and facilitate their protection? What was the experience of 19th century Catholics and other Protestants in the already dominantly, even if not entirely, Dutch Reformed South Africa? Third, it is an opportunity to observe more closely legacies of the Reformation in current African Christianity: Has there been an ecumenical advantage that is specific to Africa? How do Christian denominations relate in Africa today? How has the evolution of African-Christian Theology respected or ignored, enhanced or bridged, denominational boundaries?

The conference on “Encounters between Catholics and Protestants in Africa”, organized by the Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa (JHIA), in collaboration with Refo500, the Historical Documentation for Dutch Protestantism, and the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam), is an international forum for scholars to explore the themes outlined above and other related subjects. Abstracts for proposed papers can be sent to the JHIA (conference@jhia.ac.ke) before August 31, 2016. Successful participants will be informed by September 15, 2016, and will be expected to submit fully developed papers (5000 words in English) by April 30, 2017 in preparation for publication. They will also prepare a thirty minutes presentation to be made at the conference, which will run from July 11-14, 2017. Participants will meet transport and accommodations cost. The JHIA, in collaboration with Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Germany), will arrange for the publication of up to 25 selected papers. Further information can be sought from Dr Festo Mkenda (director.1@jhia.ac.ke), Dr Peter Knox (peter.knox@hekima.ac.ke), Prof. Herman Selderhuis (hjselderhuis@refo500.nl), or Prof. Dr George Harinck (g.harinck@vu.nl).

