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(75) CHRISTIANITY IN MALI

Yousseuf Dembele

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	442,000	2.9%	519,000	2.2%	1.1%
Independents	15,000	0.1%	17,000	0.1%	0.8%
African initiated	14,200	0.1%			
Protestants	93,800	0.6%	120,000	0.5%	1.7%
Holiness	81,600	0.5%			
Roman Catholics	342,000	2.3%	400,000	1.7%	1.1%
Evangelicals	102,000	0.7%	140,000	0.6%	2.1%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	27,300	0.2%	50,000	0.2%	4.1%
Muslims	13,379,000	88.2%	21,352,000	90.1%	3.2%
adherents of traditional African religions	1,329,000	8.8%	1,800,000	7.6%	2.0%
Baha'is	1,100	0.0%	2,500	0.0%	5.4%
adherents of new religious movements	760	0.0%	1,500	0.0%	4.7%
people professing no religion	15,400	0.1%	27,500	0.1%	4.0%
Total population	15,167,000	100.0%	23,702,000	100.0%	3.0%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Introduction

Mali is one of the largest territories in West Africa. It is the cradle of great empires such as Ghana Empire (4th-11th centuries), Mali Empire (8th-16th centuries), and the Songhai Empire (8th-16th centuries). During the French colonization (late 19th to mid-20th centuries), the area came to be known as French Sudan. It became Mali after its independence from France in 1960.

Three major religious groups inhabit Mali: Malian traditional religions, Islam and Christianity. Traditional religions are natives of the land. They are part of the fabric of the Malian soul. Islam arrived in Mali in the eighth century, less than a hundred years after its birth in Arabia. It is now the religion of the great majority of Malians. The Christian presence in Mali started in the late nineteenth century. A minority of Malians adhere to it. This short presentation focuses on this Christian minority under three headings: a historical survey, Christian engagement, and living alongside the two other religious groups.

A Historical Survey of Christianity

There are the two first Christian families in Mali, namely, Catholicism and Protestantism. It was the Fathers of the Holy Spirit who were the first missionaries to enter the country. They constructed the first Catholic mission station in the small town of Kita in November 1888. The work of the Catholic missionaries fits neatly into five periods. The years 1888-1901 mark the beginning of the mission.

The second period, 1901-1921, was a difficult one. Due to sickness and the death of many of the Catholic missionaries, the Fathers of the Holy Spirit left in 1901. The White Fathers arrived the following year, in September 1922, and opened a mission at Sikasso, appointing three missionaries at Mandiakuy.¹ The start of World War I affected mission work. For seventeen years, no new mission station started while some existing ones closed.

During the third period, 1921-1947, though World War II broke out, the work of the mission was fruitful. New mission stations opened, some Malian priests were ordained and the first training institutions started.

The fourth period, 1947-1962, was one of the most productive for the future of the work. Two major events took place: the political independence of Mali and the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. This period witnessed the foundation of three Apostolic Prefectures. The number of missionaries increased and several new mission stations opened. Mgr Luc Sangare became the first Malian Archbishop of Bamako.

The fifth period, 1962-2015, witnessed local Christians assuming responsibility for evangelization and management. It was the period of the National Church.²

Protestant missionaries first explored Mali in 1913. Only after the signature of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye on 10th September 1919 did the French authorities allow Protestant missions to settle in Mali. Four American missions made their entry: The Gospel Missionary Union (GMU, 1919), the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA, 1923), The Evangelical Baptist Mission (EBM, 1951), and the United World Mission (UWM, 1954). The Protestant Church in Mali originated from the joint efforts of these four mission agencies. The churches planted by them formed four church denominations respectively under the names of the Christian Evangelical Church of Mali (ECEM, 1960), the Evangelical Protestant Church of Mali (EPPM, 1961), the Protestant Church of Kayes (EPRK, 1965), and the Federation of the Evangelical Baptist Churches (FEEB, 1971).

The founding missions and the church denominations came together in 1963 to form the National Association of Evangelicals in Mali (AGEMPEM).³ Since the advent of democracy in Mali in 1991, several independent churches and Christian movements from Nigeria entered Mali. They came together in an Association called AMEN-REVEIL⁴.

Christian Engagement

The two Christian families in Mali are involved in holistic ministry. They showed concern for the spiritual, physical, psychological and social needs of the people to whom they ministered.

Language Learning and Literacy Work

The missionaries started their ministry by learning the local languages. They reduced to writing the main local language, wrote grammar books, lexicons, collections of proverbs and stories, collections of local medicinal plants, and made great efforts to develop literacy primers. Some missionaries did valuable anthropological and sociological research on Malian society. They taught the new believers, children and adults, to read and write their mother tongue. They thus prepared the future readers of the Bible and other writings in the local languages.

¹ La commission nationale préparation centénaire, *Cent ans: Eglise du Mali* (15-20 November 1988): pp.45-46; Letters to our Friends. Missionaries of Africa: White Fathers. <http://mafr.net/files/pdf/lettrelang.pdf> (Accessed 10 February 2016).

² La commission nationale préparation centénaire, *Cent ans: Eglise du Mali* (15-20 Novembre 1988): pp.43-49.

³ Daniel Coulibaly, *Histoire de l'Eglise au Mali* (AGEMPEM: 2007), pp.10, 45-175.

⁴ These movements and Churches are of Charismatic Trend.

Education and Church Leadership Training

Both church families devoted time and resources to the training of future National Church leaders. The Catholic Church and missions trained several lay leaders.⁵ They created three training centres and four seminaries for the training of catechists, moderators and priests. The Catholic Church understood that education was part of her mission. Almost every parish had its own school. there are two high schools, and several professional schools.

The Protestant churches and missions managed two training centres in the Bamanan language for pastors. The Protestant churches and missions manage four Bible schools and a theological and missiological seminary for training pastors and other church leaders in French. They do not focus so much on schools. They did more in literacy, and professional training.

Health Centres

All the mission agencies were involved in running medical activities in the villages they settled in. They contributed to improving the health of the local population. There are now Catholic and Protestant hospitals serving Christians and non-Christians alike.

Poverty Alleviation and Development

The churches and missions were sensitive to the great poverty of the local people. They engaged in several activities to alleviate poverty. Several Christian NGOs are active in Mali to share Christian love.

The Church and Other Religions in Mali

Though Mali is predominantly Muslim, the church is constantly growing. It covers the whole country in spite of some opposition. Christians maintain friendly relationships with Muslims and followers of traditional religions, and share meals with people of other faiths during religious celebrations such as Christmas and Easter. They receive return hospitality during the feasts of the other faiths. Funerals and weddings are opportunities for Christians and people of other faiths to mourn and rejoice together. The occupation of two thirds of Malian territory in 2012 by rebels and Islamists did not specifically target the church. All the Christians left the area because they felt insecure but no single Christian was killed or injured during that time. The 2015 killing of three young people in Timbuktu, including two Christians, had nothing to do with their faith.

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 (Accessed 10 February 2016).

⁵ The training was done through a programme entitled: Voir, Evaluer, Agir (See, Evaluate, and Act) in Daniel Coulibaly, *Histoire de l'Eglise au Mali* (AGEMPEM: 2007), p.41.