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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Ramambason, Laurent
Publisher	Regnum Books International
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Download date	2026-09-25 20:23:39
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166386

(73) CHRISTIANITY IN MADAGASCAR

Laurent Ramambason

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	11,997,000	56.9%	19,080,000	60.1%	3.1%
Independents	982,000	4.7%	1,620,000	5.1%	3.4%
African initiated	889,000	4.2%			
Orthodox	25,400	0.1%	50,000	0.2%	4.6%
Protestants	6,851,000	32.5%	9,700,000	30.6%	2.3%
Lutheran	3,400,000	16.1%			
United churches	2,786,000	13.2%			
Anglicans	386,000	1.8%			
Adventist	179,000	0.8%			
Roman Catholics	5,167,000	24.5%	8,100,000	25.5%	3.0%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	1,666,000	7.9%	2,372,000	7.5%	2.4%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	1,343,000	6.4%	2,300,000	7.2%	3.7%
adherents of traditional African religions	8,518,000	40.4%	11,794,000	37.2%	2.2%
Muslims	445,000	2.1%	670,000	2.1%	2.8%
Baha'is	18,700	0.1%	27,000	0.1%	2.5%
Hindus	12,200	0.1%	20,000	0.1%	3.3%
Chinese folk-religionists	10,500	0.1%	17,000	0.1%	3.2%
Buddhists	5,300	0.0%	8,000	0.0%	2.8%
Jews	320	0.0%	300	0.0%	-0.3%
people professing no religion	72,500	0.3%	112,000	0.4%	2.9%
Total population	21,080,000	100.0%	31,728,000	100.0%	2.8%

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

The Portuguese discovered Madagascar and Brazil in 1500. That was eight years after the discovery of America and the completion of the *reconquista*, the defeat of Muslim armies in the Iberian Peninsula. In 1502, the Muslims faced conversion or expulsion. The conquering mood and practice of the discoverers have been identified as one of the reasons why Madagascar did not become an Islamic country like the Comoros and Indonesia. They engaged themselves in wiping out Muslim influence, on the one hand, and evangelizing, on the other.

Two centuries later, Islam was reported to have gained access to King Andrianampoinimerina (1787-1810), who invited to his palace eleven Muslims from the south-east. They taught literacy with Arabic characters and worked as soothsayers and astrologers. However, the King's son Radama I, opted for Latin characters to write the Malagasy language in 1823. Since then the national influence of Islam has been only

academic until the 1980s. Then Muslims began to have access to national radio and the formerly rare sight of Malagasy women in burqas appeared more frequently in the capital.

In the 21st century, statistic providers differ in their reports about religion in Madagascar. The number of Muslims would vary from 2% to 10%. The percentage of Christians also varies from 45% to 60%, and the number of people following various sorts of primal religions from 40% to 90%.

It is important to learn more how the historic world church and Christians in Madagascar have contributed to mutual development. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, Malagasy people have received and responded to the Christian faith in relation to five historic phenomena: the missionary movement, the translated Bible, the ecumenical movement, national life, and post-modernism.

The Missionary Movement

Jao de San Thomas, a Dominican, who died in 1585, is reputed to have been the first missionary to come to Madagascar. A plaque at the Catholic Church in Fort Dauphin in the south-east informs us that it was founded between 1613 and 1620 by two Jesuits, Pedro Freire and Luis Mariano. Many Catholic missionaries were reported to have come to this area until 1660, and they succeeded in baptizing more than 77 local people. After that, there was scarcely any mention of Catholic missions to Madagascar until 1837.

The London Missionary Society (LMS), founded in 1795, was one of the flagships of the British missionary movement. Its missionaries, David Jones and Thomas Bevan, set foot on the island in 1818 as Protestant pioneers. They initiated a mission of remarkable success, enhanced by an indigenous missionary movement known as the *Isanenimbolan' Imerina*, formed fifty years later. Quaker missionaries came to support the LMS in Madagascar before the Friends Foreign Mission Association (FFMA) was organized in England in 1868. Other missionaries came from elsewhere. Lutheran missionaries from the Norwegian Missionary Society and the American Lutheran Free Church and Lutheran Board of Mission reached the island in 1866 and 1892 respectively. The arrival of the reformed Mission Protestante Française (MPF) coincided with French possession of the island in 1896. The MPF became the Evangelical Church of Madagascar in 1958. The LMS mutated into the Church of Christ in Madagascar and the FFMA into the Friends Malagasy Church in 1961.

The Translated Bible

The first Bible in Malagasy was just off the press when the persecution of Christians, which lasted for nearly thirty years, broke out in 1835. The Bible was almost the only source of strength and guidance for Christians as there were no missionaries left and churches were not allowed. In the late nineteenth century new insights came to some rural Bible readers when they faced various hardships. The lack of medical facilities and the reality of demon possession were pervasive in rural areas. The Jesus they read of in the New Testament healed people and cast out demons.

A revival movement emerged when a rural man, Rainisoalambo, experienced healing in 1893-1894. He initiated new ways of being Christian and proclaiming the good news. The movement known as *fifohazana* was reproduced and enhanced elsewhere by the effective leadership of Neny Ravelonjanahary from Manolotrony in 1927, Nenilava from Ankaramalaza in 1942, and Dadatoa Rakotozandry of Farihimena from 1946. Independently of one another, they led different movements of the same *fifohazana* pattern.

Leadership succession in the *fifohazana* was not through bloodline, nor election. It was by charisma, by the same way of reading the Bible and the same challenges in rural Madagascar. In other words, the Bible functioned as the mission *alma mater*, the mission matrix of the leaders. After the last leader had passed away, questions were raised about when the mission *alma mater* would raise new *fifohazana* leaders, fitting

its matrix in Madagascar. The same question can be asked concerning the West and elsewhere. Will there be revival or would reform leaders like Luther arise?

Many people who joined *fifohazana* received deliverance and healing. However, the ministry of the *fifohazana* has never been carried out with the propaganda for healing and miracles. They do not call people for healing. Rather their 'shepherds', *mpiandry* in Malagasy, are known for their radical call for repentance and persistence in prayer. They cast out evil spirits and lay on hands for empowerment. The ministry of *mpiandry*, unlike that of pastors, was unremunerated from the very beginning. The movement was anti-idol, solving the problem syncretistic pastors struggled to face. Poverty was alleviated in *fifohazana* centres by common economic activities. Shelter and care were provided for the marginalized, mainly those with severe mental illness. While the reproduction of church ministers takes place in seminaries, theological colleges and through church education, that of the *mpiandry* of the *fifohazana* takes place in revival centres, called *toby*.

The Ecumenical Movement

The problem of unity first emerged after 1861 when the door opened for missionaries to return. This was a dilemma for Anglicans, who enjoyed the dominant position in Britain. They wanted to appoint a bishop in Madagascar; but they were fully aware that it was not fair to interfere with the work of the nonconformist LMS mission. Initially, the LMS made their opposition clear. However, the situation evolved in such a way that the Anglicans did eventually appoint their bishop and built a cathedral in the capital. In contrast to its dissolution in India into the Church of South India and the Church of North India, the Anglican Church refused to engage themselves in the movement towards corporate union among Protestant denominations in Madagascar.

Unlike the Anglicans, the Catholic missions had no qualms whatever about intruding into the field of the LMS. In 1865, they began their own work on Bible translation, inventing a name of Jesus different from the name already found in the Protestant Bible. It sealed a radical division between Catholic and Protestant. When French colonial power took over in 1896, the Catholics saw their time had come. They arrogated to themselves the right to choose and confiscate lands and properties. 'The Jesuit persecution caused the death of several Malagasy pastors, who were falsely accused as disloyal, and about a hundred village churches were seized by the priests,' wrote James Sibree on page seven of his book *Ten Years Review of Mission Work in Madagascar 1901-1910*, published in 1911. The new Catholic churches were built alongside Protestant ones. It explains why, in Imerina, nearly every village has two church buildings, one Protestant and one Catholic.

To follow up the 1910 Edinburgh meeting, missionary societies working in Madagascar formed the Inter-Missionary Conference in 1913. In 1950, the Lutheran churches merged to constitute the Malagasy Lutheran Church. The churches started by the British and French missionaries united into the Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM) in 1968. The difficult negotiations were monitored closely by the World Council of Churches and reported in the *Ecumenical Review*. It was seen as puzzling as it was the only union project making the sacraments optional; the Quakers, who did not recognize any sacrament, exercised a great deal of self-denial to make this church union possible. The Inter-Missionary Conference changed into the Federation of Protestant Churches in 1964. It is now the platform where the FJKM and the Malagasy Lutheran Church have inter-communion. The process of uniting the two churches has stalled since July 1987, when the Lutheran General Synod officially rejected the goal of organic unity.

The strain on relations between Protestants and Catholics began to ease on the eve of political independence. In 1959, a flood disaster prompted the Christians to come together and act under the guidance of an Ecumenical Social Council. In 1970, an Ecumenical Commission on Theology was formed. The National Council of Churches (FFKM) was inaugurated in 1979, a year after the agreement to have a

common name for Jesus, *Jesoa*. The common name facilitated the ecumenical translation of the Bible which was published in 1991. Later, the Lutherans voiced their preference for the old Protestant pronunciation and convinced the Bible Society to re-use *Jesosy* in a new version of the Protestant Bible (!). Despite this backtracking, the FFKM is among the few national church councils in the world which included Catholics.

The mainline churches are known as ‘senior’ churches. The others, which are not Catholic, that is, the FJKM, Lutheran and Anglican, are termed ‘junior’ churches because they came later and have smaller memberships. They either split from the mainline churches or evolved from missions based overseas. Some of them co-operated with the ‘senior’ churches within the Malagasy Bible Society. Others would actively shun or criticize the mainline churches. In contrast, the historic *fifohazana* leaders refrained from starting new denominations, though they had the power to do so. However, the *Fifohazana Soatanana* had its own ecumenical problem. After the death of the first leader, the movement split into two groups. They are still separated, though their headquarters are located in the same town.

National Life

Madagascar is a nation constituted by eighteen main groups of people speaking the same language with various dialects. The Merina group is the largest. It is the most Christianized because the early missions successfully focused their work on Imerina. Coming from the periphery of politics and culture in Britain, the nonconformist LMS and Quaker missions occupied the very centre of politics and culture in Madagascar. In that context, the nonconformist roots of the LMS were tested on many occasions. The Merina were associated with Christianity by some ethnic groups. For that reason, Merina military success closed the doors on further Christianization. Colonial France came and defeated the Merina in 1896. They confiscated LMS properties, and steered education towards their own interests. Madagascar constitutes an example of the worst effects of French colonialism and post-independence possessiveness. The churches have failed to produce a satisfactorily patriotic political class. What they achieved since Independence has been to bring warring factions together round a table to solve major crises.

The early missions sowed the seeds of European civilization. They started the first school and college, created the Malagasy alphabet, translated the Bible, and carried out development projects. However, economic development has remained an unfulfilled dream for Malagasy people. The ruthless IMF/World Bank restructuring and wild devaluations from the 1980s have failed. They brought the economy to its knees with little prospect of rescue. Church education has not helped young people stand on their own feet and contribute to the economic development of the island. They fail to compete and win in an imposed hyper-capitalistic world.

Post-modernism

Madagascar was hit by a post-Christian mood in 1905 with the arrival of the French governor Victor Augagneur. He prohibited classes in church buildings and cut government subsidies to church schools. Open-air evangelism was discouraged, and public conferences and debates were organized to ridicule religion. The French doubt in ‘grand narratives’ was forced on the Malagasy. Freemasonry and secret societies gained members.

Changes in the churches in the West and the political situation in Madagascar served as forces to create a post-missionary situation. In the 1960s and 1970s, political independence and the numerical decline of the churches, among other factors, transformed the nature of the missionary societies. The LMS became the Council for World Mission in 1977 and shifted its head offices from London to Singapore in 2011. The FFMA ceased to be an independent body in 1927 and has been known as the Quaker Peace and Social

Witness since 2001. The MPF retracted to be a Département Evangélique Français d'Action Apostolique in 1970, keeping the money and properties of the mother missionary society in France. The Communauté Evangélique d'Action Apostolique, formed in 1971, unites the churches started by the missionary society overseas. It remains based in France.

The post-Christian mood was integrated into a philosophical framework, post-modernism, which believes truth to be plural. A mass conversion from 'exclusivist' to 'pluralist' religious outlooks gripped the West in the 1990s. The change took place while missionary Islam, with pre-modern values, hit the news on television. Additionally, self-styled prophets and people who are alleged to have gone to hell or heaven came back to tell stories that gripped people's imagination and attracted attention in Madagascar.

Are the churches, founded by the missionaries, following the downward turn of western churches? Opinions diverge – however, two remarks can be made. First, Malagasy diaspora Christians are increasing in the West, the Middle East and elsewhere. Their presence has a missionary function different from that of the missionaries, who came to their land in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The missionaries had funding, organizational, political, military and cultural domination. The Malagasy in the diaspora have very little, if any, of these means. Second, the co-operation of *fifohazana* with the churches, founded by the missionaries, is helping the churches avoid the declining trend of their mother churches in Europe and America. Every mainline church is, in fact, growing. *Fifohazana* constitutes a specific Malagasy contribution to world mission and 'doing church'.

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