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# Encounters between Catholics and Protestants in Africa

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24-10-2016

July 11-14 2017, the Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa (JHIA) will host a conference in Nairobi on the subject of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants on African soil in African history. 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 cannot be understood without a proper appreciation of the impact of the Reformation on global Christianity and on human encounters in general.

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. The impact of the 19th century variegated and concerted missionary focus on Africa was both unprecedented and decisive.

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? 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? 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

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(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.

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