Making disciples of all nations: Adaptation and Christian civilization in the missiological thought of Charles Lavigerie

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The phenomenal growth of the Christian churches in Africa has been noted by a host of commentators in North America, with observers like Phillip Jenkins going so far as to call Africa the next epicenter of global Christianity. [1] Despite this growing consensus, however, careful studies of the missionary origins of African Christianity remain elusive, especially in a post-colonial, post-modern Western academy with decidedly ambiguous feelings about Christian missionary history. The story is no different for Charles Cardinal Lavigerie, 19th century churchman and founder of the Missionaries of Africa. Convinced that Lavigerie's missiological vision was critical to the early gestation of modern African Catholicism – and retains some surprising lessons for our own post-Christendom context – I will focus today on Lavigerie's vision of mission and Christian civilization in cross-cultural encounter. After highlighting essential aspects of his biography (I am a church historian, after all!), I will devote the majority of this paper to Lavigerie's surprisingly-prescient understanding of European adaptation to the African context as well as the explicitly "civilizational" dimensions of his missionary vision. Finally, my conclusion will briefly address potential lessons for today's missiological and cross-cultural conversations.

I. Biographical Background

Archbishop of Algiers and Carthage, founder of two African missionary orders and an Eastern Rite seminary, international crusader against slavery, diplomat between Paris and Rome, confidant of Pope Leo XIII – Charles Lavigerie's résumé encapsulated many of the most important movements, people, and events in 19th century Catholicism. Lavigerie remains one of the seminal figures in modern European and African Christian history, with his White Fathers becoming perhaps the most influential missionary congregation in 20th century Africa. [2]

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[1] Cf. P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2] John Baur notes that White Father influence extended well beyond the missionary era, with the first three African bishops and first two African cardinals all trained in White Father seminaries. By the 1960s, Missionaries of Africa (M.Afr.) dioceses would include one-sixth of African territory and one-quarter of Catholic Christians on the continent, and the Society would count 4,350 missionaries in its ranks (cf. J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History, 62-1992* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 1994), 187.

Born in 1825 and raised in a stridently anti-clerical family, Lavigerie's priestly vocation was nurtured not at home but rather by the Sulpicians during secondary and seminary studies. The Sulpicians shaped much of Lavigerie's developing ecclesial outlook, from the importance of the sacramental life and the universal character of the priest's apostolate to the need for church/state *rapprochement* in polarized mid-century France. [3] After his ordination in 1849, Lavigerie pursued doctoral work on the ancient Syriac church, sparking life-long interest in the adult catechumenate, missionary adaptation, and the Eastern churches. After teaching church history at the Sorbonne, Lavigerie spent important periods in the 1850s and 1860s ministering among Maronite Christians in Lebanon, working as the French auditor for the Roman Rota, and serving his first episcopal appointment in France. Crucial aspects of Lavigerie's future life – his opening to Uniate Rite churches, his awareness of Muslim culture, his role as a bridge between the Vatican and the French republican government, and his cultivation of close personal relationships with Pope Pius IX – would emerge during this decade. [4]

1866 marked an important turning point in Lavigerie's biography. It was on the feast of St. Martin of Tours that Lavigerie received a dream of "dark-skinned people" asking him to restore the African Church. Taking this as a sign from God, Lavigerie petitioned Rome for the newly-vacant see of Algiers. Shortly thereafter, he started two new missionary congregations, the Missionaries of Africa and the Sisters of Africa, dedicated to Our Lady of Africa and required to take a single oath to serve in the African missions. [5] In perhaps their first act of cultural adaptation, the new orders adopted the white *gandourah* dress common in Arab North Africa, leading to their popular moniker as the "White Fathers" and "White Sisters." It was here in

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[3] F. Renault, *Cardinal Lavigerie: Churchman, Prophet, Missionary*. Trans. J. O'Donohue (London/Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press, 1994), 13-14.

[4] Ibid, 31-58.

[5] Note the language of the initial charter of the Missionaries of Africa: "A Society of secular priests, dedicated to the Missions of Africa, living in community, practicing the same rule, and bound to each other and to the common work by an oath to consecrate themselves to the Missions of Africa, either within the Delegation or beyond its boundaries, according to the rules of the Society and in obedience to its Superiors" (quoted in Renault, 153).

Algeria that Bishop Lavigerie anticipated reviving the ancient North African church, inaugurating an apostolate to the Muslims, and establishing a missionary gateway to the rest of Africa. [6]

He would only make headway on the last of his three pastoral goals. Stymied by an anti-clerical colonial government, a hostile settler population, and a committed Muslim populace, his appeals to the local Berber population to "recover the ancient faith" of Christianity fell on deaf ears. Frustrated with the dearth of conversions, Lavigerie in the 1870s turned his proselytizing zeal to the emerging mission fields south of the Sahara. Through his sizeable influence in Rome, Lavigerie was able to gain access for his order to the most promising emergent mission field in sub-Saharan Africa – the Buganda kingdom on the shores of Lake Victoria. Buganda would become the paradigm for the order's missionary work in equatorial Africa, a model that should be noted for its rapid transition to indigenous leadership.

The 1880s found Lavigerie facing an increasingly anti-clerical French government at home and an increasingly competitive "scramble for Africa" in the mission fields. Named a cardinal in 1880, Lavigerie's final decade would be occupied with inaugurating the *First Ralliément* within France, combating the international slave trade, building relations with Eastern Rite Catholics, and overseeing the continued growth of the White Father missions in central Africa. He died in November 1892, surrounded by confréres from as far away as Jerusalem and Buganda and praised in Paris and Rome alike. [7] A century later the British Catholic historian Adrian Hastings would call Lavigerie "the most outstanding Catholic missionary strategist of the 19th century," [8] with John Baur terming the White Fathers as the "most powerful Catholic missionary society working in Africa" in the 20th century. [9]

A. <u>Adapting the Church to Africa</u>

If Charles Lavigerie's missiological vision could be summarized in one scriptural verse, it would likely be 1 Corinthians 9:22. "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have

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[6] Ibid, 69-70.
[7] Upon hearing of his death, Leo XIII is said to have remarked, "I loved him as a brother, as Peter loved Andrew" (Renault, 427).
[8] A. Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 254.
[9] Baur, *2000 Years*, 185.

become all things to all, to save at least some." At the White Fathers' First General Chapter meeting in 1874, Lavigerie called on his missionaries to approximate as much as possible the exterior habits of the people they were trying to convert, from clothing to language to diet. [10] For seminary teachers, this meant teaching in the local language rather than their native European tongues; for missionaries this implied reading, writing, and speaking in the local language. [11] While such teachings were by no means groundbreaking in Christian mission history, Lavigerie's unflagging commitment to vernacular translation should be noted – he would go so far as to require his missionaries to exclusively speak the local language within six months of their arrival.[12]

In addition, Lavigerie exhorted his missionaries to transcend their loyalty to *patria*. While it was normal to possess nationalistic sentiments in favor of "the land of one's birth," the gospel called a priest to "rise above this (natural) law and extend to all nations the same love." [13] In this vein, Lavigerie reminded his missionaries that their primary identity should be one of "Christian" and "apostle" rather than "*Français or Européens.*" [14] Lavigerie would continually combat the nationalist card in his White Father missions, a card that had become significantly stronger in light of the Franco-Prussian war, the Italian nationalist movement, and the growing "scramble for Africa" among the great powers of Europe. [15]

In terms of education, Lavigerie argued that all endeavors should be judged by the principle of utility – i.e., how would this technical or humanistic training aid the African student in building up his local community? For this reason, Lavigerie felt strongly that African students

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[10] "*Ce caractère, c'est de se rapprocher des indigènes par toutes les habitudes exterierures, par le langage d'abord, par le vêtement, par la nourriture, conformément à l'exemple de l'Apôtre: "Je me suis fait tout á tous afin de les sauver tous.*" C. Lavigerie, "Initial instructions for Arab education in North Africa (11 November 1874)," in X. de Montclos (ed.), *Le Cardinal Lavigerie: La Mission Universelle de L'Eglise* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1968), 94. See also Renault, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, 107-08.
[11] C. Lavigerie, "New instructions for the 1879 caravan," in Montclos, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, 104.
[12] Hastings, 281; Renault, 239.
[13] As quoted in Renault, 161.
[14] C. Lavigerie, "Initial instructions," in Montclos, 94.
[15] "*Ce ne sont pas seulement des Français que je voi parmi vous, comme cela est naturel..j'y vois les noms de l'Angleterre, de l'Allemagne, de la Belgique, en un mot, de toutes les puissances qui, jusqu'à ce jour, ont combattu pour la civilisation africaine.*" (C. Lavigerie, "Instructions for 20 missionaries departing for equatorial Africa (29 June 1880)," in Montclos, 97). It seems particularly significant that Lavigerie would include "l'Allemagne" in this list only ten years after France's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Prussians.

should remain in country, avoiding the risk of bringing them to Paris or Rome and transforming them into "black Europeans." [16] In his 1879 missionary instructions for the first caravan headed to Buganda, Lavigerie pointed out that it would be "absurd" to try to educate African students in the same way as French students. [17]

In his efforts to adapt Christianity to the African context, Lavigerie established a new ecclesial office for promising young African Christians – the "medical catechist." Such teachers would be trained in both the arts of medicine and the truths of the Catholic faith, allowing them to fulfill the mission laid out by Jesus in Luke 10:9 – "Heal the sick and say to people, 'The Kingdom of God has come among you.'" [18] They would offer much-needed practical and healing skills for their communities, which Lavigerie saw as particularly important in the African context.[19] Significantly, such a role would allow the African catechists to marry and raise children. In this context, it should be noted that near the end of his life, Lavigerie showed an openness to loosening the celibacy requirements for secular priests in Africa, going so far as to petition Pope Leo XIII in 1890 to allow for a limited experiment with married priests in Africa. [20]

Lavigerie's openness to adaptation in language, education, and even ecclesial office reflected another crucial aspect of his missiological vision: his relatively optimistic anthropology. For Lavigerie, the death-knell of the missions would not be polygamy or idolatry, but rather a pseudo-Jansenist expectation for a "pure" church which he saw as a particular risk for French missionaries. [21] In the face of this, Lavigerie insisted that the missionary's true role was one of

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[16] Renault, 224.

[17] "*Ce sont de Nègres de l'intérieur d l'Afrique, qu'il faut élever de façon àles rendre le plus utiles possible à leurs compatriotes, et non des enfants destinés à vivre en France*." C. Lavigerie, "New instructions for the 1879 caravan," in Montclos, 104.

[18] Ibid, 100.

[19] "*Tous les hommes veulent guérir lorsqu'ils sont malades. Tous ont horreur de souffrir et de mourir*." C. Lavigerie, "New instructions to the White Fathers of Equatorial Africa," in C. Lavigerie, *Écrits d'Afrique*. Ed. A. Hamman. (Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1966), 177. While several dozen African students were enrolled in medical catechist programs in the late 1880s and early 1890s, the program was discontinued after Lavigerie's death in 1892.

[20] Hastings, 297.

[21] As he writes, "*en leur imposant un fardeau trop lourd pour la faiblesse commune*." C. Lavigerie, "New instructions for the 1879 caravan," in Montclos, 103.

Christian consolation, not defeatist discouragement. [22] Countering the negative views of neo-Jansenist and Darwinian racialist alike, Lavigerie emphasized the doctrine of creation over any Hamitic fall, arguing that Africans "possessed that original light given by God to all men and which Scripture calls God's Law written on the heart." [23]

B. <u>Adapting Africa to the Church: A Holistic Mission</u>

Lavigerie envisioned Christian evangelization as a holistic, communal process. "Individual conversion" thus played a small role in his missiological paradigm; it was much more important to Christianize a community than recruit a few lonely counter-cultural souls to the faith. His civilizational model of mission deeply involved him in the eradication of such social sins as slavery. Reflecting the medieval monastic ideal that Lavigerie cherished, [24] this worldview placed great emphasis on intellectual formation, medical care, social services, and the overall development of arts, letters, and culture. These sentiments also help to explain why Lavigerie invested so much energy in such seemingly doomed causes as restoring the ancient North African church, establishing new Catholic kingdoms in central Africa, and starting a new order of "Armed Auxiliaries" to protect the African missions.

For Lavigerie, the successful transition from mission territory to young church (whether in the ancient Roman empire, barbarian Europe, or Spanish America) always involved collective evangelization. As early as the late 1860s, the Archbishop of Algiers was advising his priests to adopt a cautious approach to mission that would aim for the gradual conversion of entire communities rather than the immediate baptism of eager individuals. [25] This in part explains his commitment to a lengthy four-year adult catechumenate (a model which would have a strong influence on Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* and post-conciliar Catholic catechetical practice).

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[22] Ibid. As he wrote elsewhere, "The worst thing in the Mission is discouragement. Discouragement comes when we have indulged in prior illusions, and when we are not determined to transcend, in a spirit of faith, all obstacles and all feelings of disgust…there is nothing more lamentable than to see missionaries treating these poor peoples with sourness and bitterness, seeing nothing but their faults…" (quoted in Renault, 159).

[23] Renault, 240.

[24] Renault writes that Lavigerie envisioned "great religious centers regenerating Africa as the abbeys of medieval Europe had restored a dying continent" (418).

[25] Renault, 182.

In addition, successful communal conversion typically involved a "top-down" approach to mission. Lavigerie saw no shame in explicitly targeting social and political elites with the gospel message, believing that the Christianization of entire societies would require the conversion of chiefs. [26] This may explain why Lavigerie took a somewhat latitudinarian attitude on the issue of polygamous practices among tribal leaders. While recognizing the sinful nature of such acts according to the evangelical law of Christ, Lavigerie argued in an 1880 letter to Uganda superior Léon Livinhac that polygamy was not inherently contrary to the natural law, and therefore the missionary should not force the chief to give up his wives prior to baptism. [27] Here we may recognize *realpolitik* as the flip side of adaptation, with Lavigerie desperate to establish an African Catholic kingdom as a bulwark against Arab slavers and Protestant missionaries alike.

Where Lavigerie seems most open to post-colonial critique was in his unambiguous commitment to "civilizing and transforming Africans," [28] introducing European arts, trades, and religion into Africa. It is important to remember, however, that for Lavigerie this civilizing mission had noble, if ultimately patronizing, ends: 1) elevating the African in all aspects of his/her material life, 2) imparting education that would raise up a new generation of indigenous Christian leaders, and 3) combating and ultimately ending the slave trade. [29] It is also critical to remember that Lavigerie, like many of his Catholic contemporaries, traced any "civil" quality in European civilization to Europe's embrace of Christianity (a commitment that appeared increasingly tenuous in the late 19th century, esp. in France). As he writes, "Christianity is not merely a matter of religious belief and practice but is the foundation of the whole social order." [30] For Lavigerie, a society was only cultured to the extent that it was Christian; Europe was therefore becoming less cultured as it turned away from Christianity, with Africa appearing as a

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[26] "*Une fois les chefs convertis, ils entraîneront tout le reste après eux.*" Lavigerie, "First Instructions (1878)," in Hamman, 154.

[27] "*La polygamie n'étant point contraire au droit naturel, puisque Moïse l'a permise, il n'y aurait pas lieu de forcer ce prince à renvoyer ses femmes avant le baptême.*" Lavigerie, "Letter to Livinhac (1 April 1880)," in Hamman, 196.

[28] Lavigerie, "Charter for the African Missions," in Montclos, 99.

[29] Lavigerie, "New Instructions (1879)," in Hamman, 176.

[30] Lavigerie quoted in Renault, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, 138.

possible successor as the heart of Catholic civilization – not a far cry, as it were, from the "next Christendom" that Phillip Jenkins heralds.

Finally, this civilizational model of mission helps explain two distinctive aspects of Lavigerie's vision that have both attracted and repelled contemporary observers. On the positive side was Lavigerie's leadership in late-19th century efforts to eradicate the sub-Saharan African slave trade; on the negative his equally robust commitment to re-establishing a "Knights Templar" order of Armed Auxiliaries to protect the missions. Throughout the 1880s Lavigerie became progressively more committed to each cause. Early in the decade Lavigerie reversed his previous teaching and discouraged missionaries from ransoming individual slaves, arguing that such practices did not sufficiently challenge the slave system. By the end of the 1880s Lavigerie was headlining international conferences calling for the immediate eradication of both the slave trade and the institution of slavery itself. Similarly, initial musings on the legacy of the Knights of the Templar led to the actual formation of the "Armed Brothers of the Sahara" in 1891, with a first novitiate class of 95. [31] Many of his contemporaries pulled back at the prospect of a Church-controlled international military force, and Lavigerie was forced to abandon the project shortly before his death. [32] Ironically, Lavigerie's arguments for the Armed Auxiliaries provided a humanitarian subtext for the rapidly advancing colonial project, with imperial apologists like King Leopold of Belgium arguing that if Europe wanted to extirpate the Arab slave trade, she would have to establish complete military and political control of the region. [33]

C. Conclusions: Lessons for Today's Context

Clearly we live in different times than Charles Lavigerie, and it would be facile to uncritically transfer his notions of adaptation and Christian civilization to a 21st century context. One should also avoid portraying Lavigerie as some sort of heroic, Promethean figure. Many of his teachings on vernacular translation, missionary assimilation, and catechetical formation

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[31] Roland Oliver notes that as early as 1880 the White Father missionaries in Buganda were accompanied by soldiers commissioned to train 200 new converts as a nascent defense force (R. Oliver, *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (London/New York/Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co.), 48-49).
[32] Cf. Renault, *Cardinal Lavigerie*, 419.
[33] Cf. Hastings, *Church in Africa*, 410.

reflected those of contemporaries like Francis Libermann and Daniel Comboni, and most became official Catholic policy after Benedict XV's groundbreaking 1919 document on the missions, *Maximum Illud*. Having said this, however, I do believe that Lavigerie's vision offers important principles for us to consider in today's context.

First, Lavigerie's vision of mutual adaptation counters a dangerous trend in contemporary inculturation discourse towards what one might term "cultural parochialism." The need to more deeply incarnate the Christian gospel in a plurality of cultural contexts remains acute, just as the Church must continue to ask herself to what extent her evangelical proclamation reflects dispensable cultural rather than universal evangelical norms. But we should remember that the "body" of the gospel is never transmitted naked; it always comes in cultural clothing, *not all of which is dispensable*. With this in mind, inculturation should proceed through a critical yet dialogical appropriation *with* rather than wholesale rejection *of* Christian tradition and its largely Hebraic, Greek, and European cultural legacies (since I don't think one can wholly separate the supposed "kernel" of the Christian gospel from its Greco-Roman and European husks). This will require local churches to engage in difficult conversations with each other and, in the Catholic case, with Rome concerning the appropriate evangelical principles of cultural discernment, recalling what Andrew Walls has termed both the "pilgrim" and "indigenizing" principles of gospel transmission (namely that Christianity is both at home and at odds with any culture). [34]

Second, Lavigerie's vision reminds us of the inherent communal or civilizational dimension of the Christian gospel. The Church preaches a gospel that affects the entire human being, soul *and* body; the phenomenal success of contemporary African Pentecostalism surely reflects this time-honored truth (Gifford). In addition, Christians retain a stake in the *polis* or common life broadly conceived; there is a need for structural as well as individual evangelization. I would hope that the era of a Constantinian state working with the Church to enforce religious hegemony should be behind us (although African examples like Frederick Chiluba's "Christian

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[34] Cf. A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of the Faith* (Maryknoll, NY/Edinburgh, Scotland: Orbis Books/T&T Clark, 1997), 3-15.

Zambia" make me wonder if this era *is* past.) [35] However, I also pause at the often-hegemonic claims of liberal modernity, esp. its tendency to relegate religion to a matter of private taste and capitalist choice. Is there an "alternative Christendom" within these two extremes? Can Christianity positively shape yet not dictate public life in a pluralistic society? Can Christians themselves re-imagine a Christian politics without politicians? Lavigerie's own success in thinking differently – such as with his proposal concerning doctor-catechists – might inspire us to do likewise within our own often-polarizing debates. Beyond Lavigerie, African communal ethics offers us new resources beyond our own Western traditions, as the Congolese theologian Benezet Bujo has pointed out. And perhaps even the contemporary African churches – spearheading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, taking prophetic stands against Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and filling social services voids left by dysfunctional states across the continent – might remind us that, to paraphrase the title of a famous little Herbert McCabe tome, "Christianity Still Matters."

Third, Lavigerie's missiological model could inspire us to rethink the relationship between Christianity and Western culture. There is a tendency among contemporary Christian scholars, Africanists in particular, to talk about the development of "non-Western Christianity" or "Christianity beyond the West." [36] Such language is appropriate in highlighting both the pre-Western Hebraic heritage of the Christian gospel and the genuinely non-Western cultural components that are shaping Christianity in the global South and, for that matter, the global North (*look who's attending Sunday services in Amsterdam or London…*). However, such language brings with it the phenomenological risk of overlooking the extent to which supposedly "non-Western Christianity" retains distinctively Western features and influences (I would refer you here to Paul Gifford's fascinating recent studies of Pentecostalism in West Africa). It also overlooks the extent to which Christianity shaped Western culture in both its positive and negative features. Lavigerie himself clearly traced the roots of European civilization to

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[35] Cf. P. Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington, IN: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1998).
[36] I note here in particular the work of Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh; see the latter's *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 2003).

Christianity. While we might wish to expand this vision, we would also be wise to grapple with the complexity of this connection.

Finally, I hope that my presentation today has at least nuanced some of our traditional stereotypes of Western missionaries in Africa – stereotypes that I even heard during yesterday's presentations. Not every missionary fulfills the image of the fire and brimstone Georgia preacher of Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible*, nor were all prudish Victorians blind to the needs of cross-cultural adaptation. This is not to say that Christian missionaries in Africa were above reproach, or that they somehow stood aloof from the colonial project. But just as comparative theology requires a deeper, detailed engagement with other religious traditions in their particularities, so missiology would benefit from a thicker, comparative study of mission history in all of its trans-national, cross-cultural, and inter-denominational complexity. For in better understanding our missionary past, we may just find new directions for our evangelical future.

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