

# Travelling with Father Morin: Missionaries, colonial projects, and the transnational core of national debates in Quebec

For those struggling against mounting racism in Quebec, the January 2017 white nationalist massacre of six Muslim mosque-goers seemed almost inevitable.<sup>1</sup> In a society with entrenched historical patterns of anxiety over questions of religion, language, and identity, the debate about “reasonable accommodation” of minorities dominates the national conversation.<sup>2</sup> At the crux of the issue lies Quebecers’ deeply held belief in a modern origin myth that explains how the province cast off a backward, Catholic past to emerge into a contemporary era of secularism, human rights, and equality.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTOIRES CONNECTÉES

In intellectual tension with the contemporary moment, historians of Quebec are increasingly moving from an emphasis on national narratives to the *histoires connectées* of communities and social groups in the province across borders and oceans.<sup>4</sup> Others have given thought to how trends within the Catholic Church, rather than presenting obstacles to progress, have been central to the post-WWII transformation of Quebec society—the “Quiet Revolution.”<sup>5</sup> Within these historiographies, particular emphasis is placed on the foundational role of Quebec Catholic missionaries in creating and disseminating knowledge about the colonial Other for domestic consumption.<sup>6</sup> Around 1900, the Catholic Church in Quebec began to send out young men and women to convert non-Christians around the globe.<sup>7</sup> “Missionary publications, along with returned missionaries,” writes historian Sean Mills, “brought understandings of the non-Western world back home to Quebec, shaping attitudes and forging cultural perceptions.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the earliest involvements of Quebec Catholics in foreign missionary

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endeavours came through a French group, the White Fathers of Africa.<sup>9</sup> The history of the group, which was founded in 1868 by Cardinal Charles Allemand Lavigerie, is inseparable from the story of the imperial division of the continent from which they took their name.<sup>10</sup> Lavigerie saw Africa as a battleground between Christians and Muslims for the souls of the “negro countries,” where, “as a result of the rapid advances made by war-like Arab tribes,” Islam was “making vast strides ... at the very door of our colonies.”<sup>11</sup> French-Canadian White Fathers, in turn, became active soldiers in this religious war.

Following the personal trajectory of Montreal-born White Father Oscar Morin (1878-1952) sheds light on this phenomenon. Morin’s observations were featured over the course of his career in *Missions d’Afrique*, a journal

circulated to tens of thousands of Quebecers.<sup>12</sup> Tracing his writings and reflections can help us understand the historical roots of Quebec’s understanding of Islam and non-Western cultures more broadly.

## HISTORICAL ROOTS

Morin began his work (probably in 1901) in French-controlled North Africa, where they had, as one missionary put it, “visions of the standard of the cross returning to a land famous in the history of early Christendom, but for centuries past the prey of the fanatical followers of Islam.”<sup>13</sup> Writing from Carthage, Tunisia, young French Canadians like Morin cast themselves as inheritors of the legacy of the 13th-century French Christian crusades, and described their experiences in their published letters home in Orientalist idioms.<sup>14</sup> In this construction, Muslims were dogmatic and fanatical, alternatively pious and hedonistic, “poor victims of the impostor” Muhammad. “Let us pray,” wrote one Quebec missionary in 1905, “that soon will come the day that will see the Cross replace the Crescent, the Gospel replace the Coran, Christ triumph over Mahomet.”<sup>15</sup>

By 1906 Morin was in French West Africa, continuing his Orientalist task of cataloguing the various peoples he met for a Catholic audience back home. Writing from Dakar, he drew a picture for the thousands of readers of *Missions d’Afrique* of “n—s dressed in the strangest costumes, ranging from sheer nakedness to loincloths to three-piece suits that would be coveted on the streets of Paris.”<sup>16</sup> Later that year, as the British Empire cemented control over the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), the bilingual Father Morin became Superior of a new mission in the Ghana-

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ian region of Navrongo. He attributed this new position of authority to Britain's stipulation that the head of the mission in an "English country" be a British subject.<sup>17</sup> From its beginnings, the Gold Coast mission was concerned with regulating and disciplining the indigenous Gurunsi population.<sup>18</sup> Morin wrote home to his Quebec audience in October 1906 that his main task was teaching English and touring the country to "tame the souls of our savages."<sup>19</sup>

During the First World War, when many West Africans were forced into the French military and much of the region was in revolt against its occupiers, Morin was called back to lead the mission in French territory (in Ouagadougou, present-day Burkina Faso).<sup>20</sup> Despite financial difficulties presented by the war, French-Canadian White Fathers in *Soudan français* continued to be primarily concerned with the battle with Islam over pagan souls, reporting that "Islamism is amongst the obstacles that have prevented Grace from opening up a path, despite the zealous perseverance of our missionaries."<sup>21</sup> Following the war, Morin found himself once again in Navrongo, rising to the position of Vicar Apostolic for the region in 1933.<sup>22</sup>

Upon his retirement in 1947, Morin finally returned to Montreal.<sup>23</sup> Long having shaped the imaginations of his audiences through his letters and reports, he now worked from the White Fathers headquarters on St-Hubert Street, established in 1934. The group visited parishes, schools, and colleges across Quebec, organized touring exhibits that reached cities across Canada and the United States, and produced educational films about the group's mission work.<sup>24</sup> "You should all become missionaries!" they encouraged their readers in 1929, a message that was reinforced through their participation in mass public missionary "fairs." Their advertisement for one such event in 1930 speaks to the depth of the entrenchment of missionary work in Quebec society, through ties of parish, family, and friendship: "What good

heart can ignore the labour of its brothers, sisters, parents and friends, of its compatriots? Well, missionaries are your brothers, your sisters, your parents, your friends, your compatriots."<sup>25</sup> Morin, whose reprinted letters home to his family were for four decades an important source of information for Quebecers about African societies, Islam, and non-white cultures, was no exception.

## QUESTIONING THE ORIGIN MYTH

There is a larger story to be told here about Quebec's missionary spirit and its evolution in the second half of the 20th century, and more particularly about its continued ideological impact in a "secularized" society struggling with racism and patterns of exclusion.<sup>26</sup> Foregrounding the thought and work of missionaries like Father Oscar Morin can begin to tell us something about the historical identification of Quebecers with global processes of imperialism, and particularly about the entanglement of Quebec identity with Orientalist discourses about Muslim backwardness. In so doing, we can begin to explore the transnational and contingent roots of what too often seems to be a fixed *Québécois* cultural mode, and to take the first steps forward in building a new, just, model of Quebec society. 🍁

## NOTES

1. For one such expression of dissent, see Solidarité sans frontières, "Ensemble contre la charte xenophobe," January 27, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.solidaritycrossborders.org/fr/community-statement-ensemble-contre-la-charte-xenophobe-together-against-the-xenophobic-charter>
2. For trenchant critiques of discourses on multiculturalism, "interculturalism," and race in Quebec, see Darryl Leroux, "Entrenching Euro-settlerism: Multiculturalism and the politics of nationalism in Québec" (2014) 46:2 *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 133-140; and Darryl Leroux, "Québec nationalism and the production of difference: The Bouchard-Taylor Commission, the

Hérouxville Code of Conduct, and Québec's immigrant integration policy" (2010 Spring/Summer) 49 *Quebec Studies* 107-126.

3. See Catherine Foisy, "Dépasser la haine de la religion" (2017 janvier/février) 788 *Relations* 27-28. See also Jocelyn Létourneau, *A history for the future: Rewriting memory and identity in Quebec* (Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).
4. Aline Charles and Thomas Wien, "Le Québec entre histoire connectée et histoire transnationale" (2011) 14:2 *Globe : Revue internationale d'études québécoises* 199-221.
5. See E.-Martin Meunier and Jean-Philippe Warren, *Sortir de la 'Grande Noirceur': L'horizon « personnaliste » de la Révolution tranquille* (Québec, QC : Septentrion, 2002); Louise Bienvenue, *Quand la jeunesse entre en scène : L'action catholique avant la Révolution tranquille* (Montréal, QC : Boréal, 2003); and Michael Gauvreau, *The Catholic origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution* (Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
6. See Catherine Foisy, "Des Québécois aux frontières : Dialogues et affrontements culturels aux dimensions du monde. Récits missionnaires d'Asie, d'Afrique et d'Amérique latine (1945-1980)" (PhD dissertation, Concordia University, 2012); and Catherine LeGrand, "L'axe missionnaire catholique entre le Québec et l'Amérique latine. Une exploration préliminaire" (2009) 12:1 *Globe: Revue internationale d'études québécoises* 43-66.
7. See Henri Goudreau, o.m.i., "Les missionnaires canadiens à l'étranger au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle" (1983) 1:50 *Sessions d'Etude, La Société Canadienne d'Histoire de l'Eglise Catholique* 351-380.
8. Sean Mills, *A place in the sun: Haiti, Haitians, and the remaking of Quebec* (Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), p. 59. See also Michel Lacroix and Stéphanie Rousseau, « Les relations internationales du Québec à la lumière du missionariat, de l'économie sociale et de l'éducation » (2009) 12:1 *Globe :*

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- Revue internationale d'études québécoises* 16.
9. So named for their long, white robes, not out of any sense of historical irony.
10. André Picciola, *Missionnaires en Afrique : L'Afrique Occidentale de 1840 à 1940* (Paris : Denoël, 1987), p. 111; see also Jean-Claude Ceillier, *Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs). De la fondation par Mgr. Lavigerie à la mort du fondateur (1868-1892)* (Paris : Karthala, 2008), pp. 15-16; and Aylward Shorter, *Les Pères Blancs au temps de la conquête coloniale : Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique, 1892-1914* (Paris : Karthala, 2011).
11. Reproduced in J. Bouniol, W.F., *The White Fathers and their missions* (London, UK: Sands, 1929), p. 32.
12. Bouniol, *The White Fathers and their missions*, p. 314. The more reliable source on circulation is André Beaulieu and Jean Hamelin (with Jocelyn Saint-Pierre and Jean Boucher), *La Presse Québécoise des origines à nos jours, Tome quatrième, 1896-1910* (Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1979). Both Bouniol and the Quebec historians put the starting date of the publication in 1906, but the holdings of the Collection nationale go back to 1904. On Morin, see E. Champagne, "Vicariat Apostolique de Navrongo. S.E. Mgr. Oscar Morin, 'L'Apôtre des Gurunsi,'" *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, April 1934, pp. 98-110; Chanoine Lionel Groulx, *Le Canada français missionnaire : Une autre grande aventure* (Montréal, QC : Fides, 1962), pp. 267-268; and Shorter, *Les Pères Blancs*, p. 36.
13. Bouniol, *The White Fathers and their missions*, p. 17.
14. "Souvenirs de Carthage: Lettre du Frère Jos. Déry, d. P.B. (de Charlesbourg) au R.P. Directeur du Bulletin," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, February 1906, pp. 43-58.
15. "Lettre du Fr. Jos. Fillion à son frère Mr. Ad. Fillion, de Québec (St. Louis de Carthage, 26 Novembre 1905)," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, March 1906, pp. 79-89.
16. "De Dakar a Kita.—Lettre du R.P. Oscar Morin a sa famille," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, February 1906, p. 6.
17. "Vicariat Apostolique du Soudan Français. Extraits de lettres du R.P. Oscar Morin, missionnaire à Ouaghadougou, à ses parents," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, 1918, p. 131; and Camille Lafrance, "Un patrimoine chèrement conquis," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, December 1948, p. 333.
18. See David Kimble, *A political history of Ghana: The rise of Gold Coast nationalism, 1850-1928* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), pp. 80-81.
19. "Vicariat apostolique du Soudan. Lettre du R.P. Morin à sa famille (à Montréal)," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, October 1906, p. 307.
20. "Vicariat Apostolique du Soudan Français. Extrait des lettres du R.P. Oscar Morin à ses parents," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, 1917, p. 11.
21. R.P. Buchault, "Vicariat Apostolique du Soudan. Rapport du R.P. Buchault, Supérieur de la mission de Ségou," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, February 1915, p. 45; Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Senegalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), 25-46; and Michael Crowder, *Colonial West Africa: Collected Essays* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012), pp. 104-121, 177-197.
22. "À sa retraite," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, July 1947, p. 215; and Francis Nolan, *Les Pères Blancs entre les deux guerres mondiales. Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique (1919-1939)* (Paris : Karthala, 2015), pp. 173-174.
23. "À sa retraite," p. 215.
24. "Afrika Montréal : Une exposition du 18 septembre 2014 au 1<sup>er</sup> février 2015, à l'Écomusée du fier monde," Écomusée du fier monde. Retrieved from <http://ecomusee.qc.ca/evenement/afrika-montreal>
25. "Tous vous devez être missionnaires!" *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, December 1929, p. 354; and "Exposition Missionnaire," *Les Missions d'Afrique des Pères Blancs*, September 1930, p. 273.
26. See, particularly, Foisy, "Des Québécois aux frontières."