

Religions that Thrive and Religions that Die

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Jacques Marion is one of those first generation Unificationists who, he told me, "dropped everything" when he met Reverend Moon and set off to spread the teachings and vision of Unificationism to the world.

He described his years as a missionary in Russia and Africa and the enthusiastic welcome the movement is receiving there. He concluded that it was in times of turmoil and trouble that people are most open to new and often radical solutions. Russia and Africa were in such states when he was

there and largely remain so until today.

My conversation with Jacques and other Unificationist missionaries evoked major questions regarding how religions take root, thrive or die.

Why did Buddhism thrive in China, Korea, Japan, and South Asia, while it all but disappeared in its Indian homeland? Why did the Russians adopt Greek and not Roman Christianity, or even Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism as their national religion? Why is Evangelical Christianity sweeping the USA while mainline Christian churches are at best lingering?

In Paris this past summer, I decided to explore how Catholicism became and remains the dominant religion of France. My experience there led me to reflect on how Unificationism might fare in Africa.



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The Thermes de Cluny: The latest in modern technology

In the early centuries after Christ, the Gauls swept out of the forests of northern Europe, eliminating all traces of Roman civilization in front of them. They sacked Rome in 387 B.C. but mighty Rome was not so easily humbled. Rome drove them out and back into their primeval forests. Finally, between 58 and 51 B.C. Julius Caesar conquered the barbaric Gauls and founded the city of [Lutetia](#) along the banks of the Seine River among the local Gallic tribe of the Parisii.

Little remains of the Roman town of Lutetia except for the underground ruins of the Roman Northern Baths beneath the ruins of the medieval Monastery of Cluny. Of all that remains of the ancient Roman bathhouse the most impressive and insightful was a massive marble bathtub dating from the 2nd century. According to the sign, the tub was made in Rome and brought to Lutetia to serve the ruling elite in the gigantic domed bathhouse.

Along with the bathtub, the Romans introduced glass bottles and plates for their dinners, cotton cloth from Egypt, and the Latin alphabet and language to record their history, laws and exploits. Iron swords, knives and arrowheads for their wars, sculptors to decorate their buildings, engineers to build roads, bridges, walls, and temples, doctors and pharmacists, books containing the wisdom of the Greeks, Egyptians, and Babylonians, and black slaves from Africa rapidly followed.

Alongside the latest in Roman technology, industry, learning, science, and art, the many religions of the Roman Empire were also introduced to the pagan barbarians. The gods of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Israel, and Greece found curiosity among the Franks, as well as the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Among the Romans who found life and adventure in the far north of the empire was Denis who was a follower of a strange religious miracle worker and teacher from distant Palestine named Jesus of Nazareth.

The Chapel of St. Genevieve: Victory in battle

My next visit was to the little known 15th century church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont where a side altar and tomb preserve the remains and memory of St. Genevieve (422-512). The Roman preacher named Denis attracted a small number of followers but the persecutions of Christians by Emperor Decius drove the few Christians deep underground.

As if persecutions by pagan Romans were not enough to wipe out the first Christians in the city, barbarians from the north bearing such fearful names as Goths, Vandals and Huns followed. Attila the Hun laid siege to Lutetia in 451 and all the generals, phalanxes, tactics, weapons, and engineering skills

of the Roman Empire proved unable to resist the fierce barbarians.

A Christian woman from a nearby village named Genevieve approached Attila and dropped to her knees in prayer. According to legend, God heard her pleas and Attila spared the city. Genevieve was canonized a saint and is honored as the patron saint of Paris. She was buried in the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont.

What better way to prove the power of your god than victory in battle. Emperor Constantine's famous victory in the Battle of Milvian Bridge proved to him the superior power of the Christian over the Roman, Greek, Celtic, Egyptian, and Babylonian gods. The miraculous victories of the Prophet Mohammed over the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians were interpreted as proof of the superiority of the new revelation over the old. The equally miraculous victory of the State of Israel over the combined armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria in 1967 was incontrovertible proof for many of God's approval of the Zionist state.

Église Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre: A national myth

The Church of Saint Julien the Poor claims to be the oldest church in Paris even if authorities can't agree on who this particular saint was. It was constructed in the 5th century, though only a small portion of the main entrance still stands.

The adoption of biblical names for individuals, streets, neighborhoods, mountains, rivers, and even entire cities is an important step in the Christianization of France. The church stands on a small street not far from the Boulevards St. Michelle and St. Germain with a host of other streets bearing biblical names nearby. Biblical names such as Marie, Sarah, Pierre, Jacques, and Thomas are commonplace, and Julien is the third most popular man's French name.

However, more than proper names were introduced among the barbarian Franks when they became Christian. The Jewish and Christian Bibles provided a universal history of humanity that began with Adam and Eve and continued until the end of days with St. John the Divine's Book of Revelation. St. Paul extended a Christian welcome to Greeks and Jews in Galatians 3:28-29: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." This same welcome was extended to Romans, Celts, Germans, Africans, Egyptians, and Franks. Christianity not only provided the Franks with bathtubs and victories in battle, but membership in Christendom.



The author by a statue of a priest in the ruins of the Thermes de Cluny in Paris

Basilica of Saint Denis: A king

A onetime divine intervention does not a Christian nation make. St. Genevieve had saved the Franks from Attila, but once secure, the majority of Franks no doubt continued worshipping the gods of their ancestors, Roman deities, and occasionally Jesus of Nazareth.

Of the many kings of France buried in the Basilica of St. Denis, Clovis I, the first king of France, was the goal of my visit. St. Denis had introduced the teachings of Jesus to the Franks and St. Genevieve had proven the superiority of the Christian god over all rivals. Through a strategic marriage, intrigue, and military victories, Clovis united the Frankish tribes, declared himself their king, and made Paris the capital of his Frankish Empire.

However, more than military victory was necessary to unite the tribes and give legitimacy to his claim to kingship and the legitimacy of his dynasty. Like Stephen in Hungary, Vladimir in Russia, and other barbarian rulers who sought to found empires, Clovis's evolution from tribal chief to king was not accepted by his rivals.

Clovis merged Roman and Christian law in his famous [Lex Salica](#) that among other accomplishments formalized Christianity as the religion of the kingdom, the diocese as the territorial division of the realm, the king as the overlord of all tribal chiefs, and heredity as the source of kingship. Furthermore, linking the new Frankish Kingdom to Christianity identified Clovis as heir to the long history of Jewish kings. With God's approval, kings Saul, David and Solomon had united 12 factious and warring Hebrew tribes into one people with themselves as their first kings and Jerusalem as their national capital. As a Christian king, Clovis was carrying out God's plan for the Franks. Kingship was part of the divine order of creation.

Along with his crown, Clovis inherited the centuries-old administrative apparatus of both the Roman church and Empire. Latin became the language of government and laws along with the wealth of Greek and Roman literature and poetry. Monks, priests, and nuns founded schools, libraries, hospitals, monasteries, and convents. Roman engineers and architects transformed the landscape with Roman-style churches and basilicas filled with mosaics, statues, and frescoes. Clovis's Merovingian kingdom lasted until 751 when the Carolingians took over and ruled for the next two and a half centuries. The bond forged between the Church of Rome and the Frankish Kingdom largely endures until today.

Rue du Temple: Saving Christendom

The bond forged by St. Denis, Genevieve, and Clovis between the Franks, Rome, and Catholicism provided a stable structure for the emerging kingdom of the Franks. Clovis was a king with a golden crown and a stable administrative infrastructure, an army trained by the best Roman generals, inhabiting a growing city constructed by Roman engineers and decorated by Roman artists, and a people worshipping the God of Nazareth. But compared to the ancient peoples of Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, Clovis was but a second-rate newcomer. The Franks needed to make a major contribution to human civilization.

Newly-converted Frankish monks and priests set out to convert the still-pagan tribes in Germany and England. As the once Christian lands of Egypt, North Africa, Palestine, Syria, and Babylon fell to the Muslims, Charles Martel defeated their invasion of France in 732. In 885, King Charles the Fat definitively defeated the Vikings and forced them into the Roman church.

But the Frank's moment of glory came when Alexion I Komnenos, emperor of the rump Byzantine Roman Empire, appealed to the French-born Pope Urban II to protect the Holy Land from the Muslims in 1045. Two Frenchmen, Hugues de Payens and the future Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, rose to his challenge and established the Military Order of the Knights Templar (The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon). The First Crusade, often referred to as the French Crusade, not only saved Constantinople and the emperor but went on to liberate the Holy Land, and founded the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1099. Beginning with Godfrey of Bouillon, a series of Frenchmen ruled the kingdom for the next century.

The massive fortress multi-towered headquarters of the Knights Templar that once dominated the Paris neighborhood of the Marais was demolished in 1808 and only a host of streets, squares, and other place names containing the word "temple" remind the curious tourist of the First Crusade.

The "French" Crusade marked the emergence of the Frankish Kingdom as a major, if not the major, defender of Christendom. No longer was France an outlying realm recently added to the civilized and Christian worlds, but a key player in saving the Roman Empire and liberating Christ's most sacred sites. France as the "eldest daughter of the Church" remains central to the national identity of France and even the Enlightenment. Napoleon, Marxists, secularism, the separation of church and state, and massive non-Christian immigration have not undermined this national identity.

The Unification Movement in Africa today

Professor Samuel P. Huntington predicted a 21st century dominated by a handful of great and ancient civilizations: Western Christian, Eastern Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, and Buddhist. Northern Africa he placed in the Islamic civilization but the southern half remained a mystery to him. It had no major indigenous great civilizations, was shattered among countless Christian and Islamic

movements, did not share a common history, enjoyed no unifying language, was riven by tribal, regional and religious conflicts, ravaged by violence, revolutions, genocides, and wars, and inspired by multiple economic and political ideologies. To make matters worse, the former -- France, Britain, Spain, and Portugal -- and current -- USA, China and India -- imperialistic powers retain and expand their influence.

What does the Unification Movement have to offer this continent?

The [International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace](#) (IAPP) provides a forum for African political and religious leaders to discuss their common problems without the interference of foreign powers, multinational corporations, and foreign religious authorities. The theme of the 2016 inaugural conference was "Addressing the Critical Challenges of Our Time: The Role of Governments, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations."

The UN, foreign governments, and multinational corporations all have their specific agendas for involvement in Africa. The IAPP, on the other hand, emphasizes peacebuilding as its central goal. In this violence-ravaged continent, any economic, social, or political success could be negated in a spasm of violence.

The IAPP highlights the need for dialogue and participation of both political and religious leaders in addressing the "Critical Challenges of Our Time." Traditional nation-states, the United Nations, and international organizations, as well as socialist and capitalist ideologies are dedicated to the notion of separation of church and state and strenuously avoid the involvement of religion in their meetings and proposals.

Unlike foreign involvement in Africa, which treats the continent as the beneficiary of foreign altruism or a trove of resources to be exploited, the IAPP provides a forum for African political, civic, and religious leaders to independently discuss and arrive at solutions to the problems facing them, such as environmental degradation, deforestation, desertification, water, food security, health, sanitation, corruption, and poverty.

Finally, the IAPP capitalizes on the themes that unite, rather than divide, the diverse peoples of Africa. The family remains a central focus of the IAPP which recognizes it as the foundation of a stable society and key to development. Whether Catholic, Protestant, independent Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or tribal, the family is the fundamental building block of society.

Will the Unification Movement play the same role in the evolution of Africa as Catholicism did in the evolution of France, Orthodoxy in Russia, Catholicism in Hungary, or Islam in Central Asia? [Jacques Marion](#) seems to be enthusiastic that it will. For global tourists like myself, who has spent considerable time in Africa, the continent is overflowing with enthusiasm. The 21st century might well witness the arrival of the continent as a major player in human history.

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Photo at top: The stained glass rose window of the north transept of the Basilica of Saint Denis in Paris, France (source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)).