Comboni and distancing from colonialism

Abstract

The article critically examines the intricate relationship between Daniele Comboni and nineteenth-century colonialism, demonstrating how his missionary efforts in Sudan were shaped within a context heavily influenced by European and Egyptian expansion in Africa. After reviewing the historical, geographical, and political causes of colonialism—including the decline of the Atlantic trade, the opening of the Suez Canal, and the increasing interest of European powers in Africa—the text places Comboni's work within this rapidly evolving environment. The author highlights how Comboni maintained a degree of independence from major European powers, despite having diplomatic backing from Austria and Italy. Unlike other missionaries, such as Charles Lavigerie, he was not directly involved in colonial policies. Nonetheless, this independence was only partial: Comboni was deeply affected by Egyptian authority, which controlled Sudan and utilised missions as tools for penetration and 'civilisation.' The article underscores how the survival of the Comboni mission depended on logistical and political support from the Egyptian government, creating an ambiguous alliance that ultimately led local populations to view the missionaries as allies of the ruling regime. This perception contributed to the mission's isolation and fragility, especially amidst tensions that prompted the Mahdist revolt. Particular focus is given to the relationship between Comboni and figures like Charles Gordon, a symbol of the intersection of Egyptian and British interests, and on Comboni's faith in Egyptian conquests as a potential avenue for spreading Christianity. However, this vision proved illusory, as it overlooked the violence and resistance dynamics at play. In conclusion, the article argues that, while not a direct agent of colonialism, Comboni was inevitably involved in and influenced by it. His missionary work tracked the developments of colonial enterprises, yet concurrently, he left a lasting legacy by helping establish the local Sudanese Church, which persisted beyond the end of colonial rule.

A Synthesis of the main ideas

This article examines in depth the relationship between Daniele Comboni and the context of nineteenth-century colonialism, highlighting a complex, ambiguous relationship that cannot be reduced to simplistic models. The author first places Comboni's missionary experience within the broader historical framework of European and Egyptian penetration into Africa, determined by multiple factors: the long tradition of the slave trade, its partial suppression along the Atlantic route but the persistence of the eastern route, and above all the geopolitical transformations linked to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. This event made previously marginal areas, such as the Red Sea and Sudan, strategic, attracting the interest of European powers and strengthening Egypt's role.

In this context, Sudan occupied a crucial position: controlled by the Egyptians, it constituted a gateway to Central Africa via the Nile. It was precisely in this context that Comboni's missionary work took place, operating during the same years in which the colonial partition of the continent was taking shape, formalised shortly after his death with the Congress of Berlin in 1884.

A central focus of the article concerns Comboni's degree of autonomy from European colonial interests. The author acknowledges that he was relatively free from Western powers: despite his ties to Austria and Italy, he was not truly influenced politically by these states. The Austro-Hungarian Empire guaranteed diplomatic protection to the mission without imposing a political line, while Italy, still relatively inactive in colonial affairs during Comboni's lifetime, exercised no significant influence. This distinguishes Comboni from other contemporary missionaries, such as Charles Lavigerie, who were more closely tied to the colonial strategies of their respective countries.

However, this relative independence does not imply a complete estrangement from colonialism. The article demonstrates that the real conditioning Comboni experienced was that exerted by Egypt, a

regional power that operated in ways similar to European colonialism. The Egyptian government permitted and supported the missionary presence in Sudan, but within very specific limits: a ban on evangelisation among Muslims and freedom of action limited to the non-Islamised African populations of the south. In this sense, the mission was functionally part of the Egyptian plan to control and exploit the territory.

A fundamental aspect highlighted is the mission's material and logistical dependence on Egyptian power. Without government support, Comboni and his collaborators would not even have been able to access Sudan or operate within it. The missionaries enjoyed crucial benefits: transportation along the Nile, customs authorisations, military protection, and support for expeditions. This privileged relationship, while ensuring the mission's survival, contributed to its identification in the eyes of the local populations with the dominant power, generating mistrust, hostility, and isolation.

The article highlights how this ambiguity manifested itself in several specific instances, in which the mission appeared closely linked to the Egyptian authorities. Government protection, for example, reinforced the idea that the missionaries were an integral part of the colonial apparatus, even when their intentions differed. This contributed to compromising relations with the local populations and making the mission vulnerable in times of crisis.

Particular attention is also given to the figure of Charles Gordon, whose work highlights the intertwining of Egyptian and British interests. Sudan, formally under Egyptian control, was increasingly influenced by Great Britain, especially after it acquired control over the Suez Canal. Comboni thus found himself drawn, often unknowingly, into a web of political interests that linked the local context to European imperial dynamics.

Another critical element concerns Comboni's view of the Egyptian conquests. He tended to interpret them providentially, believing them to be potentially useful for the spread of Christianity. This perspective led him to underestimate the violence and contradictions of Egyptian rule, as well as the growing tensions among the local populations. The inability to grasp the significance of the Mahdist revolt is a significant example of this limitation: Comboni interpreted the phenomenon through the categories of the dominant power, without understanding its deep roots.

The article also highlights how the Comboni mission was being caught up in the dynamics of colonialism even after the death of its founder. Its fate was closely tied to the region's political events: it suffered the repercussions of the fall of Egyptian rule and was able to resume its activity only under British control, within the limits established by the colonial authorities.

In conclusion, the author argues that Comboni's subordination to colonialism was real, even if often indirect and not fully conscious. He was not an agent of the European powers, but inevitably operated within a system of power that profoundly influenced his actions. His missionary experience therefore, represents an emblematic case of the ambiguities that characterised the relationship between evangelisation and colonialism in the 19th century.

Despite these limitations and contradictions, the article also recognises the positive legacy of Comboni's work: the "seed" of Christianity planted in Sudan survived the end of colonialism and contributed to the birth of an autonomous local Church. This final point calls for a balanced assessment of Comboni's figure, capable of respecting both the historical constraints and the lasting results of his work.

Complex Relations between Daniel Comboni and European and Egyptian Colonialism

Daniele Comboni established his mission in Sudan during the years when the colonial interests of European powers in Africa were taking shape. Numerous historical, geographical, and political factors were at the origin of nineteenth-century colonialism.

From a historical perspective, Africa had, unfortunately, always been a fertile source of slaves, both for the European powers operating on the Atlantic coast and for the Ottoman Turks on the opposite side, that is, to the east. During the 19th century, the Atlantic slave trade was suppressed, but that of the East, in the Ottoman Empire, remained active. This was witnessed by explorers and missionaries who began to travel within the continent, revealing its conformation and potential riches, but also the brutality that characterised the slave caravans headed for the Levantine markets. This increased European public pressure for a civilising and humanitarian intervention to put an end to this scandal.

Geographically speaking, the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) revolutionised international trade and economy by drawing the attention and interests of all the great powers to the Red Sea and the African coast facing the Indian Ocean, a geographical area that until then had been completely irrelevant but which quickly became a strategic point. This, in turn, greatly increased the importance of Egypt, which owned the strip of land where the canal was opened.

Politically, therefore, Africa, and Egypt in particular, which until then had remained on the margins of history, suddenly entered the sphere of interest of international politics and the European powers.

Comboni first arrived in Sudan in the 1850s and returned as Apostolic Vicar and then Bishop in the following decade, precisely in the years when the above-mentioned events were taking shape. Sudan, recently conquered by the Egyptians and then governed by the Cairo government, overlooked the Red Sea, the waterway that led to the Suez Canal. Furthermore, it was crossed by the Nile, made navigable by the Egyptians themselves, which constituted the only safe access to the heart of Black Africa.

Egypt and Sudan were, therefore, right at the centre of the African problem at the time when the great European powers, for the reasons just mentioned, began to plan the conquest of the continent.

A conquest that would be planned and politically organised at the Congress of Berlin held in 1884, shortly after Comboni's death (1881).

What, then, was Daniele Comboni's relationship with colonialism and the African policies of the powers of the time?

His freedom from colonial interests has often been discussed. **This is only partially true**. He was certainly freer than other missionaries, such as the French bishop of Algiers and later Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who was notoriously influenced by French African policy. However, in Comboni's case, despite having used the two citizenships and passports he possessed—Austrian and Italian—neither seems to have truly influenced his actions. **Italy**, which only demonstrated concrete colonial interests after Comboni's death, did not constrain him in the slightest. It was also misled by the anticlerical pressures arising from the Roman Question, and did not understand, unlike France, the potential importance of missionary settlements for future political and military conquests. Austrian citizenship influenced him even less, because the **Austrian Empire (Austro-Hungarian from 1867)**, which guaranteed the Comboni mission political and diplomatic protection—that is, imperial cover vis-à-vis the Egyptian government—never exploited this protection by burdening it with political and territorial ambitions. As is well known, Austria-Hungary was completely absorbed in European political issues and the management of national minorities and never cultivated any colonial ambitions in Africa, except for a brief period during which it was interested in the Suez Canal issue because of the

advantages it could bring to Venice's port system. Then the loss of Lombardy-Venetia, and therefore of Venice (1859-1866), brought its policy back into an exclusively European orbit.

More clearly, although he always used a Viennese passport in Africa and headed an institution for which the Habsburg government had provided its political, diplomatic, and legal backing, Daniel Comboni never had to engage in Vienna's politics; just as he never felt any obligation toward Italy, which only after his death realized its African ambitions in the territory that would later be called Eritrea.

This, however, does not justify the claim that Comboni was immune to colonial influences and constraints. He, too, had to pay his tolls, and while he proudly claimed to be able to ward off consular interference from the three European powers that had claims on the mission—France, Austria, and Italy[1]—he failed to realise he was falling into the far more subtle and insidious web of **Egyptian politics**. The real political influence on the mission was, in fact, that exerted by Egypt, an African state that operated south of the cataracts with the same arrogance as a European colonial power and with typically Levantine brutality.

The mission was able to exist only thanks to the benevolence and self-interested generosity of the Egyptian government, namely the Viceroy of Egypt (Khedive), who considered the missionaries, from their arrival (in 1848, before Comboni, when the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa was established), as the spearhead of his project to civilise and Westernise Sudan. He allowed them to operate with complete freedom, but only within the limits he had clearly imposed on them. Namely: an absolute ban on proselytising among Muslims and freedom of action only in the territories south of Khartoum, where Egyptian control had ceased, and the black populations not yet Islamised lived, whom the Egyptians considered merely a convenient reservoir of people to be reduced to slavery.

Without the government support of the sovereign of Egypt, formally dependent on the Sultan of Constantinople but effectively independent, Comboni would not have even managed to cross the desert. It must be remembered, in fact, that the mission was first and foremost a highly complex organisational undertaking, forced to introduce all manner of merchandise into a country deprived of everything. The Egyptians had introduced a semblance of civil and political administration to Sudan (that is, the territory south of the cataracts), but it remained a primitive and unknown land, where everything had to be done on one's own and death was constantly around the corner. Only when Charles Gordon took over (in the 1870s) did he achieve a modicum of European-style efficiency, but the organisation he had introduced was a drop in the ocean, and only at the service of the state. Even in 1876, Comboni wrote to a correspondent in France, "the majority of my Vicariate is more backward in civilisation and customs than our fathers were in the primitive era of Adam and Eve"[2]." To enter and survive in such an environment, the protection of those who held the levers of power was essential.

In short, the Vicariate was able to exist thanks to the missionaries' selflessness, but the missionaries could remain in Sudan thanks only to the concessions and aid provided by the Egyptian government. Just a few examples. At Aswan, on the Nile, the entry point to Sudan, where the customs house was located, the mission's weapons, indispensable for hunting and the missionaries' personal defence, particularly in the primitive Nuba Mountains, would never have passed without government safe-conduct. Comboni routinely travelled along the Nile on the governor's steamer, placed at his disposal free of charge. The crossing of the Nubian Desert, during the expedition he organised in early 1878, was hampered by the famine raging in Sudan, which had reduced the availability of

[1] Comboni writes: "The matter of our European protection in Egypt is a rather sensitive point. Austria has a right to it, since it is the protector of the Nile Valley. France has a right to it because of the protection it granted me for the crossings and for what it will do. Italy has a right to it because we are Italians. All three consuls of these nations treat me kindly. However, and for some time to come, *I have been keeping myself and will keep myself* in a position of respectful and friendly independence". (D. Comboni, *Writings*, 1526; Comboni to Canossa, Cairo, 20 December 1867).
[2] *Scritti*, 4030.

camels. At Korosko, where the desert stretch that was crossed on camelback began, Comboni says, "I found a large number of merchants who had been waiting there for four to six months for camels." Well, a chance encounter with Charles Gordon, who was travelling the same route in the opposite direction on his way to Cairo, magically resolved the situation: "I was fortunate enough to meet Gordon Pasha. I insistently begged him to move heaven and earth to get me at least the camels needed to transport the personnel to Berber and Khartoum, and he was so good that he sent numerous telegrams, ordering the great desert chiefs and the Mudirs of Sudan to give me 80 camels. Thank God, in four days, out of many hundreds of ulcerated and tired camels, 50 were selected, and in eleven days, I crossed the desert. I sent the rest of the caravan via Dongola."

Many other similar incidents can be documented. They certainly attest to Comboni's skill and his endless connections, **but they also demonstrate a privileged relationship with the Egyptian rulers, which inevitably made the mission appear, in the increasingly uneasy eyes of the Sudanese, as an integral part of the invading government**. A significant episode occurred in El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan, where the opening of the mission provoked a Muslim riot, with missionaries threatened and beaten. Their protest to the authorities, which landed those responsible for the disturbance in prison and even mobilised government offices in Cairo, could only reinforce this popular impression and, with it, the isolation of the missionaries. They were certainly regarded with "fear" and subjected to every "possible kindness," as Comboni's magazine (the future "Nigrizia") put it, but only because it was known that the heavy hand of the Turkish-Egyptian forces was behind them.

This privileged relationship, which conferred prestige and power on the mission but increased its isolation and enmities, became even stronger when Gordon became Governor General of Sudan in 1877. It should be noted that shortly beforehand, Egypt had been forced to sell its stake in the company managing the Suez Canal to Great Britain to avoid bankruptcy. With this, Great Britain had effectively assumed control of Egypt. Gordon, an Englishman, was therefore an Egyptian official but answered primarily to London. Comboni, I believe, did not always realise that he was conditioned by a web of interests that extended from Sudan to Egypt but had its terminal in England and therefore in Europe.

The Comboni settlement among the Nuba of Kordofan was the one that suffered most from this political overexposure. It was requested by the Nubans in the hope that it would help halt Egyptian slave raids. It was first authorised by the government as a bridgehead for penetration among the Africans, and then closed down by the authorities, with the missionaries ordered to abandon it when Cairo decided to intensify its actions against the locals. This mission was, in short, an instrument of Egyptian politics, almost unnoticed by the missionaries, perhaps not even by Comboni.

Even Comboni's assessment of the Mahdi, who would take over Sudan after his death, in the only place where he mentions him, appears to be aligned with the government's positions, incapable of seeing the reality of the country in which he was operating, where an uncontrollable and violent revolt was brewing that would eventually overwhelm the mission. Let's reread his words. "The Austrian consul tells me that Sudan was in full rebellion because of a self-styled prophet who claimed to be sent by God to free Sudan from the Turks and Christian influence. He has been collecting taxes for himself for years, and he has at his beck and call many of those who can no longer get rich because they can no longer engage in the slave trade (and they are nine-tenths of the indigenous) and those who pay taxes. I saw this prophet in 1875 with other missionaries, when we went on the government steamer beyond Tura el Khadra to the country of Cavala, and there we saw him, naked on a camel, and it was said that he lived in caves with naked women. The day before yesterday, Rauf Pasha, governor of the Sudan, sent a steamer with 200 soldiers and cannon to capture him, and they were all massacred. Now Rauf Pasha himself wants to leave with a large force of troops. We shall see."[3].

[3] *Writings*, 6941-6942; Comboni to Sembianti, Khartoum, 13 August 1881.

How can we be surprised, faced with judgments like this, that the mission appeared to the dervishes to be the institution most closely tied to the Turkish-Egyptian colonial plan? That the missionaries were judged to be the most disciplined pawns in an invasion, even more loyal to the government than the army?[4] Numerous writings by Comboni attest to his unconditional trust in Egyptian politics. The most disconcerting is the following report, addressed to Propaganda Fide, drafted in the aftermath of the Egyptian conquest of Darfur. "In the neighbouring, conquered empire of Darfur," he writes, "five large Mudiries or Egyptian provinces are being busily organised by Ismail Ayub Pasha, my friend, the governor general. I am still perfectly aware that the wealthy Khedive aspires to conquer the great empire of Waday and Bornu, and, I might say, almost all of Central Africa. Despite many objections to the contrary, I believe that the continuing Egyptian conquests can contribute to the spread of the true Catholic faith in Central Africa. I am intent on studying ways to capitalise on these important developments. Just as, in the marvellous discoveries of industry and the sublime conception of human genius, the enlightened gaze of faith contemplates, especially in our century, the means God uses to fulfil his designs on peoples and lead men to his immortal destinies, so too it seems to me that Providence uses human conquests to benefit the spread of the Gospel in these lands and the triumph of truth. Egypt is becoming increasingly important. In addition to the recent conquest of the Darfur Empire, I received a letter today from Colonel Gordon informing me that he was able to complete the stretch of the White River from Rejaf to Kerri in a felucca, whereas until now navigation was thought impossible due to the cataracts that made it unnavigable. The difficulties of communication between Gondokoro and the sources of the Nile and the Nyanza [the great lakes] have thus diminished. It seems that Gordon's enterprise is progressing for the better. On the basis of these results already obtained and those which will probably be achieved, allow me to point out this very important fact. If the Egyptian conquests proceed at this rate, in a few years, the State of H.H. the Khedive of Egypt will become a colossal kingdom. It is my great commitment to explore every way to profit from them for the benefit of our holy Faith"[5].

In reality, things turned out quite differently. Comboni, in fact, died before the indigenous revolt razed the "colossal kingdom" of Cairo, the mission, and his—in this case—overly incautious predictions. Comboni's work thus experienced all the repercussions of the ups and downs suffered by African colonial constructions. Having been a consequence of them, it could not help but follow their fate. The political constraints to which it was subjected were less noticeable than in other cases, but no less subtle and insidious.

And it must not be forgotten that when the Comboni Missionaries returned to Sudan, after the fall of the Mahdia and following the British, the true rulers of Sudan, they could only do so within the limits, including geographical ones, prescribed for them by the British administrators.

Comboni's subordination to European colonialism is, in short, real and undeniable. But while it is true that he was not exempt from it, it is equally true that the Christian seed he planted in Sudan survived the end of colonialism and gave birth, despite all the difficulties we know of, to the local Sudanese and South Sudanese church.

Gianpaolo Romanato

Source: Gianpaolo Romanato, *L'Africa di Daniele Comboni. Missione, esplorazione, avventura,* Studium, Roma, 2026, pp. 291ss.

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[4] It should not be forgotten that the work most widely used by the British to justify their military intervention against the Mahdists was the diary of the Comboni missionary Joseph Ohrwalder, who was a prisoner of the Mahdi in Sudan for several years. After fleeing to Egypt, he was forced by the British to write his story. The manuscript was edited by the British intelligence service to tarnish the Mahdists' image and published under the title *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp* (London, 1892). (in Italian: *I miei dieci anni di prigionia. Rivolta e regno del Mahdi in Sudan*, Emi, 1998). Winston Churchill, who was part of the British contingent that descended upon Sudan to defeat the Mahdists, cites Ohrwalder several times in the book he based on it: *Reconquering Khartoum* (Piemme, 1999). On the sad odyssey of the missionaries held captive by the Mahdi, see Camillo Ballin's study, *Il Cristo e il Mahdi* (Emi, 2001).

[5] *Writings*, 3859-3861; Comboni to Franchi, El Obeid, 13 July 1875.