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Christianity Among the Nomads: The Catholic Church in
Northern Kenya (review)

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escapes the limits imposed by Derridan skepticism, and communicates his findings and analyses free of the constraints of ideology.

The Steamer Parish represents historical medical geography at its finest. Charles Good not only carries his readers back to the issues of a long-ago era in Africa, but also casts them in the context of current relevance. As a result, his superbly crafted work will be of great value to many.

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Paul Tablino. *Christianity Among the Nomads: The Catholic Church in Northern Kenya*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004. 312 pp. Available from Paulines Publications Africa, P.O. Box 49026, Nairobi, GPO, Kenya. Illustrated. Maps. Biographical Notes. References. Index. 600KS. Paper.

Paul Tablino, a missionary priest in northern Kenya since 1964, is also a highly respected ethnographer and historian whose previous works include *The Gabra: Camel Nomads of Northern Kenya* (1999). He brings to this current work not only the perspective of a missionary priest, but also the insights and analyses of an experienced ethnographer and historian well versed in the subtleties of social transformations in Africa. As the author notes in his introduction, the focus of this volume is on missionaries as agents of change. A chapter on the traditional religious beliefs and social organization of the diverse peoples of northern Kenya is followed by three chapters on the geographic and social origins and philosophical orientations of the various Catholic missionary groups that came to northern Kenya. Thus, early on in the book, the author sets the stage for a meaningful discussion of the outcomes of the encounter that ultimately occurred between Western missionaries and the people of northern Kenya. The focus of a second volume, now in preparation, will be on the responses of those who underwent change.

Although Catholic missionaries traveled to northern Kenya in the early twentieth century, a meaningful presence there was not established until well into the 1950s and 1960s. This was rather late relative to Christian missionary activity in other areas of Kenya, and is accounted for by several variables, including manpower resource allocations to more densely populated areas such as the Kikuyu highlands, the presence of a largely nomadic population in northern Kenya, and an extremely poor transportation infrastructure which made many areas inaccessible. In addition, northern Kenya had been a closed district during much of the colonial era because of periodic and unpredictable civil unrest and the regular incursions of livestock raiders over the borders from Ethiopia and Somalia. Following Kenya's independence in 1963, the presence of Somali *shifto* in the region and Somali territorial claims to northern Kenya led to serious armed conflicts

against a background of weak administrative control on the part of a new government. Not surprisingly, some missionaries were killed by bandits in northern Kenya, including the Reverend Michele Stallone in 1965 at Baragoi and the Reverend Luigi Graiff at South Horr in 1981.

Father Tablino devotes three chapters to the early Catholic pioneer missionaries in northern Kenya, most of whom came from Nyeri and Meru. Among these was Monsignor Charles Cavallera, a member of the Congregation of the Consolata Fathers, headquartered in Turin, Italy, who served as Bishop of Nyeri from 1947 to 1964. He then became the first Bishop of Marsabit in 1964 and served there until 1981. He was followed by Bishop Ambrose Ravasi, who currently leads the Diocese of Marsabit. Located in the center of northern Kenya, Marsabit is a major trading entrepot and an important administrative center which in recent decades has developed into a substantial town. The author's emphasis in this volume on events in Marsabit is understandable in view of these economic and political realities, and also because it is a central location where nongovernmental organizations have settled many refugees and sedentarized previously nomadic populations. In recent years, church membership has grown rapidly, not only among these populations, but also among those who continue nomadic and seminomadic lifestyles. This and other factors prompted church leaders in 2001 to detach the southern Samburu District from the Diocese of Marsabit in order to create the new Diocese of Maralal under Bishop Virgilio Pante. As the author demonstrates, the growth in administrative complexity of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Kenya is but one reflection of the magnitude of the social and religious transformations that have been under way for the past few decades.

Christianity Among the Nomads is meticulously researched, well organized, and engagingly written with a sensitive respect for African peoples and their indigenous beliefs and traditions. The author has eminently succeeded in joining his skills as both a Christian missionary and an ethnographer to produce an illuminating history, abundant in detail and insight, and providing a better understanding of contemporary northern Kenya and its peoples. The book is enriched with numerous photographs, several excellent maps, 237 footnotes, several pages of biographical notes, and an extensive index. Those seeking a fuller comprehension of the transformative social, religious, and economic processes that have affected northern Kenya in recent decades will find this volume of great value.

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