

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND AFRICAN RELIGIONS

A Problematic Encounter

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THE SECOND WAVE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES, following some Portuguese pioneers in the sixteenth century, reached sub-Saharan Africa during the 1800s. When they arrived, they were confronted with two major religious forces: African religions and Islam. But in the areas where they settled, the Islamic influence was not generally strong; it was African religions that were holding together the social and political fabric.

Roman Catholics have been encouraged to think in positive terms about other religions since Vatican II, and in particular since the publication of *Nostra aetate*, the Council's 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions'. In the African context, the effect has been to promote what is called 'inculturation': the attempt to discern the so-called 'authentic' African values or symbols, and to assimilate these within the version of Christianity received from Western missionaries. And since there is no clear demarcation between African cultures and African religions, this process of 'inculturation' is essentially 'interreligious'.

But what do we really mean today by 'African religions' and 'African cultures' after colonialism? What has been lost and what is left? Who are the African partners in the so-called dialogue? There are or have been three ways in which Christianity has sought to engage with the reality of Africa: colonial Christianity; inculturation; and interreligious dialogue with Islam and with African religions. In this article I want to argue that all of these models have severe limitations. At the end I will suggest a more straightforwardly theological approach:

the awkwardness connected with Christian witness in Africa today in fact reflects the vulnerability intrinsic to any authentic evangelization, any sustained witness to the crucified Christ.

Before continuing, I draw attention to my choice of the term 'African religions' instead of the usual 'African traditional religion'. The conventional term gives a quite wrong impression that we are dealing with something impervious to the upheavals of history, whereas African religions are in fact as dynamic as any other religion. Moreover, there are many forms of religion in Africa. Though there are some common factors, African religions vary according to whether it is farming, coastal or forest people who are practising them. Though there are similarities between these religions, it is wrong to lump them together disparagingly as 'fetishism' or 'animism'.

Mission and Violence

Early Christian missionary activity in Africa was both ethnocentric and iconoclastic in its attitudes towards African religions:

... neither in the nineteenth nor in the early twentieth centuries did missionaries give much thought in advance to what they would find in Africa. What struck them, undoubtedly, was the darkness of the continent; its lack of religion and sound morals, its ignorance, its general pitiful condition made worse by the barbarity of the slave trade. Evangelization was seen as liberation from a state of absolute awfulness, and the picture of unredeemed Africa was often painted in colours as gruesome as possible, the better to encourage missionary zeal at home.¹

In historical context, such attitudes are all too easily understandable. Firstly, the missionaries were children of an age in which so-called early travellers' accounts, that were 'based on inaccurate information and cultural prejudice ... made African religions appear to be a morass of bizarre beliefs and practice'.² Evolutionist theories presented African religions as primitive, merely the first stage of the evolution of human religious history; and such ways of thinking remain influential long after they have become discredited among scholars. Secondly, Western

¹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 60.

² Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 3.

Christianity itself was being challenged and disrupted in the nineteenth century by rationalism and secularism. It was therefore rather on the defensive, and not in a position to be open to dialogue with religious 'otherness'. Thirdly, the evangelization of sub-Saharan Africa took place within the context of colonisation. For all the benefits it brought (not only the preaching of the gospel, but also the foundation of schools and hospitals), it was essentially a violent enterprise. 'Missionary societies tended to work in areas where their home governments were directly involved',³ behaving often as cultural agents of their own nations. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, Christianity reached black Africa as part of the Western campaign of 'civilisation' meant to 'redeem' the 'dark continent' from the claws of ignorance and devilish superstition.⁴ The heroic commitment of Christian missionaries, not only to the preaching of the gospel but also to the implantation of schools and hospitals, was part of this general programme of elevating the 'primitive' African to the level of the 'civilised' Westerner.

In such a context of unequal power relationships, a genuine dialogue between Christianity and African religions was simply not possible. The missionary had come to give and not to receive; Africans had nothing to give but everything to receive. Just as civilisation meant substituting Western cultures for African cultures, evangelization came to mean replacing African religions with Christianity. Overzealous missionaries even destroyed traditional ritual places in an attempt to persuade the evangelized that their old ways were worthless. In this early phase of Christian missionary activity, genuine dialogue with African religions was never envisaged, and the more recent movement towards 'inculturation' is in part a guilt reaction against this violent, contemptuous past.

Official Roman Documents

Though much contemporary theology has moved beyond these ways of thinking, official Roman Catholic teaching has still arguably failed to

³ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *The African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman Kenya, 1989), 14.

⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 225.



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Bishop Franz Xaver Vogt with the first indigenous Cameroonian priests, 1935

find an appropriately respectful language for its encounter with non-Christian religions, one that avoids condescension or arrogance. Its most recent document, *Dominus Iesus*, published in 2000, evinces an obvious concern at the influence of ‘relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or *in principle*)’ (n.5). It insists on a distinction between full theological faith and mere ‘belief in the other religions that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration’ developed and acted upon by humanity in its search for truth (n.7). The document’s authors feel a need to specify what they mean by the equality of partners in interreligious dialogue:

Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ ... in relation to the founders of the other religions. (n.29)

The point is clear: dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions is not a dialogue between equal religions.

To date, the most important document of the magisterium featuring a statement about dialogue between Catholicism and African

religions remains John Paul II's 1995 post-synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, in which we find the following:

With regard to African traditional religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith. They can even be seen as a *preparation for the Gospel*, because they contain precious *semina Verbi* [seeds of the Word] which can lead, as already happened in the past, a great number of people 'to be open to the fullness of Revelation in Jesus Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel'.

The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided. For this purpose, suitable courses in African traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious. (n.67)

Here there is at least talk of respect, but it is still Christianity which is determining the conversation. The dialogue envisaged here has to be 'serene' and 'prudent' in order that Catholics be protected against 'negative influences' associated with African religions. The dialogue's aim is not so much to foster mutual understanding and mutual enrichment as to discern and assimilate the positive values of African religions; and 'positive' here means 'in harmony with Christianity'. The 'positive values' of African religions are portrayed as '*semina Verbi*', as 'preparation for the gospel'. And it is in this context that *Ecclesia in Africa* speaks of a version of inculturation:

It is by looking at the mystery of the incarnation and of the redemption that the values and countervalues of cultures are to be discerned. Just as the Word of God became like us in everything but sin, so too the inculturation of the good news takes on all authentic human values, purifying them from sin and restoring to them their full meaning. (n.61)

Whether, however, this kind of writing avoids 'all inaccurate and disrespectful language' seems doubtful. For example, it is not obvious, at least from the anthropological point of view, that the distinction in *Dominus Iesus* between 'faith' and 'belief' in terms of two different

kinds of proposition does justice to religions other than Christianity. According to the anthropologist Malcom Ruel, it is an error to presume that 'belief is central to all religions in the same way as it is to Christianity'.⁵ More obviously, it hardly fosters dialogue if we begin by telling adherents of other religions that that what they have (beliefs) is of less value than what Christians have (theological faith).

Experiments and Challenges

Nevertheless, despite all the ambiguities in the idea of inculturation, and despite the ambivalence which the Church's teaching authority seems to show, some African theologians are making creative attempts to build bridges between African religions and Christianity. But their task is not an easy one, since they are confronted with the challenges arising from the present post-colonial context.

Translating God

One of the main challenges facing every missionary is communication. How can one get the gospel message across to people? Early Western missionaries in Africa struggled to learn local languages that were without alphabets. Some developed an alphabet, and then the very first dictionaries of African languages appeared, all of which led to translations of the Bible (mainly by Protestants), of catechisms and of hymnals. Because language is the home of culture, these translations blended not only different languages but also different cultures or cosmologies. Missionaries had to find (or simply invent) African words suitable for the translation of Christian concepts such as God, Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, angels and saints. And thus, for all that these early missionaries regarded African religions as worthless, they nevertheless retained concepts from these religions for the supreme deity (*Loba*, *Sse*, *Kwoth*, *Nyame*, *Mwari*, *Katonda*, *Mulungu*, *Leza* and so on) to translate the Christian concept of God.

This choice had a huge implication: it suggested that African religions were monotheistic, whereas in fact this point is very much debated among historians of religions:

⁵ Malcolm Ruel, *Ritual and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 57.

When the so-called 'high God'—*Mulungu, Mwari, Leza, Katonda, Kwoth* or *Nyame*—was worshipped, was Yahweh in truth being worshipped and was such worship truly salvific? How far could the whole wider complex of pre-Christian religious ritual and belief—focused so often upon ancestors or hero-divinities—form part of the salvific relationship between God and human beings? Possessed of his or her own religion, a world of spirits leading up to 'Spirit', did the African need Christ at all?⁶

Through these kinds of translation, missionaries were already (often unconsciously) initiating a profound but ambiguous interaction between African religions and Christianity.

Catholic Saints and African Ancestors

Recently, in the name of inculturation, some African theologians have attempted to move this dialogue to a different level by comparing African ancestors with Catholic saints (even with Jesus Christ), and suggesting that both ancestors and saints can serve as mediators. For example, in 1986 Dieudonné Watio (now a Catholic bishop in Cameroon) presented to the Department of Religious Studies (*Sciences des Religions*) of the University of Paris-Sorbonne a doctoral thesis on the cult of ancestors among the Ngyemba.

The Ngyemba are a sub-group of the Bamileke ethnic group, and they live in the Western part of Cameroon. Their local religion is centred on the veneration of ancestors. When French missionaries arrived among the Ngyemba in the early years of the twentieth century, they chose the Ngyemba term for supreme being (*Sse*) to translate the French term *Dieu*. But at the same time they rejected the practice of the veneration of ancestors as idolatrous. This eclectic, selective and, in certain aspects, arbitrary approach did not prove to be an effective way of engaging an African religion. In fact they were unconsciously tearing apart the religious system of the Ngyemba by attempting to dissociate in people's minds and lives their supreme being (*Sse*) from the veneration of ancestors. Such a dissociation could not but be artificial.

Bishop Watio draws an analogy between Catholic saints and the role of ancestors in Ngyemba spirituality, and makes all due

⁶ Adrian Hastings, *African Catholicism* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 90.

qualifications. But at the end of his comparison, he makes the following suggestion:

I hope, then, that the Church can gradually accept the possibility of acknowledging that Christians can invoke their ancestors too, just as they invoke the Christian saints: having recourse to them as mediators and intercessors with God at difficult moments, and this without fear of possible excommunication on the Church's part. I have already stressed that the cult of ancestors is not idolatry, but rather an expression of filial piety. It seems to me that if a good catechesis about the mediation of saints and ancestors were to be given to our Christians, and if for its part the Church could accept the need to look more seriously into the cult of the ancestors in order to capture better its spirit and actual function, then Christian recourse to and invocation of the ancestors would be possible, just as it is now for the Christian saints.⁷

Other African theologians, such as Charles Nyamiti and Bénézet Bujo, have rather chosen to explore the analogy between Jesus Christ and African ancestors, but on the condition that the African concept of ancestor be 'purified' of its 'negative' connotations. In their attempts to fashion Christological titles consonant with African religions and cultures, Nyamiti speaks of 'Christ as our Ancestor' and Bujo of Jesus as 'Proto-ancestor'.⁸ At the beginning of the Congolese rite for the Mass, approved by John Paul II in 1988 after more than a decade of experimentation, both the saints and the local ancestors 'who searched for and served God with an upright heart', are called upon to join the congregation for the sacrifice about to take place.

Such *rapprochements*, unthinkable in the early decades of African Christianity, are now common in African theology and pastoral practice. Scores of doctoral and masters theses have been written on similar analogies between African rites of passage and Christian sacraments, or between African religious symbols and Christian symbols. The African bishops monitor such work closely, and occasionally clash with theologians on some of these issues.

⁷ Dieudonné Watio, 'Le culte des ancêtres chez les Ngyemba (Ouest-Cameroun) et ses incidences' pastorales (dissertation: University of Paris-Sorbonne, 1986), 361-362.

⁸ See Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor* (Gweru: Mambo, 1984); Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1998).



A newly ordained priest presiding at the Eucharist for the first time in Ngyemband, Cameroon. The horses' tails that he and his assistant are holding are symbols of honour in their indigenous culture, as is the decorated awning behind them.

Nevertheless, what is at stake here is patchwork, and its dominant thrust is assimilationist. The purpose is not to encourage any sort of mutual enrichment between two equal partners, but rather to assimilate into Christian liturgy or doctrine values and symbols thought to be 'authentically' African. There have to be questions about the appropriateness of such a procedure; and it is certainly misleading to call it 'dialogue'. For all this is happening is that Christians are talking about African religions. There is no way for the African religions to talk back.

African religions have neither books nor schools of theologies; they have never fostered speculative thought. They are sets of rituals and beliefs enacted on specific occasions for specific pragmatic interests. They are not religions of a creed inviting assent. This lack of

speculation in African religions makes it very difficult to envisage a genuine doctrinal dialogue between them and Catholicism.

It is African theologians who are the ones dissecting these rituals and beliefs, and then making theories out of them for the purpose of developing an African Christian theology. The enterprise is surely highly questionable; it amounts to imposing on these religions an intellectualist attitude proper to Christianity. There is some danger that the current fashion for inculturation and assimilation may be masking just another disguised form of cultural violence.

The Mute Partner

But perhaps there are other reasons why 'dialogue' is not a realistic term for describing Christianity's engagement with African religions and cultures today. In the current post-colonial context, it is quite difficult to identify who it is with whom Christianity can undertake any dialogue. It is no easy matter to locate African religions today; moreover post-colonial Africans have very complex attitudes towards them.

African religions are certainly not dead. But they have been destabilised, first by colonial forces and more recently by globalisation processes, and are desperately seeking new anchorages. In many places, what remains of them today are mere bits and pieces of beliefs and practices which have somehow survived into the post-colonial context. When African nations first became independent, there was much talk about restoring the 'authenticity' of African cultures disrupted by colonial forces. But the reality was more a matter of the political legitimisation of bloody dictators, as violent as the colonial regimes they were replacing. There was little genuine concern about collective identities. It is very difficult to identify the real representatives of African religions, who could indeed act as partners in a dialogue with Christianity. In rural areas they may have remained fairly influential, but in the cities their credibility has been seriously undermined by money-minded charlatans commercialising bits and pieces of rituals in the name of African traditions.

Contemporary young Africans in the cities are largely ignorant about African religions. More attracted to Western styles of life, they tend to associate African traditions with the so-called 'backwardness' of village life. Hence, the kind of interreligious dialogue that one might

hope to undertake with, say, a well-schooled Muslim seems impossible. Yet their parents will often still maintain ritual ties with the village, especially in times of existential uncertainties. In the event of a terrible misfortune, they are not above succumbing to temptation and going to a diviner. And both the older and the younger generations are often uncertain about what is and is not permissible for Christians. African religions exist less as coherent independent realities, and more as collections of practices somehow coexistent with Christianity and Islam.

Evangelization, Cultures and Vulnerability

Before its encounter with Islam and Christianity, Africa knew almost nothing of wars of religion, of proselytism or of conversion. There may have been religious interchange, as a result of ethnic groups borrowing beliefs and rituals from one another, but one was automatically initiated into the religion of one's ethnic group. Ethnic groups, and still more families, all shared the same religion.

In post-colonial Africa the situation is different. What remains of African religions now coexists with a variety of forms of Islam and Christianity. African ethnic groups, African families, are often pluralist. It would not be difficult to imagine an African family in which the mother is Catholic, the father adheres to an African religion, one son is a Jehovah's Witness, a daughter a Pentecostal, and another son a Muslim.

The potential for conflict here is obvious. When misfortune strikes, the father may choose to offer a propitiatory sacrifice, while the Catholic mother insists on having a Mass said. Some may indeed see no problem with the combination, as long as the practices work. Many African Christians are in church in the morning and at the diviner's place in the afternoon. There are serious questions here about the depth of people's faith, and about the quality of their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Why do they still miss their traditional rituals in spite of their Christian belonging?

The standard answer given to this question by African theologians is that the evangelization of Africa was not sufficiently respectful of African religions. It avoided proper interreligious dialogue and therefore failed to reach the hearts of the evangelized. The solution to the problem lies in an ever more vigorous inculturation. By bridging

the gap between Catholicism and African religious values, this inculturation will progressively unify people's religious experiences. But in my opinion, this explanation is problematic, for several reasons.

The Syncretist Reaction

In the first place, the history of religions shows that divided religious loyalty, or a lived religious syncretism, is always a temptation in any context of religious pluralism. If such divided loyalty is indeed a problem, it is unfair to attribute it to the violent missionary policies of the past. Lived syncretism has more to do with people trying out other gods when they feel that Christianity has let them down. It tends to occur in times of crisis. The Old Testament prophets often complained about the unfaithfulness of Israel when the latter flirted with foreign divinities or idols at such times:

Wine and new wine take away the understanding. My people consult a piece of wood, and their divining rod gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have played the whore, forsaking their God. They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains, and make offerings upon the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. (Hosea 4: 11-13)

African Christians go through similar temptations in times of misfortune. It is indeed important to remember that African religions are predominantly pragmatic; they are problem-solving sets of beliefs and rituals which promise immediate returns, whereas the mainstream Christian Churches insist on faith and hope. It is therefore no surprise that charismatic or neo-Pentecostal Churches are having some success in Africa today. This is partly because of their focus on a pragmatic Christianity that promises immediate benefits (healing, success, prosperity, jobs) in a context of dire poverty.⁹

Globalisation

A second reason why 'more inculturation' is not a sensible strategy for African Christianity today is that it leaves unaddressed the central reality of contemporary Africans' cultural experience: the experience

⁹ See Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst, 2004).



A witch doctor at work in Ghana

of multiculturalism resulting from current processes of globalisation.¹⁰ This is a point on which African Catholicism should learn from the experience of European Catholicism. The centuries of ‘inculturation’ in Europe have not prevented the advent of a culture that is post-Christian and in many respects secularised. The marriage between a mainstream culture and a religion is not indissoluble.

The deeper and more unsettling point, one with which advocates of ‘inculturation’ as a pastoral strategy need to come to terms, is the shifting nature of any human culture. Whereas ‘history has no end,

¹⁰ I have discussed this point further in ‘Repenser l’inculturation en Afrique’, *Études*, 404 (2005), 452-462.

and cultural change will always be with us',¹¹ the gospel message does not change. Inculturation is indeed a difficult attempt to marry culture, which is always in motion, with the message of Christ ('Love God and love your neighbour'), which will never change. Given culture's susceptibility to change, the product of any attempt at inculturation is bound to be an unstable mixture.

Evangelization and Conflict

There is nothing new about the fact that Christian mission occurs in a context of religious pluralism. Jesus himself carried out his mission in a context of pluralism and nothing suggests that he was particularly concerned about the existence of other religions. He simply went around preaching the gospel, and loving both Jews and non-Jews; we occasionally find him admiring the faith of the so-called pagans (Luke 7:9; Matthew 15:28). Moreover, there is no indication that the fact of his being culturally Jewish made his message any less difficult for his Jewish audience:

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat? ... Many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. (John 6:52,66)

The fact that these people decided not to follow Jesus any more obviously had nothing to do with some cultural gap between the evangelizer and evangelized, for the message of Jesus could not have been better inculturated. The breakdown in communication occurred because Jesus' Jewish audience found what he had to say senseless and unacceptable. Jesus spent his public ministry witnessing to the God's love for humanity. This love reaches out to one's enemies and prays for one's persecutors; it unsettles human selfishness and pride; it is countercultural; it is love nailed on a cross:

... Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

¹¹ Gerard J. Hughes, 'Matteo Ricci in Post-Christian Europe', *The Way*, 44/2 (April 2005), 71-82, here 82; the whole article is well worth consulting on issues regarding culture and evangelization.

The first Christians evangelized in a context of religious pluralism, in an environment even more hostile than ours. From a humble and vulnerable position they witnessed to the crucified Christ in word and action. Some believed them and were baptized; others did not. Why should the outcome of our mission be different today? Instead of worrying about the existence of other religions, Christians should worry about the strength and genuineness of their witness:

'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:34-35)

Instead of worrying about the survival of African religions, African Christians should instead be concerned about what Christian love demands of them in Africa today. How prophetic is their witness on a continent that is in many ways the victim of global politics and economics, and plagued by wars, pandemics and famine? The future of African Christianity has little to do with the search for values in African religions that are compatible with Christianity. What matters is the Christian mission to remind the world, both in words and actions, that the unselfish love of God and of neighbour is the only genuine solution to the problems of humanity, and that only love can overcome evil.

This message transcends cultures. It is difficult, not because it comes with the baggage of a particular culture, but because no human being, no human culture, can claim to measure up to its demands. There will always be some distance between the norms of any culture and the demands of Christian love. Any fashionable talk of inculturation, and still more any idea that there can be successful inculturation, rather obscures a central reality of Christian witness: the prophetic distance between Christ's message and human cultures.

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