

African traditional religion and the Catholic Church in light of the Synods for Africa: 1994 and 2009

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Summary

This article describes the relationship between African traditional religions and the Catholic Church as it has evolved following the two Synods for Africa in 1994 and 2009, which themselves followed from and reflected the new openness to interreligious dialogue in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. The article chronicles the various actions and pronouncements of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue concerning relations with ATR, as well as the post-Synodal exhortations of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI on evangelisation and African religions.

1 Introduction: A new order

Described as fetishism, animism and paganism, African traditional religion (ATR) has not been in the good graces of the Catholic Church or other Christian denominations since the beginning of evangelisation in Africa. It fell to the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in the 1960s to mark an official change in attitude in relation to non-Christian religions. Since then, this new order has had a profound impact on the work of the Catholic Church in Africa, which had a historic and unprecedented moment in 1994 with the first Special Synod for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. This gathering was followed by another in 2009. During the course of these conferences, serious consideration was given to the relations between the Catholic Church and ATR. A new era had begun.

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In this article, after a brief description of the history from Vatican II to the 1994 Synod, I analyse the current state of relations between the two religions in light of the two Synods for Africa. In the course of the second Synod for Africa, held at the Vatican from 5 to 25 October 2009, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, observed:¹

African traditional religion still exercises a strong influence over Africans, who are naturally religious ... In order to respond to the question, what new things does the evangelist have to say to Africans, it is indispensable to understand and appreciate the religious roots of the people of the continent since, according to African wisdom, 'it is in pushing its roots into nourishing earth that the tree grows'.

The cardinal's declaration explains well, in my view, the current state of the soul of the Catholic Church in the face of Africa's religious heritage. It can no longer ignore the 'religious roots' of the continent in its evangelising mission. A page has turned in the relations between the two creeds and, as the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue seemed to acknowledge, the change is radical. But the arrival at this conviction was not easy.

2 African traditional religion and the beginning of evangelisation

As is well known, the religious roots of the African peoples manifested in their rituals (passage to adulthood; cult of death; cult of ancestors; relation with spirits), their music and dance, and their prayers and other observances were considered by the first missionaries to be barbarism, fetishism, idolatry² – something diabolical 'whose exact contours were unknown'.³ All of this was contrary to the new religion that the missionaries had brought, and they forbade these practices and devotions among the faithful, under pain of exclusion from the Christian community. It was all purely and simply to be abandoned. The first faithful followed the prescriptions of the 'Father' during the day, but nightly returned to the practices of their ancestors. A fundamental question was posed: how to live with the prescriptions of the new religion, which spoke of brotherly love, justice, equality and peace, without renouncing the 'religious roots' that had been left to them by their ancestors and had served to cement their communities

1 J-B Sourou *L'ora della maturità, la Chiesa in Africa ai tempi del secondo Sinodo* (2010) 39.

2 See JH Kwabena Nketia 'African Christian spirituality and African culture' *The World Missionary Conference Edinburgh* (2010); FB Nyamnjoh & J Fokwang 'Entertaining repression: Music and politics in post-colonial Cameroon' (2005) 104 *African Affairs* 251-274.

3 B Bujo *Introduction à la théologie africaine* (2008) 41.

up to that point. A very important question was posed: Could they be African and Christian?⁴

3 Second Vatican Council

At the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), a global gathering of the Catholic Church convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, many African clergy took part and they brought with them the fundamental question of African 'religious roots' to the heart of the Church. For many Africans who had become Christians, the imposition of the missionaries provoked a real question of identity, many of which were collected in 1956 in the theological manifesto 'The black priests question themselves'.⁵ This document had, in effect,⁶

marked a historic break ... [f]rom an age in which, the priests said, 'We thought for ourselves, outside of ourselves, and in spite of ourselves'; there was an awareness of a responsibility: African theology was born as a will to think for us, by us, and in complete consent to the mission of the faithful quest for the intelligence of faith. A will to relate the mission of evangelisation led by foreign missionaries to African culture was thus expressed.

This awareness of the people appeared in several documents of the Council, notably, the Vatican declaration *Nostra Aetate* of 28 October 1965 on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. There, one reads:⁷

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.

Nostra Aetate continues:⁸

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognise, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

Such a declaration marked an important break in the conduct of missionary practice to that point, which I have described above. Henceforth, the Catholic Church spoke of sincere respect toward other religions, because there was nothing at all evil in them, and it

4 J-B Sourou *Comment être africain et chrétien?: Essai sur l'inculturation de mariage en Afrique* (2009).

5 See A Abble *et al Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (1956).

6 B Adoukonou 'La théologie africaine aujourd'hui' conference presentation to the Faculty of Theology of Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Taiwan, 29 April 2010.

7 Pope Paul VI *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) 28 October 1965 para 2.

8 As above.

invited the faithful to charity, dialogue and collaboration toward the progress of moral, social, and cultural values – but with prudence. This invitation to prudence meant that a road remained to be travelled to remove every shadow of a doubt in the understanding of non-Christian religions, among them African traditional religions. The effect was not total but, henceforth, one could use African musical instruments in church, celebrate mass in the vernacular, and sing and translate the Bible into African languages. This gave birth to a flowering of choirs, for example. Before Vatican II, the official liturgical language of the Catholic Church in African villages had been Latin.

The Vatican II Council touched on many of the questions that had been raised in earlier years by missionary practice, but in these general conferences, there had not been sufficient time devoted to the Church in Africa. It was thus with a feeling of half-success that the African bishops left Rome at the end of the Council. They began, from that point onwards, to toy with the idea of a Special Council for their continent. Such a conference could serve as a venue for a deeper discussion of the identity of the Church in Africa, of African 'religious roots', and of the place of Africa in the heart of the universal church. There would not be a Council, but rather a Synod in 1994.⁹

4 First Synod of Bishops for Africa

The Synod of Bishops is a permanent institution in the Catholic Church, established by Pope Paul VI in September 1965, following the Vatican II Council. It is an advisory body, composed of bishops representing the Episcopal conferences of the whole world and the presidents of Roman Curia dicasteries, or departments. A sort of 'miniature council', it demonstrates the collegiality of the bishops. It reconvenes periodically to discuss major questions for the Church.¹⁰ The Pope convenes these synods in three different forms: ordinary, extraordinary and special. The Synod for Africa was convened as a special synod.

Well before convening the Synod, which would be an important stage for the Christian Catholics of Africa, on 25 March 1988, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue led by the Nigerian archbishop, Cardinal Francis Arinze, under Pope John Paul II, published a new document on ATR, titled 'Pastoral attention to

9 See J-B Sourou *Ecclesia in Africa à la lumière de l'Esprit d'Assise: Essai de lecture du premier Synode pour l'Afrique en marche vers le second* (2008).

10 See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synod_of_Bishops_\(Catholic\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synod_of_Bishops_(Catholic)) (accessed 31 January 2014).

African traditional religions'.¹¹ The brief document, just seven pages in all, focused on how¹²

[t]he better ATR is understood by the heralds of the Gospel, the more suitable will be the presentation of Christianity traditional to Africans ... In this way, the Church will be more and more at home in Africa, and Africans will be more and more at home in the Church.

In fact, the Catholic Church more than realised that to want to separate the African man from his religious universe, from his 'religious roots', was to replant a tree without its roots, because the African was born, lived, grew and died in a religious universe and the transfer of this to Christ was particularly delicate. The idea so well synthesised by Amadou Hamapaté Ba, when he declared that to attempt to understand Africa and the African without the contribution of traditional religion would be like opening a large armoire devoid of its most precious contents.¹³

Pope John Paul II, who encouraged the drafting of the document, in the words of Cardinal Arinze, the President of the Pontifical Council, 'appreciated the African soul which searches for God through traditional religion, which was the religion of the majority of Africans before the arrival of Christianity and even Islam in Africa'.¹⁴ He realised well, the Cardinal continued,¹⁵

that the search for the divine through the African soul in these traditional religions was not without some errors here and there, but with a clear idea that there is one God and that there are good and evil spirits and that there are ancestors to be honored. This is not a bad preparation for Christianity. This does not surprise the many Christians in Africa who come from this religion, because it is a providential preparation of the people of God for Christianity. It is the human spirit that is in search of God.

Pope John Paul II had the opportunity to publicly express himself on these points, for example, in the course of his historic meeting with representatives of the Vodun religion on 4 February 1994 at Cotonou in Benin. It was a rare gesture during the 15 pastoral trips that he made to Africa.

In light of this, the Synod stressed the question of inculturation as an implantation of the Gospel message in the culture of a people. As

11 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 'Pastoral attention to African religions' letter to the Episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar, Rome, 25 March 1988, *Bulletin* 1988/XXIII/2 para 1, <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/vatican.html> (accessed 31 January 2014). The document is composed of four points: (1) reasons for pastoral attention to African traditional religion; (2) some elements of African traditional religion; (3) some key doctrinal points; and (4) proposals for action to be taken by the Episcopal conferences. See also J-B Sourou *Jean-Paul II: Pape blanc et Africain* (2009), 43-57.

12 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (n 11 above) para 1.

13 See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1993/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19930204_vodu-cotonou_fr.html (accessed 31 January 2014).

14 Sourou (n 11 above) 52.

15 As above (quoting Cardinal Francis Arinze).

Pope John Paul II described it in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, inculturation is 'a process that includes the whole of Christian existence – theology, liturgy, customs, and structures'.¹⁶ It is meant to address the deep sense in many Africans of having received a faith not totally rooted in culture and life.¹⁷ It is an 'urgent priority ... for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa'.¹⁸ To give a striking symbol, the Synod chose a powerful image: the Church as the Family of God. Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum, then Archbishop of Dakar in Senegal and Secretary-General of the Synod, proposed that that inculturation concerned all aspects of life. He mentioned worship and liturgy, marriage and family, sickness and health, and initiation rites.¹⁹ The unceasing importance that belief in ATR has on the quest for evangelisation that takes account of the African man led the Synod to insist on dialogue with it: 'Dialogue with its adherents and followers constitutes a challenge for the Church.'²⁰ As Pope John Paul II himself put it:²¹

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 harmonised with the content of the faith.

A great leap seems to have been taken in the very important document *Ecclesia in Africa*.

Pope John Paul II insisted as well on 'profound respect' and he wrote that 'adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided'.²² As a means toward a better understanding of ATR, the Synod invited research projects and publications by experts, 'especially for matters concerning marriage, the veneration of ancestors, and the spirit world, in order to examine in depth all the cultural aspects of problems'.²³ The domains of social development, peace and respect for life were points on which Catholic Christians could work and adapt from ATR.²⁴

In short, with the 1994 Synod, there officially began an engagement on the part of the Catholic Church toward cohabitation in dialogue with ATR. African Christians were called to discern what

16 Pope John Paul II *Ecclesia in Africa* 14 September 1995, para 78.

17 M Cheza (ed) *Le Synode africain: histoire et textes* (1996) 238 (citing Cardinal H Thiandoum, Introductory Report to the Synod, para 16).

18 John Paul II (n 16 above) para 59.

19 See Cheza (n 17 above).

20 Cheza (n 17 above) 207 (citing Cardinal H Thiandoum, Second Report to the Synod, para 28).

21 John Paul II (n 16 above) para 67.

22 As above.

23 John Paul II (n 16 above) para 64.

24 See Sourou (n 11 above).

was good in their 'spiritual roots' and to make peace with them. It was only in this way that faith could become culture and touch all the sectors of life in Africa, since 'a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived'.²⁵

5 Second Synod for Africa: October 2009

In the course of these conferences, there were questions of justice, peace and reconciliation in Africa. Most of the participants were very clear: 'Justice, peace, and reconciliation cannot be achieved without taking account of their contents in social life in Africa.'²⁶ Citing numerous examples, the bishops from Côte d'Ivoire, from Sierra Leone and from Guinea-Bissau showed that in these matters, if no others and in order not to fail at its plan in these domains, the Catholic Church should stay in permanent dialogue with Islam and African traditional religions.²⁷ The Archbishop of Conakry, Monsignor Vincent Coulibaly, for example, stressed the 'urgency of tripartite interreligious dialogue between Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion to make peace and to bring further into the light the spirit of fraternity and solidarity in the African cultural essence'.²⁸

In his post-Synodal apostolic exhortation, *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the elements of the preceding Synod, such as inculturation, dialogue and scientific research to come to terms as well with 'the vital distinction between culture and cult and to discard those magical elements which cause division and ruin for families and societies'.²⁹ Witchcraft and other evil rites were implied here. Several participants put into perspective the fear and the damage that witchcraft created in African societies. Many in Africa and outside of the continent thought that these evil behaviours against life are a part of ATR, but it is very important to maintain that they are inherent contradictions in African culture which, in their essence, love and protect life. Deaths supposedly due to jealousy, envy and the will to be the first in all things and not to accept the success of others are contrary to the true values contained in ATR. The real ATR is a force for life and its respect.³⁰ Discernment is not always easy. This is why, with a view to making a well-founded project and deep research, the Pope emeritus urged:³¹

It is worth singling out knowledgeable individual converts, who could provide the Church with guidance in gaining a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the traditions, the culture and the traditional religions.

25 John Paul II (n 16 above) para 78.

26 Sourou (n 1 above) 35.

27 As above.

28 Sourou (n 1 above) 39-40.

29 Pope Benedict XVI *Africa Munus* 19 November 2011 para 92. See also para 93.

30 Pope Benedict XVI (n 29 above) para 69.

31 Pope Benedict XVI (n 29 above) para 92.

On the other hand, *Africae Munus* also condemned practices that were justified a part of the ancestral tradition, but which 'debate and degrade' African women.³²

Overall, Pope Benedict XVI expressed in *Africae Munus* not only the desire to continue in the same line as preceding documents, particularly *Ecclesia in Africa*, but also to adapt to new demands in the era of globalisation. 'It is very important that this continue,' Benedict emphasised, above all 'at a time when the intermingling of peoples, while a source of enrichment, often weakens cultures and societies.'³³ 'The identity of African communities is at stake in these intercultural encounters,' Benedict emphasised. 'It is imperative therefore to make a commitment to transmit the values that the Creator has instilled in the hearts of Africans since the dawn of time.'³⁴ These values, *Africae Munus* insists, 'have served as a matrix for fashioning societies marked by a degree of harmony, since they embody traditional formulae for peaceful coexistence'.³⁵ This is rather positive.

6 Final considerations: African *and* Christian

In my opinion, relations between ART and the Catholic Church have evolved from atrocious to a point of no return in terms of encouraging perspectives for the future and for Africa as a continent in the sense of research on African culture and for African Christians. It is this to which the Church invites the African faithful through inculturation, dialogue, research, and the promotion of humanity as a challenge for African Christians. African Catholics have everything to gain from this and must do it after years of suspicion and resistance. African Christians can and must be African *and* Christian. This will enrich our continent.

32 Pope Benedict XVI (n 29 above) paras 56-57.

33 Pope Benedict XVI (n 29 above) para 38.

34 As above.

35 As above.