CHRISTIAN RELATIONS WITH ISLAM AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS IN WEST AFRICA
(c.1500 to the present)

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Abstract

The relations between the various Christian denominations in West-Africa and official Christian-Muslim relations have changed noticeably in recent times. The pre-colonial and colonial periods as well as the post-independence era is discussed with a view to establishing trends in this regard. In spite of clear universalistic and sometimes expansionist policies and aims, there are trends in Christian and Muslim circles in West-Africa towards greater co-operation than ever before. Limiting factors are described to be unfair competition and discrimination in social life rather than doctrine. In spite of a history of positing a diametrical opposition between the African and Christian belief systems, both Islam and Christianity have probably been domesticated rather than supplanting the traditional views. Some account is given of the process whereby Christian churches have recently started regarding traditional views with greater tolerance and respect.

Introduction

Not only has there been a move towards greater toleration, co-operation and unity between the various Christian denominations in West Africa, but there has also been a profound change at the 'official level' in Christian-Muslim relations in the region in recent times. At the grass roots level relations have almost always been characterised by such tolerance and co-operation.

The pre-colonial and colonial periods

One of the aims of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century was to establish Christian kingdoms in West Africa for the purpose of counteracting the growth and influence of Islam. And the missionaries of the first era of Christian evangelisation in West Africa for their own reasons, which often tended to overlap with those of their respective governments, were likewise determined to halt the spread of Islam.

Believing that Muslims in West Africa were only very loosely attached to their faith, these missionaries were fully convinced that their task would be relatively easy. On the other hand some of their lay contemporaries who knew West Africa saw things differently. One, Coelho, who visited the Senegambia in the second half of the seventeenth century wrote 'The Jolofs are all Muslims and by that very fact are extremely difficult to convert'.[1] Another seventeenth century European visitor to

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1   N.I. de Moraes. 'La Petite Côte d'Après Francisco de Lemos Coelho' (XVII siecle), *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d' Afrique Noire* (henceforth BIFAN), sér B, No.2, 1973, p. 251

Senegambia, while observing that a good deal of mixing of African traditional religion with Islam took place, was, nevertheless convinced that the Senegalese were *in principle* Muslims and obeyed the main precepts of the Qur'an.[2] This same observer noted, moreover, and somewhat ironically, that more expatriate Christians converted to traditional religions that traditional religionists to Christianity. He wrote, 'It is more frequent to see the French embrace the cult of the indigenous than to see the latter convert to the religion of the French'.[3]

Islam, though not as widespread as the above quotations might suggest, was more deeply rooted in Senegambian society than the Christian missionaries imagined.

Having arrived in Takrur in northern Senegal in the eleventh century, Islam was slowly but steadily becoming an integral part of the religious, intellectual and cultural life of the society.[4] And this was much more so the case by the 1840's when the modern period of Christian missionary activity in the region began in earnest.

Like their predecessors, the missionaries who arrived in West Africa in the early nineteenth century, and for a long time afterwards, had probably never heard or read anything positive about Islam. Made aware through their worship and liturgy, papal pronouncements, the writings of Christian theologians and historians, popular literature, and political rhetoric of a perceived Islamic threat to Christianity and European civilisation these missionaries, to whom Islam was a post Christian heresy, once again set out to halt and even reverse the progress of Islam in West Africa. And at the outset they were also full of confidence that this could be accomplished with little difficulty.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century most missionaries on the ground in the Senegambia and elsewhere had been forced by their lack of success to abandon the idea of converting Muslims and of Christianising Muslim territories. From this period onwards the concentration was more on 'stemming the tide' of Islam rather than on attempting to roll back its frontiers. The race was on to build a barrier against further Islamic penetration into non-Muslim areas. Of course, there were those who never relaxed their efforts or gave up hope that Islam would be overcome. Believing that Christianity and Western civilisation were superior to anything Islam had to offer, these missionaries were convinced that once Muslims had reached a higher level of intellectual awareness they would be able to appreciate these facts and would then make the decision to become Christians.[5]

The view was fairly widespread in missionary circles in the late nineteenth and early part of this century that the survival of Islam depended on the continuation of slavery, and that once this was undermined the whole edifice would come tumbling down. In the opinion of many missionaries no one became a Muslim out of conviction or for religious reasons, but simply out of material considerations, or because Islam was an easy option or because force had been used to convert them. Among the Christian clergy who presented a much more positive view of Islam were Mojola Agbebi and Edward Wilmot Blyden, and a number of Christian journalists in southern Nigeria. Agbebi spoke of Islam as 'Christianity's older brother and more experienced rival', as 'a demonstrative

2   Carson, I.A. Ritchie. 'Deux Textes sue le Sénégal', BIFAN. T. XXX, sér B, No.1, 1968, p. 313

3   Ibid., p. 318

4   See P.B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*, London: Edward Arnold, 1982, for an overview of the development of Islam and West Africa.

5   Citations from M. Echeruo, *Victorian Lagos*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977, 83-4.

and attractive religion', and of the African Muslim as 'our co-religionist'.[6] Similar views were expressed by Blyden in his *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, written in 1988.[7] Southern Nigerian journalists supported the positive, tolerant, more objective approach to Islam adopted by Agbebi and Blyden and condemned the negative, hostile attitude of Christian missionaries towards Muslims in northern Nigeria, arguing that they should be left alone since they were already 'religiously civilised' and that more attention should be paid to the moral and spiritual well-being of Christians in the South.[8]

This positive response to Islam did not, it should be noted, indicate a preference for Islam on the part of those who adopted it. It was to an extent a genuine, sincere appraisal, based on observation and experience, of the merits of Islam in the West African setting. There were other considerations involved as well. Blyden, for instance, attempted to move away from the negative, stereotypical view of Islam found in a great deal of the literature on Islam produced by non-Muslims. On the other hand, he was aware of and was influenced by the writings of Nöldeke, Muir, Spanger and Deutsch which, he felt, provided a much more objective balanced presentation of Islam.

There were many other reasons, of a theoretical, practical and personal nature, as to why Islam appealed to Blyden. He saw Islam as carrying out what he termed as a 'civilising mission' in West Africa by providing, among other things, a thorough, systematic education, leading to a form of development which did not involve European cultural domination. According to Blyden - and this was of great significance given his experience of racial prejudice against black people like himself - Islam did not discriminate on grounds of race or colour, while Christianity sometimes failed to uphold the dignity of the African and the equality of the races.

The response to Islam shown by Blyden, Mojola Agbebi and others was also as much a criticism of the Christian Church's attitude to the norms and values of African society as it was a positive statement about Islam. Blyden was writing at a time when Africans in Sierra Leone and elsewhere were being superseded or downgraded and in some cases even dismissed from the colonial administration by Europeans who were in some instances less well qualified than those they took over from or replaced. He wrote, moreover, at a time when pressure groups composed of European missionaries were attempting to oust Africans from positions of leadership in the Church.

Blyden and other like-minded Africans highlighted the positive side of Islam not only because they were genuinely convinced that Islam did contain an indisputably positive dimension, but also for the purpose of persuading Christian leaders and spokesmen of the need for a change in the 'form' and presentation of Christianity if it was to compete successfully with its main rival in Africa.

Christian missionaries were not alone in blocking any further advance of Islam. Some of the African and Aladura Churches were also strongly opposed to the progress of Islam. To the National Church of Africa (founded as the Unitarian Brotherhood Church) Islam, as much as Christianity, was a foreign religion. And while the Aladura Churches

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6   For a full account of Blyden's views on Islam see E.D.A. Hulmes, *Christian Attitudes to Islam: A Comparative Study of the Work of S.A. Crowther, E.W. Blyden and W.R.S. Miller in West Africa*, D Phil., Oxon. 1980.

7   M. Echeruo, op. cit., p. 83.

8   National Archives Ibadan (NAI) Oke Papers 3/1/6. *The African Religion: Neither Christianity No Muhammedanism*, by Adeniran.

shared a number of rituals in common with Muslims, they were often as determined as the mission Churches used to be to convert Muslims to Christ.

The post-Independence Era

Since the early 1960s many Christian Churches in West Africa have been involved with Muslims in attempts to create a climate for better understanding and closer co-operation between Christians and Muslims. The Catholic Church in West Africa was greatly encouraged to pursue better relations with Islam and other non-Christian religions by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). On the question of Islam the Catholic Church acknowledged the mistakes of the past, stressed the need for mutual understanding and presented for the first time a positive, if cautious and minimalistic view, of Islam. Catholics, it was stated, looked with esteem upon Muslims 'who adore one God, living and enduring, merciful and all-powerful, Maker of heaven and earth and Speaker to men'.[9]

Despite the fact that the Catholic Church had been somewhat cautious in its approach, omitting in its official statements on Islam many points that Muslims would have liked to have seen incorporated - for example a clear recognition of the prophetic mission of Muhammed - the Declaration, nevertheless, marked a breakthrough in Catholic-Muslim relations at the official level. It also went some way to vindicating the work of a small group of Catholics and Muslims who for a long time had been advocating closer co-operation and dialogue. On the Catholic side there was the French intellectual Massignon who many years previously had asked Christians to embark on a 'spiritual Copernican revolution', and return to the origins of Islamic teaching, 'to that point of virgin truth that is found at its centre and makes it live'.[10] As for Muslims, in both Nigeria and Senegal, they had already been meeting in association with Christians in the late 1950's and early 1960's for the purpose of improving relations and generating a better understanding of each other's faith. And in 1962 the 'Society for African Culture' in Senegal, composed of both Christians and Muslims, had sent a letter to Rome requesting the bishops of the Catholic Church to consider ways and means of initiating dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Africa.[11]

In Nigeria in October 1962, Christians from different denominations met Muslims in Kano and established a Christian-Muslim Committee to explore ways of enhancing co-operation and mutual understanding. Then in 1963, students at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, in Northern Nigeria, met to discuss the question of 'Ecumenism and the Undergraduate'. In 1964 the then Premier of Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello said in his capacity as Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University that the task of the university was 'to bring about a dialogue between the Islamic culture from the East, the Christian culture from the West and a third culture, that of the Ancient States and Empires of Africa'.[12]

All of this was, both in tone and substance, a long way from the negative and provocative statement made in 1959 by the former French Archbishop of Dakar when he declared that the marks of Islamic tradition were 'fanaticism, collectivism, and

9   G. Anawati. Excursus on Islam. In H. Vorgrimmler (ed.) *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol III, London: Burns and Oats, 1969, pp. 151 ff.

10 Ibid., p.152.

11 V. Monteil, *L'Islam Noir,* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971, 112.

12 Citation from Revd V. Chukuwulozie 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria', unpublished paper presented at Jos University, 1976.

enslavement of the weak', all of which made it very similar in method to Communism.[13] But from the 1960's and especially from 1969 with the appearance of the document 'Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians', Catholic Church leaders in Francophone West Africa have made dialogue with Muslims a top priority. They have established various Commissions on Islam and held numerous conferences such as the one at Niamey, capital of Niger, in 1975. At this conference the Catholic Bishop of Niamey invited the Muslim mystic, scholar and disciple of Cerno Bokar Taal,[14] Ahmadu Hampaté Bâ, to address the conference. The latter emphasised the need for religions to unite in order to arrest the growing trend towards atheism and expressed the hope that both Christians and Muslims would mediate more frequently on chapter (sura) 29, v.46 of the Qur'an which he interpreted as being a direct challenge to both to get to know and understand one another better. Ignorance of each others' faith was, he suggested, the greatest obstacle to closer co-operation and dialogue.[15]

In Nigeria, though informal dialogue between Muslims and Christians has a long history, and despite the coming together of students in the early 1960's, it was not until November 1974 that the first official Muslim-Christian dialogue in Nigeria took place in Ibadan on the initiative of the Catholic Church. The dialogue concentrated on 'areas of agreement' between the two religions and on how both religions could combat materialism. In addition, the modernisation of religious concepts and of religious language was considered with a view to making religion more intelligible to contemporary Nigerians. The common problems which Christianity and Islam should face together were listed as secularisation in education, nepotism, abortion, materialism and bribery and corruption.

Some Muslims emphasised that the real unity of Islam and Christianity consisted in the fact that they are 'united at source': God created them both and both professed entire submission to one God.[16] Muslims and Christians, however, approached God in different ways, and the main difference arose from the fact that Christians emphasised and believed in the divinity of Christ. Muslims throughout West Africa, whatever their level of education or socio-economic background, express this same point of view. Interestingly, research indicates that some Christian groups think that even the divinity of Christ need no longer prove to be an obstacle to Christian-Muslim unity. An archbishop of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Western Nigeria pointed out that Muslims do not, in his opinion, regard Christ with any less esteem and reverence than the Christians. It is, he maintains, a question of understanding correctly the Muslim position.[17]

Despite attempts to create understanding among Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and Senegal there is the view that dialogue/ecumenism is simply a front for proselytisation. Others, particularly Christian missionaries, fear that dialogue may result in destructive self-criticism, and further undermine the work of the Christian missions.

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13 Monteil, op. cit., p.129.
14 L. Brenner. *West African Sufi, The Religious Heritage and Spiritual Search of Cerno Boker Saalif Taal*, London: C. Hurst and Coy Ltd, 1984.
15 A. Hampaté Bâ, Jesus en Islam. In *Compte-Rendu de la Session de Niamey*, Catholic Commission for Muslim Relations, Dakar, April 1976.
16 Chukuwulozie, op. cit.
17 Interview, Ibadan, July 1978.

Other setbacks to dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria were occasioned by the Civil War and the Shar'ia and 'secular state' debates.[18]

Christian-Muslim relations and changing views on missionary activity

The impact of recent developments in the field of Christian-Muslim relations on Christian thinking about missionary activity has been considerable. Some Christian missionaries actively engaged in this dialogue in Senegal called for a radical rethink in the way the Catholic Church and the Christian Churches in general approach the whole question of mission. They believe that in the past too much emphasis was placed on geographical and numerical expansion.

As one Catholic missionary expressed it, 'The entire history of mission until very recently confirms to some extent that attitude [of competition], capable of giving rise to conflict, that mentality more or less guided by the desire to gain ground'.[19] This has led to, among other things, an emphasis on quantity rather than quality, on the necessity to propagate the Christian gospel in a spatial sense and consequently to ignorance of and hostility toward Islam and traditional African religions, which have always been regarded simply as obstacles to expansion.[20] The role of the missionary was not primarily to extend the visible limits of a visible Church but to be a sign of and point people to the future Kingdom of God in accordance with the capacity of each individual to accept and understand this sign. If this view of the role of the Christian missionary were widely endorsed then, it is maintained, missionaries would realise that there was no contradiction between dialogue with Islam and Christian mission.[21]

This approach to missionary activity is by no means accepted by all Christians and many Muslims are doubtful that it will ever be generally accepted. For the latter, papal visits to Africa and elsewhere are but one clear indication that the Catholic Church pursues a universalistic, expansionist policy. It is widely believed that every major world religion is of necessity universalistic. Nevertheless, many Christians and Muslims in West Africa are clear that through co-operation they can dispel the inauthentic and false image of themselves as 'brothers at war', and contribute much in the struggle against underdevelopment and materialism. Doctrinal differences, it is worth noting, are not seen as the biggest obstacle to closer co-operation, but rather unfair competition and discrimination in such areas as education, employment and politics, especially where these are used as instruments of conversion. And here, though the situation varies from one area of West Africa to another, and even within the same country, neither Christianity nor Islam can claim that history is entirely on its side.

The response to African traditional religions

For most of the pre-colonial and colonial period, missionaries, though there were always exceptions, viewed African traditional religions a morass of bizarre beliefs and practices. Missionaries, of course, were not alone in this. Sociologists, including Comte who is the

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18 See P. B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*, London: Edward Arnold, 1982, Chapter 8.
19 Revd P. Hollande, *La Dynamique Missionaire de l'Islam*. Mémoire de Maîtrise en Théologie, Institut Catholique de Paris, 1975, pp. 95 ff.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

acknowledged founding father of the discipline and nineteenth century travellers like Richard Burton, were hard pressed to acknowledge that even a modicum of 'real' religion existed in Africa. According to Burton the African had 'barely advanced to idolatry', and had 'never grasped the ideas of a personal Deity, a duty in life, a moral code'.[22]

Not all missionaries were in entire agreement with this. For example, the American missionary Thomas Jefferson Bowen who compiled a dictionary of the Yoruba language pointed, albeit paternalistically, to the 'higher aspects' of Yoruba religion. He wrote, 'In Yoruba many of the notions which the people entertain of God are remarkably correct. They have some notion of his justice and holiness. They may extol the power and defend the worship of their idols whom they regard as mighty beings, but they will not compare the greatest idol to God'[23] In Bowen's view, however, these 'higher aspects' of Yoruba religion had very little to do with the Yoruba but were at source the product of European influence, a clear example of the application to African society of the Hamitic hypothesis.[24]

Since they were in West Africa primarily to establish Christianity and therefore to suppress all contrary beliefs and rituals, most missionaries gave little thought to providing an objective, balanced view of African traditional religion. But one can detect a slight change in perspective with the publications of such scholars as William Schmidt, a Catholic priest. Schmidt argued that African religions were at the outset monotheistic, fetishism and animism being later developments. The Supreme Being, he claimed, and not lesser gods and idols, was at the heart of the African tradition religion.[25] This was not the first time such a view had been expressed by a Christian cleric. Writing in the early eighteenth century Loyer, another Catholic priest, stated 'They (Africans on the West Coast) believe in one Supreme God, the Creator and sustainer of all things'.[26]

Other writings to appear in the 1920-1950 period, among them those of Basden,[27] Williams[28] and Smith,[29] advanced the idea of the existence in African traditional religions of the belief in a Supreme Being. The origins of this belief, however, were still not clear to everyone interested, nor was the place of God in African religious life. While some maintained that the existence of the belief was the result of contact with Christians others, like those just mentioned above, were convinced that the belief was of African origin. As to the place of the Supreme Being or High God in African religious life, most observers claimed that people paid little or no attention to Him, seeing Him as remote, withdrawn, and unconcerned with everyday life.[30]

22 R.F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome,* 3rd ed. 2 Vols, London, 1864. Vol.2. p. 199.

23 T.J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours,* 1857 (1968 reprint ed., Cass, London), p. 310.

24 E.R. Saunders, 'The hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origins and Functions in Time perspective', *Journal of African History* 10 (4), 1969.

25 For a brief summary of Schmidt's work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee,* in which these ideas are contained see William Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories,* trans. H.J. Rose, London: Methuen and Coy Ltd, 1931.

26 Revd. G. Loyer, OP. *An Account of a Voyage to the Kingdom of Assinie* (Relations du Voyage d'Issinie), Paris, 1914, 138.

27 G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria,* and *Niger Ibos,* London: Seeley, 1938.

28 J.J. Williams, *Africa's God,* Anthropology series of the Boston College Graduate School, 1, 1-81, 1936.

29 E.W. Smith, *African Ideas of God,.* London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950.

30 D. Westermann, *Die Glidiyi-Ewe in Togo,* Berlin, 1935.

This view did not fit in with the belief and practice of a number of West African traditional religionists including many in Nigeria, and it is a view that more and more students of African traditional religions, among them some who once endorsed it, are now inclined to reject. Parrinder is among those who over time have come to alter their view of the place of the Supreme Being in African traditional religions. He writes that while he once endorsed the view that 'the African's God is uncertain and remote', he had come to think of that God as being 'closer to ordinary people than this suggests'.[31] Awolalu is much more precise and definite. He says with reference to the Yoruba belief in the Supreme Being, Olódùmarè, that 'though his abode is said to be in the heavens above, He is not removed from the people and is not inaccessible'.[32] And Idowu maintains that 'the whole superstructure of Yoruba belief' rests upon the 'basic fact' that 'The existence of Olódùmarè eternally has, for all practical purposes, been taken for granted as a fact beyond question'.[33]

From the 1940's missionary writing on African traditional religions became much more objective. Works like Temples' on the Bantu were attempts to deepen Christian and Western understanding in general of African religious and philosophical thought,[34] while Parrinder with the same end in view provided a number of interesting analyses of African rituals and beliefs.[35] Other research carried out by anthropologists, such as that on the Dogon of Mali,[36] also treated African religious systems with a great deal more empathy than had been the case in the nineteenth century.[37]

Practice often lagged behind theory. While in some missionary circles views on the nature of African traditional religions were altering, becoming less ethnocentric and less influenced by evolutionist theories of religious development, many other missionaries continued with vigour their offensive against these religions. Of course, there were always the exceptions like Bishop Shanahan on eastern Nigeria who, as Ayandele points out, 'saw that what Ibo religion wanted was not 'destruction', but 'transformation'.[38] Others - Catholics, Protestants, members of the African and Aladura Churches - took a much more hostile, aggressive approach than this to African traditional religion.

Prophet Harris in the Ivory Coast regarded adherents of the traditional religions to be non-believers who, if they did not convert to Christianity, would be destroyed. Agbebi, while holding views similar to those held by Shanahan referred to the 'rubbish of idolatry' in Yoruba religion, and James Johnson was even more abusive and critical.[39] In the Aladura Churches and among the black American missionaries in Liberia traditional African religions were strongly opposed. As one writer comments with regard to the Cherubim and Seraphim Society, like the foreign observer this Cherubim and Seraphim society has failed to see the traditional religion from an objective standpoint and has, therefore, strongly advocated a radical break with it and a profession of absolute faith in God. But interestingly enough, the same feature which is partly responsible for the

31 G. Parrinder, *West African Religion* (2nd ed.), London: Epworth Press, 1969, p. 24-5.

32 A. Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, London: Longman, 1979, p. 12.

33 E.B. Idòwu, *Olódùmarè. God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longman, 1962, p. 18.

34 P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959.

35 G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, London: Epworth Press, 1968, chapter 10 and passim.

36 M. Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmëli*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

37 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.

38 E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*, London: Longman, 1966, p. 265.

39 Ibid.

misrepresentation of the traditional religion (viz.: the veneration of divinities) has been observable in the Cherubim and Seraphim in the near veneration of angels and heavenly bodies.[40]

Determined to establish a new and distinctive religious tradition missionaries likewise were not prepared for alternative ways as found in African traditional religions of praying, thinking, believing and behaving in religious matters. Commenting on this aspect of the missionary enterprise in Sierra Leone one scholar suggests that the missionaries were perhaps even less prepared to have their basic convictions challenged than 'the Mende - who had learned to live and survive alongside outside influences and different cultures'.[41] It is too readily assumed that the European layman or missionary came from a more 'open' society and culture than the African and was therefore inclined to be more open-minded, and more flexible in thought and behaviour. It is this line of thinking that in part explains why anthropologists and others conclude that African systems of thought, such as that of the Dogon are essentially 'closed', hieratic sets of formulations placed outside the realm of experimentation.[42] There is evidence to suggest that the Mende, among other African people, displayed an 'openness' to other world views and religious perspectives not often found in European circles. No one tradition of thought, of course, is in itself, of necessity, more open than another, all being to a large extent socially imposed, and therefore subject to the constraints of the dominant world view of the particular society in which they emerged. But if Dogon, Mende or other African systems of thought were 'closed' as some scholars would have us believe then it is difficult to explain the existence in these societies of, for example, alternative belief systems and of religious pluralism.

Many Christian missionaries in the pre-colonial and colonial eras particularly wanted total conversion. They wanted converts to Christianity to abandon all contact with African traditional religions and culture. They also sought to transform African societies and regulate affairs, including the law, so that the Christian view of the world, as they interpreted it, prevailed unchallenged. In their view, Christianity and African traditional religion were diametrically opposed systems of belief and practice. In northern Ghana, for instance, in the late 1930's a Catholic bishop sought the amendment of laws which, as he saw it, offended against the Christian code of ethics.

There was something of a mass movement to Catholicism in the Lawra and Wa districts in Ghana in the late 1930's. According to one account the movement began when, following on the failure of the intercession of the traditional priests to bring rain to the region which was suffering desperately from drought, a missionary came on the scene, prayed in public for rain, and within a few days the heavy rains came and saved the crops.[43] The missionary was also able to help suppress an epidemic of dysentery with medicaments provided by the medical officer, and this apparently also had a great impact on many people turning them in the direction of Christianity.[44]

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40 J.A. Omoyajowo, *Cherubim and Seraphim*, New York and Lagos: Nok Publishers, 1982, p. 95.

41 A.J. Gittins, *The Mende and The Missionary*, PhD thesis, Edinburgh University, 1977, Vol II, p. 551.

42 M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968. See also R. Horton, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa* XXXVII (2), April 1967.

43 Rhodes House, Oxford, Mss. Africa, s. 454, 'Three Memoranda of the Gold Coast', Chief Commissioner's office, Tamale, 9th March, 1937.

44 Ibid.

The local chiefs and traditional priests viewed this mass movement with alarm, believing that the new Christians would no longer respect their authority or perform their communal obligations. While strain and tension came to characterise relations between the chiefs and the Christians, the missionaries, or rather the bishop of the area, sought from the colonial authorities 'the complete condemnation' of local law and custom, and showed 'an entire disregard for the chiefs' side of the question'.[45] Explaining his case to the authorities the bishop wrote, 'The African who becomes a Christian abandons the beliefs and customs that make up Pagan worship and submits himself to the Christian law'.[46]

Although the situation could and did vary from one region to another and from one Christian missionary or prophet to another, the approach to African traditional religion was for a very long time one of confrontation. There was a demand for total renunciation. Indeed it was almost taken for granted by Christian leaders that confrontation between the 'new' and the 'old' religions was not only necessary but inevitable.[47]

In the ensuing encounter African traditional beliefs and practices were not eradicated; rather, they tended to domesticate Christianity.[48] Indeed, there has been considerable debate in recent times as to whether these belief systems were in any way radically altered or displaced by either Christianity, or Islam.[49]

In recent times the Christian Churches in Togo, and the same is true elsewhere, have begun to consider with tolerance and respect the beliefs and practices and religious values contained in African traditional religions. This represents a change in approach from one of confrontation to dialogue. It has now been publicly recognised by many of the Christian Churches that Africa has, and has always had, a rich spiritual heritage. It does not of course mean that there has been any relaxation in the effort to convert traditional religionists to Christianity, but simply a change in attitude and approach.

Since independence then, there has been a noticeable change in the attitude and approach of the Christian Churches towards Islam and African traditional religions, a change brought on by both religious and political developments such as the Second Vatican Council and the regaining of independence.

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 For an example of this confrontational approach in the first period of Christian missionary activity in Africa, see R. Gray's, 'Come Vero Principe Catolico: The Capuchins and the Rulers of Soyo in the late Seventeenth Century', *Africa* 53 (3), 1983, p. 39 ff.
48 L. Sanneh, *West African Christianity. The Religious Impact*, London: C. Hurst and Coy Ltd, 1983, Chapters 8 and 9.
49 R. Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa* XLI (2), April 1971, pp. 85-108. See also the reply by H.J. Fisher, 'Conversion in Black Africa', *Africa* XLIII (1), January 1973.