RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN AFRICA:
Some notes on the interaction between African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam in the 19th and 20th centuries

James N Amanze
University of Botswana

Abstract

The people of the African continent have been acknowledged by a great number of contemporary theologians, sociologists, anthropologists and historians as being deeply religious. African life is surrounded by religious mysticism accompanying the individual from birth to death in different forms of religious manifestation. In contemporary Africa we find a multiplicity of World Religions. These include African Traditional Religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahai, Sikhism, and others. This paper focuses on the interaction of three major religions in Africa, namely; African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. The paper argues that the interaction between the adherents of these three religions in the 19th and 20th centuries has been characterized by conflict and cooperation as they struggle to co-exist side by side in Africa for the common good. The paper begins by examining the distinctive characteristics of each of the three religions under discussion and moves on to examine the conflicts that have been endemic in the missionary field and finally discusses the attempts that have been made to enhance cooperation for the sake of peace, stability and fullness of life for everyone.

1. The three major religions of Africa and their distinctive characteristics

Recent statistics[1] on different religions in Africa seem to indicate that Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions enjoy the highest numbers of adherents compared to other World Religions. In order to understand the nature of the interaction between these three World Religions, it is important, first and foremost, to briefly outline their distinctive characteristics in order to show their similarities and differences. We shall begin by outlining the main tenets of African Traditional Religions, since they are considered as the oldest manifestations of religious orientation in Africa.

1.1 African traditional religions

Comparative studies of the religions that are prevalent in Africa have shown that African Traditional Religions are indigenous to Africa. They are as old as the African people themselves are. They have no specific founders, no sacred scriptures, no written theologies, and no missionaries. They are embodied in the blood stream of the African people. Though African Traditional Religions differ from one African society to another in accordance with the prevailing circumstances of a particular cultural group, there are many basic religious elements that are common to almost all of them. Extensive and intensive research findings of a great number of African theologians such as John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, Benjamin Ray

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1. See for example, *The Bible societies of the world*, Annual Report for the year 1997, Bulletin 184/185, Reading: UBS, 1998 where statistics on religion in Africa have been given.

and others have identified certain religious features that seem to be shared by Africans in the length and breadth of the African continent. In the first place it has been observed that the concept of the High God, similar to but not identical with the Hebrew deity as described in Deut. 6:4, is prevalent in most African societies. He is known variously as *Modimo, Mungu, Namalenga, Nkulunkulu, Leza*, epithets that indicate that God is One, Creator, Almighty, Provider, Supreme, Eternal, and Comforter. One of the fundamental characteristics of the High God in Africa is that God is Spirit, therefore, he cannot be represented by graven images. Within the many diverse tribes of Africa there are no known instances of physical representation of the Supreme Being. Many African people conceive God as one who sees, hears and knows everything. He is also everywhere. He can, here and now, save his people in times of trouble and can punish them for evils committed through the intermediary role of the ancestral spirits. God has a spirit world where the dead people go to live forever and can continue to interact actively with members of their families in this world. There is no special day such as Sunday or Friday for regular public assembly but there are times when people meet as a community to pray for rain, healing and other spiritual and material needs.

Common also to many African people is the belief in ancestral spirits. Practically everywhere in Africa ancestorhood plays a significant role in the life of the African people. Ancestorhood is a symbol of identity of a given group of people and ancestors provide channels of communication between God and his people and between the living and the living-dead. They are also considered as guardians of public morality. Coupled with this, initiation ceremonies such as circumcision and others have been observed by many African societies from time immemorial as schools for moral education and preparation for fatherhood and motherhood. Circumcision, for instance, has tremendous religious significance in that it binds together the living and the living-dead and bestows upon the neophytes a new status in life as they move from childhood to adulthood. Besides, prayers, offerings and sacrifices to God through the ancestors are common features of African Traditional Religions. Moreover, purification rites of different kinds whose objective is to remove moral impurities in the social fabric are found in many African societies. It appears also that religious specialists or intermediaries in the form of diviners, traditional healers and rainmakers, whose priestly duties and responsibilities consist of mediating between the people and the supernatural beings, are characteristic features of many African religions.

Apart from the above religious phenomena African Traditional Religions also place great emphasis on agricultural rites associated with sowing, first fruits and harvesting in the form of thanksgiving prayers to God and the ancestors for giving people enough rain and for rendering the people, animals, and the land fertile. Sacred places and religious symbols such as fire, forests, sacred trees, groves, hills, mountains, rivers, snakes, natural and man made shrines and many others are prevalent in many African societies. Fear of witchcraft which is considered as the personification of evil at the highest degree is endemic among Africans, the cure of which has not yet been found! It is also true to say that plural marriages to two or more wives are found all over Africa though in some societies polygamy is less commonly practised than in others. It is believed that the more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have, and greater his promise of immortality and the immortality of the corporate group. Last but not least dreams, especially their interpretation, have great religious significance in African Traditional Religions. It is strongly believed among Africans that the spirits of the ancestors as God's intermediaries communicate with the living through dreams and visions. It is also generally believed that the ancestors inspire the work of the diviners,

traditional healers, rainmakers and traditional priests by imparting some divine information to them through dreams.[2]

1.2   Christianity

Having described some of the distinctive characteristics of the most ancient religion of Africa, that is African Traditional Religions, we shall now proceed to describe the chief characteristics of Christianity. According to Geoffrey Parrinder, 'Christianity has the longest history of the great living religions of Africa... Christianity entered Africa in the first century of our era and it has had a continuous history in Egypt and Ethiopia.'[3] Eusebius in his book *The history of the Church* has noted that the first Gentile to embrace Christianity was the Ethiopian eunuch who received from Philip the mysteries of the divine word and eventually preached the gospel of the knowledge of God among his people in Ethiopia (Africa) thus bringing to fulfillment the prophecy 'Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand to God (68: 31).'[4] Though there are different Christian denominations in the world it appears that most of them share the following characteristics. To start with the Christian Churches are essentially monotheistic. Christians believe that God is One and Unique (Deut. 6:4). He is Spirit, therefore, invisible. He is Creator God. He is eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and immutable. He is holy, righteous, just, loving and benevolent. He is the Lord and Father of all. He is the Lord of the universe. He is a forgiving and saving God. Everything has its beginning and end in him. But God is also a Trinity in that he manifested himself to the world in three divine persons distinct from but equal to one another as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt.28:18-20)

God manifested his love to the world by sending his Son Jesus Christ so that whoever believes in him should not die but have eternal life. Jesus is the Son of God. He is God incarnate. Christ is perfect in his humanity and perfect in his divinity. He is Priest-King. He seats on the right hand of God where he intercedes for us. He is the sole mediator between God and his people. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. He is God active in the world. He proceeds from the Father and the Son. He sanctifies the people of God in the Church and in the world. He inspires the ministers of the Church to preach the Good News of salvation to the world.

Salvation is attained through faith in Jesus Christ as a personal saviour. Jesus achieved total salvation for humankind by his death and resurrection thereby becoming the first fruits of those who die in the Lord. He died once and for all and his blood has cleansed the sins of all those who believe in him. Salvation is freely given by the Lord Jesus Christ but it is appropriated through participation in the sacraments or ordinances of the Church, namely: baptism and the Lord's Supper the two sacraments that are accepted by many Christians as having been instituted by the Lord himself as necessary for salvation (Mt.28: 18-19; Mt.26: 26). Christian life is based on the law of love of God and one's neighbour as one loves oneself. Christians believe that at the end of times Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. The righteous will go to heaven and the unrighteous will go to hell.

The Bible is considered as the inspired word of God. It was written by human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is the supreme authority on matters of faith and

2.   See JS Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, London: Heinemannn, 1969. See also JS Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1975, where characteristics of African Traditional Religions have been described.

3.   G Parrinder, *Religion in Africa*, Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1969, p. 101.

4.   Eusebius, *The history of the Church*, Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 74.

church practice. The Church is the Body of Christ. It represents the Kingdom of God on earth. It is the bride of Christ. It is made up of Christian believers who confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures. Baptism is the means of incorporation into the Church and the means whereby the believer receives the Holy Spirit, dies and raises with Christ, receives the remission of sins, and becomes a member of the Church the family of God. Jesus Christ is the Supreme Head of the Church and Christians constitute the mystical body of Christ on earth called for sanctification in the power of the Holy Spirit and inheritors of God's eternal kingdom. The existence of angels as guardians and messengers of God is acknowledged by many Christian churches. Monogamy is the only accepted form of Christian marriage. Divorce is not accepted because marriage is considered as a life-long union between a husband and a wife until death does them part. Many Christian churches observe Xmas Day, Goodfriday, Easter Sunday, the Day of Pentecost and the Ascension Day as special holy days, which mark special stages in the divine drama of the salvation of humankind.[5]

1.3   Islam

The first contact of Islam with Africa goes back to the year AD 615 when some eighty Arab Muslims, under severe persecution characterized by torture and murder in Mecca, because of their adherence to Islam, sought refuge in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) which was by then ruled by a friendly Christian king. After the death of Prophet Muhammad in AD 632 Islam began to spread to Africa in full force. By the end of the 7th century Muslims had conquered much of Northern Africa. As a matter of fact Islam was planted in Egypt as early as AD 642 and in North Africa in AD 689. The rapid spread of Islam in Africa is attributed to a number of factors, which include trade, holy wars (jihad), intermarriages with indigenous peoples, and colonialism. These factors facilitated the spread of Islam in much of West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa. and Southern Africa in a very short period of time.[6]

Here we shall only indicate the major Islamic positions that make this World Religion different from what Christians and African traditionalists believe. Muslims believe that Islam is not a new religion but rather a continuation of all former religious principles decreed by God through his revelations to all prophets and that it has been manifested in history in a purified form through the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims revere and honour Muhammad but they do not worship him. Worship is reserved only for God. Their creed states that there is no deity worthy of worship except *Allah* and that Muhammad is his Messenger. The teachings of Islam are contained in the Holy Quran, which is said to have been dictated by God to Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. The Quran provides laws governing marriage, divorce, peace treaties between nations, inheritance, wills and other aspects of human life. It also contains the 'Five Pillars' and 'Six Articles of Belief' of the Islamic faith. These constitute the heartbeat of Islam.

The Five Pillars of Islam are (a) the recital of the creed (*Shahadah*), (b) the recital of prayers (*Salat*) five times daily, (c) the giving of alms (*Zakat*), (d) the observation of *Ramadhan* (fasting) in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and (e) a pilgrimage to Mecca if finance allows. The Six Articles of Belief stipulate that (a) God is one and his name is *Allah*, (b) the Quran is God's truly inspired book, (c) God's angels are heavenly

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5. See JN Amanze, *The ecumenical movement in Africa 1900-1998* (forthcoming) Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999.

6. RE Asher (ed.), *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, vol. 4., Perganon Press, 1994, p. 1779.

beings created to serve God and they are opposed to evil spirits, (d) God sent his prophets to earth at stated times for stated purposes, the last of these is Muhammad, (e) the Day of Judgement will find good and evil weighed in the balance and (f) the lives and acts of men are predestined by an all-knowing God but man is responsible for his own destiny.[7]

Muslims lay great emphasis on the absolute oneness of God. They repudiate the doctrine of the Trinity. They believe that Christians worship three Gods. They also reject the doctrine of the incarnation in a sense that God cannot take human flesh. He is wholly other. The Quran insists on the absoluteness of the humanity of Jesus. Islam denies the crucifixion as fiction. It rejects the idea that God would allow Jesus to be killed. Islam rejects the idea than man is born a sinner loaded with original sin and in need of a redeemer. The cross is rejected as a symbol of salvation.[8] Muslims shun gambling, intoxicating drinks, eating pork, and other things and activities forbidden in the *Shariah*. They also practice polygamy, and allow divorce. They observe a meticulous washing of feet, hands, head and arms before prayer and remove their shoes before entering into the mosque. In the mosques there are no icons, statues, symbols, pews, chairs, or musical instruments. They pray five times daily and Friday is the day of Assembly.[9]

2.   Conflict between the three major religions of Africa

Historical studies of the different religions in Africa seem to indicate that the interaction between the three major religions, whose distinctive characteristics have been outlined above, have, throughout their history in Africa, been characterised by conflict and cooperation. These religions have a great deal of differences and similarities. It appears to the present author that the differences account for the conflict that exists among them while the similarities account for a limited form of cooperation. In this section of the paper we are going to examine the conflicts that have been endemic in the missionary field between African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. We shall begin by examining the conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religions.

2.1   Conflict between Christianity and African traditional religions

It seems that right from the start of missionary enterprise in Africa the missionaries engaged themselves in an endless struggle against African Traditional Religions whose primary manifestations consisted of what we have described above. Foremost in the minds of the missionaries was a strong conviction that African Traditional Religions are thoroughly evil. This attitude is attributed to the evangelical revival of the 19th century in Europe which imbued into the minds of the missionaries an unprecedented missionary zeal that moulded them into Christian soldiers whose primary objective was to proclaim the saving acts of Christ. African Traditional Religions therefore were considered as the devil on the cross which was to be defeated and destroyed once and for all times. Alec R Vidler has reminded us of the main motive of missions. He writes:

> The main motive of missions in the nineteenth century was the evangelical one, common to Protestants and Roman Catholics, of rescuing as many of the heathen as possible from the everlasting damnation which otherwise awaited them. The grand object was to save as many souls as possible for eternal life in the next world. The simple view that

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7.   F Mead, *Handbook of denominations in the United States,* Nashville: Parthenon, 1980, pp. 189-90.

8.   M al-Nowaihi, 'The religion of Islam', *International Review of missions',* vol. 65, no.258, 1976, pp. 216-217.

9.   Mead, *Handbook...,* p. 190.

everything in non-Christian religions and cultures was evil dominated the missionary outlook for a long time, though individuals were of course more humane than their creeds.[10]

A careful examination of the existing literature appears to indicate that during the age of European imperialism the missionaries consciously or unconsciously represented the European colonial powers like the traders and the administrators. Although this might not have been in their minds, the peoples of Africa perceived this to be the case. This is because the missionaries came as exporters of European religions as the administrators were of European methods of administration. Alec Vidler has pointed out that in the whole missionary work 'a foreign, an imperial or colonial aroma hung about most mission stations'.[11]

Apparently it is now very clear that the missionaries seem to have known very little, if anything, of the basic African religious ideas which would have enabled them to present the gospel in terms understood by the Africans. This lack of understanding of the intrinsic values of African culture was based on the missionaries' attitude towards other cultures which were considered as inferior to their own. Alec R Vidler has succinctly put it thus:

> The missionaries had no doubt about the complete superiority of their own culture, and therefore their method was to transplant all they could of Christianity in its Western forms. Hence churches and chapels were built in Africa ... in the neo-Gothic architectural styles that were then fashionable in Europe. Native priests were dressed up like European clergymen, and even native bishops, when there came to be such, adorned themselves in the riding attire of eighteenth century prelates which has sometimes been mistaken for that of a Highlander going to a funeral! European music, art, and ways of living were blindly exported.[12]

It is a well-known fact that the missionaries considered all African Traditional Religions as archaic. The primary task of the missionary societies was to replace African belief systems with the good news of salvation. For example, when missionaries arrived in Angola in 1870s and 1880s they dismissed the African Traditional Religions as superstition since they lacked the main features of Western religions such as doctrinal statements, ecclesiastical structures and scriptures. The first missionaries criticized ancestor 'worship' among the Angolans telling them that God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Mt.22:32)[13]

It has been argued in certain quarters that modern scholars tend to condemn expatriate missionaries unfairly accusing them of Eurocentricity and of condemnation of indigenous cultures. It is being pointed out that it was almost inevitable to adopt this position because the newly arrived missionaries could not be instant experts on African languages and cultures and that the incarnation of Christianity in different African cultures involved a great multiplicity of choices that, ultimately, could be made only by Africans themselves.[14] The problem, however, resides in the fact that missionaries and their co-workers in the field tended to identify Christianity with Western culture in such a manner that the two seemed inseparable. The gative effects of the missionaries' antagonism towards African religious

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10. Alec R Vidler, *The Church in an age of revolution,* London: Penguin, 1961, p. 252.

11. Vidler, *The Church...*, p. 251.

12. Vidler, *The Church...*, p. 252.

13. L Hendersen, *The Church in Angola,* Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1992, p. 22.

14. E Isichei, *A history of Christianity in Africa,* London: SPCK, 1995, p. 82.

values was deplored by the historian CP Groves. In a stinging attack on the missionary strategies of the 19th and early 20th centuries Groves pointed out that this would likely retard the advances of Christianity instead of accelerating it. Writing about the African convert Groves has documented as follows:

> The roots of his life as an African have struck deep in African soil. If the missionary object is to secure African Christians and not a hybrid Americanized or Europeanized variety, then some regard has to be paid to this question...One factor in the question was the extent to which the Christian message had been offered in Western theological terms (it may of course be argued there were no others) and in Western thought forms (here the West could not claim a monopoly), firmly encased in a traditional ecclesiastical organization specifically Western type. True, little was so far known in any specific way of African social structure and, what was exceedingly more difficult to come by, the African outlook of God and the world. But studies worthy of their subject were at last beginning to appear, notably from the pens of James Roscoe of Uganda (*The Baganda*, 1911), and Henri A Junodi of South-East Africa (*The life of a South African tribe*, 1912), while Edwin W Smith was likewise engaged in Northern Rhodesia (*The Ila-speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, 1920).[15]

One of the problems faced by the early missionaries in Africa was lack of adequate preparation for missionary work in a totally different culture. CP Groves has intimated that the inadequacy surrounding the preparation of the missionaries that undertook missionary work in Africa led to the unfortunate situation that the missionary:

> reproduced overseas what he had grown up in and learned to value for himself at home, confidently regarding his social inheritance, coupled with his own ecclesiastical tradition, as the norm of all good life and sound churchmanship. If this was often one side of the missionary's predisposition, the other which was twin to it was to stigmatize what was African as bad just on that ground, without the necessity of further investigation. The only policy therefore must be complete replacement-denationalization with a vengeance![16]

It is important to note that the conflict between Christianity and African Traditional Religions has continued unabated to the present day. This conflict is based on the fundamental belief that Christians have received a 'special revelation' in the person of Christ who is the Word of God incarnate. As such the revelation of God in Christianity is perceived as historical, concrete, complete, perfect, and final. In this regard other revelatory experiences of God in other religions such as African Traditional Religions, are considered as false and idolatrous. Christians therefore, feel that they would fail in their duty if they compromised their mission of making all nations Jesus' disciples according to the Great Commission as recorded in Mt.28: 18-20.

2.2   Conflict between Christianity and Islam

It is important to point out that the relationship between Christianity and Islam in Africa has never been a cordial one. From the time of its inception in Africa, Islam has been at loggerheads with Christianity. The activities of both Christian and Muslim clerics in Africa

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15. CP Groves, *The planting of Christianity in Africa,* vol. 3, London: Lutterworth Press, 1955, p. 287.
16. Groves, *The planting...*', p. 287-8.

created a lot of conflict between Christianity and Islam. J Haafkens has pointed out that Christian missionaries who came to Africa generally saw Islam as a danger for Christianity. Some developed missionary strategies in a spirit of rivalry with Islam'.[17] Similarly Muslims have perceived Christianity as the archenemy of Islam in Africa. AEM Anderson-Morshead, for one, has pointed out that in many parts of Africa Islam competed with Christianity in its pursuit to win African converts to this world religion. A number of strategies were used to persuade or discourage Africans from embracing Christianity. In East Africa, for instance, Africans were told that if they embraced Islam they would have the opportunity of taking a second wife which was not the case with Christianity. It is also reported that in Cape Town a girl declined to receive baptism for a long time on the grounds that the Malay Muslims told her that if she accepted baptism, she would be forced to eat a whole pig.[18] Conflict in the missionary field flared up between Christians and Muslims in many African countries. For example, when Islam and Christianity began to spread in East Africa in the second half of the 19th century, there was a lot of recrimination between Christians and Muslims especially in Tanganyika (Tanzania). Missionaries viewed the efforts of Muslims to convert the local people in the region as driven by forces of what they called 'the false prophet from Arabia'. Muslims who were powerful in the German administration and in the army are alleged to have used persuasion and sometimes violence to convert people to Islam. Muslims are said to have gone about preaching that in hell Christians are used as firewood for the burning of the Infidel commonly known as the *makafiri*. In their bid to convert Africans, Muslims adapted Islam to the African way of life and needs. Islamic propaganda was even more uncompromising than the Christian propaganda. Islamic practices added to the African practice of divination and protecting people from witchcraft. Christian missionaries on the other hand vowed to take action against the Muslim flood. They pressurized the German government to employ more Africans rather than Arabs and gave the Christians better training to qualify them to be local government officials and employees of the government in order to enhance their presence in society and spread Christian values. Consequently an unhealthy and unnatural fear grew among Christians.[19]

It is common knowledge that Islam has been viewed the world over as an arch-enemy of Christianity in Africa. Missionaries were aware of Islam as a vital force since it has been spreading like wild fire although it has no organized missionary societies. Stephen Neil has postulated that Islam has shown the capacity of great penetration in Africa 'because it presents itself as an African religion and makes fewer demands on pagan man for change than does Christianity, it can take hold of the life of a whole tribe and refashion it within a very short time'.[20] EB Idowu has intimated that since its inception, Islam tried very hard to establish itself as the universal religion of Africa. He reports that as far back as 1910 there was a debate in Sierra Leone on the subject 'which is more beneficial to society, Christianity or Islam?' During the colonial period Christianity in many parts of Africa had supremacy over Islam. With the changing of times on the African continent, however, Islam became aggressively missionary. It began to promote school education and established charitable institutions in the same way that Christianity has been doing. The voice of Islam has been heard in daily national radio programmes and much has been published in the

17. J Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim relations in Africa: a Pan-African view', HS Wislon (ed.), *Islam in Africa,* Geneva: World Alliance, 1995, p. 17.
18. AEM Anderson-Morshead, *The Universities Mission to Central Africa,* vol. 1, London: 1955, p. 180.
19. WB Anderson, *The Church in East Africa,* Dodoma: Central Tanganyika Press, 1977, p. 58.
20. S Neil, *A history of Christian missions,* Middlesex: Penguin, 1964, p. 494.

news papers. According to Idowu, Islam in Africa is engaged in a kind of *jihad* openly or secretly against Christianity.[21]

One of the regions in Africa where tension between Islam and Christianity was strongly registered was in the Sudan. It appears that missionary societies were determined from the very beginning to fight against what they perceived as a menace of Islam. JB Grimley and GE Robinson in their book entitled *Church growth in Central and Southern Nigeria* have pointed out that the fear that the Sudanese would eventually go over to Islam was the rallying point for Christian missions in the Sudan. The strength of Islam in the region was such that a call went out among missionaries to 'stem the tide of Islam' and give the Sudanese an opportunity to choose between Islam and Christianity. It was in this vein that the Edinburgh and Lucknow World Conferences stressed that the whole strategy of Christian missions in Africa should be viewed in relation to Islam.[22]

It seems that in post-independent Africa especially in the second half of the 1970s the conflict between Muslims and Christians has surfaced once more. For example in Nigeria, tension between Christians and Muslims has been growing since 1977 when a debate started concerning the place of the *Shariah* in the constitution. It is reported that this tension led to an outbreak of violence and loss of human life on a number of occasions such as in Kano in 1982 and 1991, in Kaduna in 1987 and in Bauchi in 1991. Similarly in Sudan the introduction of the *Shariah* in 1983 by President Nimeiri, who adopted a policy of Islamization, led to the breakdown of the Sudanese accord of 1972 and the resumption of the civil war between the Muslim North and the Christian South.[23] It is further reported that in the early 1990s conflict arose between Muslims and Christians in Ethiopia as reported in the Kenyan newspaper *The Standard*, November, 1991 that 'tensions between Christians and Arabs came to a height...when Colonel Qadafi claimed that the new President in Ethiopia had told him that Ethiopia was an Arab country, extending Islam through Africa. This caused great concern in the highlands area of the country, where the population is predominantly Christian'[24]

It has been postulated in certain quarters that the tension between Christians and Muslims in Africa is fuelled partly by Arabic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq and others who give financial support to African Muslims to spread their faith. Islamic governments provide support to some African governments for political reasons with the expectation that Muslims in Africa will support their policies.[25] Conflicts have come about mainly in cases where Muslim groups in countries such as Senegal, Algeria, Nigeria and Sudan have rejected the principle of a religiously neutral state, insisting that the *Shariah* is the only acceptable basis for national life, a move that has not been welcomed by Christians.[26]

In recent years Islam in Africa is still viewed by Christians as a menace to Christianity. This is because Muslim influence in Africa is still growing from strength to strength and its proselytizing program is achieving tremendous results. It is held, for instance, that Islamic

21. EB Idowu, 'The predicament of the Church in Africa', GG Baeta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa,* London: OUP, 1968, p. 432.

22. JB Grimley & GE Robinson, *Church growth in Central and Southern Nigeria,* Michigan: W. B Eerdmans, 1966, p. 44.

23. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', p. 20-1.

24. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', p. 22.

25. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', p. 23.

26. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', p. 24.

methods of propagation relate closely to the needs of the African communities. It is reported that in some instances recognizing the inadequacy of local transportation, local Muslim missionaries, assisted by Libyans and Saudi Arabians, are equipped with mini-buses and taxis, thus enabling them to perform a service to the community, which provides them the opportunity of strengthening the indigenous witness. Furthermore, Islamic faculties provide technical leadership training and scholarships. In many parts of Africa huge and beautiful mosques are being built as well as pilot projects in farming.[27]

It is clear from the existing literature that modern Islamic strategies to win converts among Africans have sometimes caused tension between Christians and Muslims. It is noted that in their bid to win African converts Muslims claim that Islam is the religion of the Africans and that Christianity is a foreign religion on the African continent. Furthermore Muslim missionaries tend to attack basic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ and the Bible as the Word of God. Challenges of this nature have made Christians feel uncomfortable and consequently look for ways and means of fighting against Islam, which they consider as an enemy of Christianity.

The rivalry between Muslims and Christians has continued to the present day. This conflict is based on two major factors. Firstly, there is competition to gain converts among the followers of African Traditional Religions. The first aspect of the rivalry between them is the competition to gain the largest number of converts among Africans. Secondly, on the basis of their mission these two religions try to win converts from one another. This rivalry takes different forms in different African countries depending on the nature of the governments concerned. In countries where the *Shariah* prevails there is prohibition of Christian missionary work among Muslims. There is no envisaged end to this form of rivalry since Islam and Christianity are both missionary religions with truth claims that contradict each other at crucial points. JN Kritzinger has indicated that the relationship between Muslims and Christians is so complex that the element of rivalry between these two religions will remain the permanent feature of their relationship.[28]

3.   Co-operation and dialogue between the three major religions of Africa

We have discussed above the conflicts that have been going on between African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. It is generally agreed in recent years that Africans cannot afford these conflicts since they deny them peace, stability and fullness of life and that people should learn how to live in a multifaith environment. This entails a form of religious pluralism which advocates a tolerant attitude in religious matters in which a variety of view points, explanations or perspectives of religious phenomena within a given group of people are accepted as accounting for the same reality- God as Supreme Being who is beyond all human knowledge and understanding. The dominant epithet in this context is that in such a situation no particular ideological, cultural or religious group should be dominant and that divergent religious views should be tolerated by all the people concerned. In this section of the paper attempts will be made to examine the ecumenical dialogue that has been going on between the three major religions of Africa in the 20th century.

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27. *From Budapest to Curitiba 1985-1989,* Report no.27, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1989, p. 69.

28. JNJ Kritzinger, 'Islam as a rilval of the Gospel in Africa', *Missionalia,* vol. 8, no.3, 1980, pp. 91-92.

3.1   Ecumenical dialogue between Christians and Muslims

We have discussed above the endemic conflicts that have characterized the interaction between African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam in the missionary field. However, despite these conflicts attempts have been made on all sides to achieve a certain degree of *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. For example, Christians have sought ways and means of achieving friendly relations with Muslims despite their centuries-long conflict in their battle for African converts. The quest for friendly relations between Christians and Muslims is not a recent history. It is reported, for example, that in the second half of the 19th century Bishop Ajayi Crowther became a good friend of several Muslim rulers in Nigeria some of whom asked him to establish schools in their territories. It is further reported that during the same period African- Anglican clergymen in Lagos were studying Arabic and Islam with the assistance of local bilingual Muslim teachers. One of the clergymen went to the extent of translating the Quran into Yoruba.[29]

In modern church history in Africa there has been a new thinking concerning the Christian approach to Islam, especially in Protestant circles. Consequently consultations have been initiated among churches and missions in Africa to deal with the issue of Christian-Islamic relations. The French missionary Pierre Benignus is credited to have been one of the pioneers in the attempts to enhance cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Africa. In 1959 Benignus visited a number of countries in West and East Africa to discuss Christian-Muslim relationships. One of the outcomes of this visit was that in several countries such as Ghana, northern and western Nigeria, Cameroon, and Kenya, special committees were set up whose primary concern was to study closely Muslim-Christian relations. To this effect competent people were appointed to serve as advisers. It is interesting to note that this positive move led to the formation of a new organization called Islam in Africa Project (IAP).[30] The Islam in Africa Project aimed at remedying some of the factors that inhibited Christians work smoothly among Muslims. The IAP avoided the old ideas of rivalry, competition and polemic debates between Muslims and Christians. The IAP tried to inculcate in the minds of Christians an attitude of love towards Muslims as well as to develop a positive instead of a negative approach towards Muslims. It emphasized the importance of the personal living witness of Christians among Muslims and urged Christians and Muslims to learn from one another. The IAP stressed dialogue instead of controversy. To this end the IAP designed courses that helped Christians to understand Islam better. Such courses covered areas such as the life of Muhammad, the rise and spread of Islam, a study of the Quran and traditions and elements of Islam. The courses also covered elements of Christian doctrines in order to equip Christians with basic tools for evangelism among Muslims.[31]

In order to achieve its goal of encouraging Christians to witness in a spirit of tolerance, mutual respect and love rather than confrontation and fighting, the organizers of this special project organized seminars intended to inculcate a spirit of tolerance to people of different faiths. Booklets and pamphlets advocating this approach were published and a training programme for resource people was launched and a study centre for Islam and Christianity was established in Ibadan, Nigeria for longer residential courses. The IAP which began its work in West Africa eventually established itself in Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone,

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29. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', p. 18.
30. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', pp. 19-20.
31. JD Holway, 'Christianity and Islam in Africa-looking ahead' *Missionalia,* vol. 2, no.1, 1974, p. 12.

Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Malawi. In 1987 the project took a new name - the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCURA). It has also been noted that a program of a similar nature was established by the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Francophone West Africa.[32] IAP efforts, however, have not gone without its critics. It has been noted that while Christians on the one hand talk about dialogue, Muslims on the other hand are quite often not disposed to a spirit of dialogue with Christians. Muslims are, generally speaking, intent in aggressively defending their faith and on launching militant attacks on Christianity.[33]

In a bid to take the Muslim-Christian cooperation further in July 1974 nine Muslims and eleven Christians from eight African countries met at the University of Ghana, Legon. The purpose for the meeting was to work out ways and means whereby African Muslims and African Christians can learn from one another and share in each other's religious traditions. This meeting was sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana and the Islam in Africa Project of the Churches in Africa. Although Muslims and Christians met before at different forums, this was the first time in the history of Muslim-Christian relations in Africa when Muslims and Christians came together on an African regional basis. Uppermost in the minds of the organizers was a burning desire to bring together to a round table concerned people in a concerted effort to help provide guidelines on a wide basis for Muslim-Christian collaboration and action in Africa.

Those gathered at this meeting were strongly convinced that Muslims and Christians have a lot in common which could facilitate a dialogue between them. It was noted, for example, that Muslims and Christians recognize and worship One God. These two world religions are essentially monotheistic. Both religions, it appears, share a great number of theological insights including the fact that Muslims recognize the prophethood of Jesus. Therefore a call was made for mutual recognition, respect and cooperation which would be made manifest in witnessing whereby followers of both religions would work together to build the world in accordance with the will of God as understood by their respective religious traditions. Efforts were made at this meeting to identify areas of cooperation such as sharing of resources for religious, educational, social and economic development which both Muslims and Christians happen to possess. It was advocated that collaboration would be desirable and encouraged in the area of the youth, working for equality, social justice, sharing in community events such as bereavements, funerals, disasters or emergency situations such as epidemics, famine, droughts, floods as well as weddings, naming ceremonies, religious festivals on both sides and others.[34] Again in July 1974 another conference was held at Bamako in Mali which paid particular attention to the Christian attitude to Islam in Africa generally.[35]

3.2   Ecumenical dialogue between Christians and African Traditional Religions

Apart from attempting to establish a dialogue with Islam, some Christian missionaries also attempted to establish a dialogue with African Traditional Religions despite the fact that the missions came to Africa particularly to fight against 'heathenism' and win the

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32. Haafkens, 'Christian-Muslim...', pp. 9-20. See also Holway, Christianity and Islam...', p. 12.
33. Holway, 'Christianity and Islam...', p. 13.
34. *Christians meeting Muslims,* :WCC paper on 10 years of Christian-Muslim dialogue, Geneva: WCC, 1977, pp. 111-3.
35. CF Hallencreutz, *Dialogue and community,* Uppsala: Almquist & Witsell, 1977, p. 88.

African people to Christ. But right from the beginning of Christian missions missionaries practically everywhere in Africa realized that the only way in which Christianity would succeed in its new home was by entering into dialogue with African culture. Thus almost at once missionaries translated English hymns into local African languages, worship was conducted through the African media, church doctrines were taught using African words and concepts and the Holy Scriptures were rendered into the vernacular. In this, way as W. B Anderson has put it, Christianity began to become African[36] despite the fact that the roots of Africanisation did not go deep enough.

One of the missionaries who took a daring step to enter into dialogue with African Traditional Religions was John William Colenso, once Anglican Bishop of Natal. Colenso rejected the belief espoused by his fellow missionaries that non-Christians are doomed to hell. He also defended polygamists, and respected the positive qualities of Nguni life.[37] Willem Saayman in his book *Christian mission in South Africa* has indicated that Bishop Colenso was extraordinarily sensitive to African Traditional Religions. He was of the view that African Traditional Religions should not be coarsely and violently rooted out since they contained many seeds of true religion. Colenso insisted that the South African Church should be African and not partly westernized.[38] Colenso was not alone in this way of thinking. Some other missionaries in East Africa among whom were Moravian, Lutheran, Anglican as well as Catholic missionaries also adopted a similar approach. The most notable of these was Vincent Lukas the Anglican Bishop of Masasi in the then Tanganyika. According to AG Blood, Vincent Lukas was strongly convinced that the initiation ceremony of circumcision as practised by the Africans in the Masasi region had much that was good mixed with a great deal that was evil and necessarily unlawful for Christians. He therefore decided to provide a Christian rite of circumcision which, while retaining what was good in the African traditional rite of circumcision locally known as *jando*, should eliminate what was evil and yet be accepted as fulfilling the essential conditions of *jando* as an initiatory rite by which boys passed from childhood to manhood in African society. The Christian circumcision as envisaged by Vincent Lukas lasted for five weeks. It was a combination of what was best in African Traditional Religions and in Christian belief and practices. In this inter-faith dialogue, the traditional grass shelter used to house the novitiates was preserved but the spot where it was erected was consecrated with Christian prayers. The beginning of the ritual of circumcision was preceded by the Lord's Supper after which the boys were traditionally circumcised. The circumcision was followed by Christian teaching by the parish priest who with the assistance of reliable African teachers instructed the boys daily on good manners and morals according to the expectations of the society. At the end of the five weeks, during which the boys remained in seclusion, they were given new clothing to mark their new identity. This was followed by the Lord's Supper in the church which was followed by traditional dances to mark their transition from the old to the new person. It is held that this dialogue was very successful and contributed greatly towards the growth of the Church in the area. A Christian version of circumcision of girls was also introduced. It came to be known as *malango*. This experiment was so successful that the White Fathers also introduced a similar initiation ceremony in their area of influence.[39]

Recent scholarship is of the view that there is need for Christianity to enter into dialogue

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36. Anderson, *The Church...* p. 96.

37. Isichei, *A history...* p. 94.

38. W Saayman, *Christian mission in South Africa,* Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1991, pp. 46-7.

39. Blood, *The history...* pp. 154-6.

with African cultures. There is need to indigenize Christianity. Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula of Zaire, at the 1974 Roman synod, is reported to have said: 'in the past foreign missionaries Christianized Africa. Today the Christians of Africa are invited to Africanise Christianity.'[40] Carl F Hallencreutz in his book *Dialogue and community* has indicated that there is a general tendency to regard inter-religious dialogue as an issue between Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. African Traditional Religions have not been given serious attention in this connection and have thus been sidelined.[41] What is interesting, however, is that gradually there has been an awareness that African Traditional Religions cannot be overlooked. In this regard in the 1970s a major step was taken by the WCC Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths to break the general impression that inter-religious dialogue is primarily a concern of 'the big three', that is Christianity, Judaism and Islam. To this end plans were worked out in Athens in 1973 for an official dialogue with representatives of African Traditional Religions to be held in Ibadan, Nigeria in September, 1973. The participants at this meeting included representatives of established and independent churches, critical African intellectuals and representatives of African Traditional Religions.[42] The objective was to explore ways and means whereby Christianity can meaningfully enter into dialogue with African Traditional Religions. Apart from this a symposium was held at Yaounde, Cameroon, in September 1978 on humanity's relation with nature. Those who gathered at these meetings 'issued statements stressing the common respect which Christians and Traditionalists hold for natural harmony'.[43] A call for dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religions was also made very strongly at the All Africa Conference of Churches Assembly in Lusaka, Zambia in 1974. As a follow up of this call for a dialogue between Christians and traditionalists, the World Council of Churches sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths invited a group of twenty active African Christians from fourteen countries to the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Kitwe, Zambia in 1986, to discuss this issue and come up with recommendations to the churches. The participants at the conference comprising theologians (including the present author), church ministers and administrators, urged their brothers and sisters in the churches of Africa and the world to heed their call for full involvement in sincere and open dialogue with people in the African Traditional Religions and for a constructive mediation of the charisms given to various churches in all parts of the continent. A call was made by the participants for a serious study and understanding of African Traditional Religions so that there should be a meaningful discussion between Christianity and the indigenous religions of Africa.[44]

The call to enter into an ecumenical dialogue with African culture in general and African traditional religions in particular has continued since the pioneering work of people such as JS Mbiti, Charles Nyamiti, Kwesi Dickson, Bolaji Idowu, and many others at national, regional, continental and international forums. It is strongly felt by a number of African theologians today that the only way through which Christianity can truly claim Africa for Jesus is by going through a process of inculturation. Otherwise Christianity will remain foreign to the African people and their Christianity will continue to be skin deep. In recent

40. Isichei, *A history...* p. 1.
41. Hallencreutz, *Dialogue...* p. 87.
42. Hallencreutz, *Dialogue...* p. 88.
43. Stuart Brown, 'Towards a dialogue between Christians and traditionalists in Africa', A Report of a consultation held at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, Kitwe, Zambia, Geneva: WCC, 1986, p. 2.
44. Brown, 'Towards a dialogue...', p. 2.

years the claim of the growth of Christianity in Africa by leaps and bounds, especially when this is not taking place in the mission churches but in the African Independent Churches, has raised serious ecumenical questions.

At the 8th assembly of the WCC which was held in Harare, Zimbabwe in December 1998, Augustine Musopole, a well-known African theologian, pointed out that while Christianity in Africa is growing in numbers and in its geographical spread, its depth is questionable. This might be the reason it is easily overcome by forces of ethnicity, patriarchy, corruption, hatred, political manipulation, racism, classism, regionalism and traditionalism. According to Musopole, the Church in Africa, especially the mainline churches, is being called to embark on a second stage of evangelism and theological indigenisation. Evangelism has so far focused on the soul, making Christianity become like a spiritual insurance good when one is dead. Musopole has intimated that this kind of Christianity does not give security for the present. It leaves one to struggle alone with daily challenges of life. Such Christianity causes African Christians to suffer from spiritual schizophrenia. To ameliorate this situation, Musopole argued, Western Christianity must realize its own ambiguities and contradictions as problematic for the development of an authentic African Christian spirituality. A Western Christianity should also appreciate African spirituality as usable by God.[45] The lack of sensitivity of Western Christianity to take into account the values of Africa's religious culture has been lamented not only by contemporary African theologians but also by some political activists in Africa. Christo Lombard in his paper 'Three major problems facing Christianity in Africa' has noted that Steve Biko, a well-known South African Black Movement activist, once observed that

> the missionaries whose Christianity was culturally contaminated by large doses of individualism, racism, and materialist greed, instead of bringing a gospel of liberation, took away from African culture its true humanity and replaced it with a crude materialism that has very little to do with Christianity and is totally at odds with African culture. This cultural imperialism, under the guise of Christianity, has done tremendous damage and has led, up to this day, to a very serious identity crisis for Africans, especially African Christians; a crisis which cannot and should not be wished away.[46]

The urgent need to make Christianity truly indigenous to the African people so that it can remain in the bowels of mother Africa for ever has been echoed by KW Makhulu. In his paper 'Turn to God, rejoice in hope' Makhulu has argued very convincingly that lack of inculturation may lead to the disintegration of the Church in Africa. He has further reminded us that one of the reasons that led to the disappearance of the Church in North Africa, as a result of Muslim invasion in the 7th century, was lack of indigenisation in the rank and file of the Church. The indigenous people - the Berbers - did not feel at home in the Romanized Christianity of the time. According to Makhulu, the present vibrancy of the Church in Africa will come to nothing if the Church continues in its North Atlantic captivity. It is, therefore, important and indeed necessary that no one region or church or country should have monopoly on the Christian faith and that Christ would like to be the Christ of each nation, communicating with them in their mother tongue. It is essential that everyone should turn to God directly and not through other people.[47]

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45. *The Jubilee,* Harare, No.7, December, 1998, p. 4.

46. Christo Lombard, 'Three major problems facing Christianity in Africa', JS Pobee (ed.), *Africa moving towards the eight assembly,* Harare: Canon Press, 1998, pp. 61-66.

47. HW Makhulu, 'Turn to God, rejoice in hope', JS Pobee (ed.), *Africa moving towards the eighty assembly,*

This point has been made more forcibly by Andre Karamaga, another well-known African theologian. Karamaga has pointed out that there is no justification for African Christians to still entertain and maintain a colonial Christianity which is extremely divided. According to Karamaga, having done so for a long time, African Christians need to confess that they have turned against God since they have not taken seriously the challenge of inculturating the gospel in Africa and while Christianity continues to be regarded as a foreign religion in Africa. Karamaga puts it this way:

> We need to turn to God diversely named by our ancestors: *Nzamba, Leza, Mungu, Nkulu, Ngai, Andriamanuitra, Imana, Molimo, Xikwembo* etc... the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ..From our African religious background, which is similar to the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, it is not possible for believers in one God to compete or to fight in the name of that God. That is tantamount to reducing that God to an idol which needs to be protected by its creatures.[48]

4.   Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed the interaction between African Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam in Africa. It has been observed that since the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa, the relationship between these three religions has been characterized by conflict and cooperation. This paper has focused on the interaction of these three religions in the 19th and 20th centuries. It has been argued in this paper that the conflicts that have been endemic in these religions have been based on the competition to win African converts as well as their doctrinal differences. Apart from this, however, the three World Religions have tried hard to work out a working relationship that would bring cooperation, peace and harmony among their adherents.

Harare: Canon Press, 1998, p. 62.

48. Andre Karamaga, 'Turn to God, rejoice in hope', JS Pobee (ed.), *Africa moving towards the eitgh assembly*, Harare: Canon Press, p. 69.