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CHRISTIANITY AND NATION BUILDING IN WEST AFRICA (c. 1880 - c.1980)

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Abstract

Given that religion can contribute to the unity and integration of societies as well as to the reinforcement of division within societies, the role of Christianity in the process of nation building in West-Africa is studied. The article describes salient aspects of the relations between the missionaries and the political administrations and European traders, the cultural and political aims of the missionaries and the role of the Independent Churches and societies. It is concluded that the Christian Churches contributed in various ways to the processes of nation-building and nationalism in West-Africa. This section is followed with an account of the relations between the various church formations and the state in West-Africa. The whole article is concluded with some reflection on contemporary tendencies towards measuring the value of a religion in terms of the contribution it can make to national development and movement in the direction of civil religion.

Nation Building

There are many definitions of nation, some very broad, others more precise and specific. Some writers take the view that a nation is, quite simply, any group which demands to be treated as such. For others this is too broad and general a definition and they would prefer to define a nation as 'any cohesive group possessing independence within the confines of an international order as provided by the United Nations, which provides a constituency for a government effectively ruling such a group and receiving from that group acclamation which legitimises the government as part of the world order'.[1]

The degree of group cohesion required cannot, of course, be measured with any precision and does in practice vary from one country to another. While countries like the United States have been described as a 'nation of nations', and the same may be said of the Soviet Union and other countries including Canada, one can find examples on the other hand of smaller, more highly integrated, less diverse nations such as Denmark. It would seem that a high level of cohesion and integration is much less important than a widespread identification with and acceptance of the collectivity as a reality. And external contact often plays an important part in generating such acceptance among diverse peoples living within the same territorial boundaries.

Countries where there is great diversity and where the political boundaries have been arbitrarily determined by others, which is the case for the most part in West Africa, seek to develop greater unity and cohesion at the national level, while at the same time strengthening ties of a cultural, political and economic nature at the sub-regional and continental level. Although their boundaries were determined by European colonial powers West African states, as historians have shown, do not consist of totally arbitrary

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1 C. Friedrich and W. Foltz (eds.), *Nation Building*. New York: Atherton Press, 1966, p.31.

amalgamations of peoples. In the Nigerian case, to take but one example, there are links between the peoples who compose the federation of a cultural, linguistic and economic kind, which have a long history.[2] Nevertheless, events such as the Civil War (1967-70) emphasised the need for greater unity while respecting and allowing for genuine diversity in cultural and religious matters, and this is part of the ongoing process of *nation building*.

Nation building, while it involves such activities as the preservation and development of a common national heritage, the maintenance of an acceptable level of cultural, political and economic independence, and pursuit of the means necessary to control a nation's destiny in an interdependent world, does not entail uniformity. It is, according to some political scientists, 'that process of generating among a collectivity a community of culture, economics and politics which is designed to enable most of its members to maximise their potentialities'[3] While others would substitute *all* for *most* here, few would deny that there is any necessary conflict between a certain level of cultural diversity and the requirements of nation building.

A number of historians and social scientists, and perhaps none more so than Ibn Khaldun and Émile Durkheim, have stressed the cohesive role of religion in society. The former wrote of how religion strengthened group feeling and solidarity, both of which however, were based ultimately on bonds of kinship.[4] Durkheim, the sociologist, maintained that religion cemented social relations, made and remade 'the soul of the collectivity and of individuals' and strengthened the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member. What he terms commemorative rites 'revivify the most essential elements of the collective conscience' so that ' the group periodically renews the sentiments which it has of itself and its unity'.[5] Religion brings people together in society and by uniting together in society people 'become conscious of the groups they form, from the simplest to the most elevated, and thus those sentiments which the state expresses, defines and regulates, but which it assumes to exist, come spontaneously into being'.[6]

Much of the contemporary discussion concerning civil religion is based on Durkheim's view of the role of religion as a form of social cement. The American Way of Life which is said to stand for the Constitution, democracy and individual freedom, personal activism and laissez-faire economics has been described as a civil religion which serves to unite Americans.[7] There are numerous examples where religion, not always necessarily of itself, but on occasion as a result of the use made of it for this purpose, has become the focus of group, community or national identity. Further, in many parts of the world religion has played an important role in nationalist movements, for example in Burma, where nationalism during the colonial era was often referred to as Buddhist rather than Burmese nationalism. And in India Aurobindo Ghose emphasised that

2 J.F.A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), *A History of West Africa,* Vol. 1. Harlow: Longman, 1972; and E. Isichei, *A History of Nigeria*. London: Longman, 1983.

3 C. Friedrich and W. Foltz, op.cit., p.31

4 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal, edited and abridged by N.J. Dawood. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967, p.26 ff.; p.97 ff. and *passim.*

5 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J.W. Swain, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971.

6 E. Durkheim, *Germany above all: The German Mental Attitude and War*. Paris: Colin, 1915, p.30.

7 R.N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief. Essays on Religion in a Post Traditional World.* New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

'religion', Sanatan Dharma (eternal religion, Hinduism), and nationalism were the same thing. Gandhi derived much of his theory of non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*) to colonialism from Hinduism. Almost everywhere one cares to look in the so-called developed and developing worlds religions have helped provide some if not all of the leaders, symbols, rituals and cohesion found in nationalist movements.[8] And since we are dealing with Africa, and in case it should be overlooked, African traditional religion has also contributed to nationalism in these ways.[9]

While religion can contribute and has contributed to the cohesion, unity and integration of societies it can also be used, and this has also happened, to reinforce division within the same community or between different states. Then religion can be used both to unite and divide, to assist positively in the process of nation building and the closely related process of nationalism, or to act against them.

Nation building and nationalism are complex processes with a 'physical' as well as a moral and cultural side to them, both of which are often closely interlinked. In examining these processes from the 'physical' angle one would, if space allowed, consider in detail such matters as economic development, health, education, communications and social welfare, while on the moral and cultural side consideration would be given to values, norms, symbols, and questions of language, art, history, equality, identity and so forth.

In the discussion that follows on the role of Christianity in the process of nation building in West Africa it has to be kept in mind that what is being considered here is what has happened and not necessarily what should have happened. In other words, there is no attempt to suggest that there is only one model of nation building or that the model of nation building which the Christian missionaries had in mind - the contemporary European model - was either the best of the most appropriate for West Africa.

According to Ajayi the Christian missionaries played a prominent role in introducing into Nigeria - and one could extend this comment to cover West Africa as a whole - 'the ideas of nation building of contemporary Europe'.[10] Ajayi maintains that by training a 'group of Nigerians who accepted these ideas and hoped to see them carried out... the Christian movement sowed the seeds of Nigerian Nationalism'.[11] Ajayi makes it clear that he is referring to contemporary European ideas of nation building and nationalism, and that both of these concepts are relative and refer to ongoing processes. He also refers to the significant contribution made by Islam in the nineteenth century when it introduced into Nigeria 'the concept of a state transcending the bounds of personal loyalty to a clan, a traditional ruler or a particular locality'.[12]

Ajayi maintains that Christian missionary spokesmen and policy makers such as Henry Venn, the General Secretary of the CMS (from 1841 to 1871) do not appear to have interested themselves in or envisaged a formal, European political involvement in Africa. They looked to Africans themselves first as agents of the missionaries and later as

8 D.E. Smith, *Religion and Political Development*. Boston: Little, Bown and Coy, 1970.

9 See, for examples, G.C.K. Gwassa, 'Kinjikitile and the Ideology of the Maji-Maji.' In T.O. Ranger and I.N. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

10 J.F.A. Ajayi, 'Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2 (1), 1961.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

fully responsible for the building up and governing of one or several independent West African states. Venn wrote in 1857:

> 'We hope that with God's blessing on our plans a large body of 'Native' growers of cotton and traders may spring up who may form an intelligent and influential class of society and become founders of a kingdom which shall render incalculable benefits to Africa and hold a position among the states of Europe.'[13]

The missionary plan Venn wrote about and attempted to implement consisted in developing agriculture, substituting 'legitimate' trade for slave trading, extending 'civilisation' through the school - all of which would facilitate the spread of Christianity - and the emergence of a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating African Christian Church and self-governing African states. An integral part of this plan was the creation of an African middle class who would eventually have the responsibility for seeing that the plan was carried through. Such a class did emerge under mission tutelage and according to Ajayi this 'was the greatest contribution of the Christian missions to Nigerian Nationalism'.[14]

Through their schools and various educational institutions the Christian missions trained a new African élite,[15] some of whom, as Ayandele notes became enchanted by European ideas.[16] It was this new élite that came to figure prominently in the processes of nation building and nationalism.

Not all of the new African élite accepted passively and uncritically missionary ideas and methods of nation building. Some were scathing of the educational provisions made available by the missions while others rejected the attacks on African culture and ethical and moral norms.

It is difficult to measure the extent to which mission influence was indispensable to these developments in Nigeria or elsewhere in West Africa. It is possible that the changes introduced by the missionaries may well have come about through African initiative alone. There are those historians who maintain that Africa in the nineteenth century contained the seeds of its own 'modernisation'.[17] It is pointed out, for example, that 'the change-over from a subsistence economy to one geared to production for the export market', and undertaken 'autonomously' is but one piece of evidence in support of this view.[18] Furthermore, the creation of large-scale centralised states in both Muslim and non-Muslim areas of West Africa long pre-dates the arrival of the nineteenth century missionary from Europe and America.

The Christian missionary contribution to nation building and nationalism in West Africa in the nineteenth century was double-edged. While making a contribution to these processes in the medical, social, agricultural, linguistic and religious fields the nineteenth century missionary was also one of the principle 'pathfinders' of European political influence in West Africa. In Ayandele's words the missionary in Nigeria 'African or

13 Citation from J.F.A. Ajayi, 'Henry Venn and the Policy of Development', in O.U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa*. Daystar: Ibadan, 1978, p.68.

14 J.F.A. Ajayi, Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian nationalism, op.cit.

15 J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891, The Making of a New Elite*. London: Longman, 1965.

16 E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*. London: Longman, 1966, p.29.

17 H. Bruschwig, *L'Avènement de l'Afrique Noire, du XIXe siecle a nos jours*. Paris: Colin 1963.

18 M. Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule*. London: Hutchinson, 1968, p.8 ff.

European was the bearer of British influence in a subtle but sure manner, since unlike the administrator and the trader he lived among the people from the first, professed interest in their well-being and spoke their language'.[19]

But it was not the intention of the missionary, at least until the 1880s, to prepare for the formal British colonisation of Nigeria or anywhere else in West Africa for that matter. This is not to suggest that they did not at times work hand in hand with European traders and British government officials, for they certainly did. Missionaries and traders, though they often disagreed, were instrumental in the establishment of a British Consul in Lagos in 1853, to cite but one example. The political role of some missionaries even at this time was not always as subtle as Ayandele suggests, for some like Henry Townsend of the CMS saw, as Ajayi point out, their 'work in Africa very largely in political terms'.[20] Although not always in agreement with the details of British policy Townsend had little hesitation in calling on Britain to increase its influence in Nigeria for the purpose, as he saw it, of spreading the Gospel. As Ajayi comments: 'he was the sponsor of the policy of setting up Abeokuta rather than Lagos or anywhere else as the main centre of both missionary and British influence.'[21]

While missionaries involved European traders and administrators - more deeply than otherwise might have been the case - in African affairs and came in some instances to rely upon them for financial and military support, there could also be strong disagreement especially where these traders and administrators were not of the same nationality as the missionaries themselves. Conflicts of this kind emerged between the Portuguese authorities and Spanish missionaries on the West Coast of Africa in the seventeenth century and in the late nineteenth century in Nigeria relations were at times strained between the French Roman Catholic missionaries and the Royal Niger Company. The missionaries went so far as to participate in armed uprisings against the Company in 1887 and 1890.[22] These same missionaries were nonetheless very much in favour of spreading *French* influence in the region and opposed the whole idea of self-governing African churches.[23]

Later, with the formal establishment of British rule in northern Nigeria missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant and of French, Irish and British nationality once again opposed in no uncertain terms the British policy of indirect rule in northern Nigeria on the grounds that it protected Islam and frustrated attempts to convert the Muslim population of the region.[24] In former West Africa the attitude of the missionary to the French authorities in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of this century was much the same as in Nigeria. Many approved of the French military conquest of the western Sudan in the 1880s and 1890s since this would, it was wrongly believed, undermine Islam and prepare the way for Christianity. It was generally accepted that missionaries, where possible, should assist in the spread of French civilisation which was somehow regarded as a necessary preparation for becoming a

19 E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914*, op.cit., p.29.

20 J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria*, op.cit., p.79.

21 Ibid.

22 P.B. Clarke, 'Methods and Ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria, 1885 - 1905'. In O.U. Kalu (ed.), op. cit., p.40.

23 Ibid., p.41.

24 J.H. Boer, *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979, p.104 ff.

thoroughgoing Christian. There were, of course, exceptions. For example, the missionaries in Timbuktu in the early years of this century were reluctant to teach the French language, while others believed that educational work was not part of the missionary task.

In former French West Africa missionaries as a rule only rarely criticised the colonial authorities except when they felt that the latter were impeding their progress by protecting or favouring Islam. There were also at different times a degree of anti-clericalism in the administration and a fairly constant element of freemasonry, both of which displayed a certain antipathy towards the missionary and this gave rise to criticism of the administration. However, it was in general the personality of the governor of a particular territory that very often determined as much as anything else the actual state of relations between missionary and colonial administration.

Few clergy, whether they were African, American or European directly opposed, as far as is known, the colonial occupation of West Africa which began in earnest in the 1880s. This is not to suggest that they all gave it their full approval or that all those who approved of it did so in the same way and for the same reasons. Nor is it to suggest that the missionary was indispensable to the colonial occupation. It would most probably have occurred without him. Colonial society was more than anything else the product of economic and political forces, and while missionaries tended to share many of the ideas current in Europe and America at the time on the development, transformation and 'modernisation' of other societies, it was above all the search for markets, trade routes and for enhanced national status and prestige that led to late nineteenth century European imperialism in Africa.

Granted that they did not all come to approve of it in the same way or for the same reasons it was, nevertheless, the case that many missionaries believed that colonialisation would assist in the essential task of destroying the existing socio-economic and political structures in Africa, thereby facilitating the work of planting the Gospel in new and more propitious soil. For the missionary, virtually all things African - marriage customs, traditional rituals, as well as forms of domestic slavery, secret societies, and virtually all that was associated with traditional African religion - had eventually to be replaced, and the quicker the better before Christianity could flourish. This, of course, is to generalise and single out the missionary as if he were the only one who thought along these lines. Others, in Europe including theorists and practitioners of both capitalism and socialism, while pursuing different aims, held similar views to the missionary concerning the need to demolish the existing cultural and socio-economic systems in pre-industrial societies such as Africa.

Even cultural nationalists like Blyden opposed any hasty or premature challenge to European rule in West Africa and, according to his biographer, 'actually dubbed as ingratitude African agitation and their protests over growing discrimination in the administration of the colonies'.[25] Blyden, as Lynch points out, was not prepared to countenance strong opposition to the decision to exclude African doctors from the African Medical Service after 1902, or to the decision taken in the late 1890s not to

25 H.R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832 - 1912.* London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p.242.

appoint them to the highest medical positions, or to the fact that African doctors were paid at a lower rate than Europeans.[26]

One of Blyden's primary objectives was the establishment of an independent West African state that would be internationally recognised and able to play an active part in world affairs. And he believed that a temporary period of European rule was necessary if this goal was to be achieved. It is against this background that his acceptance of discrimination and foreign rule needs to be assessed. While this rather optimistic if not naive approach lost him many friends in the 1890s and early years of this century among the West African-educated élite in Lagos, Freetown and elsewhere, other clergymen of African descent like Alexander Crummell in Liberia thought along the same lines and supported Blyden. According to Crummell, who would have liked to have seen the whole of West Africa under British authority, western rule in Africa was necessary for 'progress', and 'the European drive to open Africa' was the 'highest philanthropy of the most zealous religionism'.[27]

The idea of exporting their own civilisation and lifestyle to what were regarded as culturally backward peoples was a central aspect of late nineteenth century imperialist thinking and one which many missionaries from North America and Europe shared.

While Blyden looked forward to a day in the not-too-distant future when West Africa would be independent, most European missionaries from the 1890s onwards did not speculate a great deal on such matters, expecting colonial rule to continue for a very long time. Even as late as the 1940s missionary leaders in the section of their mission reports dealing with politics made no reference to self-government but simply described the existing situation, giving no hint of a change to self-government.[28]

During the colonial era the mission-established Churches, while continuing to provide educational, medical, social and religious services seldom seriously questioned the right of Europeans to rule Africa,[29] and this did not go unnoticed by African nationalists themselves. Some nationalists demanded that Christianity should address itself much more to the ongoing, mundane affairs, political and otherwise, of this world rather than urge Africans to look to another, future world, for the fulfillment of their aspirations and ambitions.

The *Daily Service* newspaper, organ of the Nigerian Youth Movement, a nationalist party established in the 1930s, commenting in July 1942 on the implications of fifty years of 'Christian Education in Ijebuland' in present day Ogun State, Nigeria, commented that in themselves the implications of Christian education were 'revolutionary'. Among other things, 'Christian education inspired man with a spiritual force which enabled him to extricate himself from the shackles of ignorance, fear and superstition, [and] brought hopes of a better life. [But] Christian educationalists by emphasising the 'other worldly' dimension of Christianity at the expense of the 'this worldly' are failing. Africa is no longer the 'Dark Continent' where people can be carried away with obsolete theories of

26 Ibid., pp.242-3.

27 W..L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelisation of Africa 1877-1900.* Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982, p.134.

28 See for example, H.G.F. Archives, Paris. Report on the Catholic Dioceses of Guinea (Conakry), 1940. B.265, Doss. B.

29 A.A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa.* London: Heinemann, 1978, p.153.

heaven in some geographical region to which they proceed after impoverishing themselves below by selling all that he has.'[30]

To these nationalists 'slavery' and 'injustice' would never disappear as long as colonial rule continued, for in itself it was a form of both, and the task of the Christian Church was to apply its teaching directly to that issue and to educate people to that end, something which they appeared not to be doing.[31]

So far the focus has been on the role of the mission-established Churches, sometimes referred to as the older or historic Churches, in the processes of nation building and nationalism. The independent Churches and societies also need to be considered. It is clear that issues related to nation building and nationalism were partly responsible for the rise of a number of independent Churches. Some of these Churches were established for the purpose of providing Africans with a forum for exercising responsibility and managing their own affairs and as a means of defending and preserving African religious and cultural values. They were, in part, a response to increasing European control and dominance in Church life, and to some extent in the political sphere also. Churches such as the National Church of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) founded by the former Nigerian president, Nnamdi Azikiwe, were in all but name political movements. It was of course often necessary, given the restrictions on political parties, political protest and the absence of channels for the expression of political opinion to establish a religious movement for the purposes of political self-expression, and as a way of establishing the principle of 'Africa for the Africans' in opposition to foreign rule in Church and State.[32]

Not all independent Churches were equally political nor can their emergence always be seen as a form of direct opposition to colonialism and foreign influences generally. Although his ultimate political objectives were different, the Prophet Harris encouraged the people of the Ivory Coast and Ghana to participate actively with the administration in the development of the country along western lines. Later, after his expulsion from the Ivory Coast, he was to change his position and advise the Ivorians not to assist further in the French imperial scheme for the Ivory Coast.[33] By way of contrast other African prophets, among them the Nigerian, Josiah Oshitelu, while never explicitly confronting the colonial authorities, made pronouncements almost from the outset that were regarded as 'subversive' by the regime.

The independent Church movement contributed to nation building and African nationalism by emphasising and spreading widely among ordinary people the idea that there was an African alternative to European values and European control.[34] They also made a significant contribution to the indigenisation of Christianity itself in West Africa and like many sects in such circumstances enabled people to cope with rapid change.[35] It can be argued that the independent Churches simply provided an escape route from reality and generally held back the process of development in the fields of medicine and science by their emphasis on an allegedly non-scientific - some might term it 'irrational' -

30 National Archives Ibadan, Daily Service, 2/7/1942.

31 Ibid., 27/7/1944.

32 T. Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*. London: Muller, 1956, Chapter 3.

33 S.S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, p.167.

34 T. Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, op. cit., p.113. And G. Balandier, 'Messianismes et Nationalismes en Afrique Noire', *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie XIV*, 1963, p.41 ff.

35 B.R. Wilson, *A Sociological Interpretation of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

approach to healing, and even by their opposition to customary or traditional medicine which an increasing number of experts now see as highly valuable and relevant.

There was a 'situational logic' and consistency to faith healing as practised and encouraged by the leaders of the independent Churches: given the scarcity and difficulties of access to modern medicine and the failure of traditional medicine during the epidemic of 1918 for example, the religious healers performed a valuable and useful role in society. As one scholar points out, 'they carried and continue to carry a considerable load of the health service'.[36] This writer continues, 'While they may condone paranoid ideas they do not tend to enhance them nor even create them like the traditional healers do. They alleviate rather than create anxiety as the traditional healers do'.[37]

In more recent times the independent Churches have tended to become much more like the 'older' Churches in organisational form and in other ways, and have also become much more involved in education, socio-economic development and other fields. They promote literacy through their Sunday Schools and Bible study groups, are responsible for schools, healing centres, printing presses, guest houses,[38] hospitals, co-operatives, and trade training.[39] Other independent Churches, such as the Holy Apostles, a branch of the Cherubim and Seraphim, have been largely responsible for the economic development of whole local communities.[40] In the Ivory Coast the Harris Church is now involved in the same type of activities, and like the Holy Apostles of western Nigeria and the Church of the Messiah, Labadi, Ghana and many other independent Churches, encourages members to work hard for the benefits of themselves and the wider society.

The Christian Churches, then, contributed in different ways to the twin processes of nation building and nationalism in West Africa. And while the mission-established Churches in particular operated at times as vehicles for the spread of colonialism, they also helped the cause of nation building and nationalism by providing a considerable amount of the necessary infrastructure. This is not to suggest that other forces were not involved, or that the course taken by nation building and nationalism were the only ones or the right ones. It is simply to describe what happened and not what might or should have happened. There is, given the nature of the issues involved, a considerable amount of overlap between what has just been discussed and what follows.

Church - State relations

Religious institutions can relate to the State in different ways, depending both on the type of religion and the type of society in question. In the centralised societies of pre-colonial West Africa, there tended to be a close identity and interaction between the religious and political sphere and a strong sense of common purpose between the two. The religious

36 T. Asuni, 'Socio-Medical Problems of Religious Converts'. *Psychopathologie Africaine* IX (2), 1973, p.22-36.

37 Ibid.

38 R.J. Hackett, 'Nigeria's Aladura Churches Gateways or barriers to Social Development', *Africana Marburgensia XIV*, (1), 1981, pp.9-26.

39 For example, the Mennonite Church in Nigeria, Inc., Ikot Ada Idem, at Uyo has organised co-operatives which in turn have established hospitals, and offer people trade training in tent making. See E. and I. Weaver, *The Oyo Story*. Elkhart, USA: Mennonite Board of Mission, 1970.

40 S.R. Barrett, 'All Things in Common: The Holy Apostles of Western Nigeria (1947 onwards)', in E. Isichei (ed.), *Varieties of Christian Experience in Nigeria*. Nigeria, London: MacMillan, 1982, pp.149 ff.

authorities were often the political authorities, and this made for a strong sense of common purpose and an emphasis on common values. It would be incorrect to assume that where such a relationship exists societies are free of all conflict, or that such a relationship is indispensable to the harmony, stability and progress of a society.

During the colonial era and in most West African countries today there was and is (at least in principle) a separation between Church and State, between the religious and political spheres. Moreover, as far as world religions such as Christianity and Islam are concerned, they can encourage loyalties that are wider than the local society or nation in which they exist: they preach universal brotherhood and require faith in a God who is the God of all men. This does not necessarily mean that their preaching contradicts the requirements of citizenship, although this can sometimes happen.

During the first phase of missionary activity in West Africa the Christian missions were heavily dependent upon their respective European governments and were to all intents and purposes State controlled. In the nineteenth century many of them were much more financially independent, and the Roman Catholic missions were of course much more directly under the control of the Vatican.[41] The situation varied, the Catholic missions in former French and Portuguese West Africa being much more subject to and dependent on government financial assistance and government approval when appointing and deploying personnel than was the case in former British West Africa. Nevertheless, it was the case that missionaries in general enjoyed more freedom from secular control than in the earlier period. However, certain restrictions were placed on their movements and on what they could do, especially where it was a question of mission work in the Muslim territories. This - it has been suggested in the case of northern Nigeria - was a policy designed more to protect government interests rather than one based on Muslim objections to Christian missions and western education.[42]

Christian missionaries did not have things all their own way in non-Muslim areas either. Colonial governments, on occasion, gave support to the local ruler where there was a dispute between the latter and the missionary. In the dispute already referred to between the head of the Catholic mission in the Lawra and Wa districts of Ghana the colonial authorities informed the bishop, who wanted to see the powers of the chiefs limited and the traditional courts adapted to conform more to Christian interests, that this could not be done. The bishop was informed that the courts were 'under the paternal guidance of Administrative Officers who are placed in the most favourable position to appreciate the points of view of the Pagan and the Christian. And I would add that the Pagan Chiefs are not lacking in the qualities which are necessary to enable them to rule their people of whatever religious beliefs with justice and tolerance.'[43]

Ayandele, in his analysis of the attitude of traditional rulers to missionaries with special reference to the pre-colonial period writes of the very real fear felt by some of these rulers that missionaries might undermine their authority and indeed the whole social structure. They therefore, rejected missionary overtures. A classic instance of this

41 R. Gray, 'The Origins and Organisation of the Nineteenth Century Missionary Movement'. *Tarikh* 3 (1), 1969, p.19 ff.

42 P.K. Tibenderama, 'The Emirs and the Spread of Western Education in Northern Nigeria, 1900-1946'. *JAH* 24, No. 4, 1983.

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

response came from the Awujale, Ademiyewo of Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria.[44] Rulers such as Ademiyewo feared the disrupture, political, economic and cultural, that they believed would inevitably come about as a result of a foreign presence in their kingdom. They also entertained, as Ayandele points out, a certain contempt for the white man whom they regarded as 'a harbinger of evil'.[45]

The greatest problem facing the missionaries in many parts of West Africa in the pre-colonial era was that they were regarded by the rulers of the more established, better organised, more self-sufficient kingdoms in particular as agents of foreign power, and as the first step on the way to foreign political intervention. This was certainly the case, not only in Ijebuland but also in many other areas of West Africa. In the 1840's the missionaries in Senegal were never able to convince the rulers of Serer that they were not agents of French military power, and this proved to be a serious obstacle to Christian expansion.[46] As Ayandele notes, this reaction of the traditional rulers was one important reason why some missionaries were favourably disposed to European military expeditions in West Africa.[47] Later generations of West African clergymen were also to place the blame for these expeditions on the shoulders of the traditional rulers. In his address in 1942 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the British military expedition against the Ijebu a clergyman said that it was 'the mistakes (among them the opposition to missionaries) made by our forefathers which made the expedition necessary, inevitable and justifiable'.[48] There were also a number of traditional rulers like Sodoke of the Egba of Abeokuta, who welcomed missionaries and expected that the latter would in return obtain for them military assistance against their opponents, act as intermediaries between themselves and European officials and traders, and in some instances introduce western education if not necessarily Christianity.

With the onset of colonial rule and the application of the principle of religious freedom, never applied unconditionally, the hand of the missionary was strengthened, although as we have seen they were by no means free to do exactly as they liked. The 'older' Churches were taken more seriously and given more latitude by the State than the independent Churches which were regarded as much more of a threat to the *status quo*. Moreover, in the former Portuguese West African colonies the ties between the Catholic Church and the government were extremely close, especially from 1940 when Portugal and the Vatican signed a Concordat which included a missionary agreement. This was followed in 1941 by the Portuguese Government's Missionary Statute which provided for considerable government financial aid to the missions, mission control over education in return for a state veto over the appointment of bishops and support for Portuguese colonial policy. This agreement between the Catholic Church and the Portuguese government militated against the interests of the Protestant Churches.

In former French West Africa, though the links between the Catholic Church and State were by no means as close, there was a general tendency to favour Catholic missions to the disadvantage of protestant missionary societies who were suspected of being agents of British interests. On the other hand in Liberia, there was for a long time

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44 E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria*. op.cit., p.57 and *passim*.

45 E.A. Ayandele, Traditional Rulers and Missionaries in Pre-Colonial West Africa, in *Tarikh* 3 (1), 1969, pp.23 ff.

46 M.A. Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968, Chapter 3.

47 E.A. Ayandele, Traditional Rulers and Missionaries in Pre-Colonial West Africa, op.cit.

48 NAI Daily Service, 3/6/1942.

a strong connection between the Protestant Church and the State which Catholic missionaries felt at one time was to their disadvantage.

Today all West African states, with one or two exceptions like Mauritania, describe themselves as secular and assure all their citizens of full equality before the law without making any distinction on religious grounds. As for traditional African religions these are given the same status in some countries, as for example in the Republic of Benin, as any other religion. There is, however, a tendency to be suspicious of certain religious organisations such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and certain types of Pentecostal churches in 1978.

In the preamble to a number of constitutions there is a pronounced religious emphasis and while this does not mean there is no separation between Church and State, it is often welcomed by both Christians and Muslims as the Shari's debate in Nigeria (1976-8) demonstrated.[49] Furthermore, although profoundly shaken by the total or partial takeover by the State of Church schools and hospitals in Ghana, Guinea (Conakry), Nigeria and elsewhere since independence and in some cases having fought to defend what they considered to be their legitimate interests, ecclesiastical authorities at national or regional level, notwithstanding what individuals may have said or done, have not as a body called into question the established political system of the day. The response in fact has been to become more deeply involved in economic and social development projects by starting co-operatives, credit unions, agricultural training schemes, industrial workshops and so on.[50]

While stressing that the mission of the Christian Church is at one level - the supernatural, spiritual level - of more significance and value than that of the State, and that while government has the greater competence in the political, economic and industrial spheres and religion in the moral and ethical realms, the Christian Churches have tended to stress the need for solidarity between Church and State. While emphasising the need for an opposition some Christian writers have expressed the view that the Christian need not in principle oppose the one party state system.[51] Leaders of the 'older' Churches, while encouraging Christians to participate in the political life of the nation, stress that the Church as a religious institution cannot become involved; its role consists simply in presenting its teachings 'on matters on which the Church is competent'.[52]

There have been instances, and some of these have already been mentioned, where individual churchmen and branches of Churches have in practice become involved in politics in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of such involvement in the colonial era was the involvement of members of the Catholic clergy in the nationalist struggle in Cameroon, where they opposed the nationalist movement, the Union of the peoples of Cameroon (UPC), suspecting it of being Communist in inspiration and intent.[53] And for similar reasons, although on a

49 P.B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam.* London: Edward Arnold, 1981, pp.250 ff.

50 D. Diane, *Le Catholicisme en Haute Guinée.* Mémoire, University of Paris, 1st June 1981.

51 Alfred de Soras, *Relations de l'Eglise et de l'Etat dans les Pays d'Afrique Francophone.* Paris: Mame 1963, p.122-3.

52 F.A. Arinze, *The Christian and Politics.* Onitsha: Tabansi Press Ltd., 1982: 29 and *passim.*

53 J. Mfoulou, 'The Catholic Church and Cameroonian Nationalism; from misunderstanding to opposition'. In E. Fashole-Luke *et al.* (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa,* op. cit., pp.216 ff. See also R. Joseph. *Radical Nationalism in Cameroon.* Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1977, p.177 ff. and *passim.*

smaller scale, the Church opposed nationalist developments in Guinea (Conakry). Although some may see this as a form of casuistry, Mfoulou suggests that such opposition was not necessarily opposition to nationalism *per se* but simply to a particular kind of nationalist movement.[54] In more recent times, aspects of the involvement of some of the Christian Churches in such events as the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70) have been seen as involvement in politics.[55]

On the question of Church-State relations the independent Churches take a similar line to the 'older' Churches. While emphasising the need for harmony these Churches claim that the spiritual welfare of the people is primarily their concern while the State has the right and duty to exercise temporal authority. And like the 'older' Churches these Churches also reserve the right to advise and direct the State on religious matters and condemn injustice.

The status of a number of the independent Churches has been enhanced since independence. For example, the Harris Church in the Ivory Coast has not only received recognition from the State, but is also considered as one of the 'national' religions.[56] This concept of a 'national' Church is interesting and takes us back to previous attempts to establish this kind of Church in Nigeria and elsewhere. In the Ivory Coast the government political party, the Democratic Party of the Ivory Coast (PDCI), recognised the Harris Church as constituting the fourth national religion, along with Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam and actively encouraged these religions to engage in the process of nation building and to uphold Ivorian culture and traditions. The Harris Church for its part made a determined effort to show that it was the only authentic Ivorian religion and this was one of the main reasons why it was given government recognition.

Conclusions

This support for and endorsement of 'national' religions appears to reflect a growing tendency to measure the value of a religion in terms of the contribution it can make to national development. It also reflects a move in the direction of 'civil religion' where the justification for religion in itself is not to be found primarily in its doctrinal content, but perhaps even more so in the extent to which it can make a positive contribution to the nation, upholding and sustaining national values and interests and operating as a force for unity and integration.

This is not an entirely new departure. At the beginning of the section on Church-State relations we discussed the close identity of religion and politics, of traditional African religions and the State, and the strong sense of common purpose between the two in the pre-colonial period in West Africa. The Christian mission-established Churches moreover played an important role in introducing European ideas of nation building and in spreading European civilisation, while adhering in principle to the position that Christianity had to be judged far more by the validity of its doctrinal content, its claim to be in possession of the Truth, than by its usefulness.

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54 J. Mfoulou, 'The Catholic Church and Cameroonian Nationalism'. In E. Fashole-Luke *et al.* (eds.), op.cit., p.226.

55 A.F. Walls, 'Religion and the press in 'the Enclave' in the Nigerian Civil War'. In E. Fashole-Luke *et al* (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa*, op. cit., p.207 ff.

56 S.S. Walker, op.cit., p.128.

With some modifications this would appear to be the position of most Christian Churches in contemporary West Africa. They would not claim to be in sole possession of the truths of Christianity, not would they deny that Islam and the traditional African religions contain important supernatural truths and insights. These Churches furthermore, would not necessarily share the nineteenth century missionary ideas of nation building and nationalism. And while they believe they can and do make an important contribution to the kind of nation building and nationalism that are now seen as more authentically African, they would not want to be judged solely by the relevance or the contribution they make to these and related processes. They continue, on the whole, to see themselves along with other religions as the guardians of spiritual truths and moral values with the right to educate and instruct people in these truths and values, while the State has responsibility for the material well-being of the people.

Of course, in practice, given their involvement in educational, social and economic activities, and their claim to be guardians of spiritual and moral values, the Churches cannot escape having a political dimension. This the State does not in general oppose, providing religions do not create dissension or mobilise people against the prevailing political and economic orthodoxy. Although the situation can vary enormously, what the state often looks for and in some instances demands in present-day West Africa is that the Christian Churches and other religions avoid polemics and demonstrate a strong sense of common purpose in the task of nation building, while not intervening directly in politics. This view of things in practice sees religion primarily not as an alternative system of authority and values, whose requirements contradict political requirements, but one which can help legitimate existing political, social and economic arrangements, performing a role similar to that of traditional African religions in the past.