

# In search of a common ground for a fruitful interreligious dialogue in Sub-Saharan Africa

Frederic Ntedika Mvumbi

African Traditional Religions have not disappeared and they do not seem to disappear from the life of many Africans, for they continue to influence their way of life. African Traditional Religions may not continue to exist in some forms or the way people used to identify them –e.g. popular activity or visits of shrines- but they remain a determinant force of many thoughts, evaluations and decisions of Africans; they play an important role in many phases of human meaning and values. Indeed, the present African world has a strong and different interest in African Traditional Religions and related issues are discussed in many spheres of life. Fortunately or unfortunately, the up-rising new religious movements in Africa particularly in towns and cities, does not seem to neglect their significant role in daily life. There is a different story in villages, for Africans carry on various dimensions of African Traditional Religions' spirituality.

All religions require serious understanding since they are to be lived for different reasons. So the way religions are lived and understood ought to be taken concomitantly for proper fitness. Thus, presenting and discussing new observations on African perceptions of God in African Traditional Religions or finding a new order of understanding is not a futile enterprise but an unavoidable project that shapes Africans, particularly as we attempt to create more opportunities for a fruitful interreligious dialogue in Africa. Here, old but scholarly statements made on God in African Traditional religions are comprehensively and critically examined in order to have a second view or a more cultured perspective out of what is taken for granted.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Ferre, E., *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 11-22.

With the help of comparative study of Religious, we intend to give a new direction for a new questioning and a new understanding. However, we should not think at any time that what was previously said by eminent scholars in African Traditional Religions is reduced to nothing; instead it is given a new framework that considers the past, the present and the future of Africa as a whole since every person has a dream for a better life, a greater future. Africans dream for an improved African life and the Church in Africa looks forward to delight all Africans.

So as we think of the future of the Church in Africa, we choose to reflect again on African Traditional Religions as the ground of a healthier Africa. Charles Nyamiti, for instance, calls for a serious study of African social-cultural situation as a source of African theology in order to build Africa; he, therefore, demands that non-Christian content be studied in its three historical moments, namely its past, present, and even future dimensions.<sup>148</sup> Although Charles Nyamiti is more concerned with African theology, his advice stands as a general principle which also guides scholars in the study of African Traditional Religions because such studies build the ground for genuine interreligious dialogue. However, we limit ourselves to the study of God.

A study of God in African Traditional Religions is certainly an old topic but not obsolete as many people might assume. Of course, many eminent scholars in this area have dealt with it intensively but there are still some realities to discover or a new order to set maybe not in the general content of the subject but in the interest of the writer and the methodology used. Still for some others, it is an irrelevant subject because most of Africans have embraced Christianity or Islam. Indeed, it is an old topic but rendered here in a new order. I still believe that what scholars have presented should help us review our literature and build an image that could help us engage into interreligious dialogue. The followings headings are a few in the framework that we intend to present in this text.

---

<sup>148</sup> Quoted by Wanjala, F., *Basics of African Theology: A cogent Mentor in Charles Nyamiti* (Rome: Litografia Lierit, 2008), 50.

### **Belief in God is taken for granted, what does it mean today?**

Once the Roman emperor Caesar said: “Men freely believe that which they desire” (De Bello Gallico, Bk. Iii, sec.18) as if desires precede beliefs or beliefs are made of people’s desires. This does not seem to be true in the context of African Traditional Religions where beliefs are considered as the pillars and sources of all that African traditional believers’ activities. John Mbiti says:

When we come across African beliefs, we are in fact dealing with African Religion, although religion is much more than its beliefs. The beliefs are handed down from generation to generation, sometimes with modifications. Without them no religion can inspire its followers.<sup>149</sup>

Actually these brief words of John Mbiti affirm the importance of beliefs and customs in each religion and invite, particularly, scholars in African Traditional Religions to consider African beliefs and customs as the primary sources of the whole “*Domus Africanis Religionis*”. Hence, these words appeal to all people who do not know something or much about African Traditional Religions (cf. The preface of the second edition of the same book) to study African belief repertoire with magnanimity because it encompasses a variety of related, nuanced and distinctive elements of the African religious heritage. We speak of a repertoire of African beliefs to assert that Africans have many traditional religious beliefs which shaped up their livelihood before the coming of missionary religions and continue to guide many Africans up-to-date. Perhaps the most important article of this African anthology is their belief in God which, I think, is simply “taken for granted”.

But this expression “taken for granted” should not be diluted or given a meaning that works against the validity of the belief in God in African Traditional Religions since it justifies the pre-eminence given to God in the hierarchy of beings and the widespread role of God in the mind of the traditional believers. Now let us examine what such expression could mean.

---

<sup>149</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (second edition.), (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2003), 29.

### **Belief in God in African Traditional Religion is a fundamental truth**

We want to affirm here that belief in God in African Traditional Religion is a fundamental truth since it justifies all that is visible and invisible in African worldview. Already in 1885, Noel Baudin noted this fact but refused to accept its legitimacy when he wrote:

In these religious systems, the idea of God is fundamental: they believe in the existence of a supreme, primordial being, the lord of the universe, which is his work... and notwithstanding the abundant testimony of the existence of God, it is practically only a vast pantheism – a participation of all elements of the divine nature which is as it were diffused throughout them all.<sup>150</sup>

According to Noel Baudin, although the belief in God in African Traditional Religions is fundamental and cannot be denied, he doubts on its genuineness for it is not clear enough to certify its authenticity. Bolaji Idowu responded to Baudin's double stand and included all those who pretend to hold a clear understanding of God. He observed that

Those who take one look at other people's religion and assert glibly that such people have no clear concept of God, or no concept of God at all, should first look within themselves and face honestly the question, "How clear is the concept of God to me? How clear is it to my people, the generality of them and not the few leading thinkers among them?"<sup>151</sup>

In spite of Baudin's statement and other similar ones which we neither neglect nor reject, this belief remains fundamental and genuine in African Traditional Religions, for it elucidates the African traditional life as a whole: it explains the organisation of the community; it determines the standard moral life of the community; that is what is permitted as well what is prohibited. J. Mbiti states: "All African peoples believe in God. They take this belief for granted. It is at the centre of African Religion and dominates all its other beliefs."<sup>152</sup>

<sup>150</sup> Cited by Idowu, B., *African Traditional Religion. A definition* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1973), 140.

<sup>151</sup> Idowu, B., *African Traditional Religion. A Definition* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1973), 143.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Ignorance or neglect of this belief leads to the ignorance or neglect of other African Traditional tenets such as beliefs in Ancestors, the continuity of life after death... Indeed this could lead to the ignorance of the created world and all it contains, particularly the people. Jesse Mugambi and Nicodemus Kirima affirm it,

Each community has individuals who are believed to be wise, that is to know many things and to render advice to many people of different subjects. God is believed to excel above all wise men. Wise men know many things, but God knows all things. Even wise men draw their wisdom from God, and this is why in Traditional Africa a wise man has a religious function in the community.<sup>153</sup>

Those who are familiar with the organisation of life in African traditional societies and the importance of Wise Men, Diviners and all Healers in those societies will not hesitate to affirm that God is the source of all since He is even the source of the wisdom of Wise Men, Medicine Men, Diviners and Healers who are so venerated in Africa. John Mbiti says:

In many ways, religious leaders are the embodiment of what is the best in a given religion. They embody the presence of God among people and the faith or beliefs of the people, as well as their moral values. Without them African Religion would disintegrate into chaos and confusion. The religious leaders are the keepers of religious treasures and of religious knowledge. They are wise, intelligent and talented people, often with outstanding abilities and personalities.<sup>154</sup>

This truth is so fundamental in the life of Africans that many Africans often insist that the idea of Supreme Being (God) in African Traditional Religions is not of missionary origin.<sup>155</sup> African Traditional Religions are not a result of a revelation, but rather, a natural folk-religion, nevertheless lived with conviction (Achermann, 1993, p. 23). Furthermore, in his "Bantu Philosophy", particularly while

<sup>153</sup> Mugambi, J., & Kirima, N., *The African Religious Heritage. A Textbook based on syllabus 228 of the Kenya Certificate of Education* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 125.

<sup>154</sup> Mbiti, J., *op., cit.*, 153.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Onwubiko, O.A., *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, Enugu: Snaap Press LTD, 67.

presenting the hierarchy of beings among the Bantu, Placide Tempels shows with a remarkable clarity the profundity of this affirmation. He relates that, in Bantu philosophy, God is considered as a being above all other beings, for he is spirit and creator of all; he gives existence to all; he sustains all and he is the source of growth.<sup>156</sup> Laurenti Magesa observes that the supremacy of God above all created order is both the starting and the highest control authority of values and norms in Africa.<sup>157</sup>

Again, the possible explanations given by J. Mbiti concerning the origin of this belief in God in African Traditional Religions – People came to believe in God through reflecting on the universe, people realised their own limitations, people observed the forces of nature-<sup>158</sup> uphold its continuity up-to-date because they persist to challenge Africans.

Everything in African Traditional Religions begins with God, for God is believed to be the founder of the community and all that is in it. In many occasions while reflecting on the major characteristics of African Traditional Religions, M.Y Nabofa says:

African Traditional Religions permeate life. That is, the religion embraces the whole life of the people, and an adherent is involved in the religion from birth to afterlife. There is no clear distinction between religious and secular affairs. Consequently the government of every traditional African community is theocratic and gerontocratic. The people are governed by the priests and the elders who are regarded and revered as the physical and symbolic representatives of the divinities and the ancestors. It is believed that the well-being of the physical community very much depends upon the

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Tempels, P., *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Traduit du néerlandais par A. Rubbens, Lovania (Elisabethville) 1945. Texte intégral digitalisé et présenté par le Centre Aequatoria. «Comme il est des castes aux Indes, comme les Israélites distinguaient le « pur » de l'« impur », ainsi les êtres sont-ils répartis en logique bantoue par espèces et classes suivant leur puissance ou leur préséance vitales. Par-dessus toute force est Dieu, Esprit et Créateur, le *mwine bukomo bwandi*. Celui qui a la force, la puissance par lui-même. Il donne l'existence, la subsistance et l'accroissement aux autres forces. Vis-à-vis des autres forces, il est «Celui qui accroît la force» ».

<sup>157</sup> Cf. Magesa, L., *African Religion. The moral traditions of Abundant life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 45.

<sup>158</sup> Mbiti, J., *Op. Cit.*, 45-46.

good-will of God, the divinities and the ancestors. The divinities and the ancestors constitute the spiritual tribunal governing the affairs of the community through God's delegation.<sup>159</sup>

All laws and all legitimacy of leaders are governed by God who is considered as the source of all. So our attempt to understand the African traditional belief in God makes us know that it is not an addendum but a fundamental truth.

### **The world manifests God**

Belief in God is taken for granted because the world is the manifestation of the God. Africans firmly believe that, although the world is not God or it is not identical to God or it is not equal to God, it expresses God's nature and attributes. By insisting that the world manifests God, African traditional adherents think of the sacredness of the world and all that is in it; each creature is an evidence of God's presence and life. Laurenti Magesa insists on this when he writes:

Yet, religious reverence must be accorded to the world and what is in it and around it. This is a moral requirement because the world is the manifestation of God, God's power and benevolence. Accordingly the big rock where people go to sacrifice is not just a big rock, but it incorporates, shows and for that reason is, in fact, some supernatural quality of the divine. The same can be said in different African societies of practically anything that inspires awe: mountains, trees, snakes, certain animals, and so on. While African Religion understands very well that these elements are of no means God but creatures, as we have emphasised, it also recognises that they have divinity in them because they exist by the will and through the power of the divinity. In a sense, therefore, they represent the divinity and surely demonstrate God's will and power to humanity.<sup>160</sup>

God that we cannot see is at least perceived through some powers in the world. This is not solely a cosmological statement but more importantly ethical and perhaps spiritual. Indeed, Laurenti

<sup>159</sup> Nabofa, M.Y., Religious values and salvation in African Traditional Religion in *Training for Religious Dialogue* CBCN, IRDC Regional Seminar (Agbarho -Nigeria-, 23 -30-May 2003), 7-8.

<sup>160</sup> Magesa, L., *op.cit.*, 61.

Magesa's quotation is more about the morality than the cosmology of African Traditional adherents, for he directly talks about the ethical consciousness of Africans.

On the same line, Shorter explains how this manifestation of God in the world could be viewed when he asserts that in many African communities, the sun which is one of the most important creatures that manifests God's power, simply becomes the name of God. God is called Rua, Ijwa, Yuva...)<sup>161</sup> This may, of course, be argued against the belief in God in African Traditional Religions and cling to assign to it pantheism or even idolatry. Surely Adherents of African Traditional Religions know that the sun is not God and God is not the sun but the sun manifests God's attributes such as power, holiness, greatness... Charles Nyamiti maintains that certain objects "Hierophanies" manifest God's holiness. He says:

Everything unusual becomes a hierophany. There is always a correspondence between the mode of being of an object and the modality of sacred it reveals: a particular aspect of the sacred is revealed through the objects' specific mode of existence.<sup>162</sup>

In this quest of understanding how the world manifests God's being, Charles Nyamiti introduces the concept "modality" for precision and coherency. It seems clear to me that, on one hand, we argue that the world manifests God; on the other, we state that all modes of beings in the world do not manifest God unless they reveal the sacred. Thus, Laurenti Magesa concludes:

The world represents in various ways the being and the personality of the Divine Giver who always has the final claim on it. As all human beings are children of God, no one can claim to have a monopoly of ownership over those aspects of creation that are deemed to have been placed by God's will in public trust for the public good. Perhaps a good way to describe this understanding is to see goods and resources in terms of the image of the lender, the borrower and the article lent or borrowed. In African ethical thought, the universe has been lent by God to humanity through the ancestors and the living leaders to use on the condition that it

<sup>161</sup> Shorter quoted by Laurenti Magesa, *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Charles Nyamiti quoted by Laurenti Magesa, *ibid.*



must be kept in good order and used by all for the promotion of life, good relationships and peace, at least within the clan or ethnic group. If those conditions are broken, humanity forfeits the right to it and often deserves chastisement if reparation in the form of sacrifice or offering are not offered.<sup>163</sup>

In his books “African religions and philosophy (1967) and “Concepts of God in Africa” (1970), John Mbiti speaks abundantly on the active attributes of God: God is the creator, God provides and sustains the universe; as king, lord and judge, he governs the universe. For instance, says John Mbiti:

The Fon believe that God has an assistant (Da) and together they sustain the world, coiled in spiral round the earth which they preserve from disintegration – if they slaked it would be the end of the world – and under the sky which they uphold, with the world of gods. This assistant is said to have set up four pillars to support the sky. Similarly, the Banyarwanda hold that God’s action is necessary to maintain the world, for without him it would not continue to exist. They do not consider God to intervene in the laws of nature as such, but his action is conceived rather as an underlying force which sustains the whole universe. The Bamburi show the same concept when they say that if God should die, the world would also collapse. They believe that the phenomena of the nature are dependent on God. For the Lozi, God’s sustenance of the universe is maintained through his not intervening in it.<sup>164</sup>

Moreover, all these above-mentioned comments testify loudly that the belief in God in African Traditional Religions is taken for granted since the world itself in which they live and move is simply the manifestation of God. Who could, therefore, ignore God and refuse to believe in him or doubt on his existence? This is what prompted Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia to state that “the question about God is not “who is God” since he always dwells among the people and all that one has and knows comes from God, such as descendants, cattle, harvest, etc. The question to be asked is how can one live without losing one’s union with God. One can say that the God of the Africans is not an

<sup>163</sup> Magesa, L., *op.cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>164</sup> Mbiti, J., *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: S.P.C.K, 1970), 63.

abstract concept, but a living and supernatural reality. God participates in the life of man through cosmic and mysterious events, but above all he is concerned with the happiness of his creatures.<sup>165</sup>

### **Belief in God in African Traditional Religion is embraced without demonstration**

The previous point – The world manifests God – presupposes the African idea of the belief in God that is embraced without justification or demonstration. We repeatedly say that God is invoked in many circumstances, he is named but it is difficult to have a discourse on God or write about God for fear of saying what he is not or stating too little who he is indeed. Africans believe that this could also lead to an adulterated perception of God's doing; and consequently they might have an erroneous view of all that surround them. Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia wrote:

No one can know anything without the presence of God, even if this presence is implicit and man is unaware of it. This makes it difficult to discourse the issue of God and one can understand why anything written about him is always insufficient. Thus the issue of God can only be of verbal nature, made up of dynamic expressions and the rest should be left for intuition, because any definition of God would impoverish the relationship between God and man and lead us astray from any perception of his life. The discussion on God belongs to the ontological and religious sphere, therefore as such there is no need of any justification or demonstration.<sup>166</sup>

Belief in God in African Traditional Religion is taken for granted given that it is embraced without demonstration. Indeed, the wisdom of Africans is far from challenging its pre-eminency, uniqueness as well as its transcendence. The world is his and Africans believe that, far or near, he controls it. Bolaji Idowu asserts:

Those who are studying African beliefs with carefulness, open-mindedness, and honesty are now coming to see that ideas like K. Little's of a world created, equipped, and set going with a

<sup>165</sup> Nkafu Nkemnkia, M., *African Vitality. A step forward in African thinking*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999), 144.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

self-changing and self-directing power is alien to African belief. Africans do not think or speak like this. In fact, they are rather anthropomorphic about their concept of God in this connection; they do not think or speak of a certain non-material kind of power or influence with which God has invested the world so that he could go and abide unmolested in the repose of eternity.<sup>167</sup>

Africans speak of God, celebrate his providential help, invoke his power in times of distress and praise his guidance. Furthermore, Isaac D. Osabutey-Aguedze says:

In like manner sculpture and painting grew out of the African's inherent love to adhere closely to nature. The former had its rise from imagination. Speculative, the African believers (and that belief is not puerile) that the divinity is unnameable, indescribable, and illimitable. It is blasphemous to say God is this or that. All objects and feelings are forms of his manifestation.<sup>168</sup>

Again Africans employ some anthropomorphic expressions while talking about him; this is a proof that they have some knowledge of God. Indeed, this belief is like something that gives meaning to all the manifold aspects of the life of Africans, and yet supersedes their scope of knowledge. Thus, this reality of God in African Traditional Religions, acknowledged by all African cultures, is felt more than analysed, lived more than thought. Pope Paul VI says:

A common and very important element of the spiritual concept is the idea of God as the first and the last cause of all things. This concept which felt more than analysed, lived more than thought is expressed in extremely diverse ways, according to the culture. In reality the presence of God permeates traditional African life as the presence of a superior being, both personal and mysterious. One has recourse to him in the solemn hours of life and its most crucial moments, when one considers useless the intercession of all other beings who could serve as intermediaries. Nearly the fear of his great power is overcome and God is invoked as Father. The prayers that one addresses to him, whether individual or

<sup>167</sup> Bolaji Idowu, E., *op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>168</sup> Osabutey-Aguedze, I.D., *The African Religion and Philosophy*, (Nairobi, Mailu Publishing house), 1990, 59.

collective, are spontaneous and sometimes touching, while among the forms of sacrifice the first fruit is notable for the purity of his symbolism.<sup>169</sup>

### **A binding truth that someone cannot afford to forget, deny or neglect**

Who can question the existence of God or who can afford to ignore, forget or neglect since belief in God is like an inbuilt fact in the African tradition? Certainly no African with sufficient knowledge of African culture and religion will, authoritatively and convincingly, deny the belief in God publicly. If he does in a closed door, it does not carry weight. Not even non-Africans who are conversant with African way of life will critically reject it with genuine reasons. Indeed, elders and parents hand it over to their children not perhaps in a formal way that necessitates classrooms or shrines but in their daily life. They also transmit the whole tradition as they rejoice over a joyful event or as they mourn over a sad experience. Writing on Kikuyu Traditional Culture in Kenya, Silvana Bottignole said:

Religion is interwoven with traditions and social customs of the people. Thus all members of the community are automatically considered to have acquired, during their childhood teachings, all that is necessary to know about religion and custom. The duty of imparting this knowledge to the children is entrusted to parents, who are looked upon as the official ministers of both religious ethics and social customs. Such traditional religious knowledge and belief hinge upon belief in: Ngai (God); the Ancestors; the spirits of God in the world of the living and of the unborn, in the animals, vegetables and inanimate world.<sup>170</sup>

We agree with Masumbuko Mununguri when he emphatically affirms that the majority of scholars in African religions find the idea of the nonexistence of God unthinkable and obsolete. He wrote:

Today it has become banal and almost chronic to repeat that “for Africans the nonexistence of God is unthinkable.” All the researches undertaken by the CERA from its foundation until the present time have

<sup>169</sup> Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum* Rome, 1067, no. 8.

<sup>170</sup> Bottignole, S., *Kikuyu Traditional culture and religion* (Lusaka: Heinemann Educational Bokks, 1984), 34.

done nothing more than conscientise and attract the attention of Africans and other citizens of the earth about this solid affirmation expressed above. We call it, this God of the Africans, “the God of our Ancestors” simply because the notion of Ancestor seems to us to correspond very well to the African mentality. The expression “God of our Ancestors” corresponds better to the idea Africans have regarding the role played by those who have preceded us in their relations with the Lord of life.<sup>171</sup>

It is important to note that, while talking about the closeness of God in African perspective, Masumbu begins his book by assuring the readers that no African will attempt to deny or maybe neglect the fact that God exists. It is commonplace that all Africans should believe in God before they believe in anything visible and invisible. It is a binding truth that no one affords to ignore. According to him, God has been journeying with African Ancestors and continues his journey with all Africans today through joyful as well as poignant events. He is of the opinion that the Incarnation of Jesus should find a fertile land in Africa; Africans should understand the Incarnation of Christ with fewer difficulties, for the same God of our Ancestors became man.

Masumbuko does not make a distinction between closeness and Incarnation as taught in the Catholic Church, for he says in the second chapter of the same book that

The Incarnation of the Word is not a mystery coming from outside, foreign to the traditional African religion in its conception of God. It is located within the African’s prolonged search for God. Our Ancestors, after having searched and groped for him, saw him irrupting into their history.<sup>172</sup>

It seems to me that it will be too ambitious to arrive to this conclusion because Incarnation remains a mystery that is foreign to the conception of God in Africa. It is also foreign to the Jews and the Muslims. Masumbuko will probably need a systematic teaching on the Trinity in order to avoid such “saut indu” and embrace true distinctions, particularly in this case. A God with a Son is foreign to the perception of God in Africa. He indeed developed two contra-

---

<sup>171</sup> Mununguri, M., *The Closeness of the God of Ancestors. An African approach to the Incarnation* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 13.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

dicting ideas that could adulterate the understanding of God in African traditional religions when he stated in the following page that

The Christian novelty is to know that this God so great is near to us, one who speaks with us. Our Ancestors spoke of him, spoke to him, but never with him. In praying the Christians speak with God in a friendly dialogue.<sup>173</sup>

This novelty is very important and it needs to be well understood for the avoidance of confusion and the practice of “cut and paste”. In actual sense, this distances the conception of God in African Traditional Religions from Christianity. Both of them are unique; they should not be mixed. That is exactly what we are doing here in this chapter: to present the notion of God in African Traditional Religions with carefulness, critique and objectivity without comparing.

God in African Traditional Religions speaks to his people through Ancestors, Elders, Diviners, etc. He does not speak and would not speak directly with his people because he is supreme although he comes down to dwell in some places.<sup>174</sup> Africans believe that God is Spirit; he is invisible; Africans feel his effect through some natural things or forces such as wind. They witness his presence through events like death and other limitations<sup>175</sup> Again, the presence of God among people cannot be simply likened to Incarnation – as taught in the Catholic Church – although it can be taken as a new way or the perfect way of God’s presence in humanity. According to Africans, God has been ever present in humanity but not with the idea of becoming man.

Furthermore, the Church teaches that the Son brought us salvation which carries different meaning. In his conference on “salvation in African Traditional Religion”, Professor M.Y. Nabofa defines salvation as understood ATR. He says:

Salvation could be defined as: well-being won or held against disaster, assurance and realisation of blissful security in the hereafter. This refers to the salvation of soul: which, of course, presupposes belief in life after death; salvation is escape from suffering, pain, misery, sorrow, lust, enmity and stupidity that

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>174</sup> Bottignole, S., *op.cit.*, 34.

<sup>175</sup> Mbiti, J., *op.cit.*, 59.

inevitably entail suffering, however much they may induce transient delights or satisfaction; salvation is a state of sentient existence conceived as freed from suffering...it is getting rid of those things and conditions which man considers to be absolutely evil and also preservation from destruction, danger and calamity which he may meet in life...<sup>176</sup>

These few descriptions should not be simply identified with salvation that the Son brought (as understood in the Church). So God as the Son is really foreign to the perception of God in African Traditional Religions. In fact, Salvation as perceived in Christianity is not counted among the numerous works of God in African Traditional Religions: God is the creator; God is the sustainer of his creation; God is the provider; God is the ruler over the universe.<sup>177</sup> This could be likened to the Christian idea of salvation.

Thus, any attempt to understand Christianity and all its dogmas with African Traditional lenses is a difficult task; it is like treading on a very dangerous route. We limit our study to the God in African Traditional Religions or as Masumbuko put it, the God of our Ancestors.

### **New order and new challenges: a way to a fruitful interreligious dialogue**

One would be satisfied to get to know that belief in God in African Traditional Religions is neither a trend that started at any point of time nor a mentality that developed due to some circumstances but a known-unknown truth that is in the mind of Africans at their birth and continues until death. Thus, Africans who take part in interreligious dialogue, even when they have become Christians or Muslims, would begin with “what is taken for granted” and recognise the values that this expression “taken for granted” contains.

As explained above, this fundamental truth should be the basis of any kind of interreligious dialogue; it should instil in the mind of Africans the fundamentals of genuine dialogue with religions. The

---

<sup>176</sup> N abofa, M.Y., Religious values and salvation in ATR in *Training for Interreligious dialogue. A CBCN, IRDC Regional Seminar* (Agbarbo: Dominican Publications, May 2003), 9-11.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Mbiti, J., *op.cit.*, 49-52.

belief in God in African Traditional Religions, felt more than analysed and lived more than thought of, should prompt Africans to find a new order where it is equally felt and analysed, equally lived and thought. This belief, therefore, requires more analysis and thought for it to bring out its real content. This could, perhaps, make it more practical and realistic for the benefit of interreligious dialogue in Africa.

Again, when we say that belief in God in African Traditional Religions is a binding truth that no one would afford to neglect or ignore, one would expect to build around it strong bonds or relations that go beyond religious traditions. Actually, this is the truth that binds all Africans together in spite of their differences. Such analysis would consider interreligious dialogue not as an option but as a compulsory activity.

Therefore, belief in God in African Traditional Religions should not be embraced without demonstration, for it is when it is demonstrated that it creates more opportunities for improvement, particularly as far as interreligious dialogue in Africa is concerned. This should challenge all Africans. Since goodness communicates, let this belief which is taken for granted communicate its real meaning and value.

## Conclusion

If the world (Africa) as we know it does not allow interreligious dialogue,<sup>178</sup> Africans should rejoice having a strong backup for dialogue of religions, for traditionally they are bound to foster their relations for the sake of their fundamental truth, a truth that unites them all: the belief in God is taken for granted. This expression “taken for granted” should not be taken for granted but it should challenge all Africans to measure up with this traditional belief. I know that this first traditional belief taken from African Traditional Religions still affect all in many ways.

Thus, this article invites Africans to commit more and more into activities of interreligious dialogue in Africa, for both the ground and the spirit are set for a fruitful one. The old principle but given a new order should equip Africans to face the problems and pitfalls related to interreligious dialogue with the same traditional spirit: belief in God in African Traditional Religions is taken for granted.

---

<sup>178</sup> Cf. Knitter, P., *One earth many religions. Multifaith dialogue and global responsibility* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 85-86.



# MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



Edited by

Klaus Krämer and Klaus Vellguth

