

*Michael Kpughe Lang**

***MAINSTREAM CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AS OBSTACLES
IN THE PATH OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CAMEROON
SINCE REUNIFICATION***

Abstract: The religious landscape of Cameroon has significantly changed over the previous century, especially after the 1961 reunification of British Southern Cameroons and French Cameroon. This change, driven by a plethora of forces, resulted in the present multi-religious setup of the country. The challenges connected with this religious diversity (comprising Catholics, mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, indigenous religions, Islam, Orthodox) heightened the need for religious freedom and religious pluralism. In spite the efforts made by the state to establish a plurality tradition in the religious landscape, there are persistent impediments to this project.

In light of this, the aim of this paper is to examine how mainline Christian churches have served as impediments to the religious pluralism project in Cameroon. The contextualization of Cameroon's religious diversity is followed by an overview of religious pluralism in the country. The paper further discusses the multifaceted ways by which mainline Christian churches (Catholics and Protestants) have perturbed religious pluralism in this secular state. It also pays attention to the response of discriminated religious groups to the anti-pluralism practices of mainline churches.

Finally, the paper provides some recommendations as informed by what upholds elsewhere. The essay asserts that mainline churches do not believe in religious pluralist inclusiveness and have, in a multifaceted manner, obstructed the establishment of an inclusive culture of religious pluralism in Cameroon.

Keywords: *Religious diversity, religious pluralism, public presence, secularism, Cameroon, Christian churches*

* Department of History, Higher Teacher Training College Bambili, The University of Bamenda, Cameroon (mickpughe@yahoo.com).

Danubius, XXXII, Supliment, Galați, 2014, pp. 275-291.

Introduction

With the political independence of French Cameroon in 1960 and her subsequent reunification with British Southern Cameroons a year later, the Cameroon federation that emerged from this union opted for the secular state machinery with the hope of rendering the young state operational. From this moment, religious traditions that were present in Cameroon had to negotiate their presence and activity within the framework of national law. The law made religion to occupy a distinct sphere, separate, yet regulated by the state. Among the many issues that lingered on the minds of the political leaders was the fashioning of a workable strategy capable of surmounting the dilemma of profound religious diversity which Cameroon had inherited from the oppressive and exploitative British and French colonial governments. It was in this context of dire necessity to address the religious multiplicity problem that a religious pluralism project, though seemingly not well defined, was envisaged and constitutionally embedded in the secular status of the state. According to the 1961 Federal Constitution, Cameroon became a *de jure* multi-religious society with the same powers of existence and public presence given to all recognized religious faiths.

Drawing from this religious freedom and pluralism tradition adopted for experimentation in the religious landscape of Cameroon, it was hoped that the various religions (Christianity, Islam, Bahai, Orthodox and Indigenous Religions) including the myriad of groups within each of these religions were to be peacefully accommodated by the new state. Their followers, apart from being free to believe in what they wanted to, had to be accommodating and friendly towards those who did not share the same beliefs with them. Put differently, they had to believe and practice in a manner capable of enhancing a culture of pluralism among the people of the over 250 ethnic groups¹ and numerous faiths in Cameroon.

From the beginning, this *de jure* religious freedom and vision of pluralism which seemed to take roots, was challenged by the incessant splits within mainstream Protestant churches and the planting of hundreds of various branches of Evangelical churches. The latter are commonly referred to as "Born Again" churches among Cameroonians. Worse still, other religions such as Buddhism and Greek Orthodoxy were also introduced in Cameroon. This significant multiplication of faiths made the task of executing the pluralism project extremely difficult for the state. Besides, some of the religious faiths, especially the dominant and conservative ones, became involved in attitudes that were injurious to religious tolerance and pluralism. In addition to this, the government, in some specific situations, shelved the secular state apparatus by extending an aura of favors to mainline Christian churches and Islam. Consequently, the state and the faiths it favored became obstacles in the path of secularism and religious freedom and

¹ J. Willard, *The Cameroon Federation. Political Integration in a Fragmentary Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 2.

pluralism. Indeed, they acted as if they were yet to come to terms with the meaning of the culture of pluralism.

Although religious pluralism is a commonly-used term with numerous distinctive meanings, it generally revolves around the central idea of different religious traditions working together. As observed by many scholars of religion, religious pluralism refers to the coexistence of people who hold divergent and incompatible religious views within a defined political community. Eck, the author of a monumental work on American religious pluralism, sees the term as the dynamic process through which different religious traditions engage with one another in and through their very deepest differences.² The interpretation of these definitions is that religious pluralism should be evidenced by an unchallenged culture of tolerance of religious difference alongside an inclusive free exercise of religion. Hence, the state has to ensure that the exercise of any religious faith does not impede others from enjoying the culture of tolerance and public presence. As Eck further notes, frank dialogue between religions with the encouragement of the government can place pluralism on a good path. This gives religious pluralism the status of an unending process that gains roots with time and circumstances. The process of pluralism, as evident in the United States and elsewhere, is constrained by numerous forces. But its persistence and success hinges on how committed and truthful the actors are to dialogue on the project.

In Cameroon just like elsewhere, especially in Africa, it seems that the governments either opted for secularism, religious tolerance and pluralism either without a proper appreciation of what they meant or deliberately not attaching any commitment in view of guaranteeing success. The religious conflicts in Nigeria, Mali, Egypt, Algeria, among others are indicative of the failure or non-application of religious pluralism. Although the situation in Cameroon is yet to gain overt conflict proportions, there has been suspicion and skirmishes between followers of Christianity and indigenous religions and between Christians and Muslims in the northern part of the country.³ In light of the foregoing, this paper projects the argument that mainline Christian churches have contributed in a multifaceted manner towards the absence of an inclusive culture of religious pluralism in Cameroon. The paper starts with a presentation of the historical roots of Cameroon's religious diversity before it seeks to provide an overview of religious pluralism in the country. Included in this paper is an examination of the multifaceted ways by which mainstream Christian churches have obstructed the culture of religious pluralism in the secular state. In addition to this, the paper discusses the response of the discriminated religious faiths to the assault on their

² See Diana L. Eck, *A new Religious America: How a "Christian Country" has become the World's most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 70.

³ "International Religious Freedom Report on Cameroon, 2012, by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor", accessed July 5 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71290.htm>.

religious traditions. Finally, it seeks to provide some recommendations in view of placing the pluralism project in Cameroon on a good course.

Historical Roots of Religious Diversity in Cameroon

The population of Cameroon is a blend of more than 250 different ethnic entities, whose indigenous religions differ significantly.⁴ Each ethnic group has its indigenous religion characterized by prayer, rituals, sacrifice and a plethora of beliefs that are embedded in the culture of the people. A cross-cutting feature of these indigenous religions was the belief in a Supreme God whose appellation was as varied as the ethnic groups. They are not limited to beliefs in supernatural beings (God and spirits) or to ritual acts of worship, but affect all aspects of life, from farming to hunting, from travel to courtship. It is important to remember that while there are similarities between indigenous religions in Cameroon, there are also differences that can be likened to what upholds in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. So, prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity, the area that eventually became referred to as Cameroon was host to numerous indigenous religions. The observance of these religions within their ethnic boundaries was communal and absolute since they were interpreted as a way of life.

The imposition of Islam in the northern region of Cameroon in the first half of the nineteenth century through an Islamic revolution that was linked to Uthman Dan Fodio's jihad launched the real beginning of religious diversity in the country. For the first time, the people in the region were divided between followers of indigenous religions and Islam. Indeed, the dominance enjoyed by Islam in the present day northern region of Cameroon is a product of the nineteenth century jihad.

But from around the mid nineteenth century, Western Christian missionary bodies (London Baptist Mission, Basel Mission, American Presbyterian Mission, Pallotine Fathers, German Baptist Mission, etc.) began planting Catholicism and Protestantism in Cameroon. This new religion which came on the heels of European scramble for the annexation of Cameroon further mutated the country's religious landscape. Initially annexed and governed by Germany (between 1884 and 1916), the territory was eventually partitioned and placed under Britain and France's governance, first as mandates of the League of Nations and later as trust territories of the United Nations. In October 1961, the southern portion of British Cameroon reunified with French Cameroon to constitute Africa's pioneer bilingual federation.⁵ Throughout the colonial period, Protestant and Catholic denominations

⁴ See Willard, *The Cameron Federation*.

⁵ For insightful treatment of the colonial history of Cameroon, read V. G. Fanzo, *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*, Vol. 2, *The Colonial and Post Colonial Periods* (London: Macmillan, 1989); V. G. Ngoh, *History of Cameroon Since 1800* (Limbe: Presbook, 1996). The northern portion of British Cameroon was officially attached to Nigeria following the results of the February 1961 plebiscite.

were established in Cameroon largely on regional and ethnic basis. The Christian churches in Anglophone Cameroon had little or no connection with their counterparts in the Francophone zone. Numerous Christian churches emerged from the ecclesiastical colonial mould, such as: the Roman Catholic Churches in both Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon, Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) and the Cameroon Baptist Convention (that were limited only in the Anglophone zone) as well as their counterparts in the Francophone zone (*Eglise Evangelique du Cameroon, Eglise Presbyterienne Camerounais*, etc).

The young state encompassed people who were not only separated by ethnic and colonial experiences, but also by marked religious disparities (indigenous religions, Islam and various branches of Christianity).⁶ It is therefore evident that Cameroon's diversity was (and still is) also reflected in the parochial and regional character of its various religions. The Christian population was and is still divided between Catholics (38.4 percent of the total population), mainstream Protestants (26.3 percent), and Evangelicals (4 percent).⁷ The two Anglophone regions of the western part of the country are largely Protestant, and the Francophone regions of the southern and western areas are mostly Catholic. In the northern region, the dominant Fulani ethnic group is mainly Muslim since the imposition of Islam in the area in the first half of the nineteenth century by Muslim jihadists. But the overall population is fairly evenly distributed among Muslims (20.9 percent), Christians (69.2 percent), and followers of indigenous religions (5.6 percent). The recently introduced religious groups (Orthodox Church, Buddhism and Hinduism) represent only four percent of the total population.⁸ In light of this religious diversity that has gained roots with time and circumstances, there was need for

⁶ See E. Mveng, *Histoire des Eglises Chrétiennes au Cameroun : Les Origines* (Yaoundé: Imprimerie Saint Paul, 1990); A. Ndi, *Mill Hill Missionaries in Southern West Cameroon 1922-1972: Prime Partners in Nation Building* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005); M. B. Funteh, "A Historical Survey of the Strategy for Church Expansion in Cameroon: The Case of the Mainstream Denominations," *Kaliao*, Volume 1, No. 2 (December 2009): 49-68. See particularly, K. Werner, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon* (Victoria: Presbook, 1969).

⁶ For more information on the limitation of churches' activities to specific areas of Cameroon, see D. H. Chimi, "Les Organes de Promotion de l'unité des Protestants au Cameroun 1941-2005" (Mémoire de Maitrise en Histoire, Université de Yaoundé 1, 2007); O. Etuge, "Church Union in Cameroon" (Bachelor Dissertation in Theology, Theological College Nyasoso, 1977): 32-45.

⁷ See "Cameroon", accessed May 10, 2012,

<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171604.pdf>. This implies that Christians constitute about 69 percent of Cameroon's population (about 20.4 million).

⁸ Information on the religious demography of Cameroon is contained in the "International Religious Freedom Report on Cameroon, 2012 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor," accessed July 5, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71290.htm>.

practical and effective methods aimed at ensuring pluralism in Cameroon's religious landscape. The argument sustained in this discussion is that mainline churches in Cameroon have failed to wholeheartedly embrace and recognize the religious diversity that accrued from various historical accidents as well as from the country's religious freedom tradition. Amazingly, they have, to a significant extent, impeded the transformation of Cameroon's religious diversity to religious pluralism in nearly all the forms it is supposed to take.

An Overview of Religious Pluralism in Cameroon

Following the reunification of Cameroon in 1961, the Federal Constitution on the basis of which the federation had to function provided for freedom of religion and worship. The tradition of religious freedom was not unprecedented since the Mandate and Trusteeship agreements under which British and French Cameroons were governed for nearly half a century made provision for it. Apart from approving religious freedom, the 1961 constitution alongside all its amended versions made Cameroon a secular state. It is stated in the preamble of the 1996 constitution that "The state shall be secular. The neutrality and independence of the state in respect of all religions shall be guaranteed. Freedom of religion and worship shall be guaranteed."⁹ This implies that there has to be a level playing ground for all religions that are present in the Cameroon religious landscape. Besides, there is need for a clear boundary between religion and state in Cameroon. This constitutional religious freedom resulted in significant religious diversity, as earlier mentioned. Interestingly enough, the tradition of secularism enshrined in all the successive constitutions (1961, 1972 and 1996) provided the potential for religious pluralism in the country.

Just like elsewhere, religious pluralism in Cameroon has its strengths, shortcomings and challenges. Since 1961, as evident in most literature, the government has through a plethora of ways tried to enhance religious pluralism in the country. Presently, Christian religious bodies are present throughout the country, including Roman Catholic, the Baha'i Faith, Baptist, Presbyterian, evangelical Protestants, Methodist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unification Church, Seventh-day Adventists, New Church of God, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), among others. In addition to these Christian bodies, there is also Islam, whose presence is evidenced by the proliferation of mosques across the country and specifically in its fief in the northern region of the country. The government, in spite some shortcomings, generally respects the right of religious freedom in practice. As a matter of fact, there is no official religion in Cameroon. Besides, Christian and Muslim religious holidays are celebrated as national holidays. These include Good Friday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, Christmas Day (all Christian holidays), the Feast of the Lamb and the End of Ramadan (Muslim feasts).

⁹ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, 18 January 1996.

The Law on Religious Congregations governs relations between the Government and religious groups. Religious groups must be approved by and registered with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINAT) to function legally. Interestingly, the government has never denied permission to any religious group seeking to operate in the Cameroon Religious landscape.¹⁰ On the whole, government policy is intended to enhance pluralism in Cameroon's religiously diverse landscape. Efforts at offering equal public presence opportunities to these religious groups are consistent and rewarding irrespective of some drawbacks. Quite often, the government steps in to resolve disputes between religious groups resulting from their public presence-related activities. The public presence of Christian and Muslim religious groups is felt through their involvement in education, health, evangelization, media, ecumenism, and humanitarian works. Their activities largely correspond to the boundaries of the nation-state. Over the years, almost all branches of Christianity (Catholic faith, mainstream Protestants, and evangelical churches) have been planted in the Muslim dominated northern region where they function nearly unperturbed. Similarly, as already pointed out, Islam is gaining grounds in the Southern part of the country as Muslim clerics are establishing mosques in all nooks and crannies.

Furthermore, the state-owned television channel carries two hours of Christian programming on Sunday mornings, normally an hour of Catholic Mass and an hour for a Protestant service. There is also one broadcast hour dedicated to Islam on Friday evenings. State-sponsored radio broadcasts Christian and Muslim religious services on a regular basis, and both the radio and television stations periodically broadcast religious ceremonies on national holidays or during other national events.

Although religious pluralism has gained roots in Cameroon with a present potential to further progress, there has been an anti-pluralism behavior orchestrated by government and dominant religious groups, especially mainstream churches. In fact, the aura of indigenous religions spread across Cameroon are neither recognized by followers of other religions nor allowed to practice their beliefs without being perturbed. Apart from this, most of the evangelical churches, especially the fundamentalist-oriented ones that grew out of mainstream Protestant churches are quite often discriminated and openly attacked by followers of Catholicism and mainline Protestantism. Amazingly, the Evangelicals, probably because of their conservative attitude, are consistent in their outright rejection of indigenous religions as evidenced by their intolerant and anti-pluralism songs, prayer, sermons and leaflet evangelism. They go as far as destroying sacred sites reserved for the observance of indigenous religious practices (prayer, sacrifice, rituals ceremonies, etc). Apart from failing to check the discrimination suffered by indigenous religions, the government has fashioned a religious studies program for secondary school and high school students without bringing indigenous religions

¹⁰ This view is expressed in annual reports on religious freedom in Cameroon by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

on board. The prayers and Bible and Quran reading in public and private schools, so far condoned by government, does not only disregard indigenous religions, but also contradicts the secular status of the state.

The foregoing notwithstanding, mainline Christian churches, as earlier noted in the introductory section of this paper, constitute a serious obstacle in the path of religious pluralism in Cameroon. Thus, the following section pays attention to the various ways by which mainline churches have impeded religious pluralism in Cameroon.

How Mainline Christian Churches have Obstructed Pluralism

The religious freedom tradition and pluralism project in Cameroon have been challenged by mainline Christian churches in multiple ways. These religious groups are presented by their followers as the dominant religious tradition, ignoring the existence of others, particularly indigenous religions and fundamental Evangelical faiths. Members of these churches go as far as disqualifying and condemning other religions. This kind of intolerant attitude peddled by dominant religious groups, as Jose Maria Vigil observes, “can, logically, lead to a crisis that at times can be profound.”¹¹ In this section, I address how the mainstream Catholic and Protestant churches have disregarded religious pluralism in Cameroon.

The ministers and followers of mainline churches had, on numerous occasions, disqualified and even condemned some religious groups. According to the 2006 International Religious Freedom Report on Cameroon published by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the multiplication of new unaffiliated religious groups, most of which are Protestant, led established churches to vigorously denounce what they label as “sects” or “cults.” Leaders of established religious organizations characterize and denounce these “sects” as detrimental to societal peace and harmony. Some religious leaders reportedly warn congregations during major celebrations to beware of such groups.¹² Akoko confirms this anti-Pentecostal attitude in these words: “The attitudes and beliefs of some non-Pentecostals towards the Pentecostals are so disturbing that some people would not feel comfortable associating with the faith. In Cameroon, it is generally believed (rightly or wrongly) that only frustrated people join the faith. Some call them ‘social misfits’ because of their practice of avoiding certain places considered ungodly, such as nightclubs and bars, whatever their popularity with other people”.¹³

¹¹ Jose Maria Vigil, “The Challenges of a Theology of Religious Pluralism for Traditional Fundamentalist Faith,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Number 4, Volume 44 (2007): 67.

¹² “International Religious Freedom Report in Cameroon, 2006 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor,” accessed July 5, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71290.htm>.

¹³ Robert M. Akoko, “New Pentecostalism in the Wake of the Economic Crisis in Cameroon,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2002): 365.

What Akoko fails to stress upon is that the majority of those who held the above view about Pentecostals were (and still are) ministers and Christians of mainline churches. Interestingly enough, Akoko goes further to mention that mainline doctrinal conservatism has obstructed the growth of Pentecostalism in Cameroon. For him, parents who are devout members of mainstream churches were consistent in stopping their children from becoming Pentecostals.¹⁴

Although mainline churches denounced fundamental churches and labeled them as harmful sects, the leaders of these frontline churches seemingly welcomed the castigation of indigenous religions by some followers of “Born Again” churches. For example, when Bafut indigenous religious sites were destroyed and burnt by followers of the Kingship International Ministries in 2012 led by Prophet Afanwi Frank, no official response came from mainline churches. As a matter of fact, the Prophet and his followers destroyed a 600 year old shrine (tree) where important traditional religious rituals were always performed.¹⁵ In a multireligious and accommodating society, response to such vandalism and violence is usually swift and strong. If the mainstream Catholic and Protestant faiths were not anti-pluralists, they would have exploited the various communication channels, through which they usually proselytize, to denounce the attacks. Amazingly, just one week after the attack, some ministers of mainline Protestant churches preached against indigenous religions over the state-owned radio and television. It is therefore undeniable that mainline churches were (and still are) complaisant with the assault on indigenous religious sites in Bafut. It is important to stress upon the fact that the destruction of the shrine of the traditional worshippers resulted in social unrest in Bafut. The anti-religious pluralism act in Bafut was not an isolated case. It represents a growing attitude among followers of the dominant Christian religion who disqualify, condemn and castigate indigenous religions. They label the beliefs, prayer, rituals and instruments of these religions as satanic.

In May 2013 when I was delivering a lecture on African systems of thought to undergraduate history students at the Higher Teacher Training College Bambili, some students who identified themselves as devout members of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon insisted that all indigenous African religions (especially their concept of God, creation, sacrifice and rituals) are satanic. They advised me as well as other scholars to “stop misleading God’s children by exposing the basis of these false religions.” Interestingly enough, some ardent followers of indigenous religions responded by stressing that religious freedom requires every person to believe in what he/she wants. The fierce debate that followed alongside the consistent rejection and castigation of indigenous religion by the students only exposed the dilemma in which followers of indigenous religions are trapped. The students were only re-echoing the views of their pastors about indigenous religions.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Mayhem in Bafut over destruction of 600 years old shrine by self-proclaimed Prophet”, accessed on July 10, 2013, <http://cameroonlatest.blogspot.com/2012/04/mayhem-in-bafut-over-destruction-of-600.html>.

This bigoted and intolerant way of expressing Christianity has been persistent and consistent in the Cameroon religious landscape.

Consider also the case of my family, which for some time now has been seriously divided between followers of Christianity, Indigenous religion and Islam. After the demise of our father in November 2006, an unperturbed Indigenous religious burial rite was conducted. But when some of my brothers decided to organize a remembrance traditional funeral celebration a year later, the adherents of Christianity objected arguing that it was a satanic religious practice. It is worth noting that this ceremony is a ritual among the Weh people designed to honor ancestors.¹⁶ The ritual is marked by sacrifices that family members offer to the dead. Followers of the Weh religion believe that after the ritual, ancestral spirits are called upon to bless the people and bestow on them economic prosperity, as well as peace and good health. The virulent rejection and obstruction of the ritual by the Christians resulted in a series of meetings marked by heated debates on the issue. Some of my brothers who came from far and near for the religious ceremony were frustrated since the Christians successfully stopped the ceremony. This confirms Mbaku's observation that Christianity has had a significant impact on indigenous religions in Cameroon.¹⁷

More still, given that many devout adherents of mainstream churches in Cameroon continue to preserve and observe some aspects of their indigenous religions, as Mbaku (2005: 61) notes, conflicts between Christians and practitioners of indigenous religions at funerals are common. The bone of contention has always centered on whether such persons should be buried according to Christian or traditional religious rites. At the funeral of Right Rev. Chief Jeremiah Kangsen in 1988 (he was former Moderator of the PCC and Chief of Kesu), for instance, the Aghem people insisted that a traditional burial ceremony be observed. The Christians of the PCC led by their Moderator, Right Rev. Henry Awasum, steadfastly favored a Christian burial. The conflict that resulted from the misunderstanding on the day of the burial necessitated the intervention of security forces in favor of the Christians.¹⁸ So, Kangsen was not buried in the cemetery of the PCC in Wum and not in the Kesu palace. This rendered the performing of prayer and sacrifices on his grave by his predecessors impossible. Similar burial conflicts were witnessed in many other parts of Cameroon.

The condemnation and disqualification of indigenous religions by mainline churches through offensive gospel music is also worth discussing. It is common to

¹⁶ For more on Weh belief systems, read Christraud Geary, "The Weh Chiefdom in Menchum Division", paper presented at CNRS's Symposium on the Contribution of Ethnographic Research to the History of Civilizations in Cameroon, Paris, 24-28 September 1973.

¹⁷ John Mukum Mbaku, *Culture and Customs of Cameroon* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 41.

¹⁸ D. N. Kumbong, "The Right Reverend Jeremiah Chi Kangsen: A Church Leader and Politician 1917-1988" (DIPES II Dissertation in History, ENS Yaounde, 1999): 67-69.

listen to church songs during the Sunday services in Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist and Evangelical churches launching serious attacks on indigenous religious practices. The songs are unanimous in describing the Supreme Being served by adherents of these religions alongside their diverse ritual ceremonies (birth, death, marriage, cleansing, infertility and farming, among others) as satanic. During the last decades, so many gospel music albums have been released by artists who follow mainline churches. Like church songs, they also virulently attack indigenous religions. In nearly all these offensive gospel albums, the Supreme God served by followers of indigenous religions is presented as a “man made god” that cannot talk, walk, see, hear and provide solutions to peoples’ problems. This type of offensive music was at the centre of a religious conflict in Ndu between adherents of Wimbun indigenous religion and Christians of the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC). Rev. Stephen Biyeh, a CBC pastor in Ndu released a controversial gospel music album in which he used Wimbun Sacred Society music and condemned indigenous religion. This resulted in clashes on March 10, 2012 when CBC pastors and Christians were attacked by devout followers of indigenous religions.¹⁹ This was only a response to the intolerant attitude of this mainline Protestant church.

Another sphere in which mainline churches have constrained religious pluralism is education. The confessional schools they operate, in spite their multireligious make up, function in a religiously monolithic mode and even in outright denial of religious plurality. Such a religious exclusivity approach in educational institutions (both in belief and practice) frustrates adherents of other religions. Normally, the numerous Catholic and Protestant educational establishments in Cameroon should serve as places where followers of various religious traditions interact and share with one another. Amazingly, as already pointed out, the authorities of these institutions act in ways that tend to project only their faith. Only their ministers are allowed to preach to the students. This discriminatory and proselytizing attitude is injurious to pluralism. It appears that these schools are tools used by mainstream churches to compete for souls.

Worse still, the discriminatory nature of prayer in educational institutions operated by mainstream churches does not enhance pluralism. In public schools, prayer was/is offered by Christians in the Christian dominated south and by Muslims in the Muslim dominated north. There is strong disregard for indigenous religions as well as other religions such as Buddhism in the school prayer. Since students who are not followers of Christianity and Islam are not given the option not to participate, prayer in the confessional schools favored mainstream Christian Churches and Islam and violated the constitutional clause relating to religious freedom. This favoritism impedes pluralism since it results in the domination of public presence by mainstream denominations. More still, the religious exclusive nature of prayer in schools certainly made indigenous religion children prone to

¹⁹ Hilton Ndukong Kimeng, “Cameroon: Ndu Masquerades Banned for a Year,” *Cameroon Tribune*, 22 March 2012.

psychological harm since they quite often listened to Bible verses, prayer and Christian songs that castigated their religious practices. Reference to indigenous religion as satanic was commonplace in the school prayers and Christian songs. This can be likened to the manner in which Jews felt in America when their children were ridiculed by the Christian prayer and Bible reading tradition in public schools. Consequently, the American Supreme Court outlawed prayer and Bible reading in public schools in the early 1960s.²⁰

In light of the above, it is evident that mainline churches do not believe in religious pluralist inclusiveness. Their disqualification and condemnation of other religions are indicative of the fact that they are not steadfast supporters of the legislation defining the Cameroon religious landscape as diverse, tolerant and pluralist. In some situations, as already discussed, followers of indigenous religions were not allowed to worship as they wished irrespective of the fact that their public conduct did not challenge the laws. Indeed there has been no purposeful commitment of mainline Christian church participants to the principle of entrenching pluralism in Cameroon. By being consistent in their assaults on indigenous religions and Evangelical fundamentalists, they do not bother about the psychological trauma and frustration their unconstitutional behavior can inflict on the adherents of these faiths. Based on this intolerant attitude of mainline churches, the response of the condemned and marginalized faith groups did not come as a complete surprise.

The Response of Discriminated Religious Groups

The incessant obstruction of religious pluralism by mainline Christian churches eventually resulted in the emergence of an active opposition to this anti-pluralism attitude among devout followers of indigenous religions and fundamental Evangelicals. This opposition was fueled by people who hated a mainstream Christian church which refuses to recognize other religious groups, which attacks other religions through songs and prayer during their services and by way of the media and which celebrates the destruction of the sacred sites of indigenous religions. Some of the people I interviewed in the course of this study, especially Tieherrt Akwo, Miselele Akwa, and Gladys Nnam (all committed followers of indigenous religions) were unanimous in observing that the public attitude of the members of mainline churches alongside their ministers was, in every respect, the opposite of religious freedom and plurality. Given that indigenous religions were not institutionalized, there were no people who could lead the opposition on a national scale. Expectedly, their response, though fierce, was sporadic and segmented.

There were independent protests that developed in the ethnic groups with the goal of protecting indigenous religions. The Bafut people, especially ardent followers of the indigenous religion were unanimous in criticizing the destruction

²⁰ For more on this, read Eck, *A New Religious America*.

of their shrine and other sacred sites in 2012. Responding to an article posted on the internet relating to the assault, most of the comments regretted why the perpetrators were not killed. For those who posted the comments, mob justice would have been the best response. Good enough, the peace-loving Fon Abumbi II of Bafut did not choose the path of violence. Rather, he calmed his people before alerting the security forces resulting in the arrest and detention of the prophet alongside some of his crime mates. The conflict is still being resolved in the court. This can be likened to the response of the traditional worshippers in the Nigerian state of Anambra when their indigenous religious tools were burnt by a particular Christian faction.²¹

The Way Forward

What emerges from the preceding sections is that, at the moment, Cameroon remains a *de jure* and not *de facto* religious pluralistic society. Thus, a rethinking of the process, with the intent of placing religious pluralism on a success path is a dire necessity. It should take the form of inclusive consultations and discussions so as to ensure that the views of all actors are obtained. This would provide the potential for consensual religious pluralism decisions to be arrived at. It is worth stressing that such an embracive dialogue should initially focus on enabling followers of each religion to understand the other religions, since it is evident that the actions of these religions are not well appreciated by the people. For me, an unchallenged culture of pluralism in Cameroon can be attained only if all religions, especially indigenous ones, are well understood by Cameroonians. Awareness of the bases of religions to which we do not belong can motivate the general public presence of all religious groups irrespective of their incompatibilities. This line of thinking ties with Eck's observation on the American religious landscape that "Pluralism requires participation, and attunement to the life and energies of one another."²²

Ali Abtahi confirms Eck's observation by stressing that inclusivism and the inclination towards openness and dialogue, which is embedded in religion, can result in pluralist and multiminded behavioral patterns. Abtahi, in his "Religion and Media", calls on religious leaders to use the media to enhance pluralism.²³ So, the mainline churches in Cameroon, in light of Abtahi's proposal, should restrain from using their private and public media organs to condemn other religious faiths. As

²¹ For more details concerning religious intolerance in Nigeria, refer to Rose C. Uzoma, "Religious Pluralism, Cultural Differences, and Social Stability in Nigeria," *Brigham Young University Law Review*, volume 2004, issue 2, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2197&context=lawreview>.

²² Eck, *A new Religious America*, 70.

²³ Seyyed Mohammad Ali Abtahi, "Religion and Media," in *Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution: Religion Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Westport and London; Praeger, 2008): 163.

noted earlier, exclusivist ministers of mainline churches employed the media to present indigenous religions as satanic faiths. It is therefore time for Catholic and Protestant religious authorities to use the media (press, television and radio) to advertise religious tolerance, dialogue and pluralism.

Besides, mainstream religious traditions should consider sacrificing their privileged status as unique and absolute in the eyes of their adherents. From every indication, such a profound shift is yet to be envisaged by many mainline religious groups. They continue to interpret pluralism as a means of dethroning and dispossessing them of their position as the traditionally dominant religions. They are surely scared by the mutation of religious demography to the detriment of traditionally majority religious faiths. In the United States for instance, the enforcement of tolerance and pluralism, despite some flaws, has resulted in the significant growth of the Evangelicals who are already threatening the dominance enjoyed for a long time by mainstream Protestants.²⁴ Given that religious diversity in Cameroon is so obvious and that the constitution makes provision for tolerance, mainstream churches need to be sincere about issues relating to religious pluralism. They should overcome the fear of losing their majority privilege by adapting to the stubborn reality of the manyness in a level playing field. Akoko, as observed by John Forje, “challenges mainline churches to face the realities of emerging religious fundamentalism.”²⁵ It is time for its leaders not only to truly embrace the vision, but to start encouraging their Christians to adapt to the new but real situation. The Indigenous religions they disqualify and condemn mattered and still matter profoundly to their followers. So, they deserve their place in an inclusive pluralistic Cameroonian society.

The Cameroon Government can emulate what is practiced in the United States of America. There, people are free to believe what they want but they are not necessarily free to act on it. This implies that there are laws governing the manner in which the followers of a particular religion should act. For instance, if what you believe in pushes you to overtly attack other religions as the Cameroon situation evidences, the government steps in to reprimand such excesses. This is because no religion has prominence over the other despite the variance in numbers and public presence. Some are new, while others are old; some proselytize while others do not. But there must be mutual recognition of all religions especially as there is a religious freedom doctrine enshrined in the constitution. It is the role of the government to protect indigenous religions and “Born Again” churches that are often castigated by some followers of mainstream churches. Amazingly, it seems that the government, since reunification, has championed and encouraged the violation of its own laws related to tolerance and state secularity. After exposing

²⁴ For more on this, read Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, Fifth Edition, (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012) and Eck, *A New Religious America*.

²⁵ See John W. Forge, Review of Akoko, Robert Mbe, “*Ask and You shall be Given*”: *Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon* (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2007), accessed July 14, 2013, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23129>.

the multiple ways by which the Cameroon Government has trampled on the secularity and religious freedom laws of the country, Alex Mbom steadfastly observes that “the complicity of the State and the Christian clergy in marginalizing the minority groups is obvious.”²⁶ There is need for the government to strictly respect the secular status of the state and terminate its complicity with mainline churches.

Conclusion

The purpose of this current study was to examine how mainline Catholic and Protestant churches served as obstacles in the path of religious pluralism in Cameroon. Overall, what becomes clear from what precedes is the rather obvious conclusion that mainline churches do not believe in religious pluralist inclusiveness and have in myriad of ways constrained the establishment of an inclusive culture of religious pluralism in Cameroon. The response of the followers of the marginalized religious traditions, especially practitioners of indigenous religions, which took different forms, did not come as a complete surprise. This makes it very clear that the pluralism project in Cameroon remains at an early stage. Concrete measures, including those already highlighted, are therefore required to strengthen religious pluralism in Cameroon. Apart from being inclusive in the manner in which they interpret the doctrinal texts of their religion, the authorities of mainline Christian churches need to accept bringing all religions on board an inter-religious dialogue. The latter has been presented by many scholars as part of the solution to the dilemma of religious anti-pluralism. It is also the common conclusion of scholars that many paths (religions) lead to God. Hence, a culture of religious pluralism can gain roots in Cameroon only if the adherents of all religions truthfully engage with one another in and through their very deepest differences.

REFERENCES

- Abtahi, Seyyed Mohammad Ali. “Religion and Media.” In *Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution: Religion Today and Tomorrow*, edited by Arvind Sharma. Westport and London: Praeger, 2008.
- Akoko, M. Robert. “New Pentecostalism in the Wake of the Economic Crisis in Cameroon.” *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2002).
- Albanese L. Catherine. *America: Religions and Religion*. Fifth Edition. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012.

²⁶ Pierre Alex Mbom, “State, Society and Secularism in Cameroon,” accessed July 13, 2013, <http://iheu.org/content/state-society-and-secularism-cameroon>. Alex Mbom is the President of the Association of Free Thinkers of Cameroon.

- "Cameroon." Accessed May 10, 2012. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171604.pdf>.
- Chimi, D.H. "Les Organes de Promotion de l'unité des Protestants au Cameroun 1941-2005" (Mémoire de Maitrise en Histoire, Université de Yaoundé 1, 2007).
 - Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon. 18 January 1996.
 - Eck, L. Diana. *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. New York: Harper One, 2001.
 - Etuge, O. "Church Union in Cameroon" (Bachelor Dissertation in Theology, Theological College Nyasoso, 1977).
 - Fanso, V. G. *Cameroon History for Secondary Schools and Colleges*. Vol. 2. *The Colonial and Post Colonial Periods*. London: Macmillan, 1989.
 - Forge, W. John. Review of "Ask and You shall be Given": *Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon*, by Robert Mbe Akoko. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2007. Accessed July 14, 2013. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23129>.
 - Funteh, M. B. "A Historical Survey of the Strategy for Church Expansion in Cameroon: The Case of the Mainstream Denominations." *Kaliao*, Volume 1, No. 2 (December 2009): 49-68.
 - Geary, Christraud. "The Weh Chiefdom in Menchum Division." Paper presented at CNRS's Symposium on the Contribution of Ethnographic Research to the History of Civilizations in Cameroon, Paris, 24-28 September 1973.
 - "International Religious Freedom Report in Cameroon, 2006 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor." Accessed July 5, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71290.htm>.
 - "International Religious Freedom Report on Cameroon, 2012 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor." Accessed July 5, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71290.htm>.
 - Kumbong, D. N. "The Right Reverend Jeremiah Chi Kangsen: A Church Leader and Politician 1917-1988" (DIPES II Dissertation in History, ENS Yaounde, 1999).
 - Kimeng, Hilton Ndukong. "Cameroon: Ndu Masquerades Banned for a Year." *Cameroon Tribune* (22 March 2012).
 - "Mayhem in Bafut over destruction of 600 years old shrine by self-proclaimed Prophet." Accessed on July 10, 2013. <http://cameroonlatest.blogspot.com/2012/04/mayhem-in-bafut-over-destruction-of-600.html>.

- Mbaku, John Mukum. *Culture and Customs of Cameroon*. London: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Mbom, Pierre Alex. "State, Society and Secularism in Cameroon." Accessed July 13, 2013. <http://iheu.org/content/state-society-and-secularism-cameroon>.
- Mveng, E. *Histoire des Eglises Chrétiennes au Cameroun: Les Origines*. Yaoundé: Imprimerie Saint Paul, 1990.
- Ndi, A. *Mill Hill Missionaries in Southern West Cameroon 1922-1972: Prime Partners in Nation Building*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005.
- Ngoh, V. G. *History of Cameroon since 1800*. Limbe: Presbook, 1996.
- Uzoma, C. Rose. "Religious Pluralism, Cultural Differences, and Social Stability in Nigeria." *Brigham Young University Law Review*, volume 2004, issue 2, Accessed July 10, 2013. <http://digitalcommons.law.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2197&context=lawreview>.
- Vigil, Jose Maria. "The Challenges of a Theology of Religious Pluralism for Traditional Fundamentalist Faith." *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Number 4, Volume 44 (2007).
- Werner, K. *The History of the Presbyterian Church in West Cameroon*. Victoria: Presbook, 1969.
- Willard, J. *The Cameron Federation. Political Integration in a Fragmentary Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.