

## Pastoral attention to African traditional religion:

Letter of the President of the Secretariat for non Christians  
to the Presidents of all Episcopal Conferences  
in Africa and Madagascar

Your Eminence/Excellency,

1. In the course of its work, the Secretariat for non Christians has become more and more convinced of the importance of giving greater pastoral attention to the traditional religion (incorrectly called animism) in Africa and Madagascar. This conviction is reinforced by the expressed wishes of many Bishops of Africa and Madagascar which our Secretariat receives, together with the experience gained by other heralds of the Gospel in this continent.

The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, at its plenary meetings held at Grottaferrata in 1975 and in Lagos 1987, reflected on the Gospel Message and the cultures in Africa influenced by the traditional religion, and asked that the Church in Africa give more pastoral attention to the question.

2. Therefore the Secretariat for non Christians, after consultation with the Standing Committee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, with the other competent Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, with our Consultors in Africa and with some individuals, wishes to address this letter to the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar. These reflections have four parts:

- I. Reasons for Pastoral Attention to African Traditional Religion (ATR);
- II. Some elements of ATR;
- III. Some Key Doctrinal Points;
- IV. Suggested Action by Bishops' Conferences.

### 1. REASONS FOR PASTORAL ATTENTION TO, OR DIALOGUE WITH, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

3. ATR is the religious and cultural context from which most Christians in Africa come, and in which many of them still live to a great extent.

4. Many Christians, at critical moments in their lives, have recourse to practices of the traditional religion, or to prayer houses, healing homes, "prophets", witchcraft or fortune-tellers. Some tend to join sects or so-called "Independent Churches" where they feel that certain elements of their culture are more respected.

5. ATR is still alive and dynamic. Its vitality varies from country to country. In some African countries some of the intellectual elite are declaring themselves to be adherents of ATR.

6. The Church respects the religions and cultures of various peoples and wishes in her contact with those peoples to preserve all that is noble, true and good in their religion and culture. As His Holiness Pope John Paul II has stated: "man is the primary and fundamental way for the Church" (*Redemptor Hominis*, no. 14).

7. The better ATR is understood by the heralds of the Gospel, the more suitable will be the presentation of Christianity to Africans. By a study of ATR the underlying felt-need of Africans will be identified so that it will become clear how Christianity can meet such needs. In this way the Church will be more and more at home in Africa, and Africans will be more and more at home in the Church.

8. Elements of a non-Christian religion and the culture it influences can enrich Christian catechesis and worship and find in them their deepest fulfilment. To identify elements which Christianity could adopt, or adapt, or ennoble and purify, or elements which it must reject, study is necessary (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13).

9. The Second Vatican Council urges deeper theological investigation in each major cultural area with a view to deeper evangelization. It says: "Theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, at it is called. In this way, under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to sacred Scripture, and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and teaching authority of the Church.

Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation" (*Ad Gentes*, no. 22).

The pastoral attention to ATR which this letter is encouraging is a step in the direction of this deeper theological reflection.

10. His Holiness Pope Paul VI, in his Message to Africa, *Africae Terrarum*, in 1967, and in his SECAM inauguration address at Kampala in 1969, and His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic journeys in Africa, have given this pastoral effort their authoritative approval and traced the major guidelines to be followed. Both Popes have stressed the great responsibility which the Pastors of the Church in Africa have in this matter.

11. Therefore dialogue with ATR is to be understood in two senses. With adherents of ATR who do not as yet want to become Christians, dialogue is to be understood in its ordinary sense of encounter, mutual understanding, respect, and mutual searching for the will of God. With adherents of ATR who want to become Christians and with Christians converted from ATR, dialogue is to be understood in the wider sense of a pastoral approach to ATR with a view to a more adequate presentation of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so that the Church will have deeper roots in the African soil.

## 2. SOME ELEMENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

As a general orientation in the research into ATR to be conducted in each country or cultural area by a commission of experts set up by the Episcopal Conference, we may make the following suggestions.

12. The traditional religion could be studied as to its name, its major objects of belief, especially God the Creator, the place of the spirits and the ancestors, the fundamental rites in this religion, sacrifice, priesthood, prayer, marriage, the human soul, life after death, religion and moral life.

13. Values such as sense of the sacred, respect for life, sense of community, family spirit, a spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred, and symbolism in religious worship, could profitably be studied.

14. There should be no attempt to romanticise ATR or culture or to defend every practice in them. Therefore the research should also spell out the negative elements that may be found in ATR and culture, such as inadequate ideas on the objects of worship, objectionable moral practices, degrading rites, polygamy, discrimination against women, human sacrifice and rejection of twins (where these are practised), etc. The study should be an objective and factual work so that the heralds of the Gospel will see more clearly the positive and the negative in the religious and cultural situation of the people to whom the Gospel

is being brought. As the Second Vatican Council recalls: "The good news of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which flows from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 58).

15. The strength and influence of ATR should also be studied, together with the effects of social change on it. New religious movements and religions which are often a mixture of ATR, Christianity and nationalism, can also be usefully examined. An inter-disciplinary approach would be advisable. Investigation from the point of view of anthropology, sociology and psychology will usefully complement theological reflection.

16. In each country or cultural area it will be useful to study and document what efforts have already been made by the Church to meet the prevailing ATR and culture, and with what results. In this exercise it is helpful to take the major elements of ATR and ask how Christianity has met each of them, and also to examine ideas which are entirely new to ATR and which Christianity should emphasize.

## 3. SOME KEY DOCTRINAL POINTS

17. In the research into ATR and culture and the study of how Christianity can assume the desirable pastoral approach, some key doctrinal points such as the following should be borne in mind: the revealed nature of the Message brought us in Christ, the centrality of Christ, the irreplaceable role of the Bible and Tradition, the unity of the Church, the role of the Successor of St. Peter in the communion of the local Churches with the Church of Rome and among themselves. These provide the necessary framework within which the riches of the traditional religion can find their fulfilment. It is important to preserve the unity of the Catholic faith throughout the whole world, although the manner of expressing the faith can differ according to peoples and cultures.

## 4. ACTION BY EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES

18. In view of the importance of this research and the pastoral action consequent on it for the apostolate of the Church, and because

of its delicate nature, the major action is to be taken by the Episcopal Conference of each country or region.

19. Each Episcopal Conference should appoint a small group of really competent people who are able and willing to work on this research in close collaboration with the Episcopal Conference and, through it, with the competent Dicasteries of the Apostolic See. The four higher Ecclesiastical Institutes at Kinshasa, Abidjan, Port Harcourt and Nairobi, and relevant research centres outside Africa should be of help.

20. Episcopal Conferences should see that seminaries, ecclesiastical institutes and houses of religious formation in Africa and Madagascar which do not already have courses on ATR should now arrange to have them.

Hoping that your Episcopal Conference will find these suggestions useful for more lasting fruit in the work of evangelization, I remain, with sincere religious respect and esteem,

Devotedly Yours in Christ,

FRANCIS CARDINAL ARINZE  
*President*

25 March 1988

## Attention Pastorale à la Religion traditionnelle Africaine:

Lettre du Président du Secrétariat pour les non Chrétiens  
aux Présidents des Conférences Episcopales  
d'Afrique et de Madagascar

Eminence/Excellence,

1. Le Secrétariat pour les non Chrétiens, au cours de son travail, est devenu de plus en plus convaincu qu'il est important de donner une attention pastorale accrue à la religion traditionnelle (qu'on a appelée inadéquatement « animisme ») en Afrique et à Madagascar. Cette conviction se trouve encore renforcée par les souhaits formellement exprimés par beaucoup d'Evêques d'Afrique et de Madagascar à l'adresse de notre Secrétariat, et qui correspondent d'ailleurs à l'expérience acquise par d'autres messagers de l'Evangile sur ce continent.

Le Symposium des Conférences Episcopales d'Afrique et de Madagascar, à sa réunion plénière tenue à Grottaferrata en 1975 et à Lagos en 1987, a réfléchi sur le message évangélique et les cultures en Afrique influencées par la religion traditionnelle, et il a demandé que l'Eglise d'Afrique donne plus d'attention pastorale à cette question.

2. C'est pourquoi le Secrétariat pour les non Chrétiens, après avoir consulté le Comité Permanent du Symposium des Conférences Episcopales d'Afrique et de Madagascar, d'autres Dicastères compétents de la Curie Romaine, ses Consultants en Afrique et quelques autres personnes, souhaite adresser cette lettre à toutes les Conférences Episcopales d'Afrique et de Madagascar pour leur proposer les points suivants:

1. Raisons pour l'attention pastorale à la religion traditionnelle africaine;
2. Quelques éléments de la religion traditionnelle africaine;
3. Quelques points-clés doctrinaux;
4. Propositions pour une action à mener par les Conférences Episcopales.