

METOGO, Éloi Messi, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique? Essai sur l'indifférence religieuse et l'incroyance en Afrique noire*, Paris, Editions Karthala & Yaounde, Presses de l'UCAC, 1997, 249 pp., ISBN (Karthala) 2 86537 692 3; ISBN (Presses de l'UCAC) 2 911380 01 0

This is an extraordinary book that merits careful reading. Metogo, professor of theology at the Catholic University of Central Africa at Yaounde, Cameroon, documents religious indifference as an indisputable reality in black Africa. His study runs counter to the frequently asserted assumption that 'the African soul is incurably religious', or that secularisation is not a problem that affects Africa.

Metogo contends that quite a number of Africans are agnostic and that, contrary to the standard view, certain cultural values predispose them to religious indifference. Conscious of the fact that his conclusions will be keenly scrutinised and possibly fiercely contested, he marshals his data with great care and formulates his statements cautiously, even turning many of his copious footnotes into mini-arguments and models of academic diplomacy. The bottom line, however, stays the same: God has been dead in much of Africa for a long time and is dying in other parts.

The author shows that in traditional African societies there always have been individuals, and even whole tribes, who ceased to believe in the myths and the ritual practices of their own communities. In some cases this 'estrangement from God' was even seen as a condition of becoming truly mature, facilitating escape from a childish need of constant help to freedom, responsibility for one's own life and the ability to solve one's own problems.

Those who studied tribal religions in the past have too easily assumed agreement between basic African beliefs and the Judaeo-Christian creed. Often they have, without adequate justification, elevated a local God to the status of a supreme Creator God on a level with the Old Testament Yahweh. And even where a Supreme God did exist in some cultures, he/she certainly did not function automatically as the Christian God of Providence. 'Missionary ethnology' has confused the true picture.

Traditional African religion focuses completely on improving terrestrial life. Prayers are pragmatic—they try to seek favours, and rarely contain worship, thanksgiving or the expectation of future reward. The ultimate fulfilment of human life lies within earthly life itself, so that even the cult of ancestors revolves around eliminating obnoxious interference from the deceased in one's own situation. The rites of initiation and membership of secret societies effect mainly social and economic

integration in tribal power structures. According to the author, the core of traditional religion in Africa consists of magic and witchcraft, not in salvation, not in a relationship with a transcendent God or securing a happy afterlife. The question can, therefore, be raised whether the anthropocentric religions of Africa do not, in their final analysis, lead to atheism.

The author maintains that the conversion of Africans to Christianity was, at least partly, due to the pagan logic of self interest. Knowing the Christian God was perceived to be more powerful than traditional magic, and to provide access to the wealth and technological superiority of the Whites. This hidden motivation shows up in a pseudo-magical approach of many Christians to personalities and practices: to God, Jesus, Mary, the priest, the Eucharist, medals, and so on. These are interpreted in terms of traditional sorcery. The cities of Africa are invaded by a multiplicity of secret societies and churches which celebrate the human search for wellbeing, a new mixture of idols.

Basing himself on research done in a number of African countries among ordinary Christians, the author shows not only a high degree of confusion about orthodox Christian beliefs and morals but also a pronounced religious indifference amongst a proportion of believers. 'Such religious indifference exists in black Africa just like anywhere else', he asserts. 'One meets a lot not only amongst high school and college students, but also amongst professionals, academics and business executives'. They consider religion a private affair. They resent authoritarian intervention in their own moral decisions. Some prefer a responsible humanism to religion.

The author devotes another part of his book to an analysis of recent African literature. Here, too, a new phenomenon is observed. A number of African novelists de-mystify traditional African magic by questioning religion as such, replacing it with respect for the scientific method. Others turn directly on Christianity, accusing Christian missionaries of having prepared the way for the colonisers. Christian faith is presented as a fraud, a colossal mystification of the world of the Whites, which succeeded in putting the Whites on a higher level and in creating God in the image of the Whites. Some leading African authors, such as the Cameroonian Mongo Beti and the Kenyan Ngugiwa Thiong'o present themselves as agnostics.

At the time of writing, Metogo further outlines the influence of Marxist thought on Africa. Africa's fifty-plus countries had twenty-two communist parties. Five countries were ruled by Marxists, namely Angola, Benin, Congo, Mozambique and Ethiopia. Many prominent African

intellectuals are Marxists who actively promote atheism, such as Sékou Traoré, Marcien Towa and Paulin Hountondji. The influence of communist thought through government imposition, either through openly challenging Christian values or in more subtle forms, is indisputable in many African societies.

Metogo thus comes to the conclusion that religious indifference, and even agnosticism and atheism, are realities in Africa. He pleads for the Church in Africa to take stock of the true situation, for theologians to ask new questions. What is true African culture?—Do we not easily fall into the trap of a naive ‘inculturation’? How can African Christians themselves be mobilised to deepen their faith, with full awareness of today’s world? What pastoral support can the Church offer to people in this process?

Years ago, when taking part in a religious sociological research in Hyderabad, India, I learnt a valuable lesson from a Muslim friend, a professor at Osmania University. ‘A discordant voice reveals more about the true situation than a hundred who express the majority view’, he told me. Metogo is such a discordant voice, and I hope that many will take note of what he has to say.

JOHN WIJNGAARDS