

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Religions, Africa and covid-19

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1. Africa is not immune

Certainty came on the eve of Holy Week. Covid 19 has not forgotten sub-Saharan Africa. For some time, it had been hoped for. Some continental peculiarities, such as climatic characteristics, the young age of the population, the presence of antibodies generated by other pandemics, had authorized optimistic forecasts. Instead, even without presenting itself with the exponential growth rates experienced in the northern hemisphere, the virus has crept in and began to claim victims in all countries south of the Sahara¹. At the moment, those reporting the highest number of infections are South Africa (5,647), Ghana (2,074), Nigeria (1,932), Cameroon (1,832), Guinea (1,495), Ivory Coast (1,275), Djibouti (1,089). They are the only countries to have crossed the threshold of a thousand cases, an event which, considering the whole continent, occurred in ten states: Egypt (5,537), Morocco (4,423), Algeria (4,006)². The real representativeness of these figures is necessarily conditioned by the costs necessary to carry out the tests to detect positivity. Apart from the numbers, it is nevertheless interesting to observe the attitude of the religious communities,

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¹ Lesotho and the Comoros are still exceptions.

² Data from European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ecdc.europa.eu), last update May 1, 2020.

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which in Africa are distinguished by the plurality of religious affiliations and the high participation of the population in the moments of worship, although a clear process of secularization and disillusionment is rapidly changing the behaviour of African women and men, in the context of increasing urbanization³.

The containment measures adopted by governments have not been uniform. They range from the extreme lockdown decided by South Africa, which has classified the measures into five levels - the fifth, the most restrictive is now in force -, to the almost normalcy of Burundi, which “is an exception among nations because it is a country that has put God first, a God who scrutinizes him and protects him from any discomfort”, as the spokesman for the Presidency of the Republic explained in an [interview](#) with the BBC. It is to be hoped that this celestial privilege – In truth, not very observable in the recent history of the country – will last, and protect the population that in these days is gathering in the electoral rallies convened for the May 20th presidential election. But countries – Tanzania and Benin are among them – that trust in the possibility of maintaining normalcy are in the minority. Most governments, even in the face of a small number of contagions, have opted for rather sharp limitation measures, although not always extended to the entire territory of the state. In Ivory Coast the capital Abidjan has been “closed” on entry and exit; in Kinshasa the “red zone” has been applied to the Gombé district, that of business, ministries and embassies. The common feature of the measures adopted is the ban on gathering, with a limit set at 20, 50 or 100 people. Where it is in force, it necessarily involves, whether there is an explicit ban or not, worship activities. In addition to this measure, in many cases, given the difficulty or impossibility of practicing the lockdown - on which I will return later - the curfew measure has been adopted from Tunisia to South Africa, from Nigeria to Kenya. Movements are allowed for a few hours a day, and at the time of

³ See E. Messi Metogo, *Dieu peut-il mourir en Afrique?*, Karthala, Paris 2013; V.S. Naipaul, *La maschera dell’Africa*, Adelphi, Milano 2010².

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closing, the army and the public order forces are authorized to intervene to enforce the ordinances, which has already provoked cases of shooting with victims among the population (in Nigeria, on April 17, eighteen deaths, against twelve caused by the virus)⁴.

The analysis of the declarations, documents and directives issued by bishops, episcopal conferences, councils and coordination committees of the Churches, imams and ulema, shows, in general, an attitude of collaboration, adherence and support to government directives, often supported from practical indications that interpret them in a restrictive and prudential sense. The catholic episcopal conferences, for example, have opted, almost without any exception, for celebrations in absence of the faithful, without taking advantage of the non-explicit suppression of the right of assembly within the limits of established participants. Therefore, even where it would have been possible to celebrate a mass with a predetermined number of faithful, it was decided to avoid.

The majority of African Christians therefore participated in the most important rites of the year - those of Holy Week and Easter - remotely, via radio, television and social media. For the first time in history, an Easter on air, or via cable. A revolution? Not entirely. Indeed, it should be remembered that in recent years religious subjects have made extensive use of the means of communication, acquiring channels and radio and television broadcasters. The trend has certainly grown with the advent of "neo-Pentecostal" groups, which has pushed other confessions to adapt.

3. A Easter and a Ramadan video-transmitted

⁴ I get this data from the following sources: the magazine *Jeune Afrique*; broadcasters *Radio France International*, Bbc, Radio Okapi; press agencies NAN (News Agency of Nigeria, government), SANews (South African Government News Agency); websites fides.org, africanews.com, nigrizia.it; African bishop conferences webpages.

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“We asked the faithful to emphasize personal and family prayer. Since the celebrations will be held without the participation of the people of God, we asked the priests to be more creative at the pastoral level to offer reflections, homilies and exhortations to the faithful through social networks. We must also take this opportunity to live solidarity better in a concrete way. It is not a question of visiting people, but of approaching them in various ways: through calls, messages on networks, etc. We must also help those who have difficulty living in containment to find ways to do it. A large part of our populations live in a precarious situation and will not be able to support containment measures. It's up to us to help them”⁵.

So said the archbishop of Lomé, capital of Togo, Barrigah-Benissan. The secretary general of the episcopal conference and member of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, p. Frederick Chiromba, has announced the suspension sine die of the cults of all religious denominations, specifying that “believers will be able to attend all the functions of Holy Week through live streaming on the web”⁶. In Cameroon, by decision of the bishops, the masses will be held only in the main parishes, while in the mission churches they will be suspended. “Fortunately”, said Msgr. Esua, bishop emeritus of Bamenda, “we have Catholic radio and TV stations that will broadcast the entire function. Our people have been warned and invited to stay at home as much as possible”⁷. In Guinea Bissau, Catholic radio is the most listened station, despite the fact that in the country Christian faithful are around 10% of the population. The director, an Italian PIME missionary, revolutionized the schedule by inserting programs for catechumens, prayers for the end of the pandemic, transmissions for Lent with the possibility of intervening and the *Via Crucis*.

⁵ Statement issued to www.omnisterra.fides.org.

⁶ *Catholic Church in Zimbabwe to live stream Mass*, in thezimbabwemail.com, March 21, 2020.

⁷ Statement issued to www.omnisterra.fides.org.

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Many South African parishes, according to the emeritus archbishop of Pretoria Slattery, are able to stream the functions via radio and TV. And so it happened, having the bishops decided that under no circumstances should the liturgical celebrations be public, "in full compliance with the guidelines of the government, which was very wise". Also in Uganda, obligatory celebrations without people in all dioceses, and baptisms scheduled for Easter night have been postponed. Card. Ambongo, archbishop of Kinshasa, presided over all Holy Week celebrations from the cathedral, broadcasted on Catholic radio and TV.

If Christians have experienced a Easter “of the heart” rather than a celebrated one, it is now up to the Muslim faithful to experience for the first time a new way of living the holiest month, that of Ramadan, located in this 2020 between April 23rd and May 23rd. On this occasion, Egyptian cities, including Cairo with its nearly 15 million inhabitants, used to enlighten themselves, with full of gatherings, parties and prayers all night long, until dawn. This year it won’t happen the same. The places of worship will remain closed, and the same will happen in mosques in all African countries where containment actions are in place. But in the Maghreb countries the authorities have introduced lightening measures. From April 30 in Algeria, from May 3 in Tunisia, where the head of government has declared that the situation is almost completely under control. The curfew has been postponed for two hours, from 18 to 20. If mosques remain closed, news show a certain indisposition to respect the rules of isolation and distancing in this month of celebration by the population. In the meantime, the more general debate about the opportuneness to respect fasting at the time of the pandemic is still open, given the consequences that abstention from solid and liquid nourishment causes on the body, weakening the ability to protect and react to the virus. At the moment, Al-Azhar has not yet pronounced a fatwa to exempt from ritual obligations.

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3. For a sustainable lockdown

Authorities who chose to decisively deal with the health emergency had the Chinese and the European examples available. But are these models reproducible in sub-Saharan Africa? Is it possible to implement the lockdown in Africa? On the night of Thursday 26th March this question rises dramatically in the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kinshasa. A three-week period of confinement, total was to begin the following morning, proclaimed by the governor of the city-province Gentiny Ngobila. The announcement had provoked in the days leading up to a race to acquire food reserves. Prices had soared. But perhaps only half of the more than ten million inhabitants (the exact number cannot be calculated) participated in this competition for food. Most *kinois*, in fact, live in the moment. They buy food for the evening with the proceeds of the morning's activities: *obimi te okolia te* (if you don't go out, you don't eat), says a saying Lingala. Immediately, civil society associations and political representatives of the ruling and opposition coalition called for the national government to revoke the measure, which came overnight. The closure has been postponed to a date to be set. A significant, if not decisive, influence on this decision is due to the intervention, both public and discreet, of Archbishop Ambongo, created cardinal in the last consistory and destined to collect a political legacy, as well as spiritual. Faced with dictatorships and embezzlement, with internal and international conflicts that have affected their country, Ambongo's predecessors such as Malula and Monsengwo have embodied, willy-nilly, the role of the alternative, of denunciation, of the opposition. Ambongo vigorously asked the authorities to guarantee food and drinking water for the whole population through free distributions, without which the confinement would result in a death sentence for many. His appeal - as we have seen - was heard, and four weeks later, on April 22nd, President of the Republic Felix Tshisekedi appointed the cardinal to head the coordination

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that will oversee the administrative structure of the Solidarity Fund to fight the virus, with a substantial budget. In the crisis, and in the storm of controversy triggered by the declaration of a state of emergency, Tshisekedi has not neglected to take care of relations with religious representatives. So the press described the meeting on April 20th: “Les chefs des principales confessions religieuses du pays ont été reçus ce lundi par le président de la République, Félix Tshisekedi. La rencontre entre le chef de l’État et les leaders religieux a tourné notamment autour de la participation de l’église dans la lutte contre l’épidémie de coronavirus. Selon le cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, qui a conduit la délégation de ses pairs à la cité présidentielle de la N’sele, le chef de l’État a ‘estimé que c’était donc le moment ultime d’associer les confessions religieuses dans ce combat commun contre cet ennemi qu’est COVID19’. Malgré l’interdiction des cultes qui frappe les églises, Félix Tshisekedi a demandé aux confessions religieuses de continuer à intercéder pour le pays. Après échanges, les hommes d’églises ont promis qu’ils vont continuer à jouer leur rôle en tant que leaders d’opinions en sensibilisant les fidèles sur les risques réels du Covid-19”⁸.

4. “There are no more old men to kill here”

Religious leaders have therefore collaborated and aligned themselves with the choices of the authorities, aware of the worrying repercussions of the restrictive measures on the population, potentially worse than the contagion itself. The Africans, moreover, are well aware of the limits of the health systems of the countries in which they reside⁹, and seem to understand the need for “fasting of worship” to which they are forced. The concern and fear for the

⁸ www.cas-info.ca

⁹ According to *Jeune Afrique, compared to the thousand care places available in South Africa, there are only 15 in Burkina Faso and Somalia, less than one hundred in many other countries. There would be just 3 respirators in the Central African Republic, 4 in Togo, 5 in Niger, 10 in Congo Brazzaville, 11 in Burkina Faso, between 15 and 20 in Cameroon.*

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spread of the virus are indeed strong. In addition to physical suffering, those who exhibit symptoms must also face the stigma and distrust of neighbours: sources report about entire streets that are empty, with residents leaving home, to the news - real or presumed - of the occurrence of a case of positivity.

There is also, however, a phenomenon of opposite sign, in rapid development, and it will be interesting to observe which religious leaders will choose to be his spokespersons, in addition to the pastors who complain about the interruption of the payment of tithing and the drying up of their sources of livelihood¹⁰. While fear spreads, in fact, a narrative of a different sign grows, strongly critical on the adoption of ‘western’ measures in a radically different context, and averse to the ‘prone’ acceptance by the authorities of measures taken elsewhere. The Ivorian writer Gauz¹¹, from the columns of *Jeune Afrique*, expressed it with the usual sagacity. He wrote that Africa is closing and confining itself “like a mad dog in seeing its master afraid [...] With the significant exception of Benin, all its leaders repeat the speeches of European leaders to the letter”. It is the demographic difference, the different structure of the age pyramid that makes the African reality completely not comparable to the European one: “As of March 30, in France, the average age of the positives was 62.5 years, 84% of the deceased were over 70 years old [...]. In France 20.3% of the population is over 65, in Ivory Coast 3 out of 100 [...]. Life expectancy in Africa does not exceed 62 years, in Niger and Uganda the average age is 15 years. A fifty-year-old in Bouaké is a person miraculously cured”.

Not without controversy he concludes: “Coronavirus in the west is a very serious problem. Africa is not involved in the same way for the simple reason that, for sixty years, the neglect of its politicians, the greed of the financial systems, the nonsense of the structural adjustment plans, the ambitions of

¹⁰ See *Afrique: la fermeture des églises provoque un débat sur le versement de la dîme*, in *evangeliques.info*, 8 avril 2020.

¹¹ Pen name of Armand Patrick Gbaka-Brédé, Gibert Joseph 2014 price of French booksellers with *Debout-Payé*,

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adventurers without faith or law they have already done the job: there are no more old men to kill on our continent”¹².

In his bitter considerations Gauz does not note how in sub-Saharan Africa, like the rest of the world, the absolute number and percentage relevance of the elderly is constantly increasing. Even in Africa, their lives are at risk and with them that of health workers, even less protected and even more exposed than ours, and key to general sustainability. The African peoples have already paid, among all, the highest price for the pandemic from HIV-AIDS, to Ebola, and continue to be weakened by malaria, in its various forms, suffering among other things from the lower right of access to treatment compared to the other. Preserving them from contagion, and treating them and vaccinating them when possible, is in everyone’s interest.

¹² *Le coronavirus n’a plus de vieux à tuer sur ce continent*, in *Jeune Afrique*, April 16, 2020, page *Tribune*. Gauz adds: “We understand well the tormented peoples of Europe and America. We are in solidarity, and we know that they will come out of it, they who have been able to think only of themselves for so long, of their material well-being, they who for centuries have walked the world building their precious lives on the negligence of those of the others. They will come out of it. They have the political, historical and cultural material to do it. We don’t live the same fight. Absolutely not. There are no older men to kill here. Poor virus!”.