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## THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

*Maria Zandt*

Christian communities in Africa do not need to worry about declining membership and empty churches. On the contrary, membership of churches is rocketing. For many people in countries where the state is failing in its duty of care, faith and Christian welfare often offer the last hope for peace and a better life. As a result Christianity in the African continent is as diverse as anywhere in the world. Alongside the Catholic, Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox Churches there has been a steady growth in the number of evangelical churches, especially Pentecostal churches, which represents a new phase in the spread of the Christian faith in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although religious freedom is enshrined in the constitutions of most countries and Muslims and Christians do live peacefully together, there is also evidence in Africa of growing restrictions on religious freedom and targeted persecution of Christians.<sup>1</sup>

### ONE OF THE MOST RELIGIOUS REGIONS IN THE WORLD

Statistical data relating to the percentage of followers of Christianity, Islam and other religions in Africa are as disputed as the argument over which of the two biggest world religions has the most members. The figures are often influenced by ideology and claims of supremacy, especially in countries with Muslim or Christian minorities. According

1 | The country-specific information in this article is based on information gathered by Eric Ouangré (Burkina Faso), Emmanuel Kouassi (Côte d'Ivoire), Anke Christine Lerch (Kenya), Berthe Yacouba (Mali), Annette Schwarzbauer (Mozambique), Sourghia Soumana (Niger), Klaus Pähler (Nigeria), Ute Gierczynski-Bocandé (Senegal), Stefan Reith (Tanzania) and Peter Girke (Uganda) and by the author herself.

to estimates in the World Religion Database 2010<sup>2</sup> there are around 470 million Christians and 234 million Muslims living between the Sahara and the Cape of Good Hope, suggesting that around one fifth of all Christians worldwide live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the oldest Christian communities was founded in Ethiopia and what is today Eritrea as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards Christianity reached the coastal regions of Africa and spread inland during the colonisation process and accompanying missionary work during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The initial missionary work carried out in the Congo by the Portuguese at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was continued on a grand scale throughout the whole region by the French,

English, Germans and Belgians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The spread of Christianity has still not finished today. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where Christianity enjoyed its biggest percentage growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1900 it was only nine per cent Christian, by

2010 that figure had gone up to 57 per cent. During the same period Islam only grew from 14 to 29 per cent. With the growth of Christianity and Islam there was an accompanying steady decline in traditional religions.<sup>3</sup> However, it should be noted that traditional practices are often mixed with Christianity or Islam.<sup>4</sup>

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Christian churches in Africa do not have to worry about disused church buildings. Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most religious regions in the world. Religion plays an important role in the everyday life of many people of the region, and in many places church activities often dominate people's free time. According to a study by the American Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 19 African countries an average of 85 per cent of people questioned stated that religion played a very important role in their lives.

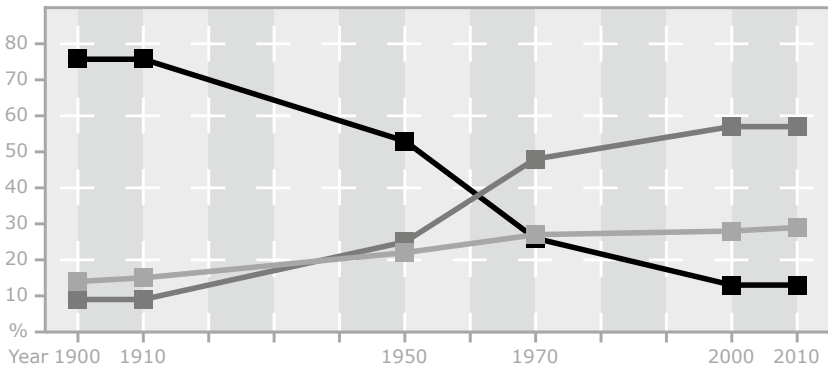
2 | Quoted in: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," 2011, <http://pewforum.org/executive-summary-islam-and-christianity-in-sub-saharan-africa.aspx> (accessed March 29, 2011).

3 | Ibid.

4 | See section: Church in the Morning, Voodoo Temple in the Evening.

The percentage was slightly higher for Muslims than for Christians. There are also slight regional differences. While religion is very important to 95 per cent of Christians in Tanzania, it is only very important to 75 per cent of Christians in Botswana. However, this is still a very high percentage compared to the rest of the world. In Nigeria, Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana, Chad, Liberia, Uganda, Mozambique und Kenya over 80 per cent of Christians go to church at least once a week.<sup>5</sup>

Abb. 1  
**The Development of Religious Affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa**



■ Traditional religions ■ Muslims ■ Christians. Own graph based on: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," n. 2.

**MOSTLY PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS**

Media reports on the growth of Islamic extremists in the Sahel Region and around the Horn of Africa and a spate of related kidnappings cannot alter the fact that Christians and Muslims in southern Africa mostly live together quite peacefully, apart from few exceptions. In contrast to North Africa and the Middle East, religious freedom in large parts of southern Africa is generally respected. The constitutions of the ten countries covered by this article all guarantee freedom of religious practice. There is no state religion in these countries. The opposite is in fact true – the French-speaking countries of West

5 | Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," n. 2.

Africa<sup>6</sup> are secular republics, based on the French model, with a strict separation of state and religion. This respect of religious freedom has allowed different religions to co-exist peacefully in large parts of southern Africa. A geographic breakdown of religions shows that Islam and Christianity are both common in West African countries in particular, while the Sahel countries, the Horn of Africa and the east coast of Tanzania are mostly Muslim and central, southern and eastern Africa is mostly Christian.

Table 1

**Religious Affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa  
(selected countries, in per cent)**

	Christians	Muslims	Other
Benin	43	24	Voodoo 17, other 16
Côte d'Ivoire	33	39	Traditional religions 12
Nigeria	40	50	Traditional religions 10
Tanzania	30	35	Traditional religions 35
Zanzibar		99	
Botswana	72	—	Badimo 6, Traditional religions 1
Democratic Republic of Congo	70	10	Kimbanguist 10, Traditional religions 10
Kenya	78	10	Traditional religions 10, other 2
Uganda	84	12	Other 3,1
Mali	1	90	Traditional religions 9
Niger	5-6	80	Other (Traditional religions and Christianity) 20
Senegal	5	94	Traditional religions 1

Source: *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook> (accessed April 12, 2011).

What is interesting to note is that, with the exception of Nigeria, there is generally peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims in those countries that have a mixed religious population. It is possible for people to enter into interdenominational marriages or to convert to other religions without any form of repression, at least on the part of the state.

Interreligious dialogue makes a significant contribution to successful coexistence between religions. In many countries such dialogues are either institutionalized or at least take place on a regular basis with a view to promoting mediation between religions. The Interreligious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT) for instance, which is also a KAS partner organisation, promotes peace and tolerance in a country where Christianity and Islam are almost equally represented. The Interreligious Council of Uganda (IRCU) goes a step further and is very involved in issues such as HIV/Aids, human rights and democracy. Interreligious dialogue can play a very important mediating role in fragile or conflict-ridden countries in particular. The Conférence des Confessions Religieuses (CCR) in Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, has been trying to help finding a solution to the political crisis there and is calling for peace and tolerance. However, religious institutions are often powerless in the face of political conflicts. This can also be seen in Côte d'Ivoire, where the power struggle after the presidential elections in November 2010 between ex-president Laurent Gbagbo and Allasane Ouattara, the man recognised as the new president by the international community, resulted in a bloody civil war in February and March 2011. In Nigeria too attempts to set up an interreligious dialogue have not been successful. The attempt to create an Advisory Council of Religious Affairs foundered over the question as to which religious leader should chair the council. However, the NGO Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), has at least been able to widen interreligious dialogue beyond the founding state of Kaduna.

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An important part of interreligious dialogue is the sharing of power between the supporters of the various different religions. So in Nigeria it is an unwritten rule that the president and vice-president should not be from the same religion, even if this is not enshrined in the constitution. The current president Goodluck Jonathan comes from the Christian south, while his vice-president Namadi Sambo is from the Muslim north. It is a similar situation in Cameroon where they make sure that the president, prime minister and parliamentary president represent both the south and the north, Christians and Muslims.

In the majority of Muslim countries, such as Senegal, many Christians have a hard time. Officially there is no evidence of Christians being disadvantaged in any way and Senegal is still seen as a model country for interreligious dialogue. And of course the country was ruled for 20 years from 1960 to 1980 by a Christian president, Leopold Senghor. However, religious freedom presupposes the presence of churches, whereas in Senegal there are towns and cities in which it is forbidden to build churches, although the ban does not come from the state but is at the behest of Muslim leaders, especially those of the Muslim Brotherhood. In this respect the capital of the Mouride Brotherhood, Touba, enjoys a special status, as the Khalifa is apparently considered to be the owner of the whole city. In Touba there is neither a French-speaking school nor a church and no Christians live there. State law enforcement officers were only allowed to enter Touba 10 years ago and before that security was the responsibility of a kind of militia run by the Khalifa. It is the same in the city of Tivavouane, the power base of the Khalifa of the Tidiane Brotherhood. Although the city has no special status, even today there are still no chapels in Tivavouane. Christians have to meet in private houses to celebrate mass or visit churches in neighbouring towns. The Khalifa banned the opening of chapels and related Christian education institutions in April 1985, which resulted in a conflict between Christians and Muslims that is still smouldering away today.<sup>7</sup>

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## **PLACES WHERE CHRISTIANS ARE DISCRIMINATED**

In spite of the many positive examples of Christians and Muslims living together peacefully in southern Africa there are still some countries and areas in Africa where Christians are under threat and are being stopped from exercising their religious freedoms. The worst affected are Christians in Nigeria, Eritrea and also in the Sudan, Somalia and Mauretania. It is now worth taking a more detailed look at the situation in Nigeria and Eritrea.

7 | Cf. *Country Reports*, KAS field office, Senegal.

The spread of radical Islamist movements, especially around the Horn of Africa, and the activities of al-Qaida in the Maghreb, in the Sahel region in particular, are a cause for concern. The security situation in both areas has got significantly worse in recent years and months and has led to countless numbers of kidnappings. The recent death of two French citizens kidnapped in Niger in January 2011 caused an international outcry. Linked to this is the growing support amongst people in strongly Islamic regions for the introduction of Sharia law. In Djibouti for instance, 82 per cent of Muslims questioned would welcome the introduction of Sharia law. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria the figure stood at 70 per cent, while even in Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Kenya and Mali over 60 per cent of Muslims are in favour.<sup>8</sup> At the same time there is also a number of countries where the majority of Christians support the introduction of laws based on biblical teaching. In Zambia, Ghana and Nigeria over 70 per cent of Christians are in favour of such a move. In Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, Liberia and Mozambique the figure stands at over 60 per cent.<sup>9</sup> These trends are very worrying. In countries like Nigeria the high levels of support on both sides are an indication of the growing tensions between Christians and Muslims.

### **NIGERIA – THE BATTLE FOR THE CITY OF JOS**

Nigeria and the north of the country in particular has been the scene of confrontations between Christians and Muslims for over thirty years. Nigeria is really divided into two parts from a religious history point of view. While the south is mainly Christian, the north is predominantly Muslim. The religious borders often run along ethnic lines with the Hausa to the north being predominantly Muslim, while the Yoruba and Igbo in the south are predominantly Christian. After the end of the military dictatorship under General Sani Abacha and the restoration of democracy in 1998, twelve states<sup>10</sup> in northern Nigeria had introduced Sharia

8 | Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," n. 2.

9 | Ibid.

10 | These are Zamfara State, Kano State, Sokoto State, Katsina State, Bauchi State, Borno State, Jigawa State, Kebbi State, Yobe State. In three further states Sharia law is in force in regions with a high proportion of Muslims: Kaduna, Niger State, Gombe State.

law by 2002, although it was only fully implemented in two of these states. Religious freedom in these states is only safeguarded on paper. Christians in northern Nigeria are increasingly subjected to discrimination and persecution and there have been more and more targeted attacks on Christian establishments. However, Muslims have also been victims of these conflicts.

One of the main centres of the conflict is the city of Jos, the capital of Plateau State, which stands on the border between the Christian south and the Muslim north. There have been many clashes here between Christians and Muslims since 2001, resulting in thousands being killed. During the unrest in 2001 alone there were more than 1,000 deaths. The report into the events commissioned by the government has still not been published.<sup>11</sup> At the local elections in 2008 both the Christian People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Muslim representatives of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) claimed victory. The ensuing riots resulted in hundreds of deaths on both sides.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of 2010 there were more violent clashes with several hundred dead. President

Goodluck Jonathan had to send the army into the city to defuse the situation. During Christmas 2010 there was a series of bomb attacks on Christian churches, for which the radical Muslim group Boko Haram claimed responsibility. Roughly translated, Boko Haram means "western education is a sin". This led to yet more acts of violence between Muslims and Christians. According to Human Rights Watch over 200 people have died since December 2010.<sup>13</sup> Even the caricatures of Mohammed published in Denmark had an impact in Nigeria and led to attacks on Christians in the north, with many dead and several churches burned down. The city of Jos is now more

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11 | Cf. "Muslims Riots in Northern Nigeria," *BBC*, May 11, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3703775.stm> (accessed April 4, 2011).

12 | Cf. "Riots kill hundreds in Nigeria," *BBC*, November 29, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7756695.stm> (accessed April 4, 2011).

13 | Cf. Human Rights Watch, "New Wave of Violence leaves 200 dead," January 27, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/01/27/nigeria-new-wave-violence-leaves-200-dead> (accessed April 4, 2011).



divided than ever. Muslims and Christians live in strictly segregated districts and hardly anybody dares to go into opposition areas without fearing for their lives.

Where financial funding for this type of conflict is coming from is still unclear. There is speculation that the clashes are being supported by people from the outside, for instance by members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), of which Nigeria is also a member. The run up to the elections in April 2011 saw a mixture of both religious and political confrontations. The riots and the intervention of both the military and the police have led increasingly to accusations of partisanship amongst the security forces. It has been suggested that the military act in a pro-Muslim way while the police are on the side of the Christians. Even relatively minor incidents can escalate into a major confrontation. The mistreatment by the police of a motorbike thief in the northern Kano State at the end of February 2011 led to renewed interreligious clashes during which churches were desecrated and over 60 people were killed.<sup>14</sup>

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The religious conflicts in Nigeria are complex and have many causes. Often they are linked to ethnic tensions and conflicting claims of ownership. In the end the problem in the city of Jos comes down to a conflict between settlers and locals as to whom the city and its natural resources really belong to. In the last 100 years more and more settlers from the north, especially Muslim Hausa, have settled in Jos to work in the region's tin mines. When the mines closed down, tensions between the predominantly Christian locals and the Muslim settlers developed as economic resources and the number of available jobs started to decline.<sup>15</sup>

14 | Cf. "Riot in Kano over Police killing," *allAfrica*, February 27, 2011, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201102211164.html> (accessed April 4, 2011).

15 | Cf. Katrin Gänslar, "Gewalt in Niger: Die Stadt der Barikaden", *die tageszeitung*, March 3, 2011, <http://taz.de/1/politik/afrika/artikel/1/die-stadt-der-barrikaden> (accessed April 5, 2011).

## **ERITREA – DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NON-REGISTERED RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS**

Despite the fact that religious freedom is enshrined in article 19 of Eritrea's 1997 Constitution, for years now Christian groups in Eritrea have been suffering discrimination and persecution. In 2002 the government passed a decree stating that all religious groups had to register with the state. Only the Eritrean Coptic Orthodox Church, Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church are officially recognised, and even then they are strictly bound by government regulations. All other Christian denominations such as Pentecostals and Adventists are illegal, along with Buddhism. These groups regularly find themselves the victims of discrimination and persecution. The government has also banned religious organisations and the religious media from expressing opinions on political issues. As a result Eritrea is number 12 on the persecution list drawn up by the NGO Open Doors.<sup>16</sup>

It is estimated that around 2,000 to 3,000 members of "non-registered" religions are in jail<sup>17</sup>, often in terrible conditions. Some prisoners are held in sordid conditions and without adequate medical care in shipping containers or military camps. Many of them have been imprisoned for years without charge. It is reported that five prisoners died in 2009.<sup>18</sup> Since its 2002 decree, the government has continued to shut down churches and ban private assemblies. Anyone who defies the ban and holds services or prayers in a private house runs the risk of torture and imprisonment and can be forced to renounce their faith. But even the four officially-recognised churches are often subjected to harassment and manipulation by the state. The state has to be kept informed of all their activities, including their financial and personnel affairs. In 2007 the Catholic Church was ordered by the authorities to sign over all its social institutions such as schools and

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16 | OpenDoors, "Länderprofil Eritrea," <http://opendoors-de.org/verfolgung/laenderprofile/eritrea> (accessed April 5, 2011).

17 | Cf. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Eritrea, International Religious Freedom Report 2010*, November 17, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/index.htm> (accessed April 5, 2011).

18 | Ibid.

hospitals to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. Four bishops wrote a letter of protest, refusing to comply with this order. Shortly afterwards, eleven missionaries were expelled from the country.<sup>19</sup>

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The Coptic Orthodox Church in Eritrea is still a constant target of governmental discrimination, despite the fact that around 40 per cent of Eritreans belong to it. The Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since 2006, after he rebelled against the arbitrary arrest of three priests and the take-over by the government of all financial and personnel matters within the Orthodox Church. Although the election of a new Patriarch, Bishop Dioskoros of Mendefera, was officially unanimously approved by the synod, there are suspicions that the government had the decisive say in the matter.<sup>20</sup>

### **THE EVER-GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES**

The continuing growth of Christianity in southern Africa is largely due to the attraction exerted by the "charismatic" churches, above all the Pentecostal Churches. Even in a small country like Benin there are around 430 different Christian denominations.<sup>21</sup> The growing visibility of the Pentecostal movement has aroused a certain amount of unease among many observers<sup>22</sup>, as the Pentecostal Churches are increasingly gaining both financial and political muscle in Africa.

The Pentecostal movement was founded in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has been spreading rapidly since 1970, particularly on the African continent. Precise

19 | Cf. Kirche in Not, "Länderbericht Eritrea," in: *Religionsfreiheit weltweit – Bericht 2008*, <http://www.kirche-in-not.de/was-wir-tun/laenderschwerpunkte/afrika/eritrea> (accessed April 5, 2011).

20 | Ibid.

21 | Action pour la recherche et la croissance des Eglises au Bénin (ARCEB) quoted in: *AllAfrica*, "430 dénominations pour un seul Christ," April 8, 2001, <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/200104090064.html> (accessed April 11, 2011).

22 | As expressed in Cédric Mayrargue, "Les dynamiques paradoxales du pentecôtisme en Afrique subsaharienne," in: *Note de l'IFRI*, 2008, and by observers in the KAS field offices.

figures on the strength of the movement are disputed, and, as previously mentioned, they are manipulated for ideological and political ends. According to the World Christian Database (2006)<sup>23</sup> the Pentecostal Churches on the African continent have around 107 million members (about 12 per cent of the population), and a further 40 million belong to other charismatic churches. After the USA and Brazil, Nigeria has the third-largest Pentecostal community in the world, with around one-third of its population belonging to one of the Pentecostal Churches or a charismatic church.<sup>24</sup> In Kenya around 33 per cent of the population are members of Pentecostal Churches and another 23 per cent belong to other charismatic churches. In Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Zambia and Uganda more than 20 per cent of the population profess to be members of charismatic and Pentecostal churches.<sup>25</sup>

**After the USA and Brazil, Nigeria has the third-largest Pentecostal community in the world, with around one-third of its population belonging to one of the Pentecostal Churches or a charismatic church.**

The Pentecostal movement comprises various tendencies and although it has some huge places of worship, it is predominantly made up of tiny, makeshift churches. It is characterised by belief in the Holy Spirit and the hope that this will provide deliverance from poverty and sickness in this life, something which is linked to experiences of miracle healing. There is also a strong belief in the direct causality between leading a religious life and personal financial success, as evoked by the Prosperity Gospel. This particular aspect is much criticised by observers for its emphasis on the individual which does not fit in with the Christian principles of loving one's neighbour and charity.<sup>26</sup> Many Pentecostals propagate the simple and attractive idea that if you believe in God you will get rich – in this

23 | Quoted in: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals," 2006, <http://pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Overview-Pentecostalism-in-Africa.aspx> (accessed March 31, 2011).

24 | Cf. "Auf der 'Autobahn Gottes' – Pfingstkirchen in Nigeria," Deutsche Welle (2007), [http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2766733\\_page\\_2,00.html](http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2766733_page_2,00.html) (accessed March 31, 2011).

25 | Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals," n. 23.

26 | Cf. Mayrargue, "Les dynamiques paradoxales du pentecôtisme en Afrique subsaharienne," n. 22.

way making a promise to the poorest countries in the world which is unlikely to be kept. So poverty is explained as being due to lack of piety, meaning that active steps towards finding solutions to Africa's problems are often neglected. Miracle healing and material prosperity also lie at the heart of Pentecostal proselytising, often called crusades, which the churches use to recruit new members.

**In 2009 the U.S. magazine *Newsweek* named Adeboye of the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God as one of the hundred most influential people in the world.**

One of southern Africa's most successful preachers is Enoch Adejare Adeboye, General Overseer of the Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God, which was founded in 1952 by Pa Josiah Akindayomi. In early 2009 the U.S. magazine *Newsweek* named Adeboye as one of the hundred most influential people in the world (number 49). To date the Redeemed Christian Church of God is represented in more than 90 countries worldwide. In Nigeria alone it has around three million members in 20,000 congregations. And the church is growing at breakneck speed, with three new congregations popping up every day.<sup>27</sup> Adeboye is pursuing an ambitious missionary course, using Coca-Cola as his role model and using this company's methods to compete on a global scale. Adeboye's churches are part of media and financial groups and are supported by Nigerian companies and politicians who are members of the movement.<sup>28</sup> Before the presidential elections on April 17, 2011 almost all the presidential candidates asked the pastor for his blessing.

The example of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria shows that the Pentecostal movement has for a long time been much more than just a religion. The churches follow clear business strategies and many of them have significant assets, as they claim that only people who give generously will be saved. Religion has become a lucrative market and founding a church is a worthwhile business model. This opens the floodgates for the abuse of religious followers. It is also a problem that the charismatic churches rarely take part in interreligious dialogues, despite their growing numbers.

27 | Cf. Andrzej Rybak, "Nigeria bekehrt die Welt," *Financial Times Deutschland*, April 16, 2010, <http://m.ftd.de/artikel/50101637.xml?v=2.0> (accessed March 31, 2011).

28 | Ibid.

## **FAITH AND THE CHURCH – A LAST HOPE FOR PEOPLE LET DOWN BY THE STATE**

The list of Christian welfare organisations – both international and within the African countries themselves – is long. Thousands of Christian NGOs are striving every day to help Africa's poorest people. During the many humanitarian catastrophes which regularly strike the continent, Christian aid organisations make a significant contribution towards providing humanitarian support. In Africa, more than anywhere else in the world, many governmental functions are run by the churches, such as the provision of schools, clinics and orphanages. The state's failure to provide basic social welfare facilities means that the churches provide a last hope for people to have access to education and medical care. At the same time, the belief and faith that God will watch over the individual and provide an answer for the many development problems is nowhere stronger than in Africa. "Leave it to God" is always the answer when there seems to be no other possible solution. In Africa Christianity does also mean hope of peace and escaping from poverty.

**In Africa, more than anywhere else in the world, many governmental functions are run by the churches, such as the provision of schools, clinics and orphanages.**

Just like in missionary times, many schools are still run by the churches. Even in countries like Senegal which have a majority Muslim population, the Catholic Church runs primary and secondary schools in all the main cities and many smaller towns. The Catholic schools are of particular importance in rural regions where there are either no or insufficient schools. 70 to 90 per cent of pupils at the Christian schools are Muslims, reflecting the general population of Senegal. The country's top politicians and civil servants like to send their children to Catholic schools because of their proven record of success.<sup>29</sup>

Health care is also largely run by the churches, something which goes back to colonial times. Along with a church, the missions always had a school and a clinic. When many African countries declared independence, most clinics were church-run.<sup>30</sup> Although independence has brought an

29 | Cf. *Country Reports*, KAS field office, Senegal.

30 | Since then, the Christian health associations have come together across Africa to form the Africa Christian Health Associations platform based in Nairobi.

increased desire for autonomy and growing state influence on the health sector, the church's provision of health care still plays an important role and enjoys a good reputation in many African countries.<sup>31</sup> It is estimated that church-run health facilities in the form of hospitals, clinics and mobile clinics total between 30 and 50 per cent of all facilities in Sub-Saharan Africa, depending on the country.<sup>32</sup> Church-run health organisations are distinguished by their low charges and their focus on marginalised sectors of the population and on rural regions where there are often no public services.

However, the prominent role played by the Christian churches in southern Africa in terms of health care and social welfare has also attracted criticism from many sides. This was particularly the case with the debate about HIV/Aids prevention and care. In Sub-Saharan Africa around 22.5 million people are infected with the virus, particularly in East and South Africa.<sup>33</sup> In the face of this pandemic, which has affected almost a quarter of the population in countries like Swaziland, many people seek refuge in the healing promises of the charismatic churches. The influence of these churches' preachers is such that HIV victims hope to be saved not only by giving all their money to the church but also by refusing antiretroviral therapy, as this would mean they were questioning the power of almighty God.<sup>34</sup> In Uganda the government has used the influence of the "born again" wife of President Museveni, Janet Museveni, and of evangelical preachers to take a new stance on HIV. Instead of the erstwhile strategy consisting of education (abstain, be faithful, use condoms – "ABC") and the use of contraceptives, a strict

**In Uganda the government has taken a new stance on HIV. Instead of the erstwhile strategy consisting of education and the use of contraceptives, a strict policy of abstinence is now being promoted.**

31 | Cf. A. Green, J. Shaw et al., "A shared mission? Changing relationships between government and church health services in Africa", in: *International journal of health planning and management* 2002, No. 17, 333–353.

32 | Cf. "A Key Piece of the Puzzle: Faith-Based Health Services in Sub-Saharan Africa," USAID, in: *Capacity Project knowledge sharing, Voices* 14, 12/2007, <http://hrhresourcecenter.org/node/1789> (accessed April 11, 2011).

33 | "Factsheet Sub-Sahara Africa," UNAIDS, <http://unaids.org/en/regionscountries/regions> (accessed April 11, 2011).

34 | Cf. "Spirit, money and a dose of patriarchy," *EuropeToday*, July 12, 2010, <http://europetodayonline.com/?p=3495> (accessed April 11, 2011).

policy of abstinence is now being promoted.<sup>35</sup> Along with the charismatic churches, the Catholic Church has also come under fire. Pope Benedict XVI's clear statement against the use of condoms in the fight against AIDS, made during his visit to Cameroon and Angola in May 2009, attracted strong condemnation.

### **CHURCH IN THE MORNING, VODOO TEMPLE IN THE EVENING**

The rapid spread of Christianity and Islam in southern Africa should, however, not hide the fact that traditional religions still play an important role in the lives of many people. The relatively low statistics relating to followers of traditional religions are due to the fact that they are usually practised in parallel to Christianity or Islam. A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 19 African countries resulted in around 25 per cent of respondents claiming that along with their Christian or Muslim faith they also believed in the protective power of the spirits and that they took part in ceremonies to honour their ancestors. Over half of Christians asked in Guinea Bissau

and Cameroon and over one-third in South Africa, Chad, Botswana, Ghana, Ethiopia, Liberia and Tanzania also admitted that they regularly turn to traditional healers.<sup>36</sup> It is difficult to gather precise statistics because the boundaries between different religions

**It is difficult to gather precise statistics because the boundaries between different religions are very fluid. In their everyday lives many people mix their Christian or Muslim traditions with traditional customs.**

are very fluid. In their everyday lives many people mix their Christian or Muslim traditions with traditional customs. In a country like Benin where voodoo is very strong and where other animistic customs are also widespread, it has to be assumed that pretty much one hundred per cent of the population continue to follow traditional religious practices. It is not unusual to go to church in the morning and then in the evening go to the voodoo temple to predict the future with kola nuts. Leaders of traditional religions continue to enjoy high levels of respect and authority. The big voodoo festival is a public holiday in Benin. An interreligious council has been founded by Benin President Boni Yayi, the Cadre

35 | Cf. Mayrargue, "Les dynamiques paradoxales du pentecôtisme en Afrique subsaharienne," n. 22.

36 | Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa," n. 2.



de concertation des confessions religieuses et des têtes couronnées, which also includes representatives of the traditional kingdoms, something which has led to a boycott by the Catholic Church.

### **THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES IN THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION PROCESS IN AFRICA**

In many African countries the Christian churches were and remain critical players in the process of political transformation, conflict resolution and reconciliation. They have often acted as independent mediators in disputes between the various parties. Here they should follow more closely the example of the role of the churches in Mozambique, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

**In many African countries the Christian churches were and remain critical players in the process of political transformation and reconciliation.**

In Mozambique the churches were significantly involved in conflict resolution and the conclusion of a peace agreement in 1992, which brought to a close the civil war which

had been raging since 1977. Initially the churches played an important role in drawing the attention of the international community to the civil war which involved fighting between the Marxist government's Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and the opposition rebel group the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO). In 1984 the Mozambican Christian Council (CCM), the umbrella organisation for 17 Protestant churches in Mozambique, became a main player in the peace talks by founding the Peace and Reconciliation Commission. The churches increased their efforts to promote a dialogue with RENAMO. They were supported in this by the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). The first direct talks between RENAMO and FRELIMO took place in Rome in 1990 under the aegis of the catholic Community of Sant'Egidio. The peace agreement between the two sides was signed in Rome in August 1992 by President Chissano and opposition leader Dhlakama.<sup>37</sup>

37 | Cf. Alex Vines, Ken Wilson, "Churches and the Peace Process in Mozambique," in: Paul Gifford (ed.), *The Christian churches and the democratization of Africa*, Brill Academic Publishers 1995.

In South Africa the churches played a major part in bringing apartheid to an end and furthering a peaceful process of democratic transformation. Bishop Desmond Tutu was an outstanding player in this, and in 1984 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. The South African Council of Churches (SACC), of which Tutu was General Secretary, played a decisive role in the fight against apartheid for many years. In 1995 President Nelson Mandela appointed Tutu as President of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the events of the apartheid period.

**In South Africa the churches played a major part in bringing apartheid to an end and furthering a peaceful process of democratic transformation. Bishop Tutu was an outstanding player in this.**

In the Democratic Republic of Congo the churches have also played an important role in the democratisation process and peace talks. An example is the involvement of Abbé Appolinaire Malu Malu in resolving the conflict in the east of the country. He made a major contribution to the 2003 peace talks in South Africa which culminated in the Sun City Agreement and brought the Congo war to an end for a short while. And as president of the independent electoral commission he was also responsible for organising the first democratic elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2008 he was once again involved in the historic Goma peace agreement which was signed by the Democratic Republic of Congo and 20 rebel groups, including the rebel leader Laurent Nkunda.

## **CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCHES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

The omnipresent discussion on the spread of Islam in Africa and the tragic events of the kidnappings by Al Quaida Maghreb and the Somali pirates have overshadowed the importance of Christianity in Africa. But this is unjustified, as Sub-Saharan Africa is a region which is experiencing the highest percentage growth of Christianity anywhere in the world. Around one-fifth of all Christians live here. Christian faith in Africa means more than just belonging to a church or congregation. For people buffeted by poverty and war, it offers them the hope of peace and an escape from their plight. This hope is one of the reasons for the stunning success of the new "charismatic" churches, particularly the

Pentecostals, which have for many years now been determining Christian life in Africa alongside the Catholic and Protestant churches.

The Christian churches exert an important social and political influence in Africa. In places where the state is too weak or totally absent, it is the churches which provide access to education and health care through their schools, universities, clinics and orphanages. These Christian establishments and a host of national and international NGOs with a Christian background such as the Catholic Relief Service or World Vision make a major contribution to fighting poverty in Africa.

Although many African countries maintain a separation between Church and State, in many places the churches provide the moral authority and often have direct, or at least indirect, political influence. In many African countries the churches have played a critical role in the process of democratisation and in conflict resolution and reconciliation.

**The influence of the churches can also have negative effects, as is the case in Uganda. Here the debate about discrimination against homosexuals is mainly based on religious precepts.**

However, the influence of the churches, and particularly that of radical evangelical preachers, can also have negative effects, as is the case in Uganda. Here the debate about discrimination against homosexuals is mainly based on religious precepts. A draft bill to punish homosexuals with prison sentences or even the death penalty has caused international outrage and is still being hotly discussed. Religious values are being used to justify this bill, and Christians are the driving force behind the country's massive homophobia. In this respect critics have identified that major influence is being exercised by fundamentalist Christian preachers and groups in the USA. Some radical evangelical pastors in Uganda are spearheading the country's anti-homosexual movement, but the major traditional churches also seem to be throwing their weight behind the bill.<sup>38</sup>

In other countries too many leading politicians have close ties to the charismatic churches, such as General Mathieu Kérékou, the former leader of the military coup and later

38 | Cf. *Country Reports*, KAS field office, Uganda.

president of Benin (1996-2006) and the country's current president, Boni Yayi. The second president of Zambia, Frederick Chiluba (1991-2002), was also a committed follower of the Pentecostal Church and publically declared Zambia and his government to be the "dominion of Jesus Christ". Regrettably, the Christian beliefs of many of the country's political leaders have done nothing to change their style of government which has little to do with the Christian idea of man and the striving for solidarity, constitutional principles and peace. In 2007 Chiluba was found guilty by a London court of fraud amounting to 46 million U.S. dollars (32 million Euros).<sup>39</sup> It is therefore particularly important to continue the dialogue on values with social forces in African countries.

39 | Cf. "Chiluba's Legacy to Zambia," *BBC*, May 4, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1715419.stm> (accessed April 18, 211).