Religious schools in Africa: between conflict and dialogue

Jesuit academic from Cameroon analyzes the rise of Islam and Christianity in Africa and how the influence of the West has impacted their sometimes uneasy coexistence

Father Norbert Litoing SJ (Photo:DR)

Lucie Sarr, Cameroon, *La Croix International*, 21 September 2021

The spread of Christianity and Islam -- the world's two largest religions -- has exploded on the African continent over the past hundred or so years.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, the number of Muslims in the Sub-Saharan region went from just 11 million in 1900 to 234 million in 2010.The Pew survey indicated that, during the same period, the Christian population in that area increased from 7 million to 470 million.

It is estimated that each faith now has some 400-500 million adherents throughout all of Africa.

Norbert Litoing is a Jesuit priest from Cameroon who is currently working on a doctorate in comparative religious studies at Harvard University in the United States.

His specific focus is on Islam and Christianity in Africa.

In this interview with La Croix Africa's Lucis Sarr, he talks about conflicts related to religion in schools across the African continent.

La Croix Africa: In recent years, there have been conflicts between Catholic educational institutions and Muslim students. That was the case with banning the veil some time back at a school in Senegal and more recently an incident in Cameroon. How do you interpret these incidents?

Norbert Litoing: The recent claims reflect a rise in cultural identity politics. There are several factors to take into consideration.

First, it is clear that we are witnessing a generational shift in the understanding of religious identity in Africa, from an inclusive to an exclusive identity.

Where, in part because of the spiritual heritage of traditional African religions, earlier generations of African Christians and Muslims understood religious identity in a way that

positively integrated difference, younger generations tend to see the integration of these differences as a lack of authenticity, a lack of fidelity to the unsullied message of Islam or Christianity.

This exclusivist reading is the consequence, on the one hand, of a cultural uprooting linked to a growing urbanization and, on the other hand, the influence of the global context where the fundamentalist rereading of Islam and Christianity is widespread.

Thanks in particular to social media, we are witnessing the democratization of sources of authority in religious education and, consequently, the rejection of traditional structures of religious authority.

As for Islam, as a corollary of the advance of political Islam, there is a rejection of the West on political-religious grounds, and of all those in Africa who are considered to be pro-Western.

The Western school is one of the institutions perceived as being a place for indoctrinating students with the "Western ideology".

Wrongly, for reasons of simple chronology, Islam and the Quranic school are perceived by some as being indigenous to Africa, while Christianity and its educational structures, often assimilated to the West, are perceived as foreign to Africa.

In recent years, terrorist groups claiming to be Islamic have brought instability to parts of Africa. How do you view this situation?

The establishment of terrorist groups claiming to be Islamic can be explained by a range of factors internal to our countries and linked to more global dynamics.

I will limit myself to a few factors internal to the continent.

From a political point of view, there is first of all the weakness of our countries.

The presence of state structures and the effectiveness of state services tend to be limited to a few large urban areas.

In the remote corners of the country, people do not necessarily feel concerned or taken into account by what is decided in the large centers of power.

Linked to this, there is a crisis of citizenship which provides fertile ground for the emergence of identity-based withdrawal, whether on ethnic or religious grounds.

From an economic point of view, the lack of adequate training and the massive unemployment of young people also create a breeding ground for ideologies that challenge the political and economic system in place.

From a religious point of view, it is worth mentioning the preponderance of religious sentiment in Africa.

This religious sense can serve as an anchor for a religious speech that claims a return to the pure sources of faith.

All these factors, and many others, contribute to creating conditions for the emergence of fundamentalist movements within the continent and the rooting of movements from elsewhere.

In your opinion, what are the conditions for harmonious interreligious dialogue?

Interreligious dialogue, whether Islamic-Christian or otherwise, requires, first of all, a rootedness in one's own faith identity. It requires that we enter into it with the entirety of our own faith, that we are ready to give an account of the hope that dwells in us.

It then requires an attitude of openness to the truth, a willingness to learn from others, to allow oneself to be enriched by encounter with others.

In connection with openness to the truth, we need a balanced attitude (neither too ingenuous nor hypercritical) in welcoming what we learn from others.

Having said that, the Church differentiates between at least four forms of dialogue: the dialogue of everyday life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of theological exchanges and the dialogue of religious experience.

The first two forms are lived on a daily basis on the continent. The last two require preparation.