

Laurent Gbagbo and the evangelical church in Côte d'Ivoire: Ambiguous political affinities

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Abstract

This article attempts to understand and analyse the relationship between politics and religion in Ivory Coast. The relationship between the former President Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church expresses this relationship that has always existed between the two entities in a spirit of religious freedom recognized by the Head of the State by all citizens and the impact that this relationship had on the evolution of the Ivorian crisis. Since colonial times to the time of independence, from Felix Houphouët Boigny to Henri Konan Bédié, to Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara, they have all forged close ties with their religious community. The case of the former President Laurent Gbagbo with the Evangelical Church of Ivory Coast is an interesting example: first, because of his particular relationship of both proximity and distance, and then because of the accusations of both national and international media and of the political opposition against Laurent Gbagbo for his connections with the leaders of evangelical churches. The latter were accused of having been led to believe that Laurent Gbagbo was God's choice when he lost the election. In fact, Evangelical pastors have developed the doctrine of the personal or individual predestination through divine revelation which makes Laurent Gbagbo God's choice and the other political protagonists outcasts. The religious dimension has become a register of legitimation of political power with an impact on popular imagination. This was followed by violence against the Evangelical Church. However, the interference between politics and religion raises the question of the separation of both areas, but also of the globalisation of the present religious phenomena.

Keywords Laurent Gbagbo, Alassane Ouattara, prophecies, political, religious, evangelical Church, globalisation.

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1. Introduction

Since colonial times until the time of independence a great number of African heads of State have favoured relations of proximity with their religious denominations. In Ivory Coast, from Félix Houphouët Boigny to Laurent Gbagbo, the political leaders have maintained close contacts with their religious communities. The case of the former president Gbagbo with the Evangelical Church² of Ivory Coast is an interesting example, because of his particular relations both of proximity and distance and the impact those relations have had on the evolution of the post-electoral crisis.

In fact, since the post-electoral crisis, one has just to skim through the websites or the national and international papers on the political environment of the Ivorian opposition, to go over the blogs which flourish on the relations between Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church to assess the extent of the charges: “Confiscation of power in the name of God: Here is the false prophecy of which Gbagbo and Simone dream” (Bakassien 2011a); “The boat of Captain Jesus is sinking” (Bakassien 2011b). According to a journalist, “The devil eventually lifted the body of the Church between the nose and beard of Jesus Christ and his followers [who are] mostly responsible” for the crisis (Igomzikipé 2011); “Those pastors have been known for their unflinching support to Gbagbo since 2000, for financial privileges and for personal interest” (Billé 2011:9); “You are false prophets, ridiculous impostors and politically committed [...]” (Billé 2011:9).

In fact, these media and political circles which are unfavorable to Laurent Gbagbo often criticized him for wanting to stay in power, and for being convinced by the predictions of the Evangelical ministers that he is the elected representative of God with “a divine mission” leading to the birth of a new Ivory Coast, whereas in reality he lost the elections against his opponent, Alassane Ouattara. In other words, they reproached the Evangelical pastors and Laurent Gbagbo for instrumentalizing each other. The former were said to have developed, through divine revelations, the theory of personal or individual predestination which makes Laurent Gbagbo God’s choice and the other political protagonists outcasts. Thus the religious dimension became a register of legitimization of the political power with an impact on popular imagination.

Violence against the Evangelical Church followed. In the end, interferences between the political and religious dimension raise the question of the separation of both domains, and also that of the globalisation of new religious phenomena.

This article, in line with a socio-anthropological and religious approach, tries to shed light on the relationship between politics and religion in Ivory Coast. The relationship between the former President, Laurent Gbagbo, and the Evangelical Church expresses in a rather particular way this link which had always prevailed between the

² In all which follows, the term “Church” indicates “evangelical Church”.

political power and religious bodies in a spirit of religious freedom recognized by the Head of State as by every citizen. This permits the ties between President Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical churches to have an impact on the evolution of the crisis because of the latter's inevitable influence on the management of the country.

2. Relations between the political and the religious realms in Ivory Coast

In Ivory Coast politics and religion always cohabited, as is shown by the rise of prophetic characters (such as William Harris, Papa Nouveau, Koudou Jeannot, Kacou Séverin) who made this country the "cradle" of the prophetic phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa (Dozon 1995:321).

2.1 Laurent Gbagbo: proximity to the Evangelical Church

Laurent Gbagbo and his wife Simone Ehivet were of Catholic confession before becoming Evangelical Protestants. Laurent Gbagbo is a historian by training and a former Catholic seminarist, born in a Catholic family. He was converted to the Protestant religion in 1998 during an encounter with Pastor Koré Moïse and the Prophet Degny Paul, both being founders of the Schekinah Glory Ministries Church. His wife, Simone Ehivet Gbagbo, is a researcher in applied linguistics and a trade unionist. She is a co-founder of the political party of Laurent Gbagbo, the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI). She was also Catholic, before becoming a committed Evangelical Protestant. But it was the meeting between the Gbagbo couple and the Prophet Kacou Severin, "The Nations' Prophet", which was decisive in their lives both religiously and politically.

The prophet was the President of Foursquare International Church of Ivory Coast, which is a branch of the American Foursquare International Church as well as are several other local churches such as Schekinah Glory Ministries Church of Koré Moïse. He was well known as the founder of The Ministry of the Powerful Gospel (MPG), a transcontinental ministry, situated in Africa, Europe and the United States. The Prophet Kacou Severin, who was on good terms with all the Ivorian political elite, played a prophetic and important role in the political life of the country and in the rise of Laurent Gbagbo to the supreme office.

This prophet is said to have predicted a presidential destiny to Laurent Gbagbo long before the year 2000 when he was elected president, as did other prophets such as Papa Nouveau and Koré Moïse. They are also said to have announced the crisis that the country is undergoing currently (Mary 2002).

Being a member of the Foursquare Church of the prophet Kacou Severin, Gbagbo and his wife maintained their membership after the elections which made him Head of State. Having become the President of the Republic in 2000, Gbagbo continued at-

tending the services and honouring the numerous meetings, the popular crusades and campaigns of evangelization of the prophet Kacou Severin by his presence. The prophet became his “pastor” or “spiritual guide” till his death in 2001 in a road accident.

After the death of the Prophet Kacou, Pastor Koré Moïse, founder of Schekinah Glory Ministries Church, and one of the disciples of the prophet, became President Gbagbo’s spiritual guide, being surrounded by other young pastors and leaders of the Ivorian churches located in the United States or Europe. These ministers often invited Mrs Simone Gbagbo to sponsor public events organized by them. Thus emerged the relationship of the couple Gbagbo with a supposed Pentecostal network in the United States, the echo of which was found in the media.

In fact, Laurent Gbagbo lives his faith in broad daylight, as does his wife: he prays, he fasts, attends services in several churches. To all those who accuse him for the visibility of his faith he answered (during an interview on television in May 2006): “I was and am first of all a Christian before becoming the President of the Republic. Should I give up my faith because I am the President of the Republic?”

Whether in his important speeches to the nation or in his political meetings, one can see in Gbagbo a kind of Christianization of symbolic and political action, suggesting a reappropriation of Christian procedure and elements of a new covenant between the Power and the Church, frequent reference being made to the Bible and a specific rhetoric being used, exemplified in the slogan: “Ivory Coast, a land blessed by God”.

This proximity can also be seen in the connections between Gbagbo and the leaders of many Churches and Evangelical missions. The closest one and the most spoken of in the media of all those pastors is certainly Koré Moïse, whom the Western media or the African anti-Gbagbo ones qualify as “African avatar of the cloudy American Evangelical,” or “Raspoutine” or the “*missi dominici*” co-operating with “the born again Christians” of the Bush Administration who had ties with some American congressmen (cf. Cheikh Yérim 2004).

This interpretation deserves some remarks: First of all, it ignores that Pentecostalism conforms to dynamics significantly more complex than this Manichean point of view. Second, there is an overestimation of Koré as a pastor, in his role towards Laurent Gbagbo, and the ties with Evangelical and American political circles he is credited with. Is Koré so powerful and has he got so many relations in the United States? If that was the case, why did Laurent Gbagbo not profit from the help of his powerful American “partners” to neutralize the armed rebellion in 2002 and save his presidential stool from the devastating raids of the French air force in April 2011? Third, if Koré had so many ties with the American Churches, why don’t they help him financially, for instance, by contributing to the completion of the construction of his temple, the work of which has been in progress for ten years?

In Ivory Coast, Koré is first of all known as a former professional basketball player and currently the President of the Ivorian Federation of Basketball, and also as a telecommunications engineer who worked in many African countries before resigning and going into business. Having become a pastor, he leads a small community, the Church of Schekinah Glory Ministries, which would hardly represent 0,05% of the Protestant believers nationwide.

With Koré, aren't we dealing with a kind of relationship between religious leaders and the Head of State already practiced under previous governments of Ivory Coast?

2.2 From Félix Houphouët Boigny to Laurent Gbagbo

Since the period of independence, the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have almost all in their constitutions – copies of the one of France – affirmed the separation between the State and the Church, but, according to the circumstances, remain on good terms with religious leaders for political purposes. The latter know how to profit from the situation. Already in colonial times, there were some connections between the French colonial administration and the European Christian missions as well as the local prophets (Dozon 1995:306). This collaboration continued after the independence of the country under Félix Houphouët Boigny.

Houphouët did not hide his membership with the Catholic Church. He openly attended Catholic services. He built the cathedral of Abidjan-Plateau which was consecrated by the Pope. He erected many mosques, one of which is the big mosque of Riviera Golf. Houphouët was repeatedly generous to religions: funding Catholic and Protestant denominational schools, providing subsidies for the payment of their teachers' salaries, personal gifts to monks, etcetera.

But his relationship with religions was exceptional through his project of the construction of the costly basilica "Notre Dame de la Paix de Yamoussoukro" which swallowed billions of CFA francs, while the country was subjected to structural re-adjustment policies imposed by the international financial institutions. Houphouët offered this basilica as a gift of his family to the Pope and to the Catholic Church. The Pope made two visits to Ivory Coast at the invitation of President Houphouët Boigny to consecrate the cathedral Saint Paul of Abidjan-Plateau (1982) and this basilica (1990).

Under Houphouët "imams, witch-doctors, pastors or Catholic missionaries, in short all religious professions of Ivory Coast, traded with souls to the point of becoming staunch followers of Houphouëtism, an imaginary doctrine in which everyone would find his place provided one adhered to the political objectives of the Father of the nation. All the religious services profited from the presidential redistributions, as it is shown by the national collection made on the entire Ivorian territory during the year 1964" (Lanoué 2004:82).

The Christian leaders who considered Houphouët as “a true alter ego” (Verdeaux 1997:171-174) or a “saviour”, almost worshipped him, as is certified by this incisive formula of the prophet-healer Kakou Essan: “If you want to see God, go to Yamous-soukro” (Dozon 1995:305-331). These men of God embraced the political doctrine of Houphouët by rallying and appealing to nationalistic feelings (Perrot 1996).

This phenomenon is found elsewhere on the continent. Mobutu, the former Zaïre President, used to distribute Mercedes Benz cars and other goods to men of God (Makiobo 2004). In Zambia under the Presidents Kenneth Kaunda and Frederick Chiluba, as Lafargue (1995:67-68) shows, churches, having moved into the political sphere, view themselves “as plain political actors by the virtue of the voluntary and programmatic choice of certain religious leaders to enter into politics”. After his election to the Presidency of the country, during a prayer service, President Chiluba declared that Zambia is a “Christian State” (Guiblehon 2010). In Burkina, President Blaise Compaoré maintained fair and special terms with the Assemblies of God. Thus, one of their pastors was appointed Head of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) by the President himself.

As far as Ivory Coast is concerned, Gbagbo is not the first to be interested in establishing relations with religions and their leaders. Even after Houphouët, before taking power, a claim to ownership over the Christian God both in matters of religion and matters of politics had already been observed with his predecessors, namely Henry Konan Bédié, and General Robert Guei, though in a somewhat less spectacular manner.

From this point of view, the relations between Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church are of the same nature as those which characterized the first Head of State of his country and other African statesmen. In spite of the similarity, we still notice something special in the relationship between Laurent Gbagbo and his Church.

2.3 Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church: a distant merger

Laurent Gbagbo establishes an original relationship with his Protestant Church. He distances himself from the Protestant religion by being widely open to the other religious denominations, in particular the Islamic religion. From this point of view, it would be difficult to pretend that he confuses his status as the Head of State and his membership with an evangelical Church. It seems that neither Gbagbo nor his Evangelical Church had a theocratic vision in the manner of certain countries where the sharia law is imposed.

With regard to the Presidential elections, the apostle K. Jean was able to assert that the Christian leaders never gave any instructions to their members to vote for Gbagbo.³

³ Interview on 7 May 2011 at 3 pm in Abobo-gare.

In other words, for this apostle, there is no Christian pro-Gbagbo electorate, as we could see elsewhere in the USA or in Brazil (Corten, Dozon & Oro 2003). Another pastor reminds us that no Evangelical Christian was appointed by Gbagbo to a political or administrative position, while he, for instance, appointed several Muslims to important positions: Seydou Eliman Diarra (who later became his Prime Minister) as Head of the National Reconciliation Forum in 2001; his Director of campaign of the last Presidential elections; the two greatest personalities of his party (Mamadou Coulibaly and Abou Dramane); the President of the Chancellor of the Great Chamber of the National Order. The second wife of Gbagbo is a practicing Muslim.

Another pastor underlines that Gbagbo neither built a single temple for the Evangelicals nor granted any particular funding to the Evangelical Church, whereas he devoted important financial means to Muslims: pilgrimages to Mecca, the creation of an Ivorian office for Hadj and Oumra and the National Islamic Council of Ivory Coast. Gbagbo carried out several other actions in favour of Buddhists and all the other religions, notably the creation of a Ministry of Religions for all the religious denominations of the country.

In a televised speech in 2009, Gbagbo himself, affirming his Evangelical faith, ("I will never deny my faith"), underlined that he would never confuse it with his status of Head of State of Ivory Coast, that he would not build any Evangelical temple and that his status of Evangelical Christian was but a mere "detail". In other words, he would not act as an Evangelical Christian in State affairs. Thus, he is said to have refused funding the Evangelical leaders for their pilgrimage to Israel in 2009 and the appointment of a pastor as the Minister of Reconciliation in 2010.⁴

From this point of view, we have the impression that Gbagbo wants to show that although an Evangelical Christian, he remains the Head of State of Ivory Coast, the President of all the Ivorians and of all religious denominations of the country. In other words, through this double game, proximity and distance, we could say that Gbagbo politically acts in an implicit way on the basis of "a social contract" between himself and the Evangelical Church. He establishes a clear and adequate distance between the political and religious spheres.

In a certain way, no matter how great the importance he may have granted to his Evangelical faith, Gbagbo, during his years in power, took a strong symbolical and political position by firmly acting in a "rational-legal"⁵ manner, intervening in all the domains where the relationship with a religious denomination was compatible with exercising his role as Head of State.

⁴ According to an interview with Bishop Paul on 10 May 2010 in Koumassi.

⁵ Max Weber describes the three forms of authority in modern societies as: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational.

But Gbagbo is not the first one to adopt such an attitude. Dozon (2008:63) shows that in the 1980s, most of the Heads of State in Sub-Saharan Africa found important support, or a source of legitimating their power, in the religious institutions. We must acknowledge that Gbagbo succeeded in doing this by not favouring his Evangelical Church at any cost. The pastors, as far as they are concerned, do not see this as a reason for refusing to serve the cause of the resolution of the Ivorian crisis through their ministries.

3. The Evangelical Church in the Ivorian crisis

While the role of the Evangelical Church as a mediating factor during this last crisis and even in all the political conflicts of the country for many years is worth being remembered, it is also necessary to mention a certain number of facts which have strongly affected the weight of her contribution on the political and religious balance. The prophecies or divine revelations of pastors and other prophets definitely have had repercussions on the attitude of Gbagbo in the post-electoral crisis.

3.1 The mediation of the Evangelical Church in the political conflicts

Already for several years the Evangelical Church has been present in the political conflicts in the country in a sort of “preventive diplomacy” (Cahill 2005:5-20). When it does not take the initiative, it is sought by the politicians themselves. These request its mediation, and expect from it, as from the other religious denominations, to meet according to circumstances the political leaders of the country individually to encourage them to dialogue, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In other words, what concerns us here, is the fact that the Evangelical Church has generally called for “the disarmament of hearts”.

Thus, even before the post-electoral war, in collaboration with the other religious denominations such as Religions for Peace or the African Council of Religious Leaders, the forum of religious denominations of Ivory Coast of which it is a member, the High Protestant Council, the highest Evangelical structure, comprising thirty federations (Confeci, Feci, Cepmeci, Cenepeci, Emuci, Ceci, etcetera), were deeply involved in the process of the resolution of the post-electoral crisis.

The trustees of the High Protestant Council assured us that they, as well as the associate federations, had sent circulars to the Evangelical Churches to inform and to sensitize Christians. Thus, on Sundays, at the time of church services, pastors visit churches both in Abidjan and the interior of the country. The High Protestant Council ceaselessly exhorts Christians⁶ to have an attitude that contributes to peace

⁶ Two circular letters of the Protestant High Council and the Evangelical Federation of Cote d'Ivoire were sent to the evangelical Churches in 2009 and 2010.

and to freely vote for the candidate of their choice. Sister churches which are not part of the Evangelical circles have been visited, so have some mosques.

Another concrete action mentioned by the trustees of the High Protestant Council is the contribution made by the Protestant radio *Fréquence-Vie*. This radio initiated a special programme on topics such as “The Christian and Politics”, “the Christian and Tribalism”, “the Christian and Muslims”, and teachings or Bible studies in relation to the period of crisis. Concerts were organized, as well as several days of prayers and fasting, before the first round of the election and before and after the second round.

All in all, for the trustees of the High Protestant Council, the Evangelical churches greatly contributed to national development in the domain of health and education, and to enhancing the institutional and symbolic power of the State.

In the light of this, however, one may wonder what may have happened for the Evangelical Church to be vilified, and to become a victim of violence and criticism from the press, the parties of the Opposition and even from non-Christians.

3.2 Revelations and divine signs: the theory of personal or individual predestination

During the Presidential elections, a new Christian vision has been emerging, notably an Evangelical one, which interprets the Ivorian crisis in religious terms and the election of the President in terms of personal or individual predestination.⁷ Thus pastors and prophets believe that the outcome of the poll and the choice of the future President of Ivory Coast is a matter to be decided by the sole will of God, by “divine choice” or by “divine election” and not by the people: no one can become the President of the Republic if God has not chosen him beforehand. By way of consequence, a religious ideology was put in place, based on divine revelations concerning the Presidential poll. Thus, divine revelations spread by religious and political leaders, broadcast throughout the media, widely shared in Evangelical circles by others as well as Laurent Gbagbo himself, were mobilized and served as a symbolic matrix, i.e. a context of reading and interpreting future events.

Thus the prophet Koné Malachie made a revelation which is stated in “seven celestial decrees”. In the sixth decree, the prophet declares that Laurent Gbagbo is the choice of God:

Laurent Gbagbo will have a second mandate imposed by God, and maybe a third one. For your information, President Laurent Gbagbo is a divinely elected person. You should know that it is not the human beings who have chosen this man as the Head of Ivory Coast but it is rather the Governor of the celestial provinces: the Lord of Lords,

⁷ We use this concept in the sense of „the de facto election of certain persons as legal successors in the political power which God would have reserved for the fulfillment of a particular mission“.

the King of Kings. That is why whoever joins forces against him, will be involved in an adventure of high risk and will be accountable to God himself. You will notice that in the future events of this country, it is he who [...] will help Ivory Coast get out of this economic and politico-military precariousness, and by him and thanks to God, Ivory Coast will become an economic, military and especially a Christian power worldwide. It will thus be known as the second Jerusalem or the Blessed Land of God [...]. So it is after President Laurent Gbagbo has finished [...] executing all the commands of his God, that God himself will appoint his successor [...].⁸

The second prophecy, revealed by the prophet Ziki Zahiri (2009), confirms the first one. According to the prophet, “Laurent Gbagbo will remain in power until 2015”. He goes on: “It is God who gave the power to Laurent Gbagbo.”⁹ In the same spirit, concerning the date of the elections, the prophet stated that the different postponements of the Presidential elections¹⁰ are not due to Laurent Gbagbo, but to the will of God:

The postponements are mainly due to God. He acts in this way in order to realize his plan. If men have their share in it, God has the predominant share.¹¹ He continues: I have received a message from the Lord that the time of the economic liberation of our country has come, he will cause all the manoeuvres of the occupant to fail [...] and will allow the occupying forces to wage war to the point of killing each other, until the liberation of the country (Zahiri 2009).

For Alassane Ouattara there are also divine revelations. At the head of a coalition of 250 Evangelical pastors is Pastor Alla Sourkou who claims to coach and to advise Alassane Ouattara and his wife. The press spread the news of that meeting and the revelation that the pastor said he had received from the Lord.

[...] There is no mystery, it is Alassane Ouattara who will be the future Head of State of Ivory Coast. He has been the choice of God at all times since 1994 [...]. We have become one because of our common conviction, fruit of our diverse revelations, received by the Spirit of God within us, since 1994, by some of you up to this day, confirming that your husband, Dr. Alassane Ouattara, has been the choice

⁸ Find the full revelation at the address of Fraternité radio-Divo and online at abidjandirect.net [Accessed: 20 October 2010.]

⁹ In an interview granted to the daily news paper *Nord Sud* on 13 September 2010 and during a conference pronounced on 21 October 2010 in Yopougon.

¹⁰ The presidential elections were postponed four times. Finally the first round of the elections was held on 30 October and the second on 28 November 2010.

¹¹ Interview in the daily newspaper *Le Mandat* (14 December 2009).

of God for the management of the affairs of the State of Ivory Coast since that time [...] Alassane Ouattara is the future president of Ivory Coast.¹²

It might be added that Pastor Alla Sourkou has just published a work entitled, *On earth as it is in heaven, His excellency Alassane Ouattara, President of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire according to the will of God*.¹³ This work is a compilation of divine revelations that the pastor has received in favour of Alassane Ouattara for twelve years.

Concerning the previous President, Henri Konan Bedie, revelations also promise that he will return to power as a pledge of peace in Ivory Coast:

As long as the Ivoirians do not give back the power to the Democratic Party of Ivory Coast (PDCI) and to its President, Mr. Henri Konan Bédié, Ivory Coast will never find peace. Listen to what the Spirit of God announces to the people of Ivory Coast.¹⁴

These revelations show that the three favourites for the presidential election are all “elected people” of God. In other words, God has elected three people, but he plans only one presidential chair. So who will be the “true elected one” and who will be the “reprobate?”

In fact, as Guiblehon (2010) underlines, we are in a sort of conceptualization of events which engenders three interpretations: first of all, power is of divine and not human essence. It is God who will decide when the time comes who will inherit the presidential chair. Then, the accession to power and its control are from now on a sign of divine blessing, and they are also a means of “excommunication” of certain political opponents and the legitimising of the political power of the others. Finally, the vision of an “elected people” and of a President of the Republic elected by God is contrary to a democratic and egalitarian conception of citizens or candidates having the same rights and the same chances during the elections (Guiblehon 2010).

The revelations also underline the mission that God entrusts to his elected one. For instance, the divine mission of Laurent Gbagbo is not only the liberation of Ivory Coast but also of Africa from the colonial yoke of France. It is he who will “get Ivory Coast out of this economic and politico-military precariousness” so that it may become “an economic and military power and above all a Christian power worldwide” envied by the whole world, a “second Jerusalem.”¹⁵

¹² According to the daily newspapers close to Alassane Ouattara (*Le Jour, Le Patriote, Le Mandat*), 250 Evangelical ministers met Alassane Ouattara and his wife before the elections of 2010.

¹³ The cover of the work carries the photo of Alassane Ouattara.

¹⁴ *Le Nouveau Réveil*, July 2009.

¹⁵ On this subject, Venance Konan is ironical: “God gave Ivory Coast and the power to Laurent Gbagbo, and only God can withdraw them from him.”

Let us notice that the two other candidates, Henri Konan Bédié and Alassane Ouattara, although elected, did not see any divine mission granted to them. So, would Laurent Gbagbo be the “true elected one” for the time being since he has been entrusted with a divine mission?

On the one hand, these prophecies take sides in the electoral contest on behalf of one or the other of the two candidates, leaving little room for the political issues at stake and for the interplay of forces at work in the presidential elections. Each party was sure of prophecy going to be fulfilled in its favour, and treated the opposite side as Satan or the Devil, and hence as “outcasts” or “non-chosen ones”. On the other hand, the revelations have mobilized the political and religious imagination. Now, according to Castoradis (1975), it is in the imagination that a community invents the inaugural social significations which decide what its real problems are, irreducible to the rational or functional realities of the moment.

On the other hand, those prophecies have been reinforced by the different “divine” signs which appeared during the fighting in Abidjan. Thus, on 17 March, 2011 and Saturday, 19 March, 2011, the national television showed “a rainbow-like crown surrounding the sun”¹⁶ as a “divine sign”; then, right after the attack on the headquarters of the armed forces of Ivory Coast another sign, which was seen, was announced in the Newsreel at 8 pm, “a cloud spreading in the sky of Abidjan from which a particle detached before ending its journey in the hands of a soldier loyal to Laurent Gbagbo.” Then there were other visions of drawings of human hearts in saucers of several women.

These signs are interpreted by the press and the pro-Gbagbo pastors as “divine” signs or “the presence of God and his intervention in Ivory Coast [...] to lead the war of Ivory Coast on the side of the defence and security forces [...] against Satan, in order to allow the rebirth of Ivory Coast[...].”¹⁷

Finally, the theory of the Predestined race linked to the exercise of power has fostered feelings of a complex of “non-elect” or “outcast” within the non-Christian communities and other denominations, for it is seen as a battlefield between the Good, represented by the party of Gbagbo, and the Bad one, “the axis of Evil”. This Manichean and demobilizing vision has had an impact on the course of events following the elections and has reinforced the logic of conflict and opposition in which people were caught, as well as of avoidance and discrimination. Indeed, it gave the impression that the pastors had set themselves up as instruments of God’s judgment; we will come back to this.

¹⁶ These signs appeared simultaneously in several cities of the country (Abidjan, Agboville, Soubré).

¹⁷ Comments of the journalist on the national television, first on 17 March, then on 19 March 2011 in the 8pm news.

3.3 Instrumentalization of the religious feelings of Laurent Gbagbo by pastors and vice-versa?

If one of the impacts of those prophecies is the mobilization of religious feelings and the emergence of a new political language, in the eyes of the opposition press and the political opponents of Laurent Gbagbo, as we will see, the prophecies have above all influenced his decision to stay in power after the results of the second round of the presidential elections. According to that press, Gbagbo lost the presidential elections in the polls. The winner is Alassane Ouattara to whom the power has to be given. In other words, we have three categories of people who are called into question by a single argument. First of all, Laurent Gbagbo. The journalist Venance Konan explains that Laurent Gbagbo lost the power, but he uses “religion as a trick to persist in power.”¹⁸ In other words, if Laurent Gbagbo clings to power, it is because he believes in the prophecies of those pastors. Then, against the Evangelical Church, but moreover against its prophets and pastors, one of whom is the prophet Koné Malachie, who is blamed for having convinced Laurent Gbagbo that he has been divinely elected until 2015,¹⁹ having the divine mission to save Ivory Coast, whereas as a matter of fact he has lost against his rival Alassane Ouattara. That means that the pastors had instrumentalized Laurent Gbagbo. Venance Konan explains:

I think that his head is in the clouds, as he has begun to believe that God was really with him, that He has chosen him. Then, there were more and more pastors around him, (some) “prophets” who have a dialogue with God and are in mystic frenzies. The manipulator has been manipulated by his own creation.²⁰

The French newspaper, *Le Parisien Aujourd'hui* (28 Dec 2010) is of the same opinion: “Surrounded by Evangelists, Gbagbo is a mystic who believes that he is there by divine right.”

Other violent attacks in the headlines of the opposition press against Laurent Gbagbo follow: “Religious swindling: Laurent Gbagbo, prisoner of many pastors” (Yorohon 2010); “Laurent Gbagbo or when faith in false prophecies causes madness”²¹; “These pastors have been known for their unfailing support to Gbagbo since 2000 for financial privileges and for personal interests” (Bakassien 2011a); “With Gbagbo’s men of God it is the God of money”²² (Bakassien 2011a); “[...] These alimentary Evangelical pastors [...] There is eating at the palace” [...] to

¹⁸ Interview broadcast in *20minutes.fr*, on Thursday 7 April 2011.

¹⁹ See the seven celestial decrees of Koné Malachie below.

²⁰ Interview in *20 minutes.fr*, on Thursday 7 April 2011.

²¹ <http://touretec.centerblog.net/137-quand-la-foi-aux-fausses-prophetes-pousse-a-la-folie>.

²² The daily news paper *Le Patriote* of 3 November 2010.

say that there is feasting and money (Bakassien 2011a); “for reasons of filling the stomach you compromise yourselves by allying with Gbagbo [...]” (Gouet 2010).

Let us point out that some of those accusations go on to say that pastors are corrupt (cf. Bayart 2006²³). Finally, the criticism against Simone Gbagbo is more virulent, and it is on two levels. On the political level, she has always been considered by a great number of the political class (including her own party) as incarnating the radical wing of the Ivorian Popular Front, Laurent Gbagbo’s party. The journalist Venance Konan compares her to a very wicked biblical character who manipulated her husband: “Jezabel, a very authoritative woman inclined to crime.”²⁴ On the religious level, she is described as “mystic”; Venance Konan explains:

Simone Gbagbo has completely been in a religious delirium since 1996. That year, she had a miraculous escape from a road accident, and she met Koré Moïse, who caused her to join the evangelical faith. She often appeared on television in a mystical trance and every Wednesday, as a member of Parliament, she organized a prayer meeting at the House of Parliament.²⁵

For the journalist, while Simone Ehivet Gbagbo instrumentalizes her husband, he himself also has a great responsibility:

It is possible that it is she who leads him, but we should not believe that Laurent Gbagbo is completely manipulated by his wife. She is certainly a woman of power and an ideologist, they founded the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) together and she has often acted as if she were the co-President of Ivory Coast. But actually, both are responsible. It is not necessarily she who leads him in the evil way. Laurent Gbagbo does not want to renounce power. He has a lot of important advantages that he does not want to lose. Religion is a trick to remain in power.²⁶

Finally for the political opponents and the opposition press, Laurent Gbagbo has been the victim of a politico-religious imagination and of the instrumentalization of his pastors. But Laurent Gbagbo himself, as a man with many years of experience on the political battlefield, refuses to acknowledge the use of religion as an argument in the political struggle and answers: “It would be simplistic to believe that a President cannot dissociate his faith from his position.”²⁷

²³ J-F Bayart qualifies it as “stomach politics.”

²⁴ The daily newspaper *Nouveau Réveil* of Thursday 13 January 2011 titled on its first page: Bédié speaks (still!) to his brother Gbagbo/ Venance Konan to Gbagbo: “the night of your destiny is going to fall.”

²⁵ Interview of Venance Konan in *20minutes.fr*, on Thursday 7 April 2011.

²⁶ Interview of Venance Konan in *20minutes.fr*, on Thursday 7 April 2011.

²⁷ During an interview of Laurent Gbagbo on the Ivorian television on 24 January 2009.

Although there are different points of view, there is a double instrumentalization: First of all on Gbagbo's part. He used the Evangelical Church, particularly its leaders, for his political purposes by his generosity hoping to get their vote, then, the Evangelical leaders also manipulated Gbagbo, by making him believe that through prophecies and divine revelations he was God's choice, at the cost of invalidating 600,000 citizens' votes in the North of the country.

In any case, even if other factors of the post-electoral crisis (such as the political and geo-strategic appetites, local and western economic interests, struggles of position and style of political leadership) can be mentioned, the Evangelical religious feeling has been more decisive with Gbagbo and his camp in causing them to get stuck with a die-hard and at the limit suicidal determination.

3.4 "Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church are one and the same"

Since the post-electoral crisis, according to popular feeling, the Church in general, and notably the Evangelical churches and some Evangelical pastors at the centre of the big controversy are partly responsible for the worsening of the post-electoral crisis. Those churches and their leaders, on the other hand, think that they are victims of violence and confusion between themselves and Gbagbo. However, everybody acknowledges an outburst of violence against all the social categories and against all the religious communities as well. In other words, there was a brutalization of the Ivorian society and an appalling loss of respect for human life.

Keeping this in mind, one may wonder about specific reasons for violence perpetrated against the Evangelical church and its leaders, and how this relates to their alleged ties with Gbagbo. In fact, the Evangelical pastors complain about remarks and accusations levelled at them by certain leaders of the new Power, and they also complain about violence perpetrated against them by the Republican Forces of Ivory Coast (FRCI).

Thus, Ally Coulibaly, the Ambassador of Ivory Coast in Paris, a high-level representative of the Ivorian State, commenting charges brought against the FRCI for their alleged role in the massacres in the West of the country, and therefore against the new government which he represents in France, had this to say:

And it is Caritas, the Catholic rescue organization, a NGO which alleges the figure of this death toll of 1000, without any investigation. When we know that this NGO is close to the Church, and that the Church never wanted Alassane Ouattara to win [...] it is even a matter of question what Caritas is trying to do.²⁸

²⁸ Ally Coulibaly made this statement on radio *France Info*, on 4 April 2011.

The daily *Le Nouveau Réveil* (Tuesday, 17 May 2011) featured the title “Evangelical Churches of Ivory Coast and the post-electoral crisis: the failure of faith”. The journalist concludes: “The beginning of this failure of faith means the end of Laurent Gbagbo.”

During an electoral meeting of Alassane Ouattara, an eminent leader of his party asserted: “Laurent Gbagbo and the Evangelical Church are one and the same.”²⁹ Let us also mention another case of innuendo and violence reported by the same daily (*Le Nouveau Réveil*, 17 May 2011). In describing the following scene in front of an evangelical church whose pastor is in exile now, the paper stresses the relations between the pastor and Gbagbo’s clan, particularly Simone Ehivet Gbagbo:

This Sunday, 8 May, The Leaders’ Church of Cocody-Plateau Dokoui is attended by unusual visitors [...]. In front of the church is an Escort four-wheel drive vehicle on which it is written “FRCI”, Republican Force of Côte d’Ivoire. We do not know if the two soldiers who are sleeping on the reclined seats of the vehicle are there because they are escorting an illustrious church member who has recently joined President Alassane Ouattara, or because they are there to watch the actions and the gestures of the leader of the church. This person in charge is none else than Guy Vincent Kodja, self-proclaimed Bishop of the Evangelical church [...]. Pastor Kodja is the nephew of Simone Gbagbo, the deposed First Lady, wife of Laurent Gbagbo [...].

Now this minister had already escaped an assassination attempt which the governmental daily, *Fraternité Matin*, had reported:

“We also learn that Bishop Guy Vincent was the target of strangers around 10 pm [...]. He escaped, which cannot be said of his driver and his friend, who were both killed.” (Marie-Adèle Djidjé 2011).

According to the daily *Soir-Info* (of 25 and 26 June 2011), the Evangelical Confederation of Ivory Coast, led by its President Bishop Kassi d’ Azito, met the President of the Supreme Court. Echoing this meeting, the newspaper relates that one of the attendants reported that the President of the Supreme Court (a former Minister of Justice) intends to prosecute certain pastors:

[...] He displayed great firmness on the judicial procedures which could be undertaken against some of the pastors in exile. And this for purchasing war weapons

²⁹ “The meeting of 14 October 2010 in Abobo-gare [one of the districts of Abidjan]”, as reported in the daily *L’Inter* of Friday, 15 October 2010.

and changing churches into hiding places of weapons. With documents, pictures and sound, the President of the Supreme Court showed us (the pastors present) the gravity of the facts blamed on some of our people to the point of sometimes leaving us speechless [...]. The source made it plain that the President of the Supreme Court refused to give specific guarantees for the return of the exiled pastors.³⁰

Finally, if the international³¹ press and the report of the spokesman of the Human Rights of the UN, Rupert Colville (during a press conference on 6 May in Geneva), do not make direct links between the violence against churches and Laurent Gbagbo's membership of the Church, they confirm attacks on churches at diverse places in the country by elements of the Republican Forces of Ivory Coast (FRCI) which are favourable to the new political authorities. There is no clear evidence in support of allegations according to which violence suffered by Christians would have been somehow orchestrated at the summit of the State, or even that it is the direct result of their supposed allegiance to Gbagbo, but in a context of strong socio-political and ethno-regional tensions and of generalized disorder, such amalgams have impacts on the population.

In any case, this violence causes questions to be raised: Does it need to be interpreted as being the revenge of non-Christians or other communities against the Christians among whom Laurent Gbagbo is counted? Or, is it the revenge of the "predestined" or "elected" ones against those who were rejected, the "non-elected", i.e. those who lost the power in the elections?

Up to now, violence is still continuing and could jeopardize religious freedom. However, Bishop Kassi d'Azito, President of the Evangelical Churches Confederation of Ivory Coast (Confeci), who serves as a link between the new authorities and the other denominations and the National Board of directors of the Evangelical Protestant Churches of Ivory Coast³² admits that certain Evangelical pastors "have stuck their necks out too far into politics and by some of their statements have taken a position contrary to Christian ethics".³³ Then, Bishop Kassi d'Azito portrays a gloomy picture of the situation of the Evangelical churches: "Now, throughout the whole national territory, 1,700 places of worship or evangelical churches have been closed, with churches destroyed and pastors killed, hidden or in exile in France (60), in Ghana (134), or in Togo (75) because of violence."³⁴

³⁰ This information was confirmed by pastor K. J. during an interview on 8 July 2011.

³¹ Report of Reuters news agency of 6 May 2011.

³² Through the voice of its General Secretary, Rev. Makosso Camille Ariel Joshua, „Père du Sursaut Spirituel“. All Board members claimed to be victims of aggression by the Republican Forces of Ivory Coast (FRCI).

³³ Interview on 8 July 2011 in Cocody from 4pm to 6pm.

³⁴ Interview on 8 July 2011 in Cocody from 4pm to 6pm.

As to the President of the National Steering Committee of the Evangelical and Protestant churches of Ivory Coast, he insists that “undoubtedly Evangelical leaders have their share of responsibility, but holding them responsible for the crisis as a whole is overstating the case against them and will not contribute to reconciliation. There are too many innuendos and unfounded accusations.”³⁵ Another Evangelical pastor agrees:

Some of our pastoral colleagues have behaved as politicians, not as men of God. They have made un-Christian speeches and prophecies in favour of Laurent Gbagbo and against Alassane Ouattara. But is it for this that they must be accused of selling weapons? All have failed, the exponents of the political class as well as men of God from all religious denominations.³⁶

On the contrary, two of the ministers in exile in Ghana, consider that they “are being persecuted by the new regime because of their adherence to the evangelical faith.”³⁷

We have two different readings here: while the partisans of the new regime think that ministers must be prosecuted for the sale or hiding of arms or for having supported Laurent Gbagbo, the ministers see themselves as victims of persecution for the sake of their evangelical faith, and there is a lack of religious freedom under the new regime in Ivory Coast.

However that may be, given the fact that Muslims also underwent violence in which there was destruction of mosques and the death of some imams at the height of the crisis,³⁸ these amalgams, or these comments, afford political opportunities of confrontation of “fears against fears”: fear of being “non-predestined” tomorrow and losing power, against fear of being more durably excluded, and of being deprived of it. The long term result of all this, against the backdrop of political competition is the risk to produce a society where everybody is against everybody else. Because today’s “elected” ones can become tomorrow’s “non-elected” or “outcasts” and today’s “outcasts” can turn out to be tomorrow’s “elected”.

3.5 Religion as a register of legitimating political power

The relationship between the political and the religious spheres has given rise to some excitement in the 1990’s (Gilles 2004), the date marking the beginning of the

³⁵ Interview on 8 July 2011 in Cocody from 4pm to 6pm.

³⁶ Interview with Pastor Jean in Cocody on 8 July 2011.

³⁷ Phone interview on 7 July 2011 at 5 pm from Abidjan.

³⁸ “Côte d’Ivoire: un imam tué lors de heurts à Abidjan (responsables religieux)” published by AFP on Wednesday, 16 March 2011.

processes of democratization in sub-Saharan Africa. The various national conferences appointed men of God, in particular ministers or priests, as “Presidents” of these consultations, bringing them to the foreground of the political scene. This period also marks a strong expansion of the Pentecostal Churches the participants of which tend to position themselves in the public space, in particular in politics. This intervention in the political circles of participants of the Christian religion and also of Muslims (cf. Mary 2002) contributed to promote religion as a register of legitimization of political power.

This penetration of religion into the heart of the political sphere and its projection onto the public space can be explained by the fragility and the incapacity of African States to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the populations, and also by freedom of religion ensuing from political democratization. Furthermore, religious actors gained in credibility with the disfavored segments of society by launching initiatives in their favor in the social sphere: health, education, development, family, etc.

Since 1999, Ivory Coast has been going through a crisis of legitimacy because of the military-political situation. The effects accumulated by this crisis have increasingly provoked the decline of the capacity of the state to provide a satisfactory offer of the goods and the services which it is supposed to supply to the citizens. This is reflected in the fragmentation of institutional power, the disorganization of public services, and the reorganization of these services on the basis of unwritten rules becoming *de facto* the standard imposed by unofficial actors in quest of support from the political power. We also witness the disintegration of national identities as a sequel to the turning point marked by the rise of Ivorianness (“ivoirité”) as a yardstick of citizenship, which has become comparable to a loaf of cheese that can be cut at one’s whims into a quarter, a third, or two thirds of the whole, in a country that is, moreover, marked by strong genetic and therefore cultural intermingling of populations” (Akindès 2004).

Any reading of the political dynamism or the intervention of religion in the political sphere cannot ignore this context of conflict which generates a need for a kind of “puff of oxygen” to which the religious part is going to offer an answer by proposing and by building alternative identities. It is from this point of view that Dianteill (2006:264), observing the practices of the Pentecostal Churches in Latin America, thinks that they are not only based on feelings and compromise with the world, but also achieve an indirect contestation of the social order.

The religious references or the appearance of the theory of personal or individual predestination during these last electoral consultations in Ivory Coast, and the politico-religious imagination resulting from it, are all part of this process of producing new representations of political legitimization.

While Laurent Gbagbo is perceived by the Evangelical community mainly as the “first Christian President”³⁹, even as a “Christian political leader” with a divine mission to promote a “new birth of Ivory Coast”, with a view of it becoming a new “Jerusalem” of sub-Saharan Africa, or even of the whole world (see Koné Malachie’s prophecies above), Alassane Ouattara, too, is hailed by the Moslem community as “the first Muslim president”. One could wonder if he did not put himself in this perspective in 1999 when his application for candidacy had been invalidated because of “doubtful nationality”, and his comment was: “It is because I am Muslim and a native Jula from the North that they do not want me to be candidate for the Presidency of the Republic”.⁴⁰

At this junction, there is confusion between the fate of a “Nation” and that of an individual: the Nation cannot develop nor be imagined apart from this individual. He becomes a kind of “Messiah” or made up “Saviour”, crystallizing in his person all the expectations, but also all frustrations. Without this Messiah no Nation, no “parousia”: this is clearly a suicidal vision of democracy. Indeed, the consequence of this logic is to hinder the course of history and seriously damage the truth supposed to lead into collective freedom. To take the risk of such a biased approach will always end by adding to the frustrations which lead societies deeper into the deadlocks and crises of which they are supposed to be cured.

For one last time, let us emphasize, with respect to this theory of personal or individual predestination, its demobilizing effect on democratic processes. What it amounts to is a judgment on human life which is selective, anti-democratic and discriminatory. From the outset, it distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, the elected from the outcasts.

It is true that Christians concerned about loyalty to the Bible, too, cannot forsake this message on judgment and its finality in terms of salvation or perdition. However, is it up to a human authority to choose or to draw the line between destinies of human beings? Is God not omniscient? In fact, when God speaks about just men and about evil ones, it is not about closed categories of a priori limited access. The just men about whom God speaks, who have access to his Kingdom, do not establish a category of intrinsically superior elites having achieved all the moral and religious exploits: they are poor people, sinners who humbly accepted the grace of God and who live according to it.

In any case, this theory of individual predestination generated a kind of sectarian elitism which aroused an aversion with most people.

³⁹ The prophet Kacou Séverin, referring to Laurent Gbagbo in his preaching in the 1990’s, spoke about the first Ivorian president who would be Christian.

⁴⁰ This assertion is repeated on the site: <http://www.touspourlacotedivoire.info/?m=20110408&paged=2>.

Conclusion

The interferences between politics and religion, as we have seen, are complex, and more than ever raise the question of the separation between both spheres, but also that of the worldwide spread of new religious phenomena.

On the one hand, the question of the separation of politics and religion is worth being taken very seriously as far as Ivory Coast is concerned. In fact, if the political and religious leaders do not allow this issue to be debated openly, Ivory Coast will continue to be built on the alternation between politico-religious violence and amalgams between the public and the private sphere and vice versa, and this risks to happen at crucial moments of its history, as was the last presidential election.

With a definition of secularism in France in view, Baubérot (2003:16) identifies three axes of reflection: “The first one represents the respect for freedom of conscience and for worship; the second, the fight against any domination of religion over the State or civil society; the third, the equality of religions and convictions”.⁴¹ According to the author, different actors privilege different axes more than others: Thus, Christian believers will especially tend to emphasize the first one. On the other hand, as society has grown more secular, agnostics have constructed their secular identities, relying exclusively on the second axis. And the media, too, are inclined to talk about secularism from this angle, because it is the most conflictual one (Baubérot 2007).

In Ivory Coast, the political and religious leaders claim adherence to the first definition when it serves their interests, but in reality they practice an Ivorian brand of “civil religion”⁴² (Bellah 1967), instrumentalizing politico-religious imagination for their purposes. Certainly, “lay morality does not exclude personal religious commitment nor individual faith” as Caillavet (1998) points out. But the question remains: Do we want separation, and what form of separation do we want? In any case, the French way of conceiving this separation, at least in its pure form, cannot suit us, since Ivory Coast has not the same history as France and the Ivorian context is different from that of France. It remains therefore to find the form of separation which is best adapted to our needs, and to define its modalities and the conditions of its application.

On the other hand, it is important to take into account the fact that the interferences between religion and politics are part of a cross-border phenomenon, which according to Mary, Fouchard & Otayek (2005) “refer to a logic of spreading the practices and values in a space which is not bounded by national borders [...]”.

⁴¹ The Ivorian constitution also makes this separation.

⁴² According to R. Bellah “the civil religion confers a spiritual dimension to politics ; it is a mainly utilitarian concept”.

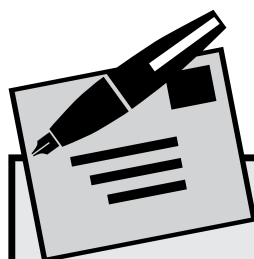
These two readings underline the importance of this question of politico-religious amalgams in the Ivorian context and show that the debate must get rid and stay clear of messy and simplistic interpretations if it is going to avoid the risk of it losing its significance and becoming a trivial matter.

The debate is open. It is part of a general reflection on the necessity of reinventing the social, cultural, religious, political and economic order for Ivory Coast.

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