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Original paper

FAITH AND THE IMAGE OF GOD AMONG YOUNG BELIEVERS IN BENIN QUANTITATIVE SURVEY AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The cultural environment in which an individual lives and grows up undoubtedly shapes the relationship to God, religiosity, and faith, and it has a certain influence on the creation of an image of God. The encounter of another religion, especially from the Western culture, with the domestic cultural environment can cause admiration or an attitude of caution or rejection, but also the possibility of partial acceptance of its values. Such reaction elements can easily be observed in the so-called mission countries that accept the novelty of the Christian message. With the aim of examining the perception of the influence of the cultural environment on understanding and perceiving God, religiosity and faith, a survey was conducted among 1062 young believers in the West African state of Benin.

Key words: youth, image of God, voodoo religion, missions, faith, Benin, sacramental life

Introduction

The evangelization of the African continent took place through three key waves. The first wave refers to the first five centuries of the Christian era with the evangelization of northern Mediterranean Africa to Ethiopia. The second wave coincides with the period of geographical discoveries and finding the sea route from Portugal to the south, when the bull of Pope Nicholas V *Romanus Pontifex* from 1455 gave the absolute and complete right to conquer lands dominated by the enemies of Christ – pagans¹. The nineteenth century, as the third and more

¹ Cf. Rosino GIBELLINI, *Breve storia della teologia del XX secolo*, Brescia, 2008.

serious wave of evangelization, was marked by considerable dynamics of the missionary activity of the Catholic Church towards West Africa, in which native cultures were invited to accept the message of salvation incarnate Son of God – Jesus Christ. Missionaries of that period were mainly from France, England, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, and Portugal. The presence of these countries is understandable if we consider that for geopolitical reasons the colonial power of these countries was already present at that time. Although they did not collaborate everywhere, where the missionaries came after the colonizers, they were forced to accept the already drawn colonial boundaries as their church boundaries².

We shall try to show the arrival of both in some parts of the African continent in the table below³:

Table 1. *Colonization and evangelization of some countries.*

Country	Colonizer	Beginning of colonization	Arrival of catholic missionaries
Benin	France	1890	1861
Burkina Faso	France	1894	1900
Gabon	France	1839	1844
Guinea	France	1890	1848
Cameroon	Germany/France	1884	1888
Congo	France	1875	1883
Madagascar	France	1885	1848
Mali	France	1863	1862
Ivory Coast	France	1889	1895
Rwanda	Germany/Belgium	1892	1900
Senegal	France	1854	1822
Sudan	France	1890	1891
Uganda	United Kingdom	1894	1879

Although the Church tried to separate the Christian mission and the national interest of the colonizers, there were frequent convergent collaborations among those present, at the time referred to as 3M: *Merchants – Missionaries –*

² It should be highlighted that previously there were informal borders that were later confirmed through the so-called *balkanization* of the African continent in 1885 in Berlin. Then each colonizing country got its territorial part. See more: Yannick ESSERTEL, *Évangélisation et culture. Essai d'histoire et d'anthropologie d'une pédagogie missionnaire du I^{er} au XX^e siècle*, Paris, 2020, 24.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 24.

Military. Of course, the missionaries tried to differentiate missionary activity from colonial goals. In this missionary activity, not only the meeting of the Gospel and man takes place, but also the meeting of two different cultures: western and African. African culture, more precisely, the cultural atmosphere in Benin through its religious dimension is characterized by animism, that is, the voodoo religion of which Benin is precisely the cradle. Such an encounter induced both missionaries and later theologians with a desire to find suitable models that would facilitate the »implantation« of the Gospel message in that context. This is how various theological models arose, such as the African theology of adaptation, the theology of inculturation, the theology of the liberation with African orientation, the theology of planting the Church – *plantatio Ecclesiae* according to the model of the document of the Second Vatican Council *Ad Gentes* no. 6, incarnational theology, etc.⁴ In short, the fundamental challenge is how to Africanize Christianity and Christianize Africa. Given that Benin is considered the cradle of the voodoo religion, it can be assumed that the attempt to achieve the aforementioned challenge may encounter various syncretistic elements if we take into account the religious structure of that country: Voodoo religion 11.6%, Catholics 25.5%, Protestants of various orientations 6.8%, Church of Heavenly Christianity 6.7%, Islam 27.7%, other Christian communities 9.5%, other traditional religions 5.2%⁵.

More than a century and a half (since 1861) after the arrival of the missionaries in Benin, we believe that it is time to examine the quality of the realization of the abovementioned challenge on the one hand, and on the other hand to open up the possibility for the Church in other African countries to conduct similar surveys in order to establish what beliefs and convictions have those who are the future bearers of the Church in Africa, i.e. the youth. Furthermore, the second goal of the research is to try to probe both the level and nature of the acceptance of the Gospel message, and the way in which young Africans perceive that message and what images they have of God. A comparison with similar research in the context of the Church in the Western world (more precisely with France as a former colonizer and Croatia as the country from which the missionaries came to Benin) will help us draw some conclusions about the

⁴ Sylvain KALAMBA NSARO, Tendenze attuali della teologia africana, in: Rosino GIBELINI (ed.), *Prospettive teologiche per il XXI secolo*, Brescia, 2011.

⁵ Cf. L'INSTITUT NATIONAL DE LA STATISTIQUE ET DE L'ANALYSE ECONOMIQUE (INSAE), *Principaux indicateurs sociodémographiques et économiques (RGPH-4, 2013)*, Cotonou, 2016, 13.

rootedness/rootlessness of the Catholic faith among young people in Benin and about the (in)correct images about God.

With reference to these goals of our survey, the following hypotheses are set:

- H1:** Religiosity and faith of young Catholics in Benin is an important factor in their daily lives.
- H2:** Most young Catholics practice their faith through the Sunday celebration of Holy Mass.
- H3:** Young believers in Benin adhere to the Church's theological teaching on sacraments, heaven, hell, and the devil.
- H4:** As the most important life values, young believers in Benin will highlight money, family, religion, and house.
- H5:** Young Catholics from Benin perceive God as a creator, a lord, merciful, a savior, and a just judge.
- H6:** A positive correlation will be shown between the acceptance of the Church's teachings and the belief in evil forces in human life among young believers in Benin.

1. Research methodology

In order to achieve the defined survey goals and test the hypotheses, the method of quantitative research was chosen. Research was carried out using the survey questionnaire technique, which was created for the needs of this research following a literature research. Part of the set of questions was taken from two questionnaires in the Croatian language: *Uпитnik o dimenzijama religioznosti i njezinom utjecaju na svagdanji život* (Šimun Šito Ćorić)⁶ and *Religioznost zagrebačkih adolescenata* (Ružica Razum i dr.).⁷ I've added set of questions bearing in mind the specificity of the culture in which the respondents are located. The survey contains 28 questions that include general socio-demographic facts, details about religious practices, as well as statements about the image of God. Most of the questions contained several parts. For the questions aimed at investigating the attitude, a Likert scale was used, in which the number 1 indicates strong disagreement with the statement, and the number 5 indicates complete agreement with the statement. The paper questionnaire was given to each respondent. The duration for completing the survey was 30 to 45 minutes.

⁶ Cf. Šimun Šito ĆORIĆ, *Psihologija religioznosti*, Jastrebarsko, 2003, 276-282.

⁷ Cf. Ružica RAZUM – Blaženka Valentina MANDARIĆ – Denis BARIĆ, *Religioznost zagrebačkih adolescenata*, Zagreb, 2019, 201-215.

The research was conducted from July to April 2022 in the West African state of Benin, in the southern part of the state, mainly in the cities of Porto-Novo and Cotonou, which represent the most developed parts of the country with the largest number of Catholics. Respondents were approached at certain religious events, and therefore the sample of this survey is appropriate in terms of type. The sample consists of two groups of respondents: people from urban areas and people from rural areas. The criteria for the inclusion of research respondents were age (from 18 to 35 years) and belonging to the Catholic Church.

In the research, basic demographic data about the respondents was collected: gender, age, level of education, family information and place of residence (urban or rural area). The survey is anonymous, and the data cannot be linked in any way to the respondent. Questionnaires were distributed to interested participants, which they filled out freely in a separate room or in the church with separate intervals to avoid mutual communication or consultation when giving answers. Questionnaires were handed out and instructions were given by catechists who had previously been trained for this. In data processing, as well as for publication, group data were used. The collected data is available only to the researcher. The data is stored on the researcher's computer and is accessible only to him. The completed questionnaires are stored in a special safe to which only the researcher, who is also responsible for data protection, has access. After five years, the data on the computer as well as the questionnaires will be destroyed. Participation was voluntary, and ethical research standards were considered in the research. Before filling out the questionnaire, the respondents were given an informed consent form with a description of the research for review and signature. Respondents could withdraw from the research at any time. They were introduced to the topic and goal of the survey with guaranteed anonymity and group level analysis of the data used for scientific and professional purposes. The data were processed using the Microsoft Office Excel program and in a statistical program SPSS (version 28) with a risk level of 5%, i.e., the reliability level is 95%.

2. The results and analysis

2.1. The characteristics of the respondents

The obtained data were analysed, and the following socio-demographic data were obtained. A total of 1,062 respondents participated in the survey, of which almost an equal number of respondents were men (52.2%, $n = 554$) and women

(47.3%, n = 502). As the criterion for the inclusion of respondents in the research was the age between 18 and 35 years, it turned out that the largest number of respondents was from the 18-21 age group (46.7%). Data on the level of education of the respondents show that the largest number of respondents have completed high school as their highest level of education (41.6%), but it should be noted that there is a slight difference between them and the percentage of those with higher education (40.8%).

The young people who participated in this survey mostly come from families with four or more children (78%). This fact indicates that it is a society that cherishes traditional family values such as openness to life and togetherness. This result is confirmed by the fact that the fertility rate in Benin is 5.47 (2021)⁸, which places it in 6th place in the world according to the fertility rate. As for the circumstances of growing up, the largest percentage of young people grew up with both parents (73.6%). It can be concluded that this is a society with a very low number of divorced parents (9.6%). Those who grew up without one or both parents make up 14.7%.

According to the place of residence, percentage of young people from urban areas (70.4%) who participated in the survey was much higher than those from rural areas (28.3%). The following summary table breaks down the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents:⁹

Table 2. *The socio-demographic characteristics.*

The characteristics of the respondents		%	N
Gender structure	Men	52.2%	554
	Women	47.3%	502
Place of living	Town	70.4%	748
	Village	28.3%	300
Age	18-21	46.7%	496
	22-25	22.4%	238
	26-30	15.5%	164
	31-35	14.1%	150

⁸ CIA, *The World Factbook*, Benin (22. III. 2022) <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/benin/#people-and-society> (Accessed: 23. VII. 2022).

⁹ The missing percentages or numbers from the table related to those questions which the participants did not respond.

The characteristics of the respondents		%	N
I grew up	As only child	2.8%	30
	In a family with two children	5.1%	54
	In a family with tree children	13%	138
	In a family with four or more children	78%	828
Who did you grow up with?	Without one or both parents	14.7%	156
	With divorced parents	9.6%	102
	With both parents	73.6%	782
Education level	Primary school	4.1%	44
	High school	41.6%	442
	University	40.9%	434
	Trade	10%	106
	Other	3.4%	18

2.2. Faith and sacramental life

One of the proposed hypotheses addressed the topic of the importance of faith in the lives of young believers in Benin. When asked about the level of importance (Unimportant; Mostly unimportant; Neither important nor unimportant; Mostly important; Extremely important) of certain life values, the respondents highlighted health as the most important or extremely important value in the first place (89.7%), in the second place faith (77%), and honesty (65.6%) in the third place. This shows that religion occupies an important place in their lives, even more important than, for example, family, friendship, money (considering the material conditions in which they live) and others – which rejects H4. This fact is significant and clearly shows that young people are still aware of the transitory value of material goods and the importance of some more permanent values that can bring fundamental fulfillment with the gift of health as a starting point and prerequisite for experiencing all other values. In a 2016 study on the religiosity of adolescents in Zagreb (Razum, Mandarić, Barić), young people also ranked health first (89.9%), followed by family (89.8%) and friendship as third (87.2%). Such a coincidence demonstrates that every person, regardless of cultural environment and level of education, recognizes health as the first desirable value. Faith is in the tenth place among young people in Croatia, where 46.5% of

respondents considered it extremely important¹⁰. It is interesting to observe the most prominent motives of the belief, which emerged as the most common. The results show that the greatest importance of religion to young people in Benin is the enabling of contact with God, which was marked as extremely important by 71.6% of respondents. In the second place according to importance is the help of faith in overcoming life's problems (63.8%), and in the third place is instilling hope and trust (63.1%). Overcoming life's problems was ranked third by young people from Croatia (37.9%), while enabling contact with God was ranked fifth (31.7%)¹¹. As expected, young people from Benin placed overcoming life problems higher on the scale of importance than young people from Croatia, which is an interesting fact if we consider the way of life and living conditions of both groups of respondents i.e., the more difficult living conditions of young people from Benin.

Practicing faith at a certain level should be an indicator or reflection of the importance of faith as a certain life value. Prayer is a significant indicator of religiosity. The largest number of respondents in our research pray several times a day, almost 50%, and the motives for belief differ. They regularly pray mostly to thank God (68.7%), then to ask for forgiveness (65.1%) and with the goal of being closer to God. If we take into account the material poverty in which young people live in Benin, the results reveal that young people only sometimes pray for material goods (37.3%), which can be an indicator of uncalculated faith, i.e. faith from assurance and the belief that God controls their lives and will also take care of the material, following the example of Jesus's encouragements: »Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well« (Mt 6, 33). Most respondents never pray out of habit or behaviour learned from others (27.7%). Young people from Croatia regularly pray to gain strength in difficult moments (57.8%) (while in Benin it refers to a lower percentage – 54.6%), then to thank God (49%) and finally to seek forgiveness from God (29.8%)¹².

Practicing religion also includes attending religious ceremonies. Respondents of this survey most often attend Holy Mass every Sunday (61%), followed by attending Mass several times during the week (23%) (cf. Chart 1). Similar results were found in the 2021 research by Begić and Kutleša, which examined the understanding of faith and the image of God among young believers in

¹⁰ Ružica RAZUM – Blaženka Valentina MANDARIĆ – Denis BARIĆ, *Religioznost zagrebačkih adolescenata*, 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹² *Ibid.*, 223.

Croatia. Their results showed that 58% of young believers in Croatia attend Holy Mass every Sunday.¹³

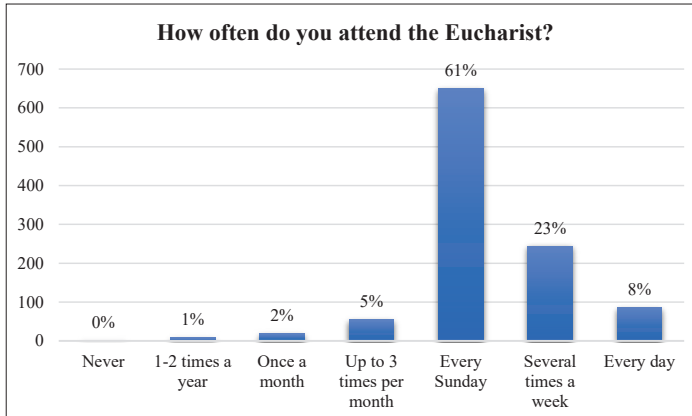


Chart 1. *Frequency of attendance of the Eucharist.*

The sacrament of confession is also an indicator of a certain level of practicing faith and leading a spiritual and sacramental life. The results of our research show that the largest number of respondents, 44% of them, attend confession several times a year. This is followed by the same percentage of those who attended confession once, but no longer do so (16%). The reason, apparently, is the lack of sacramental living of the marital relationship. Those who confess once a month also make up 16%. Related to this, the largest number of respondents (73.2%) fully agree with the statement that the sacrament of confession enables reconciliation with God, and with other people.

¹³ Martina s. Ana BEGIĆ – Mislav KUTLEŠA, Understanding Faith and the Image of God Among Young Believers Today. Presentation of the Survey Results on the Attitudes and Opinions of Young People about Understanding Faith and the Image of God in Croatia, in: *Bogoslovska smotra*, 91 (2021) 5, 966.

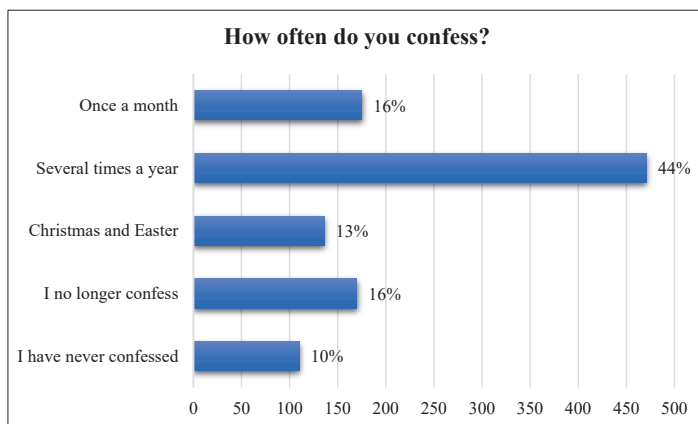


Chart 2. *Frequency of attendance of the Confession.*

All the above speaks in favour of the first (H1) and second (H2) hypothesis, that is, according to the results of this research, the claim that the religiosity and faith of young Catholics in Benin is an important factor in their daily lives, and that the majority young Catholics practice their faith through the Sunday celebration of Holy Mass.

2.3. *Actors in faith formation*

Investigating the faith of young people includes investigating the foundations of their identity that unfolds under the influence of various instances: family, school, university, Church, friends, media etc. Identity here represents a set of characteristics that make a person what he or she deeply is. In the experience of young Catholics in Benin, we notice a double source construction of identity—an African source and a Christian source – that passes through three factors. The first one is the tradition of the elders (which includes both African religious habits, and the tradition of the Church). The second is the role of the institution (family community, Church, associations, and movements) in the transmission of biblical values and their actualization in line with the current challenges. The first and the second factor allow us to determine that one believes based on the testimony of others, i.e., with the help of others to keep something true and real. Faith is then a kind of cognition or knowledge – *scientia testimonialis*¹⁴. Finally, the effort of personal formation of the young. The construction of identity in the

¹⁴ Cf. Josef PIEPER, *O vjери. Filozofska rasprava*, Zagreb, 2012, 20.

face of modern challenges is never a finished work. The family remains, therefore, the instance of permanent follow-up of the formation of identity. This is at least what our research has confirmed when we look at those who have most influenced the spiritual – and therefore human – formation of young people.

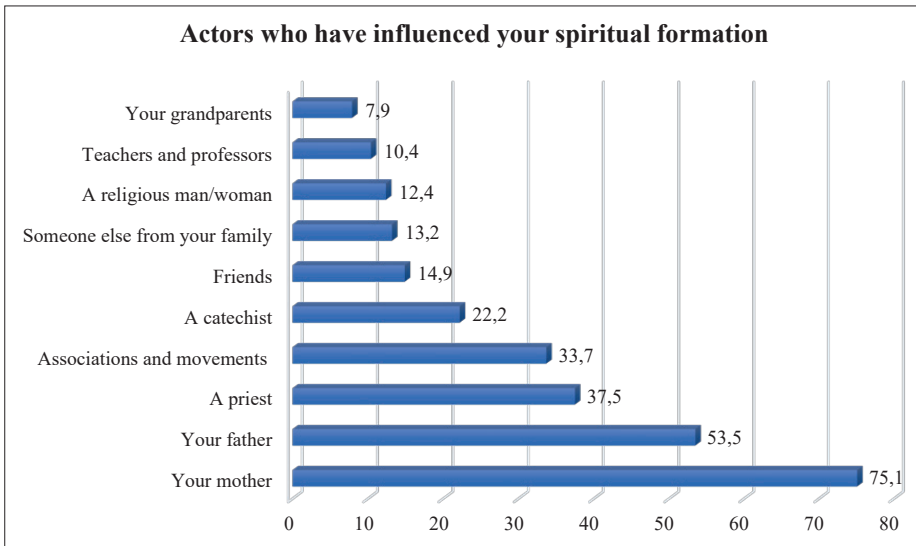


Chart 3. *Actors who have had the most influence on the spiritual formation.*

In the first place is the mother, then comes the father, and the priest comes in the third place. This position of the priest is, in our opinion, a tribute to the work done by the missionaries and other pastors of this young Church. It is interesting to observe that other structures of the Church participate actively in this formation. These are the associations and movements as well as the volunteer catechists. However, three elements stand out with regard to this role of identity formation.

In the first place, we notice that the religious (monks and nuns) are not emphasized among the principal actors in the formation of the spiritual identity of young people. This result is perhaps because they are much more involved in charitable structures and in percentage less represented in the structures of education and spiritual formation. In addition, we must stress that such formation is much more related to parish life than to the houses of religious communities. The second element that is surprising at first sight concerns the role of teachers and professors. Nevertheless, we may assert that this research was not carried out exclusively in Catholic schools, but among young people in general. Given

that we are in a context of secularity (not secularism!), it is understandable that teachers in public schools do not have as their primary mission the spiritual formation, but rather general and intellectual formation of young people. We could point out that research in Catholic schools would surely yield a higher percentage among teachers. The last element that may also be surprising is that grandparents are less involved in spiritual formation than friends are. The European context shows the opposite. Grandparents are often the first actors in spiritual formation. Let us take the example of Croatia, where research in 2021 gives the following results: parents (43.7%), priest (10.9%), grandparents (7%), and religion teachers (6.3%)¹⁵. In the western world, grandparents play an important role in the transmission of faith as shown by the research of Yusuf¹⁶ and Vigner¹⁷. This result in the Beninese context is quite understandable insofar as we are in a young Church in which spiritual formation is carried out on all age groups through the catechumenate. Here we can notice the conversion of the elderly who cannot yet play the role of formators in the faith. We could also notice that many grandparents are still linked to traditional religions.

In summary, the great influence of fathers and mothers on the spiritual formation of young people is understandable insofar as the family plays an important role in the life of the African being. In fact, 73.6% of the participants grew up with both parents. This influence of the parents is crystallized through the education model through which the family tries to transmit the necessary fundamental values. We are faced with a model of identification by which parents exert their influence much more by the force of their exemplarity than by a logic of spiritual authoritarianism.

2.4. Prayer life and church attendance

The prayer life of young people is marked by a theocentric, Christocentric and Marian dynamic insofar as most young people, through prayer, address themselves first to God (74.8%), then to Jesus Christ (69.7%) and then to the Blessed Virgin Mary (59.7%). The relationship with the Holy Spirit comes in the fourth place (55.5%), followed by the saints (28.6%). The closeness to Mary is not a

¹⁵ Martina s. Ana BEGIĆ – Mislav KUTLEŠA, Understanding Faith and the Image of God Among Young Believers Today, 970.

¹⁶ Cf. Muhammed YUSUF, The role of grandparents in grandchildren totality development, in: *Journal of Research, Policy & Practice of Teachers & Teacher Education*, 4 (2014) 2, 73-81.

¹⁷ Cf. Paz VIGUER and al., Grandparent-grandchild relationships from the children's perspective: shared activities and socialization styles, in: *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 13 (2010) 2, 708-717.

phenomenon observed only among young people in Benin, but in the whole Church. In terms of spirituality, Marian devotions often take precedence over a Trinitarian spirituality. The weak relationship with the saints is understandable in a context where the country does not yet have any recognized and beatified or canonized soul. The very low percentage (3%) of those who pray but do not know to whom they are praying shows a certain spiritual maturity of the young people. This relationship of identity through the life of prayer finds its summit in the relationship with the Eucharist. Given the large number of young people who attend Sunday Mass (61%), and the attendance of Mass several times a week (23%), we can state that this is a Eucharistic spirituality. Furthermore, 82.9% believe entirely in the presence of God in the bread and wine consecrated during the Mass, and 13.5% simply believe in it. In total, we have 96.4% who believe in the real presence of God under the species of bread and wine. A comparative look allows us to see that in some European countries surveys from 2018 showed the following result on church attendance, outside of special occasions, among young Catholics aged from 16 to 29. These are 15 European countries¹⁸.

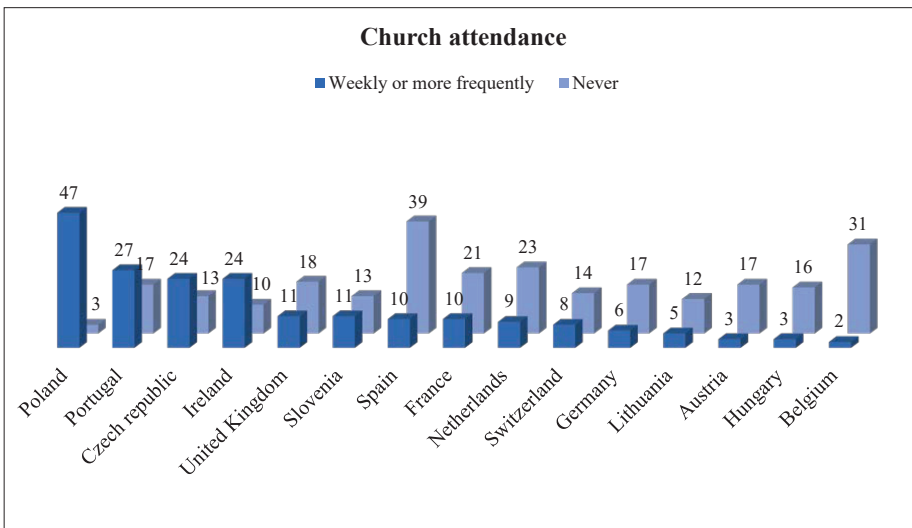


Chart 4. The mass attendance in some European countries.

¹⁸ Stephen BULLIVANT, *Les jeunes adultes et la religion en Europe: Présentation des résultats de l'enquête sociale européenne (2014-16) en vue d'informer le Synode des évêques 2018*, Twickenham – Paris, 2018, 8.

In general, in France, the country that colonized Benin, 6% of 18–29-year-olds are practicing the Catholic faith, at least for some religious holidays¹⁹.

We could conclude that in general, orthodoxy and orthopraxy do not always go hand in hand and the colonizing countries, from which the orthodoxy of the Christian message came, are no longer the mirror for African countries. Fortunately, the history of the Church shows that Christianity is a pilgrim religion because it moves and always finds new territories of expression and rooting. The irruption of the great mass of Christians from the south as pilgrims of Christ thus generates an intercultural rebirth of the world and of the Christian message. If it is true that we cannot scrutinize the mystery of the Church through statistical and empirical data, and that any belonging of the most faithful member to the Church always remains partial²⁰ because of human weakness, it is necessary to notice a »de-Catholization« of the European world through various forms of secularization. Moreover, we can say with Yves Congar that »the Church learns from contact with the facts. (...) The truth remains the same, but it is grasped in a new way, and undoubtedly more authentic, when we learn more about humankind and the world as they really are.«²¹

3. The image of God and the relation with others religious truths

3.1. The image of God

Since 1861, Benin as a missionary country has been faced with the acceptance of the novelty of the Christian message and certain teachings of the Catholic Church. Due to the distinct differences between these two cultures, Western and African, there is a possibility of only partial acceptance of certain teachings of the Church, or incomplete rejection of the religious elements that come from animism, that is, the voodoo religion. For this reason, it is interesting to examine young believers – who have lived a Christian life for several generations in advance, accepting the Church's teaching – to examine their view of God and the level of acceptance of the Church's teaching.

The survey questionnaire contained questions that make certain statements about God and Jesus Christ with which respondents expressed their

¹⁹ Cf. Claude DARGENT, *Recul du catholicisme, croissance des non-affiliés et des minorités religieuses*, in: Pierre BRÉCHON, Frédéric GONTHIER, Sandrine ASTOR, *La France des valeurs. Quarante ans d'évolutions*, Grenoble, 2019, 224.

²⁰ Cf. Joseph RATZINGER, *Identifikation mit der Kirche*, in: Joseph RATZINGER – Karl LEHMAN, *Mit der Kirche leben*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1977, 11-40.

²¹ Yves CONGAR, *Vaste monde ma paroisse*, Paris, 2000, 113.

level of agreement or disagreement. The results show that the largest number of respondents completely agree with the statements about God that correspond to the image of God taught by the Church; 85.3% of respondents fully agree that God is the creator and the master of all creation. In the second place is the statement that God is the one who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and 76.6% of respondents fully agree with this. God is a father who understands and supports us for 73.4% of respondents and a merciful saviour for 72.1% of respondents. Respondents completely disagree with the image of God as strict and unjust (57.8%), but 40.3% completely agree that God is a strict and righteous judge. They also do not agree with the statements about God as the one who causes fear (73.4%) and the one who punishes sinners (60.5%). The results obtained by correlation demonstrate that people who grew up without one or both parents more often agree with the statement that God is strict and unjust ($r = 0.07$; $p < 0.05$). In Begić and Kutleša's research, a slightly higher percentage of young believers in Croatia, in relation to young people in Benin, do not agree with statements about God as the one who punishes sinners.²²

The situation is almost identical with the image of Jesus Christ. Namely, most respondents fully agree with the claims about Jesus Christ taught by the Catholic Church; 83% of young people fully agree that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and 14.5% of young people agree, which makes 97.5% of respondents who agree with this statement. 77% of respondents consider Jesus as the Saviour and Redeemer of people, that is, they completely agree. 67% of respondents expressed complete agreement with the statement »Jesus Christ is a friend to whom we entrust everything«, which speaks in favour of the existence of a personal dimension in the relationship of young people with the person of Jesus Christ. Almost 52% of respondents expressed complete agreement with the statement »Jesus Christ is the person I would like to be a like«. The connections between who a person grew up with and the statement about Jesus Christ were examined, and it was found that people who grew up without one or both parents will more often consider Jesus Christ as a friend in whom they can confide everything ($r = 0.09$; $p < 0.01$) and as a man who opposed all forms of social injustice ($r = 0.08$; $p < 0.05$).

The survey contained one open-ended question asking for a personal description of God in a maximum of four words. Young believers in Benin mostly described God as the Creator, then as Merciful or with the word Mercy. Other

²² Martina s. Ana BEGIĆ – Mislav KUTLEŠA, *Understanding Faith and the Image of God Among Young Believers Today*, 968.

descriptions that appeared most often together with the frequency of responses are found in Table 3. In a similar survey conducted in Croatia, young people most often described God with the following words: Love, Mercy, Father, Support, Goodness, Greatness, Justice, Light, etc.

Table 3. *Description of God according to the personal perception.*

Description of God	F
Creator	304
Mercy/Merciful	174
Saviour	130
Lord	130
Love	116
Father	110
Mighty/Almighty	68
Alpha and Omega	44

3.2. *A three-dimensional consequence of understanding God as the Creator in the African context*

We shall now focus on the first and dominant description of God as the Creator among young believers in Benin. It is understandable that in the first place they describe God as the Creator seeing that their faith is still connected with the relationship to nature, that is, to the created world as a reflection of God's creative power and love. In this context, the theological awareness is highly developed through terms such as *Gbèto* (man) and *Mawu Gbèdoto* (God the Creator of life). *Gbèto* signifies man as the giver of life, and *Gbèdoto* as the Creator of life. In the centre is life – plant, animal, humankind. However, man is the transmitter of that life. It should therefore be said that such a cultural environment is opposed to the »culture of death«²³. Humankind receives life from the Creator to give it. The most important thing is therefore not humankind, i.e., *Gbèto*, but the *Gbè*, i.e., the life that comes from the Creator²⁴. Such theological anthropology places

²³ JOHN-PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae. Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life* (25. III. 1995), no. 12. Available from: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (Accessed: 2. VIII. 2022).

²⁴ Cf. Mèdèwalé-Jacob AGOSSOU, *Gbèto et Gbèdoto: l'homme et le Dieu créateur selon les Sud-Dahoméens. De la dialectique de la participation vitale à une théologie anthropocentrique*, Paris 1972.

humankind in an incarnational dynamic that presupposes the humanization of himself and the created world through the receptivity of the gift of life. Here, a true humanization presupposes openness to the surprise given by the Creator. Being in the world such as Heidegger's *dasein* presupposes being-with (*mitsein*); and this implies the necessity of receiving ourselves from the other and from God. The original setting of existence is thus receptivity. Such receptivity has its prehistoric and transhistorical dimension.

Specifically, in almost all sub-Saharan cultures, the understanding of God as the Creator always presupposes a three-dimensional awareness of the gift of life. The first level of this consciousness refers to living members as a visible level of God's gift. Man realizes the meaning of his existence only in close connection and in communion with others, and together they have their foundation in God. Therefore, the concept of family in Africa is never related to the nuclear family (father, mother, children, grandparents, etc.), but includes all those who are related to each other in various categories. Here, what binds first is not blood, but a gifted humanity. Furthermore, while the Western world associates the concepts such as father, mother, brother, sister, etc., exclusively with biology, the African world extends this concept even to an uncle or aunt, or in the case of a sibling to cousins, and is much closer to the Jewish mentality than to the Western one²⁵. It should also be added that belonging or staying in the same village creates family ties, so that in some cases marriage is prohibited among young people of the same village²⁶. Such a conception of God as the Creator that has long been present in many African cultures since the pre-Christian period, shows the confirmation of Jesus's promise: »...who was born not out of human stock or urge of the flesh or will of man but of God himself« (Jn 1,13).

The second dimension concerns the relationship to the dead. The dead do not disappear but are always present in the lives of the living. Therefore, in this context, they can be considered as »dead-alive«²⁷ because the dead do not live only in the memory of the living, but it is thought that they still preserve the personality and physicality that God had given them once and for all. Therefore, traditional religions have always nurtured various rituals that include, for example, feeding the deceased by placing food on their graves. The

²⁵ Let us recall the observations of Jesus's interlocutors: »Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, a brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters our neighbors here?« (Mk 6, 3).

²⁶ Cf. John Mary WALIGGO, The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church, in: Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua MUGAMBI – Laurenti MAGESA (eds.), *The Church in African Christianity. Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, Nairobi, 1990, 111-127.

²⁷ John S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, 1992, 107.

spiritual dimension is manifested through prayers addressed to them by the living for various purposes, especially for their intercession and protection. If these deceased do not deserve a positive spiritual connection because of the bad way they lived, other rituals are used to try to distance from them. It is interesting to notice through this research how in meeting with the Catholic faith, our respondents show a certain distance and maturity both with respect to the way in which the deceased can influence the living, and in regard to some practices of traditional religions. The following chart displays a broader picture of their attitudes.

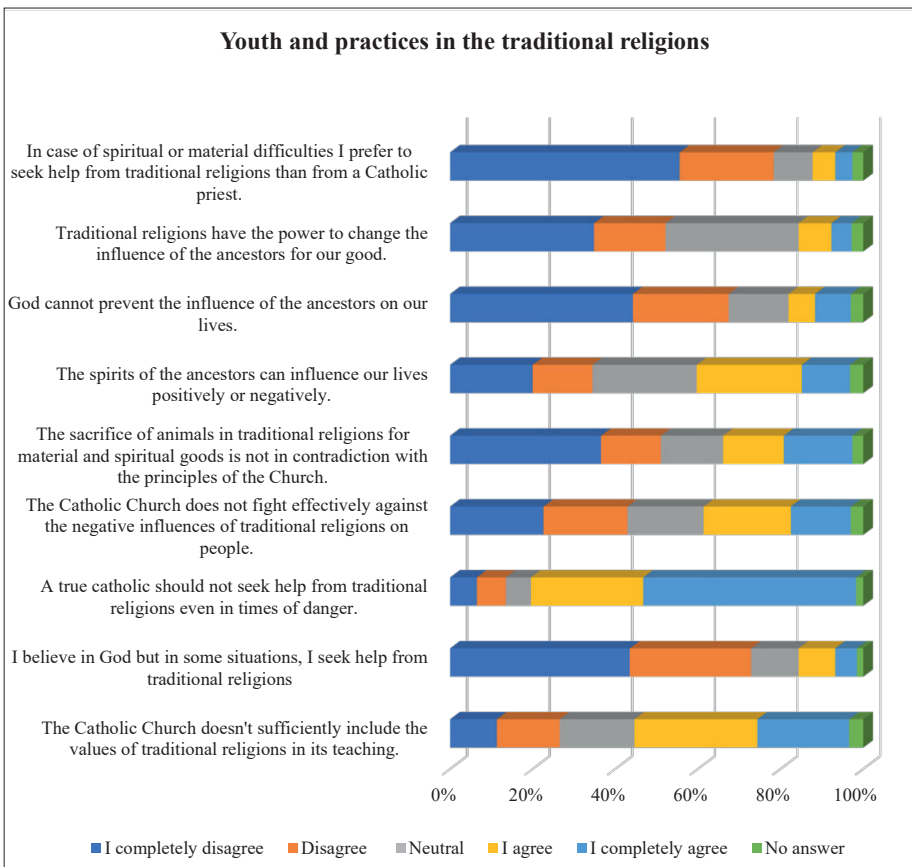


Chart 5. *Youth and its relationship with practices in the traditional religions.*

Although 25.4% agree that the spirits of ancestors can positively or negatively influence the living, 44.2% do not think that God would be powerless before this influence; and 34.8% do not think that traditional religions could influence

ancestors, while the vast majority (55.5%) do not want to seek help from these religions in case of some difficulties including difficulties in the relationship with the deceased. On the one hand, there is an awareness of the ambivalent influence of the deceased, and on the other hand, they do not think that, because of this influence, they should seek help from Catholic priests instead of traditional religions. A certain maturity in faith can be observed here. In particular, the attitude towards ancestors in traditional religions is often associated with fear, not with trust. Therefore, it is not surprising that young people here place mercy second in their understanding of God. Because of his mercy, He is not a God of fear, but a God of love.

Finally, in some cultures the attitude towards the deceased is so strong that they can even be »threatened« through prayer in order to improve the living conditions of the living. In this sense, it is worth quoting the prayer *kongo*, in which the relationship between the living and the dead is dynamic and takes place through the logic of receiving and giving, and both sides continue to nurture the relationship of communion:

*As for you, in your village, Masa, we beg you, our ancestors,
our prosperity and happiness depend on your understanding.
if we notice that the luck is returning to us,
then we will always give you the honours,
but if it doesn't return,
will you continue to come and pick us up in our village,
we will gladly accept that.
Exterminate us all.
And then we will see who will bring you more meat dishes,
who will take care of the safou and the palm trees that we shall leave,
That foreigners come to inhabit this land.
I, as I speak, let it be so.
I have finished!²⁸*

The third and last dimension refers to what Bujo calls the »non-born-yet«²⁹. However, that expression does not only refer to children who are already in the mother's womb, but it is about the future world in which live (yet unconceived) children who will join the current generation and who will take over the »torch« of the ancestors' memorial. In the southern part of Benin where we

²⁸ Yvon NSUKA, Une prière d'invocation kongo, in: *Cahier des Religions africaines* 4 (1970), 259-264.

²⁹ Bénézet BUJO, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, Fribourg, 2008, 26.

conducted this survey, specifically among the Ewe-Mina cultural group, there is a myth called *Bomenɔ* that clearly highlights how this world of relationships works. The Beninese theologian Pénoukou describes this relational dynamic in these words: »Bomenɔn, or the resident (nɔ) of the prenatal universe (Bome) is a spiritual character to whom the creator of all things (Mawu) would have entrusted the care to introduce in the terrestrial world the ‘small human beings’. Those would exist already in this prenatal universe waiting to be ‘released’ on the orbit of the existential history. To do this, Bomenɔn introduces the man (Agbe-tɔ), in a reduced form, into the woman’s womb (nyɔnu b’adɔmɛ). But the man is only sent down here for a limited time, he will have to return one day to his country of origin by crossing the earth’s womb (e la to anyigban mɛ).«³⁰ We have a cosmotheandric relationship in which three people collaborate: God (Mawu), spiritual being (Bomenɔn) and man (Agbe-tɔ), and three worlds: Bome (prenatal universe) woman’s womb, and the earth’s womb. A relation by interposition is deployed, which establishes an »organic medium«³¹ between two distant instances. Bomenɔn is the intermedium between Mawu and Agbe-tɔ; woman’s womb mediates between Bome and earth. In Africa, and particularly in Benin, the vision of God as the Creator therefore includes a relationship of organic mediation and solidarity with people and worlds.

Children who will be born from this third dimension represent the hope of the society to the point where begetting or giving birth becomes a sacred mission and a religious duty³². By procreation, man contributes to the immortality of the community; he vitalizes the past, the present and the future. Since by descent the dead are assured of their survival, the living of this world is strengthened and the whole future of the three-dimensional community is guaranteed³³.

3.3. *The relationship to certain Church teachings*

Several survey questions dealt with beliefs and acceptance of certain truths and teachings of the Catholic Church with regard the sacrament of the Eucharist, life after death, purgatory, heaven, and hell. The results show that the young believers of Benin accept and fully believe in the most important Church teachings. In the first place is the complete belief in the presence of God in the

³⁰ Efoé-Julien PENOUKOU, *Christologie au village*, in: François KABASELE – René LUNEAU (eds.), *Chemins de la christologie africaine*, Paris, 2001, 86.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³² Cf. Judith Mbula BAHEMUKA, *Our religious Heritage*, Nairobi, 1982, 101.

³³ Cf. Bénézet BUJO, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, 98.

consecrated bread and wine (82.9%). 53.9% fully believe in life after death. The results are displayed in Chart 6 and point to the acceptance of the hypothesis about the knowledge and acceptance of the Church's theological teaching on sacraments, heaven, hell, and the devil. These results are not surprising if we keep in mind that we are in the context of a deep awareness of the connection between the living and the dead as we have previously explained. For this reason, it is easier for missionaries to evangelize such people who can easily recognized themselves in the Gospel message of salvation because of their cultural and spiritual foundation. The biggest challenge missionaries usually face is material poverty, not spiritual.

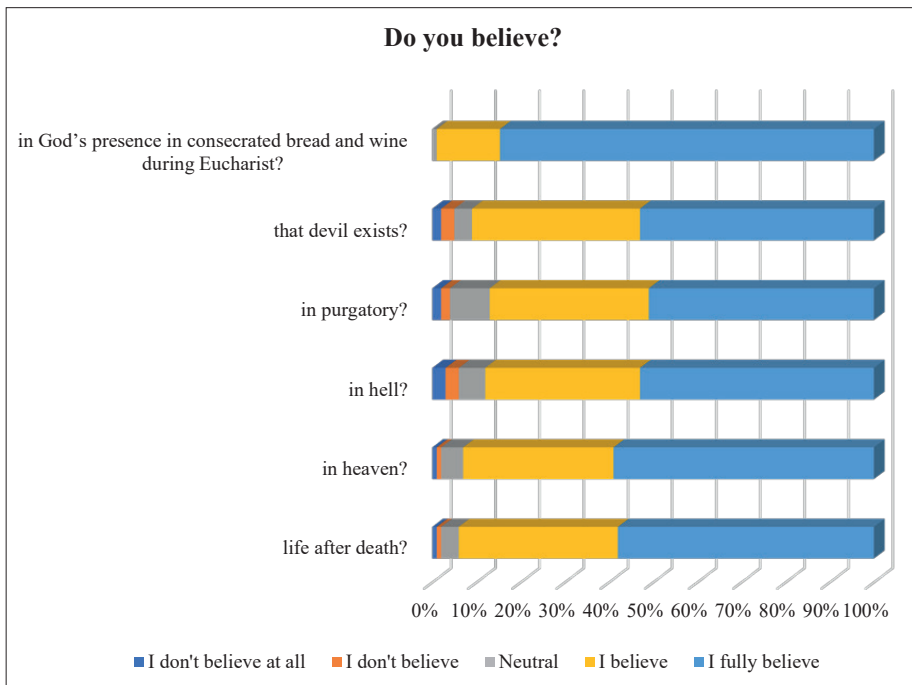


Chart 6. *The belief in certain truths of faith.*

The specificity of the Christian faith in mission countries is represented by the present religious elements that come from animism, that is, the voodoo religion. The survey contained certain questions related to beliefs arising from the cultural environment in which young believers live in Benin. The aim is to analyse the level of belief in such teachings, and also compare or connect the acceptance of the aforementioned teachings of the Catholic Church and some traditional beliefs.

Of all the listed beliefs, the largest percentage of respondents believe that other people can cast spells (53.5%). 38.6% believe in the possibility of some people to contact the dead, while 45% believe in the power of curses. To the statement »It is possible to read the future through the voodoo religion«, an equal number of respondents expressed complete disagreement, disagreement or gave a neutral answer (about 25%). 45% of young believers trust that the power of the curse exists, while the largest number of respondents do not believe that magic is effective (26.3%). Almost equal percentages of young people do not believe or have a neutral attitude towards predicting the future offered by horoscopes (28% vs 27.5%). If we consider the level of disbelief and complete disbelief in the ability of some people to kill other people with supernatural force, we obtain the information that more than half of the respondents (58%) believe in such powers. It is also interesting to observe that 35.2% of young people believe that certain forces like sorcerers can harm a Christian, and on the other hand, the largest percentage of respondents (31.1%) do not believe that God allows innocents to suffer.

Through correlation analysis, it was determined that people who believe more in the teachings and truths of the Catholic Church are more likely to believe that there are some people who can cast different spells ($r = 0.11$; $p < 0.01$), as well as that it is more likely that the power of curse exists ($r = 0.07$; $p < 0.05$). In addition, these people are less likely to believe that the future can be predicted using voodoo religion ($r = -0.15$; $p < 0.01$) and that magic is effective ($r = -0.15$; $p < 0.01$), and that the horoscope can accurately predict events ($r = -0.15$; $p < 0.01$). Therefore, the hypothesis of a positive correlation between acceptance of the Church teachings and belief in evil forces in a person's life is confirmed.

The relationship between the level of education and the various beliefs listed above was also examined. The results show that the level of education is significantly negatively related to the assertion that the horoscope accurately predicts events, that is, more educated individuals are more likely to believe that the horoscope does not accurately predict events ($r = -0.08$; $p < 0.01$).

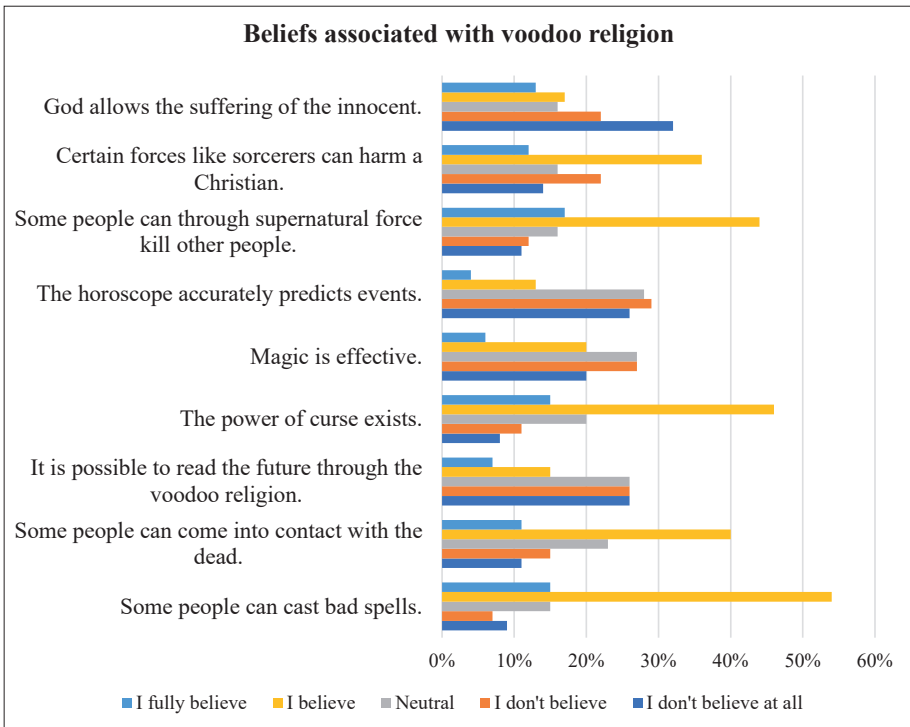


Chart 7. *Beliefs associated with voodoo religion.*

With respect to the challenges brought by the presence of religious elements from the voodoo religion, the Catholic Church has learned from mission experiences to face them and offer alternatives within the framework of the Christian message in an appropriate manner. The attitude of young believers towards the role of the Church in the fight against such elements was examined. We might remark that the term traditional religions from those questions in the questionnaire refers to »domestic« religions, i.e., animism, i.e., voodoo. Most respondents agree with the statement that the Catholic Church does not include enough values of traditional religions in its teaching (29.8% – agree, 22.2% – completely agree), however still around 73% of them do not seek help from traditional religions in some situations. Accordingly, around 77% of young people believe that a true Catholic should not seek help from traditional religions, even if they are in trouble, and 78.3% of respondents disagree with the statement that in case of spiritual or material difficulties, they prefer to seek help from traditional religions, rather than from Catholic priests (55.5% – do not agree at all, 22.8% – mostly disagree). The largest percentage of respondents

disagree with the statement that the Catholic Church does not fight effectively against the negative influence of traditional religions on people (22.6% – do not agree at all, 20.3% – mostly disagree), but a similar percentage (21.1%) of them agree with that statement. The spirits of ancestors form an important segment of the voodoo religion, and most respondents agree with the statement that the spirits of ancestors have a positive or negative influence on the course of our lives (25.4% – agree, 11.7% – completely agree). Regardless, young people do not agree with the statement that God cannot prevent the influence of ancestors (44.2% – do not agree at all, 23.2% – mostly disagree). Relatedly, most respondents disagree with the statement that traditional religions have the power to change the influence of ancestors for our good, which shows faith in God's supremacy over all evil forces.

These results reveal a deep religious awareness among young people. However, this awareness should be evangelized in the segment of belief in the influence of the deceased on the living. Such a belief often creates a relationship of fear among young people to the extent that many are not fully committed to God in the way of professing their faith. The maturity we observed in some responses must be more visible in living the faith.

4. The youth and other values

On the question of how satisfied they are with life, the respondents answered that in the face of the current state of their lives they feel more satisfied than dissatisfied (32%) with 26% of those who are very satisfied. It can be said that the satisfaction scale of young people is holding up well despite the precarious economic situation in which young people often find themselves. The meaning of their lives is therefore not dominated by a nihilistic or negationist feeling, as a sign of loss of orientation with respect to all values, both individual and normative. The following values were proposed to the young people: knowledge, money, home, political commitment, love, health, family, religion (faith), honesty, friendship, sex life, travel and discovery of the world, freedom, and independence. As we might expect, for most respondents, health takes the first place with 79.7% confirming the thought that circulates among Beninese: »health above all!«

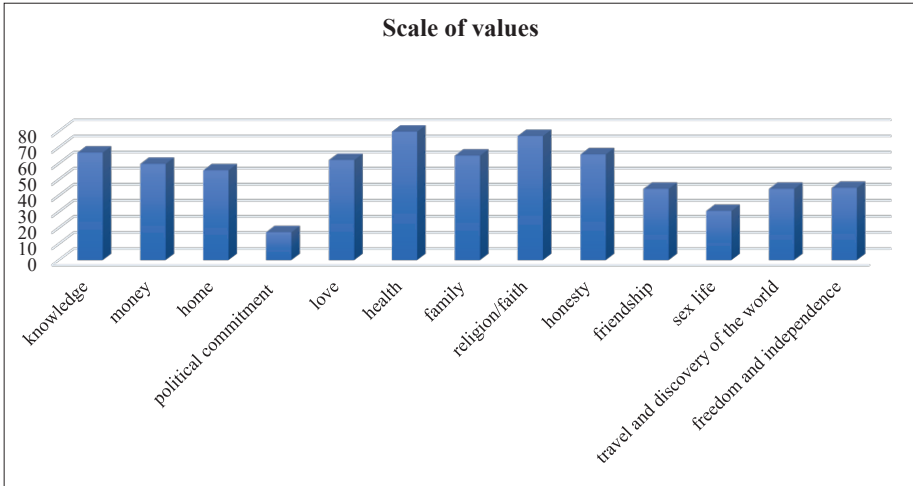


Chart 8. *The scale of values.*

It should be noted that political commitment is in a neutral perspective among young people (27.8%). It is interesting to see that, apart from political commitment, sex life is not among the most important values, despite the common idea that youth is often seen as a time of uncontrolled virility. Among the thirteen values proposed, these occupy the first five places in the lives of young people: health, religion/faith, honesty, knowledge, family. These results defied the hypothesis we had posed at the beginning of our research. Indeed, we would expect money to occupy an important place in the scale of values, but the results place it in the seventh position behind love. While the position of health and even religion is understandable, honesty and knowledge are paradoxically promising answers. Obviously, young people are looking for an atmosphere of integrity as a condition without which there can be no personal or societal development. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge remains a crucial problem that deepens the underdevelopment of many African countries. It is therefore understandable and encouraging to see that young people are reflecting on knowledge as a source of personal and collective development.

Conclusive thoughts

In the light of the results of this research, it should be emphasized that Christianity in this young African Church is on the right track. At the time when

we are facing the so-called process of »unchurching of Europe«³⁴, the continent that brought Good New to the African continent, the current situation with the Church in West Africa shows growth not only in the number of believers, but also in the understanding of the truths of the Christian faith. This research is the beginning of a serious questioning of the quality of that faith in the hearts of young lay faithful. One key question for the quality of faith is related to the definition that Pope Francis gives, which helps us to ask whether the faith of young people is really an expression of an encounter with the living God. For Pope Francis: »Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment, and that a vision of the future opens before us. Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time.«³⁵ Two theological virtues are important here: faith and love, which give security and remove fear from the heart. The ambivalent attitude of young people towards some truths of traditional religions shows the presence of a certain form of fear. However, the encouraging answers to other questions of this survey highlight the third theological virtue: hope. This hope stems from the fact that young people's awareness of the need for God can be a source of true development for the individual as well as for society.

It is true that through this survey, young people showed a high level of agreement with the teaching of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the question remains whether this agreement is an expression of consistent living of faith in a context where poverty can be a source of waste from faith, depending on the offers of contemporary society. In this sense, the task of the Church is to continue to follow and invest both in education and in social institutions that would consider the specific challenges that young people face.

Finally, one of the shortcomings of this research is that it dealt exclusively with young Catholics. However, as a pioneering study, it serves as an impetus to expand and include youth of other religions and worldviews to see the state of mind of youth in that part of the African continent. Other questions

³⁴ Cf. Sheena ASHFORD – Noel TIMMS, *The unchurching of Europe?*, in: Sheena ASHFORD – Noel TIMMS, *What Europe thinks. A study of Western European values*, Darmouth – Aldershot 1992.

³⁵ FRANCIS, *Lumen Fidei. Encyclical letter on faith* (29. VI. 2013), no. 4. Available from: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_ enciclica-lumen-fidei.html (Accessed: 10. VII. 2022).

with regard to the Church teaching on moral issues should also be included, to examine the level of influence of Western cultures shaping the global world.

Sažetak

VJERA I SLIKA BOGA KOD MLADIH VJERNIKA U BENINU KVANTITATIVNO ISTRAŽIVANJE I KOMPARATIVNE ANALIZE

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Kulturni ambijent u kojem pojedinac živi i odrasta nedvojbeno oblikuje odnos prema Bogu, religioznosti i vjeri, kao što utječe i na stvaranje slike o Bogu. Susret neke druge religije, osobito iz zapadne kulture s domaćim kulturnim ambijentom može izazivati divljenje ili pak stav opreza, odnosno odbijanja, ali i mogućnost djelomičnog prihvaćanja njezinih vrijednosnih sadržaja. Takve reakcijske elemente lako se može primijetiti u tzv. misijskim zemljama koje prihvaćaju novost kršćanske poruke. S ciljem ispitivanja percepcije utjecaja kulturnog ambijenta na shvaćanje i poimanje Boga, religioznosti i vjere provedeno je istraživanje među 1062 mladih vjernika u zapadnoafričkoj državi Benin. Ključne riječi: mladi, slika Boga, vudu – religija, misije, vjera, Benin, sakramentalni život