STATE, RELIGION AND LAW IN CAMEROON: REGULATORY CONTROL, TENSION AND ACCOMODATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex relations that have existed over the years between religious organisations and the state in Cameroon. It focuses on the tensions that have arisen as the state tried, especially after 1990 to recognise and protect freedom of religion and religious diversity whilst working closely with the diverse religious organisations in the country to further the political, economic and social development of the country. It is shown that the idea of state secularity, neutrality and independence with respect to the diverse religious organisations is fairly nuanced. What clearly emerges is that in spite of resistance and even occasionally, open confrontation, religious denominations in Cameroon are no longer as passive as they were in the past and have the potential to play an even greater role in promoting change and the common good.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the independence and reunification of the former British and French parts of Cameroon in 1961, the country emerged as a highly complex heterogeneous nation with a wide diversity of ethnic groups, languages, culture and religions.[1] Like most other African countries, the great hopes of political, social, economic, and cultural development that were expected to follow from independence were compromised by years of repressive, corrupt, and incompetent authoritarian rule. The democratic winds of change that hit the African shores from the 1990s have by and large passed the country by as it remains trapped in its authoritarian past sustained by a charade of multiparty democracy.

Since the colonial days, in the midst of authoritarianism and poverty, religious denominations have continuously played a role not only in the spiritual wellbeing of the people but also in

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[1] Cameroon was a German colony from 1884 to 1916 when a combined British and French expeditionary force defeated the German forces in the country during the First World War. Thereafter, the victors divided the territory into two unequal parts with the British taking control of about a quarter and the French the rest. The two portions of the territory were only reunified in 1961. Superimposed over this division between Anglophones, who make up about 20% of the population and Francophones 80%, are over 250 ethnic groups that speak over 280 different languages. Cameroon in this respect probably possesses more ethnic groups and languages than any country of comparable size (475,440 sq. km.) and population (20,129,8781 people according to July 2012 estimates by Index Mundi, http://www.indexmundi.com/cameroon/demographics_profile.html (accessed July 2, 2013).

their political, economic and social development. In doing so, they have in various ways come into conflict with the state. Worldwide, state practice shows an enormous variety of perceptions of the appropriate relationship between the state and religion. In Cameroon, the relationship between the state and the different religious denominations has varied over time and has been complicated by the country's unresolved bi-cultural (Anglophone/Francophone divide) and multi-religious and multi-ethnic contradictions. This has consequently been a relationship that has continuously been marked by a mix of suspicion, tension, regulatory controls and containment. Consequently, the levels and degree of engagement by the different religious denominations with the state in attempting to address the burning issues of the day have not always been exactly the same or consistent. As a result of the 1990 winds of change, the government introduced a series of laws that were designed to recognise and protect freedom of religion and worship. These now provide for a secular state, which is supposed to be neutral and independent with respect to the different religious denominations.This paper will show that Cameroonian religious secularism,neutrality and separationism has not completely removed the state from religious matters but rather led to a form of pragmatic cooperation and accommodation under rather complex circumstances where inter-and intra-denominational dynamics, ethnicity, geographical location and political opportunism have come into play. A brief historical background and the present status of the different religious organisations is a valuable starting point for this discussion.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND THE STATUS OF THE DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS IN CAMEROON TODAY

The modern history of the state of religion in Cameroon has been largely shaped by the political history of the country. In this regard, it is important to note that before the Portuguese pioneers and early missionaries reached Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1880s, there were two strong religious forces already on the ground; African traditional religions and Islam. The Islamic influence was not as strong as the African traditional religions which was basically an integral part of the culture and traditions of the people that had been handed down uninterrupted for generations.

By the time of the German conquest in the late 1880s, most of northern Cameroon was under Muslim influence and organised into areas called lamidats under the control of religious leaders known as lamidos. On the eve of the twentieth century, the Cameroonian territory was seemingly divided into two distinctive zones of religious influence; the Christian south and the Muslim north. However, the expansionist tendencies of both religions could not be confined within these restricted geographical areas.[2] Whilst Islam was being imposed in the north, Christian missionaries were busy in the south.

The first Christian missionaries came from the London Baptist Missionary Society and arrived in 1845. But after Cameroon came under German rule in 1884, the British

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[2] Hamadou Adama, "Islam and State in Cameroon: Between Tension and Accomodation," http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=46649 (accessed July 2, 2013).

missionaries left the country. However, on the defeat of the Germans after the First World War, Cameroon was divided into two unequal parts and placed under a League of Nation's mandate. The French were given the much larger part of the territory (that today corresponds with the eight Francophone regions of the country) and the British, a much smaller portion, part of which today makes up the two Anglophone regions. In the part under the French mandate, the Paris mission took over the work of the Baptist mission. Meanwhile, it was only in October 1890 that the first group of Catholic missionaries arrived in Cameroon.

Although the Muslims are still dominant in the northern part of the country and the Christians the southern part, other religious denominations, such as the Baha'i faith and Jews have since established themselves in the country. However, the exact number of religious denominations operating today in the country today is quite difficult to estimate with any degree of accuracy. The main reason for this is due to the steady decline in the number of people practising African traditional religions.

Be that as it may, according to the 2005 census, the most recent available statistics, approximately 69% of Cameroonians are Christians, 21% are Muslims, 5.5% are practitioners of African traditional religions, 3.5% do not associate with any particular religious movement and the other 1% practice other religions.[3] The Christian population is divided between the Roman Catholics (38.4% of the total population), Protestants (26%), orthodox (0.5%) and other Christian denominations (4%). The Roman Catholic Church is not only the largest Christian denomination in the country but is also the only religious denomination that embraces both the eight Francophone and two Anglophone regions of the country. The largest non-christian community is the Muslims who are concentrated in the three northern regions and amongst the Bamoun ethnic group of the West region. On the other hand, traditional African religions are practised in rural areas throughout the country but these are hardly practised openly in the cities because of the numerous varieties and their intrinsically local character. The exact number of those practising these African traditional religions is quite difficult to estimate because many of them have also accepted and practise certain tenets of either Christianity or Islam.[4] As a result, the traditional beliefs and practices have simply been incorporated into their faith. It is however, the way the different religious groups have interacted with the state particularly in bringing about the political changes that have taken place in Cameroon in the last two decades that have raised interesting issues.

3. RELIGION AND STATE RELATIONS IN THE FACE OF POLITICAL CHANGE

Some scholars in the field of religion and the state generally and religion and politics in particular are concerned and even surprised with the changing relationship between religious denominations, the state and society as a whole. Much has been written about the role that religious denominations have played in political change generally and the democratisation

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[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report for 2012, Cameroon, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper (accessed July 2, 2013).

[4] Most studies on African traditional religions show that although they still maintain many of the original beliefs and rituals, these have been significantly altered by Christian teachings and the Muslim faith. Since they have no doctrines, theologies or profess any claims to truth or have any missionary intent, they have easily accommodated new factors whilst retaining their essential identity. See further, J.G. Platvoet, "African Traditional Religions in the Religious History of Humankind," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 6 (1993): 29-48.

process in particular, not only in Cameroon but also in the rest of Africa.[5] Religious bodies and their leaders sometimes have to make difficult decisions and choices. They often have to balance strictly sacramental or liturgical issues against pressure to become actively involved in the socio-economic and political issues of the day. They cannot close their eyes to the daily issues of poverty, corruption and embezzlement, bad governance and other ills which inflict misery on their adherents. But even when they do decide that it is their religious and moral duty to address these issues, there is also the difficult task of determining exactly what cause of action they need to take and how far they can go. Religion's impact on African political activity in general, according to conventional wisdom, has been negative. It has served as an instrument for preaching patience, encouraging forbearance, teaching obedience to the state and urging dialogue. In so doing, religion is viewed as having hampered African assertiveness, the degree of piety corresponding to the level of passitivity within the population.[6] In looking at the Cameroonian situation, we will first start by showing that the intervention of religious denominations in calling for changes needed to improve the lot of their adherents goes back to the colonial era. Nevertheless, the intervention in the post-independence period has been quite different although here, one can and should make a distinction between the pre and post 1990 periods. Thus, the pre and post-independence periods will be briefly examined.

3.1   The colonial roots of church and state tension in the face of change

The relationship between the state and religious organisations today with reference to political change can only partly be explained by reference to its colonial roots. Yet, this is important. In doing so however, a difference in approach can be noticed between the Christian southern part and the Muslim northern parts of the country. Even within the Christian churches in the south, evidence of the differences in response to political change that were later to emerge were already visible.

With respect to the southern part of the country, it has often been felt that the Christian churches were part of the grand colonial "civilising mission" in Africa and not only supported and collaborated with the colonising authorities but also provided them with legitimacy. It would be wrong to simply associate the missionary project in Cameroon with colonialism for as we noted above, the first missions were not only started in 1845, well before the Germans

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[5] For some of the literature on Cameroon, see Bernard Momo, "La Laïcité de l'Etat dans L'espace Camerounais," *Cahiers de Droit* 40 (1999): 821-846; Hamadou Adama, "Islam and State in Cameroon,"; Pierre Titi Nwel, " The Churches and the Democratic Upheaval in Cameroon 1982-1993," in *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*, ed. Paul Gifford (Leiden, E.J. Brill,1995): 168-187; Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church, *Journal for the Study of Religion* 20:2 (2007): 46-64.; Robert Akoko and Timothy Oben, "Christian Churches and the Democratization Conundrum in Cameroon," *Africa Today* 52:3 (2006): 25-48. For some literature on other African countries, see Tristan Anne Borer, *Challenging the State. Churches as Political Actors in South Africa 1980-1994* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame, 1998); P. Gifford (ed.) *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa* (Leiden, E. J. Bril, (1995); and P. Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London, Hurst & Co., 1998).

[6] Lyn S. Graybill, *Religion and Resistance Politics in South Africa* (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1995): 2.

formally assumed control of the country in 1884 but their primary purpose was to fight against the slave trade. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the Christian missions through their evangelisation campaigns and the social projects that they carried out, such as the provision of education and other welfare services such as hospitals, created a moral order that provided some legitimacy for the so-called civilising mission of the colonial powers. Their work in converting the population into good, obedient and faithful Christians inculcated an attitude of loyalty and submissiveness to the colonial authorities. Besides, there were often frequent changes in the missionary corps with each change of colonial administration in each instance ensuring that most of the missions and missionaries were from the metropole. This certainly contradicts any argument that the missionaries' objective was entirely non-political.[7]

One of the main issues between religious denominations and the colonial state was the attitude of the former with respect to the nationalists who were beginning to clamour for independence. Most of the Christian denominations tried to steer clear of this issue. Only a few Christian churches, such as the Native Baptist Church with a leadership that consisted mainly of Cameroonians and people of African descent took a firm anti-colonialist stance and openly rejected Euro-centric Christianity.[8] The colonial administration alarmed by the flames of anti-colonialism that the Native Baptist Church was perceived to be fanning under the umbrella of religious revivalism refused in 1932 to formally register the church. In fact, the requirement of registration had been introduced by the French authorities in 1930 in order to suppress so-called hostile associations. The other mainline church, the Roman Catholic Church which was established much later in 1890 supported and cooperated with the colonial regime and was strongly opposed, unlike some of the Protestant churches, to the radical nationalist party, the *Union des Populations Camerounaises* (UPC) which had started a guerrilla warfare in the 1950s designed to send away the colonial powers and secure the country's independence. In fact, in an Episcopal letter issued in April 1955, the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church strongly condemned the UPC for its communist ideology and the violence it directed at church members and their property.

With respect to the relationship between Islam and the colonial authorities, this was bound to be difficult because of Islam's worldview which does not strictly distinguish or extricate the sacred from the secular. The state was seen as an outright rival of the Muslim faith. There was therefore mutual suspicion from the start and the different colonial powers tried to act decisively to restrain the hegemonic desires of Muslims to extend their faith to the Christian southern part of the country. The policy started by the Germans and continued by the British and French thereafter, was to negotiate with the Muslim theocracies and confine Islam to the north in order to safeguard their respective interests and consolidate their presence in the different parts of the country.[9] Although the colonialists through compromises worked out

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[7] See further, Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony," ; and Richard Joseph, "Church, State, and Society in Colonial Cameroun," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 13:1 (1980): 5-32.
[8] See, Richard Joseph, ibid: 9 and 20.
[9] See generally, Hamadou Adama, "Islam and State in Cameroon ,": 45-46.

with moderate Muslim leaders tried to limit the spread of Islam to the south of the country, it eventually spread southwards through urbanisation, economic change and improved communications. One could say here that the consistent policy of the colonial state towards Islam was one of "live and let's live" philosophy which allowed the Muslims to administer and manage their affairs under the supervision and watchful eyes of the state.

3.2 Post independence period until 1990: Tolerance and cooperation

At independence, the new leaders inherited a secular state that had learned to live with the numerous religious denominations in the country. Ahmadou Ahidjo, a moderate Muslim Fulbe from the north became the country's first president. He came to power at a time of great social unrest and political upheaval caused by the UPC rebellion that had started during the last years of colonial rule and continued after the territory became independent and re-united with the former British Cameroon. Ahidjo was viewed with suspicion by the southerners who feared that he might try to impose Islam on the country. It became an irony that initial resistance to Ahidjo's religion-state policies came from his fellow Muslims in the north who did not take long to discover that the new president had no plans to change the colonial policy of pragmatic cooperation with the Muslims which deprived them of real powers in running their affairs.

Ahidjo nevertheless restricted Christian evangelisation campaigns to the north to the barest minimum and tried to contain Muslim radicalism by adopting new executive orders which restricted some of the privileges granted to Muslim chiefs during the colonial period. In a series of decrees in 1974, the Ahidjo regime formally subordinated traditional Muslim rulers to the local representatives of the political administrative authorities. Another decree effectively nationalised all unoccupied land which was previously owned by the local rulers and had been the source of their wealth, privileges and prestige. This marked the turning point in the relationship between the government and Muslim leaders who denounced and condemned all these measures. The relationship between the Muslims and the Ahidjo regime had deteriorated so badly by the time he voluntarily stepped down from power in 1982 the accession of Paul Biya to power was greeted by them with relief and hope. This was however short lived because after an abortive coup d'etat of 1984 blamed on Ahidjo loyalists who wanted to regain power, all northerners were blamed. Muslim leaders decided to keep a low profile politically whilst the Christians used this opportunity to expand their evangelisation campaigns in that part of the country.

As regards relations with the Christian south, early suspicions about Ahidjo's intentions were quickly dispelled because of his pragmatism. However, the ruthless measures which he was using to suppress the UPC rebellion drew criticism from some religious leaders, particularly the Catholic Church. There were several incidents but the most significant one was the so-called Ndongmo affair. Bishop Ndongmo, a member of the Bamilike tribe, which was associated with the UPC rebellion, was enthroned as bishop of the Nkongsamba diocese in 1964. He quickly gained the reputation of being the only member of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon (NECC) who was able to publicly criticise Ahidjo's authoritarian

style of governance and the unusually harsh military means he had adopted to suppress the UPC rebellion in the Bamilike region. In 1970, the last of the UPC leaders, Ernest Quandie, a fellow Bamilike was caught and he implicated Bishop Ndongmo. Both were subsequently tried and sentenced to death by firing squad. Under pressure from Rome, Ahidjo commuted Bishop Ndongmo's death sentence to life imprisonment.

Divisions along regional and ethnic lines which later became a common feature of the Catholic Church manifested themselves in respect of the Ndongmo affair. The NECC which met shortly after the arrest of Bishop Ndongmo had been encouraged by the Papal Pro-Nuncio Gallina,[10] to support their arrested colleague unconditionally but declined to do so. Archbishop Jean Zoa argued that the Ndongmo affair was not a problem between the Catholic Church and the state but rather an individual's crime.[11]

From his accession to power until the early 1990s, President Paul Biya's messages of a "renewal" based on principles of "political liberalisation, moralisation and rigour" raised high expectations that he will undo the highly centralised, authoritarian, repressive, corrupt and ineffective system that his predecessor had imposed. It did not take long for many, including the churches to realise that his fine words and promises were hardly matched by concrete action. The 1984 abortive coup by the Muslim dominated Republic Guard provided an easy excuse for Biya to abandon his promised renewal project. By the 1990s, as the country moved deeper into a political crisis, the different religious denominations ceased to be mere silent observers. They joined the general outcry for political reforms.

3.3 The post-1990 period: Tension and crisis in the pangs of change

To a large extent, the political developments in Cameroon in the 1990s in which religious organisations played a role were shaped mainly by international pressure that encouraged the diverse groups of opposition voices within the country to raise their voice and take to the streets to agitate for change. Unlike in the past, many religious organisations were quite outspoken in their criticisms of the government. The details of the travails of the mainline religious denominations in the post-1990 attempts at democratic transformation from the monolithic authoritarian repressive system to an open, democratic and free society have been elaborately commented upon in the literature.[12] It will suffice in this section just to highlight a few incidents during this turbulent period that have marked the tense relationship between religion and the state.

Problems started in the so-called Yondo Black affair, when Yondo Black, a lawyer and former president of the Cameroonian Bar Association and ten others were arrested when they met to discuss the possibility of forming a political party. They were arrested, charged and tried for carrying out subversive activities. After a brief trial by a military tribunal in

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[10] He was subsequently expelled from the country.
[11] See, Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony," 52.
[12] See for example, Pierre Titi Nwel, " The Churches and the Democratic Upheaval in Cameroon 1982-1993," ; Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony ,"; and Robert Akoko and Timothy Oben, "Christian Churches and the Democratization Conundrum in Cameroon."

Yaounde, some of them were given suspended sentences and others were acquitted. Amidst national and international criticism, the ruling Cameroon Peoples' Democratic Movement Party (CPDM) organised nation-wide rallies against what it termed precipitated introduction of multipartyism. In Yaounde the march ended on 30 March 1990 with a mass in the Yaounde cathedral celebrated by Archbishop Jean Zoa, supposedly to "pray for peace." It is worth noting that Archbishop Zoa, who has been one of the leading Catholic Church leaders since independence, is from the same Beti ethnic group as President Biya. His actions were interpreted as open support for maintaining the one party repressive system and a rejection of political change. The highest ranking Catholic priest in the country, Cardinal Tumi, openly criticised Archbishop Zoa.[13] Taking advantage of this confusion, John Fru Ndi applied for his newly formed party, the Social Democratic Party (SDF) to be registered. After waiting in vain for a response, he decided to launch the party on 26 May 1990 in Bamenda. After a successful launch during which he and his supporters managed to outmanoeuvre the heavily armed security forces that had been mobilised to prevent it happening, six of his supporters were shot dead as they returned from the launch. The Anglophone Archbishop of Bamenda, Mgr Paul Verdzekov, organised a memorial service for those who had been killed in the Bamenda cathedral. In response to this, Archbishop Zoa organised a counter-mass in the Yaounde cathedral to, as he put it, "cleanse the image of the Catholic Church from the unholy service" organised by his colleague in Bamenda.[14] It is worthwhile pausing here to point out that both Cardinal Tumi and Mgr. Verdzekov do not only come from the Anglophone North West region where the main opposition to Biya's regime has consistently come from but also often speak and reflect the general feeling by Anglophones that they have been marginalised and discriminated against by the Francophones, with the situation getting worse during Biya's tenure.[15]

Cardinal Tumi was throughout this period one of the most vocal critics of the government. Sometimes, he was supported by NECC but often, he was criticised as acting as a regionalist and spokesperson for the SDF. Meanwhile, the Catholic leaders from the president's ethnic group have hardly hesitated to defend the regime whilst bishops from other Francophone regions have been more reserved. Nevertheless, the evidence from the various recent studies on the reaction of the Catholic church during this period show that although the NECC and other Catholic church leaders have often been divided on the issue of democratic progress, they have through pastoral letters, episcopal conference statements, press releases, interviews and other media been generally quite critical of the government's handling of the economy, electoral malpractices, corruption, poverty alleviation and unemployment.

The reactions of the Protestant churches also generally reflected their regional and ethnic base. Whilst most of them, with the exception of the Pentecostal churches have spoken out in favour of more democratisation, combating corruption and economic reforms, the severity of criticism has varied. For instance, the leadership of the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC), based mainly in the two Anglophone regions, have in pastoral letters and sermons been critical of the slow pace of political reforms and have been particularly vocal about Anglophone marginalisation.[16] On the other hand, the ten churches making up (*Fédération*

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[13] See Pierre Titi Nwel, " The Churches and the Democratic Upheaval in Cameroon 1982-1993," 173-174.

[14]. Robert Akoko and Timothy Oben, "Christian Churches and the Democratization Conundrum in Cameroon," 44.

[15] As Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony," says at p. 58, Cardinal Tumi feels that the positions of Anglophone in present day Cameroon is so unenviable that "if it was the prerogative of Cameroonians to choose a cardinal, it would not have been him."

[16] For a detail account of this, see Robert Akoko and Timothy Oben, "Christian Churches and the Democratization Conundrum in Cameroon."

des Eglises et des Missions Evangéliques du Cameroun) FEMEC, with the exception of the Baptists, whilst advocating for political reforms, require their priests to keep out of active politics. Nevertheless, as with the Catholic church, the ethnic factor has also always surfaced. For example, the Bassas in the Littoral region of the country, regardless of their particular faith have always tended to support the UPC, whose historic leader, Ruben Um Nyobe came from their area. The Bulus have also often supported President Biya even though he is a Catholic. The Pentecostal churches, for example the Adventist Church preach absolute neutrality and discourage their Christians from participating in the political struggles. But as has been the case in many other African countries, their claims that their only interest is in "taking the continent for Jesus," has been shown to be hollow, especially in countries such as Kenya.[17] They have however exploited the growing disillusionment caused by unemployment and poverty to lure people away from the mainline religious denominations by preaching which focuses on pragmatic Christianity that promises immediate benefits such as jobs, success prosperity and healing. On the other hand, the Muslim north, after the 1984 abortive coup d'etat debacle have generally taken a low profile and tended to act cautiously when political changes are taking place rather than taking any serious steps to promote changes. But it is now necessary to see how the state has since the 1990s adopted a legal framework which provides for accommodation in the face of increasing political and social activism of religious organisations.

4. RELIGION AND STATE RELATIONS IN OTHER MATTERS OF COMMON GOOD: REGULATORY CONTROL, CO-OPERATION AND ACCOMODATION

Two issues will be examined here viz the legal framework and the extent to which this has provided a basis for regulatory control and co-operation between the state and religious organisations.

4.1 The legal framework for a religiously secular, independent and neutral state

One of the main benefits ushered in by the post-1990 constitutional reforms in Africa was the introduction of bills of rights containing provisions that recognise and protect amongst other human rights, religious freedom in most African constitutions.[18] Cameroon, like most other African countries used as a reference point, global developments in human rights instruments to guarantee religious freedom.[19]

Today, the relationship between religion and the state is now spelt out in the preamble to the 1996 constitution. It states that "freedom of religion and worship shall be guaranteed" and further that "no person shall be harassed on grounds of his origin…or beliefs, subject to respect for public policy." The concept of freedom of religion is not defined either in the

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[17] See, David Westerlund ed., *Questioning the Secular State. The Worldwide Resurgence of Religion in Politics* (London, Hurst & Co.,1996): 14.

[18] For general discussion of these developments, see Charles Manga Fombad, "Post 1990 constitutional reforms in Africa: A Preliminary Assessment of the Prospects for Constitutional Governance and Constitutionalism." in *The Resolution of African conflicts,*eds. A.G. Nhema and P. T. Zeleza (Oxford, OSSREA & James Currey, Oxford, 2008): 179-199.

[19] The main ones are article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights 1966, article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief and at the regional level, there is article 8 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981.

Constitution or in any legal text. One of the best definitions[20] of freedom of religion is that given by the Canadian Supreme Court in *R v Big M Drug Mart Ltd*:

"The essence of the concept of freedom of religion is the right to entertain such religious beliefs as a person chooses, the right to declare religious beliefs openly and without fear of hindrance or reprisal, and the right to manifest belief by worship and practice or by teaching and dissemination. But the concept means more that. Freedom can primarily be characterised by the absence of coercion or constraint. If a person is compelled by the State or the will of another to a course of action or inaction which he would not otherwise have chosen, he is not acting of his own volition and he cannot be said to be truly free."[21]

Such a definition of the concept of freedom of religion is important because in many respects it gives an indication of the scope and application of this concept in understanding the relationship between the state and religious institutions. And having made it clear that everybody has a right to freedom of religion and worship, the Cameroonian C
onstitution then defines the relationship between the state and religious bodies in the preamble by stating as follows:

"the State shall be secular. The neutrality and independence of the State in respect of religions shall be guaranteed;"

The Cameroon Constitution, unlike some constitutions which outline in some detail the specific legal-political ramifications of the concepts of secularity, neutrality and independence,[22] does not even define these three key concepts. The principal piece of legislation regulating freedom of religion is Law No. 90-53 of 19 December 1990 on the Freedom of Association Law. None of the ten of its 36 articles which specifically deal with freedom of religion and worship and several aspects of the relationship between the church and the state define any of these three concepts. Nevertheless, alhough the constitutional framework has remained unchanged under the 1996 constitution, what has certainly changed is the law regulating the actual exercise of religious freedom. It is now necessary to see how the three concepts of secularism, neutrality and independence have regulated the relationship between the state and religious bodies in the country. One issue that needs clarification is whether these are three separate and independent concepts which mutually complement each other in strengthening the right to religious freedom or they are so interrelated and possibly synonymous that it borders on the tautological to include all three concepts in the same clause in the constitution. In other words, does their combined use add anything to religious freedom and the way religious bodies interact with the state? It is necessary to briefly attempt to unpack these concepts before seeing to what extent they apply and have a practical impact on the relations between the state and religious bodies generally.

Cameroon is one of several African states that have declared themselves as secular.[23] What exactly does this mean, particularly in a situation where neither the constitution nor any

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[20] One of South Africa's most renown judges, the late Chaskalson P, in *S v Lawrence* 1997 (4) SA 1176, 1208 had in adopting this definition commented: "I cannot offer a better definition than this of the main attributes of freedom of religion."

[21] (1985) 18 DLR(4th) 321, 321-354. Per Dickson J.

[22] See, Jeroen Temperman, *State-Religious Relationships and Human Rights, Towards a Right to Religiously Neutral Governance* (Leiden, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers,2010):125-127.

[23] See for example, article 2 of the Constitution of Benin of 1990, article 31 of the Constitution of Burkina Faso of 1991, article 1 of the Constitution of Burundi of 2005, article 1 of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo of 2006, article 2 of the Constitution of Gabon of1991, article 25 of the Constitution of Mali of 1992, the preamble and article 1 of the Constitution of Namibia of 1990 and article 1 of the Constitution of Rwanda of 2003.

piece of legislation defines the concept? It is worth noting that state secularism in Cameroon can be traced to the colonial days. All four post-independence constitutions have recognised this principle. The secular concept, like the other three concepts is, as will be shown below, not free from difficulty because it has often been defined in different ways by various writers.[24] Nevertheless, in its traditional sense, the secular concept encompasses at least three main notions.[25] First, is the idea of religious liberty which also includes the freedom not to believe. This means that no one must be forced in the domain of religion or basic faith. Second, the idea of equality between people of different faiths or basic beliefs, which means that no religious denomination should enjoy a privileged position vis-à-vis other religious denominations. It also means that no religion should be adopted as the official religion of the state and that the state should not be in the business of imposing or advancing the interests of a particular religion. In establishing itself as non-religious and non-denominational, the state does not positively identify itself with any religion or religious group. Third, the idea that all religious denominations without distinction should be involved in the process of determining what society is all about and how it should go about realising its goals. This also means that the state will not be bound by any religious laws or principles. Cutting across these notions is the distinction made by Wilfred McClay between what he terms secularism of the benign sort and secularism of a more robust or more assertive nature.[26] The former obliges the state to refrain from adopting and imposing any established beliefs upon its citizens; that is a non-confessional state that is equally respectful of religionists and non-religionists alike. By contrast, the more robust and more assertive approach requires the state to actively pursue a policy of established unbelief. That is, it entails the exclusion of religion from public life and confining it to a "strictly private sphere, where it can do little harm – and little public good."[27]

The question that arises then is to determine how different, if at all, the concept of secularity differs from the second concept of " the independence of the state in respect of all religions," which practically means the separation of religion from the state or what is often referred to as separationism? The concept of separationism is fairly vague and carries with it diverse subtleties of meaning.[28] The idea of separation of state and religion has been described as a legal-political endeavour aimed at internalising and consistently preserving a regime in which the state apparatus and religious institutions function independently and do not interfere with each other's activities.[29] From this perspective, two points are worth noting. First, it has been rightly pointed out that the concept of separation of religion and state is quite artificial because it is incapable of easy implementation or logical achievement.[30] While institutional separation may be possible, it is difficult to see how a separation of ideas, beliefs, attitudes and other ideological influences between religious institutions and the state can easily be achieved.[31] This is because the same persons may "inhabit each sphere and inevitably carry

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[24] See for example, the discussion by I. Benson, "Notes Towards a (Re)Definition of the 'Secular,'" *University of Columbia Law Review* 33 (2000): 519-549.

[25] See generally, Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Mogood eds., *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009):. xi-xii and 1-24.

[26] In, "Two Concepts of Secularism," *Wilson Quarterly* 24 (2000):54-64.

[27] Ibid: 64.

[28] See further, P. Weber, "Separation of Church and State : A Potent, Dynamic Idea in Political Theory," in *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, Vol. 2, ed. Wuthnow (London, Routledge, 1988): 684-690.

[29] See Jeroen Temperman, " State-Religious Relationships and Human Rights,":111 and 121.

[30] See Samuel Krislov, "Alternatives to Separation of Church and State in Countries Outside the United States," in *Religion and State*, ed. James E. Wood Jr. (Waco,TX, Baylor University Press,1985): 421-440.

[31] See Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005): .72.

across influences from each."[32] Second, in spite of the theoretical and analytical distinction, it is clear that upholding the separation between state and religion presupposes a fairly secularist state much as maintaining a secular order inevitably necessitates a reasonable degree of separation of religion and state. To this extent, it can be concluded that secularism and separationism are mutually reinforcing concepts both conceptually and in practice. Can the same be said of neutrality?

Like the other concepts, neutrality is fairly vague and one writer has even described it as "an indeterminate and vacant idea."[33] Be that as it may, the literature, especially in America, makes the distinction between formal neutrality and substantive neutrality.[34] Formal neutrality or what has sometimes been referred to as "religious-blindness" is where the state engages with the religious believer without looking at or indifferent to their faith.[35] For example a law mandating safety helmets for all is religion-blind even if Sikhs cannot fit the helmet over their turban and hence will risk violating this law.[36] Substantive neutrality on the other hand involves the situation where the state considers the consequences or effects of its actions on religion. Its objective must be to minimise the degree to which it interferes with religion on one hand and also strive to leave religion as far as possible to individual choice.[37] Substantive neutrality seeks even-handedness between all systems of religious belief, and this includes those anti-religious belief systems that reject or doubt the existence of the divine, such as atheism, secularism and agnosticism, but also entails levelling the playing field through limited corrective action.[38] It is clear from this that the concept of neutrality, although distinguishable from both the concepts of secularism and separationism is closely connected with them especially in advocating for even-handedness by the state vis-à-vis all religious beliefs. To this extent, it can be concluded that all three concepts are inextricably linked. Jeroen Temperman is therefore correct when he opines that, "[t]he Constitution of Cameroon appears to use the term 'neutrality' to define or elaborate on what is meant by the Constitution's provision for secularism."[39] In a sense, it can be argued that the concept of secularism is sufficiently broad to encompass the other concepts but in adding them in the same constitutional provision, the draftsman must have intended to underscore the different aspects of this broad concept that are define by the other two terms.

The Cameroonian constitutional framework is completed by another principle stated in the preamble that "no person shall be harassed on grounds of his…religious…opinions or beliefs, subject to respect for public policy. The next two sections will examine how these constitutional concepts and principles have been enforced in practice, particularly when it comes to recognising religious organisations.

4.2   The state and the recognition of religious organisations

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[32] Ibid.

[33] See, D. Cinotti, "The Incoherence of Neutrality: A Case for Eliminating Neutrality from Religion Clause Jurisprudence," *Journal of Church and State* 45 (2003): 499-500 and 523.

[34] See further, Douglas Laycock, "Formal, Substantive, and Disaggregated Neutrality Toward Religion," *DePaul Law. Review* 39 (1990): 993-1018.

[35] See, Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State* :88.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid. As Douglas Laycock, "Formal, Substantive, and Disaggregated Neutrality,": 1000-1002 aptly puts it, substantive neutralilty, "…either encourages religious belief or disbelief, practice or nonpractice, observance or nonobservance... Government should not interfere with our beliefs about religion either by coercion or by persuasion. Religion may flourish or wither; it may change or stay the same. What happens to religion is up to the people acting severally and voluntarily; it is not up to the people acting collectively through government."

[38] See, Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State* : 89-90.

[39] In, *State-Religions Relationships and the Human Rights Law*: 115.

Although the secular idea, in its broadest sense means that the state should not interfere with religious affairs just as religious organisations should not get involved in state affairs, it would be absurd to expect both to live in total isolation of the other. This underscores the artificiality of a total separation of religion and state. It is thus not surprising that the Constitution implicitly provides for the enactment by the state of laws that should determine the circumstances for the lawful establishment of religious organisations.

The law that regulates the activities of religious organisations is the   the 1990 Law of Association which provides a rather broad and obscure definition of a religious organisation or to use its own language, "religious congregation." According to section 22 of this law, religious congregations consist of either "any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship" or "any group of persons living in community in accordance with a religious doctrine." In order to operate legally, all religious organisations that fit these definitions are required to apply for registration at the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation (MINATD). To register, a religious group must submit a file to MINATD requesting the authorisation to operate in the country. The file must include *inter alia*, a copy of the group's charter describing its planned activities, and the names and functions of the group's officials. It is a process that might in practice take years. MINATD reviews the file and sends them to the Presidency of the Republic with a recommendation for or against the granting of an authorisation. In most cases, the Presidency follows the recommendations of MINATD and grants the authorisation by way of a presidential decree.

The requirement of registration implicitly means that only religious denominations that are legally registered are supposed to operate. According to a ministerial directive of 2012 from MINATD, only 47 religious organisations have officially been recognised by presidential decree in Cameroon.[40] There are thousands whose applications have been pending since 2009 when the last presidential decree recognising a religious group came out. Since the rapid growth of Pentecostal groups from the early 1990s, many of these groups have operated illegally whilst their applications for registration were still being considered but others, such as African traditional religious groups do not usually register. In the case of the latter, there is a practical challenge because of the fact that they are too numerous and operate as private practices amongst members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or residents of a particular locality. The Government has in most cases only interfered with some of the religious groups or their leaders where there is a threat to public order[41] or where the group gets involved with politics. There are also a good number of religious denominations whose applications have either been rejected[42] or who have not bothered to register but operate freely using the

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[40]See, « Eglises autorisées par décret présidentiel au Cameroun »
 http://journalchretien.net/17567-Eglises-autorisees-par-decret-presidentiel-au-Cameroun?lang=fr (accessed July 5, 2013). Interestingly, this list only contains 46 religious denomination with the last series of decrees coming out in 1998. A list obtained from MINDATD by this researcher in April 2013 includes the religious denomination called, "La Sainte Métropole Gréco-Orthodoxe du Cameroun," which was registered by decree No. 070 of February 2009.

[41] See for example, Yuh Timchia, "Cameroon: More Details Emerge of 'Holy Salam Cult,'"
http://www.africareview.com/News/More-details-emerge-of-bizarre-Cameroon-sect/-/979180/1719986/-/8wlkrfz/-/index.html (accessed July 5, 2013), in which he describes how police in March 2013 rescued 30 children whom a religious sect had been holding in total seclusion since 2001 in a crammed compound in the North West region's capital of Bamenda. Although the Governor of the region, in reaction to this incident ordered that all unregistered religious bodies operating in the region should be closed, hardly any of them have obeyed these instructions.

[42] For example, Bernard Momo, "La Laïcité de l'Etat dans L'espace Camerounais," : 833, found that by 15 July 1989, 77 applications for registration had been rejected by MINATD.

presidential authorisation granted to other religious groups. Some of these religious denominations are sects or cults[43] such as Freemasons which are able to operate without official recognition because they have influential members who occupy top positions in government or the ruling party.

Be that as it may, Cameroonian circularism and the manifestation of neutrality and separationism can at best be described as pragmatic rather than principled or dogmatic. The Government appears to have adopted an even-handed approach towards all religious organisations that is particularly sensitive to the daily realities such as, the predominance of two main faiths, the Christians and the Muslims and the continuous influence of African traditional religions. This is perhaps more obvious with respect to the first two whereas the exact impact of African traditional religions today is a matter that can only be speculated upon.[44] Examples of pragmatic secularism abound. For example, there is no official state religion, although Christianity and Islam tend to receive the most attention from the state. It is thus no surprise that Christian and Islamic holy days, such as Good Friday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day and Christmas Day for Christians and Feast of the Lamb, and *Aid al-Ad'ha* for Muslims are celebrated as national holidays. The state-sponsored Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) broadcasts religious programmes produced by the main religious denominations in the country. It carries two hours of Christian programming on Sunday mornings consisting of one hour of Catholic mass and one hour of a Protestant service. It also has one hour broadcast on Friday evenings dedicated to Islam. The state-sponsored radio for its part broadcasts Christian and Islamic religious services regularly and on religious public holidays. Again, because of the state's neutrality, there is no compulsory inter-denominational prayer or religious classes in Government schools, as is the case in schools run and operated by religious bodies.

The Government policy of neutrality when dealing with religious matters which dates from the colonial period has not always been an easy one to implement especially when one considers the fact that the modern post-independence Government took over from and continued pro-Christian policies from the colonial era and was applying this in a country that was predominantly Muslim. This was complicated by the fact that although Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo was a Muslim, he was, hardly fully accepted by the Muslim leaders and throughout his tenure tried to limit the influence which they had over the local communities. Keeping the Muslims happy was going to be an even greater challenge when President Paul Biya came to power. He has somehow managed to keep them quiet but one fairly recent incident shows how difficult this has been. This occurred in 2003 when the Islamic feast of sacrifice, *Aid al-Ad'ha* fell on 11 February, which is usually celebrated throughout the country as a republican day dedicated to the youths. The coincidence of the two feasts resulted in an unprecedented debate in civil society and the Government's solution to the problem was to postpone the celebration of the Muslim feast to 12 February. The postponement of a Muslim feast (which was celebrated worldwide on that particular day) in order to celebrate a republican feast caused a lot of bitterness amongst many Muslims but illustrates some of the difficult decisions that the Government has to take whilst maintaining its secular policy.

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[43] Both are now increasingly referred to in the literature as "new religious movements." See, Institute for Social Science Research, University of Manitoba, http://people.ucalgary.ca/~nurelweb/papers/irving/new-bib.html (accessed July 5, 2013).
[44] See for example, the discussion by James L. Cox, "Characteristics of African Indigenous Religions in Contemporary Zimbabwe," in Graham Harvey (ed.), *Indigenous Religions. A Companion*, Cassell, London (2000), pp.230-233.

Since the re-introduction of multi-partyism in 1990, religious denominations have become more politically active. The Government has had to tolerate this because of the extremely important role they play in providing many essential services such as education and health at a time of economic crisis, high unemployment and dwindling government resources. This has resulted in what can only be described as a policy of pragmatic circularism which we shall now look at.

4.3   Pragmatic circularism through co-operation and accommodation in attaining the common good

Circularism, state neutrality and separation of religious matters from state matters in Cameroon has not prevented profitable collaboration between the state and religious denominations in pursuing the goal of economic, social and cultural development of the country. For example, since the colonial period, religious denominations have played a very important part in social, cultural and educational development through the building and operation of schools, hospitals, clinics and even commercial businesses. Although the issue of schools which is central to secular ideology has and remains an area of continuous conflict and controversy between the religious denominations and the state, it is an area where they have always tried to reconcile and accommodate their differences.

Insofar as education is concerned, formal education in Cameroon as in most African countries was largely started by foreign missionaries. They regarded education as an important tool for effective evangelisation. Since independence, religions denominations have continued to play a key role in education. Although most schools today at the primary, secondary and tertiary level are owned and run by the Government, several religious denominations operate primary and secondary schools and even tertiary institutions. However, education is only one of the several social and cultural activities that religious denominations in Cameroon are actively involved in. But besides the opening of schools, universities and hospitals, many churches have ventured into commercial activities such as banking and printing. For example, a Pentecostal church owns and operates the Zion Credit-Financing Bank which has branches all over the country. Other institutions operated by religious denominations include maternities, leprosy centres, orphanages, nursing schools and economic activities such as plantations and co-operative societies.[45]

Secularism may have presented fewer difficulties in the past, not only because of the numbing effect of the pre-1990 repressive system that was in place but also because the state played a greater role in providing social services such as education, health, employment and social security. The continuous economic crisis that precipitated the 1990 reforms have since seen the ability of the state to provide these services contract leaving more space for religious organisations to come in. This has inevitably had implications on what is now clearly emerging as a more benign and increasingly disengaged form of secularism in which the state has had to implicitly compromise in order to work together to promote the welfare of society and the common good. It is now necessary to see how on the whole, this has impacted on its relations with religious institutions.

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[45] See for example, Bernard Momo, "La Laïcité de l'Etat dans L'espace Camerounais," : 839-840.

5.   AN OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF RELIGION AND STATE RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

What clearly emerges from the above analysis and other similar studies is that the relationship between religion and the state cannot simply be confined to considering the nature of the conflict and cooperation between religious leaders and the authoritarian and corrupt elites determined to maintain their hegemonic influence over the state and its resources.[46] It also spills into the much broader issue of the role of religious denominations in a modern state, particularly one that is struggling to move from a one-party monolithic system into a democratic multiparty system at a time of economic crisis, political instability, endemic corruption, high unemployment, and generalised poverty. Against a background and history of state secularism and separation of religion and state, the developments in the last two decades provide some interesting insights into how religious denominations and the state are likely going to operate in the future.

One aspect of religion and state relations that is clearly emerging is the rising socio-political influence of the religious denominations and how it has often led to a strained relationship with the state. One sees an increasingly assertive church community which because of their relative autonomy have remained the only zones of freedom in an otherwise hostile and oppressive political environment in which the more than 200 political parties registered since the 1990 democratic winds of change started have virtually been neutralised. The faltering democratisation process that started with such high hopes in the 1990s has ended up with the replacement of the one party regime with a dominant one-party regime that has retained all the instincts and tactics of the repressive one-party authoritarian past. This has left a huge political vacuum which the churches appear to be filling. As political parties and civil society organisations grow even weaker, the religious denominations will be forced to play an even greater role of fighting for democracy, accountability, good governance, respect for human rights and other issues that are ordinarily pursued by opposition parties and civil society organisations.

The divisions within and amongst the different religious denominations with respect to the political issues of the day has been noted. This is evident in the fact that the stalled democratic process and the increasing signs of democratic reversal has provoked different reactions within and amongst the different religious denominations. For the most part, the reactions have been dictated not by religious considerations but rather ethno-regional, political and cultural factors. As a result, the religious leaders from President Paul Biya's Beti ethnic group have generally been reluctant to criticise or condemn his human rights record regardless of whether they are Catholics like the President himself or members of any of the other Protestant churches. This regional dynamics has also been at play when the PCC which is located in the two Anglophone regions has not only been very critical of the slow pace of political reforms but has also been at the forefront of the criticisms against Anglophone marginalisation, discrimination and victimisation due to the perception that the Anglophones, particularly those in the North West Region, are the main source of Biya's political problems. The situation becomes even more complicated when the highest ranking leader of the Catholic Church in Cameroon, who is also an Anglophone, is accused of being critical of the government and its record because of his regional ties and other interests.

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[46] See Piet Konings, "Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony," 45.

The conflicting positions taken by some of the religious denominations and their leaders may suggest that religion far from being used incidentally to promote the general interest and welfare of their flock may be on the verge of being used by some ambitious religious leaders to further their political ambitions. There is evidence of some of these leaders being driven by personal ambition. It would seem that the technique of co-optation and neutralisation that has worked so well that it has turned most of Cameroon's 200 mainly sham political parties into docile allies of the ruling CPDM, has been used quite successfully against some religious leaders. For example, some religious leaders and political elites have built mutually beneficial partnerships dictated purely by their selfish interests. This is what has happened in many parts of northern Cameroon. Taking advantage of disaffection caused by the subordination of Muslim chiefs to local administrative officers and desperate to gain support of the Muslim majority in the three northern regions of Cameroon, President Biya negotiated alliances with Muslim leaders who undertook to urge their supporters to vote massively for the ruling CPDM in exchange for him giving them limited administrative rights within their localities. The most notorious example of such an alliance was that with the late Lamido of Rey Bouba. He used all methods to ensure a victory for the ruling party in his area and in exchange, he was allowed to run his district like a state within a state, with his own courts and prisons and killing or exiling those opposed to him or the Biya regime.[47] Similar arrangements were made with other Muslim leaders in the region.

The tense relation between some prominent religious denominations and the state over political reforms in Cameroon has spilled into important areas critical to the country's development such as education, health and industry. The prevailing economic crisis and the resulting poverty and unemployment as well as the doubts and uncertainty about the future that it has caused have affected the churches, especially the mainline churches. For example, it has led to massive defection of Christians from the mainline churches to some Pentecostal churches whose prosperity gospel appears to promise more hope at a time of desperation and misery. African Traditional Religion has also made inroads and in some places strongly challenging the dominant religious denominations. Like some of the prosperity gospel Pentecostal churches, it feeds off human fears and insecurity, and at the same time offers people the illusion that they can change the course of events through magic and manipulation of spirits. Perhaps a more serious problem caused by the crisis is the fact that the religious denominations are not able to attract and retain high quality employees.

The most serious effect of the prevailing economic crisis on religion in Cameroon is that it has provided a fertile ground for diverse manifestations of religious extremism.[48] The spread of Pentecostalism alluded to earlier has also been matched by the increase in the number of religious cults and sects.[49] Perhaps more worrying is the rise of Muslim fundamentalism. Both the Ahidjo and Biya regimes have been acutely aware of the danger this poses to the

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[47] See the account of Abdoul Nasser Aziz, "Rey-Bouba, Les Exactions du Lamido Persistent," http://www.leseptentrion.net/2012/01/rey-bouba-les-exactions-du-lamido-persistent/ (accessed July 5, 2013) and some of the United States Department of State, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in Cameroon, which often report many of the numerous human rights abuses that the Lamido has been involved in. In this regard, see the 2008 report at http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic,4565c2253e,4565c25f49d,49a8f19eaa,0,,,CMR.html (accessed July 5, 2013).

[48] Some countries in Africa have tried to deal with this by expressly prohibiting religious extremism in the constitution. For example, article 8 of the Constitution of the Central African Republic states: "Any form of religious fundamentalism and intolerance is forbidden."

[49] See, Tatah H. Mbuy, *Sects, Cults and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Cameroon: The Challenge of Religion in a Pluralistic Society* (Bamenda, Copy Printing Technology, 2003).

country's fragile unity. The threats posed by Muslim fundamentalism are beginning to be felt in northern regions of Cameroon. In the past two years, there have been numerous reports that the violent Islamic group, Boko Haram, whose terrorist activities in its campaign to impose Sharia law in Nigeria, has caused massive loss of life and property has infiltrated the northern Muslim majority in the northern part of Cameroon.[50]So far, Cameroon has largely escaped from Boko Haram's campaign of violence but there is growing evidence that the group is seriously recruiting young Muslims by making grandiose promises of money and food supplies and is threatening the lives of any Christians in the region.[51]

6.   CONCLUSION

The nature of religion and state relations in Cameroon in many respects reflects the latent tensions that exist in a complex multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society facing challenges of economic, social, cultural and political development. The temptation by the state to interfere in religious matters has been quite strong but it is one which the different Cameroonian Governments, since the colonial period have tried to resist. There have been numerous occasions, especially in the last two decades where they have been open conflicts between the state and some prominent religious denominations, but the two sides have now learned to accommodate each other and cooperate on matters of common good.

As in many African countries, the extent to which religious leaders have ventured into the political arena is directly related to the ability of civil society to address the social issues of the day. During the one-party era, with no avenues for freedom of expression, religious denominations, like the rest of civil society hardly had the space to speak out. With the opening of political space after the advent of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, the opportunity and space to speak on social issues has been thrown wide open. However, with the faltering democratic transition due to the effective neutralisation of the opposition parties by the regime and the growing ineffectiveness of the other opposition parties, religious denominations have increasingly filled the void by speaking out and trying to influence the pace of changes in the country. One can only speculate as to whether, if the opposition parties and civil society recover from their present insomnia and regain the political space they've lost and become effective, the religious denominations will return to their traditional pastoral functions. Be that as it may, one can nevertheless say that, from this perspective, religious denominations in Cameroon have been a strong force for economic, social and political reforms in the country against a regime that is progressively sliding back into its past authoritarian practices.

The fact that the religious denominations as a whole have not been able to speak with one voice has certainly weakened their ability to influence the political leadership. Until recently, mostly the Christian churches in the southern part of the country have been vocal about change. But within and between some of these churches, especially the leadership of the Catholic Church, there were differences which had nothing to do with doctrinal matters and everything to do with personal rivalries reinforced by cultural and ethnic-regional cleavages.

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[50] See, "Boko Haram and the Cameroonian connection: How Cameroon's tradition of non-interference may be boosting terrorism," http://blog.inkerman.com/index.php/2012/01/23/boko-haram-and-the-cameroonian-connection-cameroons-tradition-of-non-interference-may-be-boosting-terrorism/ (accessed July 5, 2013).
[51] "Christian converts in Cameroon under threat from militant Islamists," http://barnabasfund.org/Christian-converts-in-Cameroon-under-threat-from-militant-Islamists.html (accessed July 5, 2013).

This has resulted generally in leaders from Christian Churches originating from the Beti region regardless of the particular Christian denomination either supporting the regime or remaining silent when the regime's record on political reforms, human rights and economic management is under attack.

An increasingly repressive environment with effective opposition neutralised, and the churches struggling to evangelise and pursue their numerous social programmes in the area of education, health and economic development has been compounded by the continuing economic recession, unemployment and poverty. It is in this crisis that Christian and Muslim fundamentalism is gradually making its way into the country fuelled by extremists who promise their followers prosperity and a better life. Although the Government has tried to maintain a firm control over religious organisations by requiring that they should only operate after they have been registered, there are however too many informal or even formal denominations that operate without registration and therefore beyond the Government's regulatory control.

As a result of the important role that religion generally and religious denominations in particular play in Cameroon in the areas such as education, healthcare and commerce, it is certain that the Government will continue to tolerate the criticisms that these bodies have made on matters such as the lack of progress in democracy, general management of the economy and corruption. This explains the Government's policy of pragmatic circularism based on a practice of neutrality and separationism which enables both the state and religious organisations to interact without undue interference or entanglement in each other's affairs However, as the threat of extremism, especially that posed by Islamic extremist increases, the Government might be forced to be more aggressive in dealing with its opponents, especially those operating under the cover of some churches, than it has done so far. Until there are genuine political reforms that result in an open, transparent, inclusive and accountable democratic government that has the will to combat some of the country's ills, such as endemic corruption, and the inefficient and incompetent public service, religious denominations in general and the state will remain uneasy bedfellows who can barely tolerate each other. The possibilities of extremist cults and fundamentalist Islamic groups exploiting the people's poverty and disaffection remains a clear and imminent danger that can no longer be ignored.