

Religion, Politics and Identity in South Sudan: An Interview with Father Christian Carlassare (Juba, South Sudan)

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Introduction

After having gained independence in 2011, South Sudan is the youngest independent state in Africa. After two devastating civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), the road to the creation of an independent state of South Sudan had been prepared by the peace talks between the northern-dominated, Islamist-ruled government of the Republic of the Sudan and the SPLM (Sudan's People Liberation Movement), a movement fighting for the independence of the mainly Animist and Christian peoples of southern Sudan. Religion had played a central role in Khartoum's policy of repression of the southern rebellion – a policy justified mainly by making reference to Islam – as well as in the mobilization of national and international solidarity towards the southern Sudanese people and their aspiration to independence. That mobilization was often justified by the need for helping Christians suffering at the hands of 'radical Islamists', and supporting the resistance of ancestral African values against Arab imperialism.

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What is the place of religion(s) in this young African state? Has the state decided to intervene in religious matters? How have the Muslims who have become citizens of the new state negotiated their potentially problematic identity? What have been the most significant

inter-religious initiatives that have taken place in South Sudan after its independence? On May 12, 2015, the editors of ARIA had a conversation on these issues with Christian Carlassare, an Italian Catholic missionary of the Combonian order who has lived and worked in the region of Upper Nile (South Sudan) for over ten years. This conversation has resulted in the in-depth analysis of religion in South Sudan that we publish below in the form of an interview.

Interview

Father Christian, thanks a lot for being in touch with ARIA and agreeing to entertain this conversation about religions in South Sudan. Let us start with some figures. What are the most reliable statistics about religion in South Sudan?

The most recent report from the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, dated December 2012, estimated that in 2010, there were 6.010 million Christians (60.46%), 3.270 million followers of African Traditional Religion (32.9%), 610,000 Muslims (6.2%) and 50,000 unaffiliated (no known religion), in a total South Sudanese population of 9,940,000.¹ As is often the case,

however, these figures are disputed and it is hard to offer a clear picture of the different groups. Nevertheless, all agree that the three main religions in the country are African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. Muslims claim to represent 10% of the population. Their presence is felt in the urban centres and is consistent especially in Bahr-el-Ghazal, a province in the north-west of the country. Regarding the so-called African Traditional Religion, we must be aware that there are great divergences between different local traditions. We cannot really speak of an African Traditional Religion with specific practices, dogmas and beliefs as we are used to doing with other major religions such as Christianity and Islam. Moreover, unlike many African agricultural communities, most Nilotic peoples,² and generally the pastoralists, did not usually develop a traditional religion based on formal institutions; for example, a traditional priesthood performing ritual sacrifices etc. They do, however, have a traditional religion in the sense of a set of myths and customs that shape their culture and mark the identity of a specific group. Moreover, a Nuer or a Dinka (the two biggest ethnic groups in South Sudan) who becomes a Christian, would certainly abandon some practices that become redundant in the new faith, but that person would continue

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to belong to their original group, keep the same cultural and religious imagery and refer to the same stories and myths learnt from childhood. Therefore, we can say that the percentage of 32.9%, indicated above, might correspond to the number of people who do not profess Islam or were not baptized as Christians. The traditional beliefs and spirituality, however, permeate the lives of everyone, including Muslims and Christians. As

both Christianity and Islam have their cultural roots in ancient pastoralist societies, there are also many elements common to the traditional practices of the traditional religions of Nilotic peoples, and the two universal religions.

Before the independence of South Sudan, Sudan had a well-known history of conflict with multiple dimensions, including a religious one. How did the southern Sudanese perceive the role of religion in the conflict with the northern-dominated government of Khartoum?

Like the rest of Sudan, South Sudan has experienced almost constant conflict, first among the local tribes, then against foreign domination, and then in the united Sudan that was created after independence from Britain and Egypt was acquired in 1956. The first civil war between rebels based in the south and the government of Sudan based in Khartoum began in 1955 and lasted until 1972. Repeated violations of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which promised the South a measure of political autonomy, led to a second civil war lasting from 1983 until the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on January 9th, 2005. The second civil war lasted for twenty-two years and is estimated to have led to the death of more than two million people and to the displacement of another four million people. According to the terms of the CPA, a referendum was finally held in 2011 and close to ninety-nine percent of Southern Sudanese voted to secede. Despite South Sudan's independence, the conflict

between Sudan and South Sudan continues today in the form of disputes over shared border areas, control of oil and oil revenues, the failure to implement the terms of the CPA in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile (in Sudan) and in the disputed region of Abyei, all of which border South Sudan. Likewise there are ongoing disputes over the status of South Sudanese living in Sudan. Sudan has long suffered from the main macro-conflict, between north and south, as well as from various micro-conflicts; these include south-south conflicts over ethnicity, cattle, resources such as grazing land and water, and political power, as well as north-north civil wars such as Darfur, the Eastern Front, the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile.³

Many analysts have attempted to identify the root causes of this tragic history. John Ashworth, an advocacy advisor to various churches and agencies in Sudan and South Sudan, identifies two broad causes at the root of both levels of conflict. The first is *identity*. He writes: "Sudan was a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic country. But over a long period one identity grouping, which happened to be "Arab" and Islamic, dominated. It defined itself as the Sudanese identity to whom all other identities had to conform."⁴ The second is what he terms the *centre-periphery dynamic*. "Power, resources, and development were concentrated in a small geographic area and amongst a small number of ethnic groups in the centre of Sudan. All peripheral areas were marginalized."⁵

In my opinion, these two categories of *identity* and *marginalization* help us to understand the conflicting history of South Sudan. The southerners have also been constantly reminding the international community that religion was the pivotal factor of identity in the conflict. For instance, Francis M. Deng has argued very strongly and convincingly that religion, on both

the northern and southern sides, defines identity. For northerners, Islam is not only a faith and a way of life, it is also part of a northern ethnic identity associated with the Arab language and culture. Most southerners, on the other side, perceive Islam not just as a religion, but also as an aspect of an alien Arab identity that excludes them as black Africans.⁶ The identity of South Sudan has been shaped primarily by the prolonged resistance to the imposition of Arab and Islamic culture coming from the North and supported by the State central power. As a natural reaction,

this has had the effect of unifying the southerners as black Africans and has geared them towards Christianity and to the adoption of the English language as a means of combating Islam and Arabism. A northern scholar, 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi, captured this religious dilemma when he wrote: "The close association between Islam and northern Sudanese nationalism would certainly rob Islam of an advantage [in the South] [...] [as] it remains beset by problems similar to those that limited the appeal of the SPLA's Africanism [in the North]."⁷ If the northern Sudanese, who identify strongly with their Arab heritage, are in no danger of being seduced by *Africanism*, southerners, who identify strongly with their African heritage, are in no danger of being seduced by *Arabism*. While the North promoted *Arabization* and *Islamization* in order to establish a national cultural unity, the natural effect of this policy was the opposite; thus, it widened the differences between the two parts of the country, escalating the conflict and adding a racial and religious dimension. In the South, Christianity became a key element of southern identity to counter the Arab-Islamic model imposed by the North. Therefore, for many southerners during the struggle for independence, assuming a Christian name and going to church, represented more of a political statement than an act of faith.

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How has the new government of South Sudan addressed the issue of religion and identity in the aftermath of independence?

Most non-Muslim South Sudanese had always assumed that Islam was a political identity more than a religion. Therefore they wanted a clear break. This was stated in an evocative banner portrayed at Independence Day: *From this day our identity is Southern and African and not Arab and Islamic. We are not the worst of Arabs, but rather the best of Africans.*⁸ Interestingly, this banner was written in Arabic, as if the message were implicitly addressed to the government of Khartoum. The same dilemma of religion and identity, however, was a crucial one for the South

Sudanese Muslim minority. The vast majority of them, in fact, favoured southern independence, as shown by the outcome of the referendum. Southern Muslims had suffered discrimination in the North for being southerners, and to a certain extent, they had also suffered discrimination in the South for being Muslims – even if there were several southern Muslims who fought in the SPLM throughout the war. With their stand for independence, they were courageously stating that being South Sudanese and being a Muslim was not a contradiction in terms; a statement that was counter-intuitive for many non-Muslim South Sudanese. In order to become part of the new country's identity, of course, the nature of South Sudanese Islam had to cancel any northern cultural stamp, so as to wash out the stain of bad reputation acquired during five decades of domination and to present itself with a fresh face acceptable in the new country.

Did you ever perceive any risk that a new religious conflict could start in the country and that Muslims would be victimized in the newly established state due to past grievances?

After independence, some groups raised their voices by saying that the constitution should not

allow the Islamic religion to be practiced in South Sudan. Many in the country saw Islam as the cause of five decades of suffering, so in a sense, this reaction was not surprising. From time to time, one can see these feelings expressed in the South Sudanese press. I am referring to articles and opinion pieces that argue that the “growing number of the so-called South Sudanese Muslim communities in the Republic of South Sudan is an

insult to South Sudan national integrity, identity, pride of South Sudanese citizens.”⁹ However, the government of the new nation did not fall prey to the temptation to uphold a single, narrow national identity. The new government of South Sudan has promised to tackle

the relationship between religion and politics in a completely different way from what was the practice of the united Sudan. The policy enacted by the new government has attempted to promote the awareness that South Sudan is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country.

How does the legislation of the new country address the issue of religion?

The new constitution clearly upholds the dream of embracing such a diversity and creating unity in spite of differences. The transitional constitution of the Republic of South Sudan was published and ratified on July 7, 2011, and came into force on the Day of Independence, July 9, 2011. It affirms that religion and the state are two separate matters. Moreover, it clearly states that “all religions shall be treated equally and religion or religious beliefs shall not be used for divisive purposes.”¹⁰ The transitional constitution provides the right to freedom of worship; the right to solicit and receive voluntary financial contributions; the right to own property for religious purposes; the right to write, publish and disseminate religious publications; the right to communicate with individuals and communities in matters of religion and beliefs

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at national and international levels; the right to teach religion or beliefs in places suitable for these purposes; the right to train, appoint, and designate by succession one's own clergy; and the right to observe religious holidays.¹¹ Offices and businesses follow a Monday through Friday work week, with Sunday as a day for religious observance. Muslims, however, are permitted by law to a two-hour break on Fridays for worship. Government schools are in session on Friday and do not excuse Muslim students from class. Christian Religious Education is part of the curriculum in all state schools, but Muslim students may ask to be exempted and automatically receive dispensation. On the other hand, the government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Moulid, Easter, and Christmas.

Has the principle of religious freedom been implemented practically?

According to the report on religious freedom in South Sudan issued by the United States' Department of State, in the first year of life of the new state "there were no accounts of abuses of religious freedom; however, the government imposed restrictions that affected members of minority religious groups."¹² The report mentions cases in which Muslims have faced subtle discrimination, particularly regarding applications for citizenship or other official documentation. Government officials, in fact, sometimes refused to release passports or other documents to applicants of Arab ethnic descent or of Muslim faith, often without providing any explanation. It is important to remember, however, that people of South Sudanese descent too, although born in the Sudan, have faced discrimination in the North; thus, their applications for citizenship have often been refused. According to the same report, there have also been instances in South Sudan in which state government officials have

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occasionally expropriated Muslim-owned lands. It appears to me, however, that the government did not take these measures out of a specific anti-Muslim prejudice, but in an effort to nationalize resources to improve the productivity of a young and fragile economy. In fact, the confiscation of private property has been a common phenomenon

in the country, and has affected all groups. When these measures have affected Muslim religious groups, they have appealed to the national authorities for relief. In most cases, the local authorities have not responded to these appeals. What complicates the matter from the legal point of view is

the absence of clear laws governing land rights. However, the *Sudan Tribune* reported that President Salva Kiir personally intervened in the matter by instructing all state governors in the ten states of the country to hand over all assets belonging to Muslims that may have either been confiscated for political reasons, or illegally repossessed under unclear circumstances. At the same time, the president warned Muslims not to use the issue to politicize religious identity: "South Sudan under my leadership will not allow anyone to use Islam as a tool for advancing political agenda. There is no room for politicizing Islam or any other religion in this country."¹³ These words were later followed up by the decision of the government to ban religious political organizations. Some Muslims have interpreted this policy as an attack directed especially against Islam. On the other hand, under Silva Kiir's government South Sudanese Muslims have been well represented in the government and have been holding several prominent positions, including the mayoralty of the capital Juba and at least one out of ten governorships. It seems that the South Sudan government has been implementing a twofold policy of attempting, on the one hand, to ensure that Muslim constituencies are politically represented, while on the other hand, wanting to isolate the South Sudanese Muslims

from trends that are considered dangerous for the state security. In a 2014 article published by *Sudan Tribune*, for instance, it was reported that the South Sudanese president Salva Kiir had warned against the importation of “radical Islam,” and that he would not tolerate any form of extremism in religion: “Religion is a personal relation between the person and God and cannot therefore be used to cause security concerns and endanger the lives of other people as we see it in other countries.”¹⁴ The president also used his address to promote peaceful coexistence and promised the return of lands belonging to Muslim communities in the country and the building of more mosques and schools to teach Islam and the Quran. Kiir also announced the donation of \$200,000 to enable South Sudanese Muslims to make the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. On the whole, therefore, we can say that the government tries to relate to religion very cautiously. On the one hand, it is aware that it cannot do without it because people in the country tend to be very religious. Being in good terms with religious leaders of all confessions is seen by the government as one of the best ways to raise consensus. On the other hand, the government is extremely wary in avoiding any interference from religion in political matters.

Does African Traditional Religion have any political role?

In the long run, I am convinced that the government’s policy of stressing South Sudanese identity is also destined to a re-evaluation of the public relevance of traditional religion. Many influential and educated leaders and politicians of South Sudan, in fact, proudly show reverence and trust in the traditional beliefs of their tribe(s). This is reflected in the following statement published by the Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan in Washington DC on their website:

With regards to religious beliefs and practices, South Sudanese are

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mostly pluralistic, with [the] majority of them, about 85%, adhering to indigenous belief systems, which involve totems, lower gods and high God, and belief in the power of ancestors to look over the living. Others believe in both the indigenous systems and Christianity. There is also a very small percentage of Muslims. Traditionally, religion was never a source of conflict, as it was always inseparable from ethnic identity. In the indigenous religions, one is born into it, as one’s religion is the same as one’s blood, and therefore no room for efforts to convert others. But when the so-called religions of the book, Christianity and Islam ascended, the concept of proselytization and efforts to convert people became a question of placing the faiths in hierarchy, with local religions thought by foreign missionaries as inferior and the people needing their souls to be saved. This has long pitted the people against one another, resulting, at least partly, in protracted wars between the religion of the state in the old Sudan, Islam, and believers in other faiths in South Sudan who did not want to be forced into Islam. Otherwise, within South Sudan, religion is not just a question of coming to terms with the cosmos, but as much a way of life as it is a way of reckoning with the unknown, including the mystery of life and death.¹⁵

Personally, I see some wisdom behind such a re-evaluation of traditional religion, but also many limits and potential risks. Traditional religions, in fact, are inextricably intertwined with ethnicity, which has become the major source of conflict in post-independence South Sudan. This is

why, when reading the above statement on the website of the South Sudanese Embassy, an apparently provocative comment of Msgr. Paride Taban, emeritus bishop of Torit, came to my mind, in which he

warned that people in South Sudan are returning to “paganism.” Although this term might seem to be politically incorrect, this was a statement that had been made while speaking of the present ethno-political conflict in which South Sudan has been engulfed since 14th December 2013. In his speech, Msgr. Taban had said that every human being is bound to make mistakes, but forgiveness is essential in human relations, and that admitting one’s fault is essential to trigger forgiveness. The “return to Paganism,” in the context of that talk, was intended as a return to the primacy of ethnic cycles of revenge over the principle of admitting one’s individual responsibility and asking for forgiveness from the victims. “How do we get rid of the hatchet forever instead of just burying it for a time and digging it up later?” This is the same question that was asked in South Africa by Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Do you mean that South Sudan needs a sort of “Truth and Reconciliation” process?

Yes, and in fact something similar has already been put in place. The government clearly realised that the country needed a process of reconciliation because the population was traumatized from decades of conflict, violence and death. This was before the beginning of the current crisis and had to do mainly with the grievances of the fifty years of civil war within the united Sudan, and with the problem of how this memory could affect Christian-Muslim relations in the new country. In May 2013, the government appointed a National Reconciliation Committee predominantly composed of religious leaders. Their mandate was to oversee efforts to reconcile the various communities in the country, and to identify and address causes of conflict. The committee is still active. Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church is the chairman, emeritus Bishop Paride Taban of the Catholic Church is his deputy, and several other church leaders and Muslim clerics

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take part in it. After the outbreak of the new conflict, the work of this committee has intensified. The committee has met some of the communities involved in micro-conflicts, who had asked to go through such a process of forgiveness and healing. In my opinion, it is very important that both Christians and Muslims continue to be involved in this process, to pray for peace, and to help communities choose the path of reconciliation instead of violence and revenge.

How have South Sudan’s religious leaders responded to the outbreak of violence in 2013, only two years after independence?

At the outbreak of the conflict, religious leaders tried not to take sides with either the government or the opposition, but instead aimed to denounce the conflict *per se*, as in the following statement released by the Catholic bishop of Juba in September 2014.

The current war in South Sudan is evil. [...] There is no moral justification for any further killing. We can accept no excuses nor conditions from any party or individual for the continuation of the war. The fighting and killing must stop immediately and unconditionally. [...] We declare before God that it is evil for any party to use continuing violence to try to further their political agenda.¹⁶

The situation on the ground is very complex. Although the main conflict is between Dinka and Nuer factions (none of which has a sizeable Muslim population), some of the local conflicts have involved Muslims, directly or indirectly. There are rumors, for instance, that although the government of Sudan diplomatically shows its respect to President Salva Kiir, it has been supporting the opposition of Riek Machar by offering money and weapons. People are very suspicious. Most South

Sudanese Muslims have avoided taking sides in the present conflict. There have been, however, instances of Sudanese Muslims getting involved. One such example is the use of mercenaries from the JEM (Justice and Equality Movement, the main Darfurian armed group) on the side of the government to weaken the lines of the opposition in Unity State (Western Upper Nile). In February 2014, JEM brigades were involved in heavy fighting alongside the government, and they are accused of having burnt villages and targeted civilians.¹⁷ On that occasion, even our Catholic mission in the town of Leer was affected. The problem is not only the material loss occurred, but also the trauma endured by the two priests, as well as two brothers and four sisters, who spent weeks running for their lives in the bush, after the attack by the JEM brigades and the government forces. After a few months, the opposition fought back and entered the town of Bentiu. On April 21, we heard that when the opposition forces entered Bentiu, hundreds of unarmed civilians (both South Sudanese and foreigners) who had found shelter in a mosque, a church and a hospital, were brutally killed. Some two hundred civilians were reportedly killed at the Kali-Ballee mosque where they had sought shelter. One opposition source claimed that many of those killed in the mosque were in fact soldiers who had taken off their uniforms. This was a brutal act of revenge, and many of those killed in the mosque were Sudanese traders, mostly Muslims from Darfur.¹⁸ South Sudanese Muslims, however, know very well that this was not an act of hatred against Islam as such, but an explosion of anger against Darfurians caused by the involvement of JEM forces alongside the government.

In Old Fangak, where our mission is located, we were able to witness a different attitude towards Darfurians, even though we too are under the

control of the opposition. A group of Darfurians have been present in Old Fangak since the peace agreement of 2005. They had come to work as traders in the local market. They settled peacefully and they are well accepted by the local population. They practice their Muslim faith and have never been harassed for doing so. Although they only have a modest prayer hall at the market, they practice their faith with devotion. On the whole, the Nuer are quite open towards welcoming people with different religious traditions. However, they usually find it difficult to accept that a Nuer could embrace Islam. In my view, this is mainly because most Nuer do not differentiate between the religion of Islam and the politics of the Sudanese government, and therefore, they view the Muslim Nuer with suspicion. Personally, I know only very few Nuer who have embraced Islam. Those who live in urban centres can easily practice their faith and attend mosques. Those who live in the rural areas

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on Nuer ancestral land, on the contrary, usually refrain from practicing their religion openly for fear of stigmatization. To conclude, one can say that, while Christianity was a popular form of identification for the southern Sudanese during the

civil war against the government of Khartoum, African Traditional Religion is now coming back to the fore of Southern Sudanese identity. Although this process is fully understandable in the context of the South Sudanese historical struggle to defend identity, what remains to be seen is how far the Southern Sudanese will be able to moderate the ethnic cleavages (for instance, between Dinka, Nuer and Murle) which to a certain extent, are structural to their traditional religious systems. Religious leaders of all communities need to be part of the process of re-definition of South Sudanese identity in order to prevent the country from falling into a spiral of ethnic violence.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-percentages/>; <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/table-religious-composition-by-country-in-numbers/>.
- 2 The term 'Nilotic people' or 'Nilotes' refers to related ethnic groups mainly inhabiting the Nile Valley and parts of East Africa. They form the majority of the population in South Sudan.
- 3 For a discussion of the root causes of conflict in the old Sudan, see Ruth Iyob and Gilbert M. Khadiagala. *Sudan: The Elusive Quest for Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2006).
- 4 John Ashworth, *New Nationalism and Nation Healing. The case of South Sudan*. Sudan Tribune 11 April 2012. See <http://www.sudantribune.com/New-Nationalism-and-Nation-healing>, 42206.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Francis Mading Deng, *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001, pp. 13-21.
- 7 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi, 'Discovering the Sudan: Sudanese Dilemmas for Islam in Africa, African Affairs,' *The Journal of the Royal Africa Society*, July 1990, pp. 371, 387-88.
- 8 As reported in the blog of Noah Solomon, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/04/12/freeing-religion-at-the-birth-of-south-sudan/>
- 9 John Bith Aliap, <http://www.southsudannewsagency.com/opinion/articles/islamic-religion-is-an-insult-to-the-republic-of-south-sudan-national-identity-and-the-pride-of-south-sudanese-citizens>.
- 10 Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, n. 8.
- 11 Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, n. 23.
- 12 South Sudan International Religious Freedom Report for 2012. United States Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.
- 13 Sudan Tribune, August 19, 2012. <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article43617>
- 14 Sudan Tribune, July 27, 2014. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article51831>
- 15 <http://www.southsudanembassydc.org/inner.asp?z=5D58>.
- 16 "Message of Hope from the Catholic Bishop of Juba: War is Evil; War cannot bring Peace; This War must Stop," 25th September 2014. The same message was then reiterated in a similar message released in January 2015.
- 17 Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/zh-hans/node/126087/section/9>
- 18 <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/africa/471667-ssudan-rebels-massacre-civilians-in-mosque.html>