AFRICAN RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

"AND A 'MAN OF AFRICA' SAYS TO THE CHURCHES ..."

A Recent Ivorian Analysis of Christianity

BY

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The religious melting pot of Africa continues its almost unlimited production of literary materials as evidence of an ongoing process of syncretizing.¹ The appearance in 1977 of L’échelle sans fin² (The endless ladder) by V. Mathieu Ekra offers an excellent locus for observing the phenomenon.

The text is a personal statement by a sixty-year-old African writing out of a sense of duty and inner constraint to share his wisdom as a service to his fellowmen. The author is a political figure of importance in the Ivory Coast and French-speaking West Africa. Active in the struggles for political independence in the 1940s and 1950s, Ekra has played a significant role since 1960 as a minister of state in various Ivorian governments in addition to his permanent place in the bureau politique of the single-party P.D.C.I., even surviving the sweeping reduction of that organ in the historic Seventh Congress of 1980. He is presently Minister for the Reform of the State (-controlled industrial) Societies; as such he has recently completed a major liberalizing revision of that very significant sector of the Ivory Coast economy.

The personal religious history of the author is marked by the recent and rapid transition from traditional religion to modern religious practice experienced by the lower Ivory Coast since the passage of the Prophet W. W. Harris in 1913-1914. Ekra’s father, from the Abouré people east of Abidjan, was baptized by the Prophet Harris in 1914, then rebaptized three years later by an African Methodist pastor from the Gold Coast,³ the occasion of Ekra’s own baptism as an infant. He was raised by his parents—Harrists turn-
ed Methodists—until at the age of thirteen he was himself rebaptized by a Catholic missionary priest during a period of education in a Catholic part of his extended family. However, at the age of thirty-two he left the Catholic communion following the refusal by a French priest to hear confession and give communion to him and his fellow prisoners, interned for their political activity and ideas. Ekra writes that he remained a long time outside the life of the churches because of religious doubt, but later again became a Methodist Protestant following the example of a friend who fulfilled his own "duties to God" without question. He had become a practising Christian but remained "in anguish in the presence of imposed mysteries and the uncertainties which they create for faith". At the age of fifty, he had his "Damascus road" experience; this was under the tutelage of a religious "master" working in an African language who had neither diploma nor formal theological education. It was a teaching, unlike those received in the churches—

where the revelation of the spirit which is in man places him in a state for understanding the spiritual meaning of the word of God and for seeing just as far as the Spirit of God wishes to show him.

The Bible, after this initiation, became for him—

a very long path which leads to God ... like an endless ladder which is visible yet whose top and bottom are out of sight. Yet when one stands upon it, on whichever rung, and willingly holds on, the Spirit of God himself unveils progressively to the traveller—before and behind—the succeeding rungs which permit us to advance and go up to Him to the Kingdom of Light and Life where He awaits us.

Here, then, is the origin of the title of the book, and the theme around which the author desires to "share the idea and the certainty that the anguish of Man in the face of death's emptiness is vain and without object, if Man does not go alone to this fatal rendezvous." The reader who is "anxious to escape human anguish" is invited by the author to climb this "endless ladder" towards God.

Part of the interest of the book lies in the fact that the proposed teaching is seen by the author to be "really new in our time, in relation to the established churches," which presumably accounts for the publisher's announcement which forms the title of this article. The novelty is partly methodological in that the teaching "considers the reality of the existence and the life of spirits in order to help grasp the conditions and the means of the life of men who are dealing with that which they are becoming." But it is also new because