

2021

## Review of Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World

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### Recommended Citation

Asongu, Januarius J. (2021) "Review of Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, 142-145.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol5/iss2/17](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol5/iss2/17)

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**Book Review:**  
***Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World:  
Joseph Ki-Zerbo Versus Jacques Maritain***

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*Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World: Joseph Ki-Zerbo Versus Jacques Maritain*. 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Basile Sede Noujio. Conneaut Lake, PA: Page Publications, 2021, paper, \$19.95, 978-1662425646.

On the afternoon of April 6, 2021, while I was working on my review of this exciting work by my friend, Rev. Dr. Basile Sede Noujio, I received the sad news of the passing of Rev. Dr. Hans Küng. This is significant because when I was a seminarian in the early 1990s with Fr. Noujio, Fr. Hans Küng, whom *The New York Times* described in his obituary as a “Catholic theologian with a powerful critique” (Martin, 2021), was one of my heroic trinity that included Rev. Dr. Leonardo Boff (a father of Liberation Theology) and Rev. Dr. Karl Rahner (who coined the concept of “Anonymous Christianity”).

Thirty-something years after I first encountered these great scholars, I remain in awe of their ideas and contributions to philosophy and theology. In fact, they continue to influence my life, my *Weltanschauung* (worldview). It is perhaps not surprising that I left the seminary because these luminaries are considered the *enfants terribles* of the Holy Mother Church.

Fr. Basile Sede Noujio is different, not just because he has remained remarkably true to the tenets of the Catholic faith, which he serves as Pastor of Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church, Charlotte, NC, but also in the issues that he addresses. However, without directly citing these giants, I will dare to say that Noujio’s work embraces Hans Küng’s multiculturalism, Karl Rahner’s ecumenism, and even Leonardo Boff’s social justice. Moreover, the death of Fr. Hans Küng on the afternoon of April 6, 2021, impelled me to reflect on the immense contribution of priests to scholarship, a noble, but controversial, tradition which Fr. Basile Sede Noujio has embraced.

Given that this work revolves around the thoughts of Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Jacques Maritain, I think it is fair to devote some time to humanize these characters.

Joseph Ki-Zerbo, the son of the first Catholic Christian from Burkina Faso, was born on June 21, 1922. He was a Burkinabé historian, politician, and writer. Like the late Prof. Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi, he is recognized as one of Africa’s foremost historians and thinkers. Although he received philosophical training as part of his preparation for the Catholic priesthood, he never earned a degree in the field and never became a priest. Rather, after leaving the seminary, he earned a scholarship to France, where he studied history and law at the Sorbonne and also followed courses in politics at the Sciences Po. On completion of his studies, he became a certified history and

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geography teacher, the first from Burkina Faso. He then taught in Orléans, Paris and Dakar before returning to Burkina Faso, where from 1972 to 1978 he was a professor of African History at the University of Ouagadougou. In 1983, he was forced into exile, only being able to return in 1992. Ki-Zerbo founded the Party for Democracy and Progress and was its chairman until 2005. He also represented the party in the Burkina Faso parliament until his death on December 4, 2006. A socialist and an advocate of African independence and unity, Ki-Zerbo was also a vocal opponent of Thomas Sankara's revolutionary government. Ki-Zerbo argued internationally that slavery is a crime against humanity and that Africa should get reparations for this (Holenstein, 2006). Like Boff, Ki-Zerbo was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (Alternative Nobel Prize) for his research on development.

Noujio also draws inspiration from Jacques Maritain (November 18, 1882 – April 28, 1973), a French lay Catholic philosopher. Maritain was raised Protestant, became agnostic before converting to Catholicism in 1906. An author of more than 60 books, he helped to revive Thomas Aquinas for modern times, and was influential in the development and drafting of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (DeMarco, 2000). Maritain's interest and works spanned many aspects of philosophy, including aesthetics, political theory, philosophy of science, metaphysics, the nature of education, liturgy and ecclesiology. The foundation of Maritain's thought is Aristotle, Aquinas, and the Thomistic commentators, especially John of St. Thomas. Maritain's philosophy is based on evidence accrued by the senses and acquired by an understanding of first principles (Hanna, 1996).

In *Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World: Joseph Ki-Zerbo Versus Jacques Maritain*, the author correctly argues that "Thomistic thought, represented by Jacques Maritain, bears the same ideas of personalism or humanism that are expressed in the African philosophy of history as expressed by Joseph Ki-Zerbo" (p. 283). By highlighting the works of Ki-Zerbo, the author discredits those who claimed that Africa was incapable of having a religion, history or philosophy. Hegel (1770-1831) receives the brunt of the criticism (p. 23) and it is worth noting that the author has dedicated a whole book on this subject entitled *Hegel's Philosophy of History; A Challenge to the African Thinker: Compliments to Leopold S. Senghore*.

As a student of Ki-Zerbo and Maritain, it is not surprising that the author goes after postmodernism without any measure of charity, describing it as "venomous" and a "deviation" from serious scholarship (pp. 236-256). Postmodernism is a broad movement that developed in the mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism, marking a departure from modernism. Noujio states that "Nietzsche is considered the father of postmodernism" (p. 240). Common targets of postmodern criticism include universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social progress. He cites many proponents of postmodernism including Jacques Derrida who says there is no absolute truth, and Jean-Francois Lyotard who states that "the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths" (p. 237). It is worthy of note that postmodernism is always connected to poststructuralism, and postmodern thought is broadly characterized by tendencies to self-consciousness, self-referentiality, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irreverence.

Noujio is not isolated in his criticisms of postmodernism as a meaningless philosophy that promotes obscurantism. The linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky has said that postmodernism is meaningless because it adds nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge (Chomsky, 1995). The Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has said "The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unliveable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism" (Craig, 2008)!

Noujio's *Comparing Cultures and Religions in a Postmodern World: Joseph Ki-Zerbo Versus Jacques Maritain* has 10 chapters and is written in a simple style that makes it easy to read without sacrificing its scholarly character. Chapter 10 entitled "The African and Christian-Thomistic Conceptions of History: Challenges and Prospectives in a Postmodern Era" is a befitting denouement, in which the author endorses the primacy of objective truth (exemplified in Thomistic Philosophy) over the subjectivism or even relativism of the postmodernist thinkers. It is worth noting that postmodernism can be credited for the growing disregard of the institutional Church and for the spread of evangelical Christianity with each preacher holding to his/her own body of truths and resulting in the battle of truths.

The author has contributed to scholarship by undertaking a good multidimensional and comparative study of cultures and religions, whereby he acknowledged the wisdom of African, Western and Eastern thinkers. In addition, he addressed hot contemporary subjects including globalization and racism, which in the United States has targeted peoples of African descent. By elaborating on the historical, scientific, and industrial achievements of Africa through the lenses of Ki-Zerbo, Noujio is making a strong statement that Africa and African peoples deserve respect not just as humans, but also for their contribution to civilization.

In conclusion, I will highly recommend this work for its contribution, not just to philosophy and theology, but also to multiculturalism, globalization, and authentic humanism. Fr. Basile Sede Noujio is clearly following the footsteps of pioneers like Fr. Placide Temples whose work, *Bantu Philosophy*, was a practical affront on Hegel's claim that Africans were incapable of a philosophy, theology and even history. By comparing the philosophies of giants like Ki-Zerbo and Maritian, Noujio has demonstrated that Africa has and continues to contribute to global culture and knowledge. However, I could not escape from the following questions after reading this beautiful book: (1) At what point in history did Africa lose its leadership position and what factors contributed to her downfall? (2) What must we do as Africans or people of African ancestry to regain our respect in the world?

Finally, it is befitting to end with this remark from Bernard Fonlon: "It is imperative to steer clear of two extremes: on the one hand, the imperialist arrogance which declared everything African as only fit for the scrap-heap and the dust-bin, and, on the other hand, the overly-enthusiastic and rather naïve tendency to laud every aspect of African culture as if it were the quintessence of human achievement" (1967, pp. 21-22).

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