

7 SECULARITY AND EXERCISE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS IN PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Célestin Gnonzion¹

INTRODUCTION

Côte d'Ivoire is a French-speaking West African country of nearly 23 million inhabitants and about 60 ethnic groups. It is a secular and multi-faith state in which religions rub shoulders and compete with intensity and strategy to increase their number of faithful and keep them. New information and communication technologies and new media are thus “put in contribution in a competitive logic by pastor-prophets to gain advantage for their revelations through of “marketability”. Divine revelations have become “media products” and a marketing space facilitating the meeting of supply and demand.²

This effervescence of the Ivorian religious market has gone through several eras. It has long been dominated by the great confessions of Islam, whose adherents include large numbers of non-nationals living on Ivorian soil, and the Catholic Church, which owes its ascent in great part to its works in the field of health and, especially, in education. But, in recent decades, Côte d'Ivoire has seen the arrival of new Protestant evangelical Pentecostal churches. The methods and promises of some of these pastors are often considered to be exaggerated and excessive. Some are even cited in the local press and on social networks as power holders of evil origins, having signed pacts with the devil to be powerful and attract more crowds. Yet, in spite of the criticisms to which they are subjected, one cannot deny use and control of these men of God on the traditional media of television and radio, as social networks for persuasive communication.

On national public television, for example, pastors and preachers have spaces to inform their worshipers of prayers and healings. The aim is to attract the most faithful to their places of worship, prayers and spiritual and religious gatherings. A press release by the Ivorian Television Broadcasting (RTI), suspending religious announcements on all its channels as of Monday, 18 January 2016, therefore, came as a big surprise. Some Ivorian homes have television access only to the RTI for informed about what is going on both nationally and internationally. The RTI, as

1 The author is a Researcher in the Department of Information and Communication Sciences of the Training and Research Unit in Communication Information and Arts, Felix Houphouët-Boigny University of Abidjan, Ivory Coast. He is also associate researcher at the Catholic University of West Africa-Abidjan.

2 Guiblehon B. 2014. “Le marché des révélations divines dans le contexte de crise politique en Côte d'Ivoire” [The market of divine revelations in the context of political crisis in Cote d'Ivoire], 29 May. Online at: https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/anthro/documents/media/jaso6_1_2014_79_98.pdf

a public service media and in the name of the criterion of diversity should have given much better treatment to these religious leaders, for reasons that this chapter explores. The underlying study is part of field research on the issue of freedom of expression. It is an extension of earlier research on the fight for freedom of the press in Côte d'Ivoire.³ Here we focus on the perceptions of the public authority in Côte d'Ivoire of freedom of expression as constitutive of religious freedom, and how this freedom is experienced through public service media, particularly the RTI.

The chapter starts from a number of observations. First, the Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire proclaims the secularity of the state.⁴ But, in practice, it is an ambiguous secularism. For there is a rapprochement between politicians and religious leaders according to the political regimes and the religion of the head of state. Second, this ambiguity is reflected in the intervention of the public authorities in the organisation of certain religious cults and pilgrimages. But not all religions are concerned by these interventions with thousands or even millions of francs of the state. Restrictions exist on access to the mechanisms of the state by religions. Third, these same restrictions exist regarding access to public service media, access to which is reserved and controlled by the state. Through these controls, the Ivorian state demonstrates a partisan orientation in favour of the Muslim and Catholic religions to the detriment of other communities of believers. Additionally, the suspension of religious advertisements on the channels of the RTI as a public medium, was variously interpreted. While some saw in this decision the willingness of the RTI to comb through the statements disseminated through its channels, others, such as Stéphane Kipré, president of the Union of New Generations (UNG) and president of Federation and Evangelical Protestant Churches of Côte d'Ivoire, consider this measure as an attack on the freedom of worship and beliefs, discrimination against Evangelical Protestant churches.

All of these observations and tensions point to need to study the exercise of religious freedom in the public service media and to question the real application of the principle of secularism in Côte d'Ivoire. These findings raise the following question: How are religious liberty and the principle of secularism applied in Côte d'Ivoire and more particularly in the public service media? The analysis here focuses on the political and legal approach of audiovisual media, particularly the concept of public service media and how television is perceived by the different policies and regimes that have succeeded each other since the independence of the Côte d'Ivoire. As its main contributions, the chapter criticises, first of all, the excessive influence of politics on religion in a context where there has been a constitutional choice in favour of a secular state. In this context, the state interferes, sometimes paradoxically in certain spheres of the spiritual life of some of the religions and cults present in Côte d'Ivoire. It is the state which decides, for example, which religion deserves to be financed, what amount to give, which religion has the authorisation to diffuse

3 Gnonzion C. 2012. "Struggle for press freedom in Cote d'Ivoire". Online at: <http://www.unescoafricom.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/The-State-of-Media-Freedom-in-Africa.pdf>

4 Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2016, preamble.

7. Secularity and exercise of religious freedoms in public service media

programmes and to benefit from air time on national television. It is precisely this question of the exercise of freedom of expression and religious freedoms through national television that the chapter addresses as a second contribution.

The methodological approach adopted for this study is both quantitative and qualitative. In order to gather the opinions of religious groups on the question of their access to the media of public services and to know if they benefit from the help of the Ivorian state, we constituted a sample of 35 religious leaders questioned in the communities of Yopougon, Abobo and Port-Bouët. We grouped them into five religious groups: Muslims, Catholic Christians, Buddhists, Evangelical Christians and Animists. For each religious group, we selected seven respondent interviewees. This survey was intended to elicit quite diverse opinions on the issue. A questionnaire and interview guide were used for this purpose. In addition to the survey, we conducted targeted interviews, including interviews with the director of the Promotion of Religious Freedom and Secularism at the General Directorate of Cults and the producer-director in charge of religious questions at RTI. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The research also relied on the study and analysis of documents, including reports and press releases related to antenna bans of some religious leaders and their reactions and reports of the Ministry of Cults on the financing of pilgrimages to religious cults.

RELIGION, STATE AND SECULARITY IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Before presenting the results of the present research, it seems useful to recall some points of the Ivorian context of secularism, the exercise of freedom of expression and religious freedoms. The notion of public service media will also be explained in order to understand the problem that is the subject of this study, namely the lack of access to service television by some religious organisations when others have weekly broadcast programmes.

Religious institutions in Côte d'Ivoire

The concept of religious institution is taken here in the broad sense of the term and refers to groups and religious cults active on the territory of Côte d'Ivoire. The figures of the last General Census of Population and Housing (RGPH) in 2014 show the presence of several religions and cults in Côte d'Ivoire. In a resident population of 22,671,331 inhabitants, as shown in the table below, Islam is the religion with the most followers, followed by Christianity, then comes the category of "Without religion".

Table 7.1: Religious practices in Côte d'Ivoire⁵

RELIGIOUS ADHERENTS	% TOTAL POPULATION
Islam	42%
Christianity*	34%
Without religion**	19%
Animists	4%
Other religions	1%
* Christian groups combined. In order of importance by number of adherents: Catholics, Protestants and other Christian religions.	
** Agnostic and atheistic deists.	

Source: General Census of Population and Housing 2014

These data also specify that “among the foreign population, Muslims represent 72% (against 18% Christians of this population) while in the Ivorian population, it is Christians who come first with 39% and Muslims represent 30% of the population.”⁶ As for the place of Protestant churches in Ivory Coast, anthropologist Bony Guiblehon notes that, “The Protestant community has more than seven million faithful including four million evangelicals. According to an estimate of the National Directory of the Protestant Churches of Côte d'Ivoire, there are more than 450 denominations and 25 evangelical Protestant federations or federations in the country. Of the 25 federations, the Pentecostal movements would constitute more than 95% and more than 80% of the denominations.”⁷

Contrary to the official figures of the National Institute of Statistics, Catholic religious freedom monitoring organisation Aid to the Church in Need in 2016, there are among the population of the Ivory Coast, 35% who are followers of traditional religions, 33% who are Christians and 31.5% who are Muslims.⁸ The same monitoring organisation indicates that “Islam is the dominant religion in the north. Islam is also the religion of many immigrants from the northern neighbors, especially Burkina Faso. Christianity is the dominant religion in the south.”⁹ This is quite the opposite of the census data which places Islam (42%) in first place followed by Christians (34%). But it is very likely to find followers of traditional religions among those who declared themselves during the census of the population as “without religion” (19%), “animists” (4%) and “other religions” (1%).

5 République de Côte d'Ivoire, Institut National de la Statistique. 2014. *Principaux resultats du RGPH 2014* [Principle Results of the RGPH 2014]. Online at: <http://www.ins.ci/n/RGPH2014.pdf>

6 République de Côte d'Ivoire, Institut National de la Statistique, *Principaux resultats du RGPH 2014*.

7 Guiblehon B. 2012. “Les jeunes et le marché de la spiritualité pentecôtiste en Côte d'Ivoire” [Young people and the market of Pentecostal spirituality in Ivory Coast], *European Scientific Journal* 8(24):118. Online at: <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/viewFile/442/605>

8 L'Observatoire de la Liberté Religieuse. 2016. “Rapport 2016: Côte d'Ivoire” [Report 2016, Côte d'Ivoire]. Online: <http://www.liberte-religieuse.org/cote-divoire>

9 L'Observatoire de la Liberté Religieuse, “Rapport 2016: Côte d'Ivoire”.

7. Secularity and exercise of religious freedoms in public service media

Table 7.2: Main religions of Cote d'Ivoire

RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE	% TOTAL POPULATION
Traditional religions	35%
Christians	33%
Muslims	31,5%

Data from the NGO Church in Need¹⁰*Ivorian context of freedom of expression and religion*

Freedom of expression is based on legal texts at both international and national levels. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for example, provides in Article 19: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."¹¹ This is also the case in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights: Article 8, "Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed. No one may, subject to law and order, be submitted to measures restricting the exercise of these freedoms"; and Article 9, "1. Every individual shall have the right to receive information. 2. Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law."¹²

In Côte d'Ivoire, Law No. 200-513 of 1 August 2000, establishing the Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2000, in its preamble "proclaims its adherence to the rights and freedoms as defined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of 1981".¹³ The 2000 Constitution stated in Article 9 that "freedom of thought and expression, including freedom of conscience, religious or philosophical opinion, are guaranteed to all, subject to respect for the law, the rights of others, of national security and public order".¹⁴ These same provisions in favour of freedom of expression are included in Article 19 of the new Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2016, voted for in the referendum of 30 October 2016 and promulgated by the head of state, President Alassane Ouattara. Article 18 of the new constitution further adds that "citizens have the right to information and access to public documents under the conditions provided for by law".¹⁵

10 L'Observatoire de la Liberté Religieuse, "Rapport 2016: Côte d'Ivoire".

11 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc A/810 at 71 (1948), art 19.

12 African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted June 27, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force Oct. 21, 1986, art 8.

13 Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2000, Law No. 200-513 of 1 August 2000 (quoting African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted June 27, 1981, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), entered into force Oct. 21, 1986).

14 Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2000, art 9.

15 Constitution of the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2016, art 18.

It thus appears clearly, on reading the legal bases such as the constitution that religious freedom, that one of the manifestations of the freedom of expression is recognised in Ivory Coast and benefits from legal guarantees. But in practice, we can see the great negative influence of the socio-political context and the successive crises that the country has experienced on certain believers in the exercise and the profession of their faith. Two facts can support this point of view. The first fact comes from the analysis of historian of religion Marie Miran-Guyon, who points out that during the reign of the first president Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960–1993), “Although secular, the Ivorian state was thus developed partisan orientations in favor of this religion (the Catholic religion), then strongly minority population.”¹⁶ The second fact, which supports our idea that religious practices of believers are negatively influenced by the political context, is based on the 2016 report of the rights-monitoring organisation L’Observatoire de la Liberté Religieuse [Observatory of Religious Liberty]. This report states that “For many Christians, political unrest linked to the 2010 presidential elections had a traumatic effect. According to information provided by Catholic priests, 40 churches were attacked by armed gangs.”¹⁷ On 7 August 2013, Jesuit Father Hyacinthe Loua told Vatican Radio, “People have been talking about reconciliation in this country for three years now, but little has changed. We strive to do our best and we are fully aware that it will take a long time. If we want to talk about the healing of war wounds, then we must realize that it will take years.”¹⁸ If political contexts can negatively influence religious freedom, what about the secularity of the state?

State secularism and religious freedom in Côte d’Ivoire

Côte d’Ivoire is a secular republic, as underlined by its fundamental law, the 2016 Constitution, in two lines of the Preamble which state: “We affirm our commitment to respect for cultural, spiritual and moral values; Reminding everyone, and in all circumstances, of our irreversible commitment to defend and preserve the form Republican Government as well as the secularity of the state.”¹⁹ But it is very important to note in reality that it is an ambiguous secularism or to paraphrase sociologist Rubin Pohor, a secularism with two dimensions: the secularism

16 Miran-Guyon M. 2014. “Gloire et déboires de la laïcité en Côte d’Ivoire au prisme de l’imaginaire social musulman” [Glory and setbacks of secularism in Ivory Coast with the prism of the Muslim social imaginary], in Holder G and Sow M (eds). *L’Afrique des laïcités. Etat, religion et pouvoirs au sud du Sahara* [Africa of secularities. State, religion and powers south of the Sahara]. Timbuktu: IRD et Editions Tombouctou 2014. Online at: <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01063206/document>

17 L’Observatoire de la Liberté Religieuse. 2016. “Rapport 2016: Côte d’Ivoire”. Online at: <http://www.liberte-religieuse.org/cote-divoire/>; Pohor R. 2013. “Points de tensions, laïcité et cohésion sociale” [Points of tension, secularism and social cohesion], *Revue Théologie Africaine, Église et Sociétés*, 3.

18 Aide à l’Eglise en Détresse [Aid to the Church in Need]. “Côte d’Ivoire”. Online at: <http://www.aide-eglise-en-detresse.ch/liberte/details/article/cote-divoire.html>

19 Constitution of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire, Law N° 2004-644 of 14 December 2004, Preamble.

7. Secularity and exercise of religious freedoms in public service media

of “collaboration” and secularism of separatism, which Pohor explains well in observing:

In the case of Côte d’Ivoire particularly, as elsewhere in several African countries, two aspects of these types of secularism coexist to varying degrees. It is about the secularism of “collaboration” and secularism of the “separatist” type. Thus, some have a perception²⁰ of secularism tending to emphasize the independence of the state vis-à-vis religions or autonomy of the region in relation to politics. Secularism of the “separatist” type, although less obvious, is often evoked when there is a collision between religion and politics.²¹

It is in the name of the secular type of collaboration, Miran-Guyon observes that “in the state apparatus, affairs relating to religions continue to fall within the competence of the Ministry of the Interior. It was up to the various churches and religious associations to declare themselves to this Ministry to be recognised officially and as such, to benefit from the protection of the State.”²² This protection is manifested in others, by subsidies and the financial support of pilgrimages of some believers to their holy places.

But beyond this dual perception of secularism, we must add the political context of the single party of the first president Houphouët-Boigny. The management of the religious thing under the reign of Houphouët was in favour of Christianity to the detriment of Islam and even African traditional religions. As Miran-Guyon notes, “Besides the family code, which was not displeasing to the Church, the only public holidays and holidays recognized by the State, except national holidays, corresponded to the great Christian holidays. It took thirty years and the year 1991, with the arrival of Alassane Ouattara to the Prime Minister, so that the main Islamic festivals share these privileges. No special arrangements were made for civil servants and school children for the hour of Friday prayers.”²³ It is also in the name of this same secularism of collaboration that the State continues to actively involve itself in spiritual and religious affairs by financing pilgrimages to various places of holiness and piety of different religions, as we shall see.

RTI as a public service media and the state stranglehold on national broadcasting

According to UNESCO, a public service media must meet the following principles:

- **Universality:** “Public radio and television must be accessible to all citizens on the national territory.”
- **Diversity:** “The service offered by public broadcasting must be diversified in at least three ways. Diversity of the types of programs proposed, the target audiences and the topics covered.”

20 Miran-Guyon, “Gloire et déboires de la laïcité en Côte d’Ivoire”.

21 Rubin Pohor, “Points de tensions, laïcité et cohésion sociale”, 88.

22 Miran-Guyon, “Gloire et déboires de la laïcité en Côte d’Ivoire”.

23 Miran-Guyon, “Gloire et déboires de la laïcité en Côte d’Ivoire”.

- **Independence:** “The public service is a place where ideas must express themselves freely, a forum where information, opinions and criticism circulate. This is only possible if we preserve the independence – and therefore the freedom – of public radio and television in the face of commercial pressure or political power.”
- **Specificity:** “This requirement of specificity requires that the service offered by the public radio and television differs from other broadcasting services. In front of the public service’s programming, the quality and the particular character of its broadcasts, the public must recognize what distinguishes this service from the other services offered to it.”²⁴

The UN organisation also specifies that the public service media must be “neither commercial nor state”. Because “the public radio and television finds its reason to be in the only accomplishment of the public service. It is the broadcasting of the public; she speaks to everyone as a citizen. She encourages access and participation in public life. It develops knowledge, expands horizons and allows everyone to better understand themselves by understanding the world and others.” In light of the foregoing, it can be seen that, unfortunately, the RTI is “commercial” and “state”. It is no coincidence that the authors of the African media barometer call it a public broadcaster instead of a public service media.²⁵

The legal regime of audiovisual communication in Côte d’Ivoire has been strongly influenced by the changing socio-political context, culminating in the year 1990, which marked a historic turning point in the political system. It was then that the state moved from a single party, with a linear and vertical vision of the media, to a multiparty system that consecrates the freedom of the press. It shows how the media are not disembodied from society, but rather are the image of the societies and political systems of the countries where they emerge and develop.²⁶

The hegemonic visions of the media in Côte d’Ivoire, especially the public service media, therefore have distant origins.²⁷ This certainly explains why, despite the return to multiparty politics, and the dedication of freedom of expression at the political level and the freedom of the press, the public authorities have maintained control and monopoly over the public television. This maintenance of the state monopoly over public television remained unchanged under all political regimes until December 2016, because public service media are perceived by politicians as a means of gaining power and controlling it.

24 UNESCO, *La Radiotélévision publique Pourquoi? Comment? [Public Broadcasting Why? How?]* Online at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/fr/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/public-broadcasting-why-how/2001>

25 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). 2012. *Barometres des medias africains [Barometers of African media]*. Windhoek: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

26 Diégou Bailly J. 2004. “Les médias dans le conflit ivoirien” [The media in the Ivorian conflict], in Ahmimed C (ed). *Côte d’Ivoire: consolidation d’une paix fragile. Actes du colloque international sur la Côte d’Ivoire [Colloquium on the Ivory Coast: Consolidating a Fragile Peace]*. Ottawa: Université Saint-Paul, 44.

27 It must be said that in France, this sector existed under state monopoly until 1981.

7. Secularity and exercise of religious freedoms in public service media

Every politician who comes to power or who holds the ministerial portfolio of communication is quick to appoint the heads of the public media to assert control and consolidate the monopoly. Even Law No. 2004-644, creating a Legal Regime for Audiovisual Communication, while is also valuable in other respects, did not modify the state monopoly on the RTI. However, it specifies in the first paragraph of Article 1 that “audiovisual communication is free”.²⁸ Article 106 further states that “Public sector bodies of audiovisual communication pursue, in the public interest, public service missions”. However, Article 112 states that the “state holds the entire capital of public sector bodies” and that “statutes of public sector bodies are approved by decree”.

It was only in December 2016 that the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) brought about the long-sought liberalisation. The regulatory authority for audiovisual communication authorised companies to operate a private commercial television service in Côte d’Ivoire.²⁹ This put an end to state monopoly and national television communication conceived in such a narrow and linear way. What is the real weight and influence of public television on Ivorian television viewers? This is the question of the next section.

ASSESSING SECULARITY IN THE IVORIAN PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA: OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

Violations of religious freedom: the principle of diversity

The RTI, a public service television station, in deciding to suspend broadcasting through 18 January 2016 by groups of citizens, including religious leaders, violated the principle of diversity and ceased to be public media service for all. That violation of the principle of diversity was legitimised by the government a few weeks later through a communique of the Council of Ministers. Indeed, the Council of Ministers on 17 February 2016 “adopted communications conditioning the access of certain social groups (religious, traditional practitioners, NGOs, associations ...) to the public and private media”.³⁰

28 Law No. 2004-644 of 9 December 2004, creating a Legal Regime for Audiovisual Communication (2004).

29 Côte d’Ivoire, Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HACA), “Libéralisation de l’espace télévisuel, avis de publication des résultats” [Liberalisation of television space, notice of publication of results]. Décision N° 2016-012/HACA, 14 December 2016 and Décision N° 2016-013/HACA, 14 December 2016. Online at: http://www.haca.ci/fichier/PUBLICATION_RESULTATS.pdf

30 République de Côte d’Ivoire, Communiqué du conseil des ministres du mercredi 17 février 2016, au titre du Ministère de la Communication, en liaison avec le Ministère d’Etat, Ministère de l’Intérieur et de la Sécurité et le Ministère de la Santé et de l’Hygiène Publique. Online at: <http://news.abidjan.net/h/582529.html>

Violation of the exercise of religious freedom by granting RTI broadcast time to three religions

According to data gathered in our study, only three religions are entitled to time slots on the antennas of the RTI. These are the Catholic Church, the United Methodist Protestant Church Ivory Coast and the Muslim community. These three religions, according to the producer-director, in charge of religious issues at the RTI, “are religions that benefit from specifications that stipulate that they have a slice of antenna at the RTI each. The specifications are authorised by the Head of State.”³¹ It is thus at the highest level of the state that its religions have been authorised for several decades.

In addition to the free time slots, the RTI gives the members of the three entitled communities every time they come to make a show. As for other religions’ access to the public service media, other religions can solicit RTI for coverage, but that only gets them indirectly news coverage. Special reports or commercials by the religions themselves require payment. Not content with this discrimination, the RTI, followed by the government stopped the airing of direct communications by the religions themselves because it sensed ambiguity and anarchy in their communications.

Testimonials by Muslims and Christians: state favouritism and treatment by the RTI

Since the regime of the first president of the republic, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Christians and Muslims have benefited from great favours to the detriment of followers of African religions and Pentecostal Protestants. Yet even within these Christian religions, especially Catholic and Muslim, there are ways to condemn discriminations of which certain tendencies would be victims. For example, the President of the Council of Imams and Ulama of Côte d’Ivoire has denounced the state, “unequal treatment between Muslim religious structures, a certain ‘hegemony’ of Higher Council of Imams (COSIM) on other Muslim structures”.³² Some Catholic Christians also denounce a partisan attitude of the state because according to them, “when it comes to the pilgrimage to Mecca, the State of Côte d’Ivoire pays billions but when it comes to that of Rome, no one is upset about it.”³³

These two examples show that even so-called state-favoured religions also encounter difficulties and frustrations through the fault of certain authorities or institutions acting on behalf of the state. To take another example, following the release of the RTI prohibiting broadcasting access to representatives of religions, the Evangelical Protestant Federations and of Côte d’Ivoire made a statement in which

31 Interview with Tanoh N’guessan, producer of religious questions at RTI, by our investigators, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, February 2017.

32 Interview with Bakary Cherif, President of the Council of Imams and Ulama of Côte d’Ivoire, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, February 2017.

33 Dje KM and Konan F. 2010. “Dossier / Pèlerinage à Rome: 135 prêtres Ivoiriens bloqués au Portugal, faute d’argent” [Dossier / Pilgrimage to Rome: 135 Ivorian priests stranded in Portugal for lack of money], *Nouveau Réveil*, 1 June.

7. Secularity and exercise of religious freedoms in public service media

they condemned “the decision of the management of RTI forbidding Men of God to communicate about their prayer events on the programme “Les rendez-vous”. The federations found the decision to be “scandalous, sectarian and dangerous”.³⁴ In addition, a leader of the Harrist Church, situated at Blaukhaus, a small neighbourhood of the Abidjan district of Cocody, and a member of the committee of elders of this church, criticises the choices of the RTI that he considers “selective” to cover the activities of his church. He notes, “It is the RTI that decides to cover some of our activities that it deems worthy of being covered. And these are usually the generation festivals. And to get around the RTI, people in this neighborhood use their own communication systems, such as megaphones to get information out in their immediate communities.”³⁵ The lack of interest by the national television in religious activities is also underlined by a religious leader of League for the Reading of the Bible (LLB), who reports: “It often happens that we ask the RTI to cover an event in the news. But they drag their heels in putting it out. And we must police the RTI, remind them that they must broadcast this or that event. And when it does, it is often out of time.”³⁶

Access of religious groups to public service media

To find out which religious groups have easy access to the RTI, we interviewed 35 interviewees representing Muslims, Catholic Christians, Buddhists, Evangelical Christians and Animists. The first question was to know if they communicated by broadcasting on the RTI. The answers indicated that a large majority of Muslims and Catholic Christians said they communicate on the RTI, while a large number of Buddhists of Evangelical Christians and Animists said the opposite.

The second question asked those who broadcast on RTI to give examples of the kinds of broadcasts to which they had access. Here too, it was mostly Muslim and Catholic Christians who say they communicate through religious programmes broadcast by the RTI, as well as promotional advertisements, spots and releases. A small proportion of Buddhists and animists say they rarely communicate through the RTI, if they do it through promotional advertisements and spots. The majority of evangelical Christians claim to favour promotional advertisements and spots.

The third question asked those who said they did not communicate through the RTI to indicate why. The reasons evoked by evangelical Christians were, mainly, exclusion and the new modalities of access by religious groups to public media since 18 January 2016. They consider these modalities to be binding and discriminatory.

34 De Kouassi A. 2016. “La RTI à couteau tirés avec les pasteurs évangéliques” [RTI cut out evangelical pastors with a knife], *Arino News*, 29 January.

35 Interview with leader of the Harrist Church, situated at Blaukhaus, a small neighbourhood of the district of Cocody, Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, February 2017.

36 Interview with religious leader of League for the Reading of the Bible (LLB), Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, February 2017. The LLB is a Christian organisation, it encourages Christians to love the Bible and to practise it. It includes all Christian religious groups. It has existed since 1867 in London and is presently in 144 countries.

The fourth question was about another public service media, namely the daily newspaper *Fraternité Matin*. We asked our respondents if they ever communicated through it. The majority of religious leaders interviewed said they do not communicate in the columns of *Fraternité Matin*, and that it is Muslims and Christians who have greatest access to it. Buddhists and Animists said they do not have access and that access to this medium is difficult for them.

CONCLUSION

The main issue addressed in this chapter is the equal access of all religious groups in Côte d'Ivoire to public service media, especially the public service television RTI. The impetus of this chapter was the ban on public television broadcasts by religious groups. This interdiction measure targeted pastors or preachers of evangelical churches in Côte d'Ivoire. According to the producer of religious programmes at RTI, the motive put forward, was that the government "sensed a vagueness and anarchy in the communication" of these pastors on the antennas of the RTI.

To address this problem of equal access to the RTI as a public service media, we first tried to situate the very concept of "public service media" according to criteria provided by UNESCO: independence, universality, diversity, specificity. We came to the conclusion that, at least in the name of diversity, all religions should be treated the same in terms of their access to the programmes of the RTI. We then raised the issue of freedom of expression, that of religious freedom and secularism of the state in Côte d'Ivoire. We have shown in our analysis that, in a constitutional way, state secularism and religious freedoms are recognised in Côte d'Ivoire. However, despite the fact that several religions are present in this country, there is in fact an unequal treatment of certain religions, particularly in terms of access to public television.

Thus, we have noted the special treatment of three religions: Islam, the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church. Only these three religions have free access to the RTI and have weekly programmes. Evangelical Christians who do not benefit from these favours claim, for example, airtime on the RTI, and thus the relaxation of the conditions of access to this public service media in general. Buddhists and some followers of traditional African religions or even animists, who also do not have airtime on public television, also regret the fact of not receiving the help of the state, unlike to other religious groups.

Finally, we can point out that the public authorities would benefit from creating the conditions for social cohesion and better coexistence of all Ivorians. And one of the possibilities for doing so may be the free exercise of their faiths and broadcast time on public service media. In the aftermath the post-election crisis of 2010, which so divided Ivorians, efforts must be made in all areas for much more cohesion and reconciliation. The exercise of religious freedom can contribute to this.