

## ENTANGLED RELIGIONS: RESPONSE TO J. D. Y. PEEL

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When Meyer and I (Larkin and Meyer 2006) wrote our article on the shared similarities between Islam and Christianity, it was intended to interrupt what seemed to us then, and still seems to me now, the tendency for studies of Christian movements to be written as if Muslims did not exist in the same polity and vice versa. Difference has been the normative grounds upon which the scholarly literature on religion in Africa has been based, usually organized around a set of binary distinctions: animist movements are opposed to mission Christianity; traditional (often Sufi) Muslims are opposed to Salafis; mainline churches to the Born-Again movement; Islam to Christianity; both of them to animism; and, finally, religion to secularism. While the particular content changes, the structural ordering does not.<sup>1</sup> It is undoubtedly important, as Peel argues, to understand the theological traditions that orient the attitudes and regulate the practice of adherents,<sup>2</sup> but there are other dynamics that are also important and which the emphasis on difference occludes.

First, while religions do operate in specific cultural contexts that need to be taken into account, the reverse is also true. Korea is not western Nigeria and neither of them are Guatemala, but Born-Again adherents claim to follow a universalist revelation given to them through the Bible, and our ability to discuss these religions has to take seriously those elements that connect these movements beyond local contexts. *Alafia* may indeed undergird the operation of Pentecostalism in western Nigeria, but one presumes that it does not in Korea or Guatemala, and yet all see themselves as joined together in a similar religious endeavour.

Second, in many parts of Africa (certainly Nigeria), Christians (mainline, African Independent, Born-Again), Muslims (Sufi, Salafi, orthodox) and traditional religious practitioners all participate in a common space – one that is in constant dialogue with secular forms of Nigerian life. One problem with the emphasis on difference is that it makes it difficult to analyse this more thickly constituted religious and secular environment and to understand quotidian

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<sup>1</sup>There are exceptions to this. The interest in syncretism and studies of religious violence look at mutual relations between religions. But these remain exceptions to what is a dominant norm.

<sup>2</sup>This gels with the powerful analytic provided by Asad (1986; 1993) and Mahmood (2005). Recently, Adogame and Ukah (2011) have argued that analyses of Pentecostal movements have bifurcated between the sociological and the theological, or what one could term the external and the internal. The sociological refers to the interest of social scientists in factors outside religion – structural adjustment, insecurity, poverty – that create fertile grounds for the appeal of the prosperity gospel (Gifford 1998; Ukah 2008). Adogame and Ukah argue that the weakness of this is that it ignores internal theological doctrines that are both personally meaningful and institutionally authoritative for adherents. And a slew of more in-depth studies of particular churches have come to emphasize the internal nature of religious doctrine (Marshall 2009; Ojo 2010; Peel 2016).

entanglements of everyday encounter. This is an important part of how religion grows and operates. It involves, perhaps, an expanded definition of religion, taking seriously actions that lie on the margins of religious practice, not at its normative core, and things that some may not even see as fully religious at all, even if they are undertaken in religion's name.

In my own research, I focus on taking seriously the differences that exist between movements, while at the same time examining the complicated forms of entanglements in which those movements are engaged (Larkin and Meyer 2006; Larkin 2015). These entanglements are diverse, taking place in differing ways, with varied consequences.

First, movements evolve similar responses to shared conditions, even if the origins of those practices are largely independent of each other. Peel refers to these rightly as their 'elective affinities', similarities in action that do not necessarily derive from the same origin; this is largely what Meyer and I were arguing in our chapter on the similarities between reform Islam and Pentecostalism. Second, there is the much more explicit borrowing of organizational forms, mission techniques, media practices, discursive norms, style of prayer, and the entire range of formal devices that emerge from one religious or secular context and migrate into another. This can happen just as much *within* religious movements (from Salafist to Sufi Islam, for instance) as between them. Third is the entanglement that happens through opposition, the *pas de deux* that occurs when one religion responds to the actions of another so that, even in moments of difference and antagonism, religions are mutually engaged.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, and of most interest here,<sup>4</sup> religious and secular practices evolve in relation to each other and to the secular world, as well as to their own traditions. Cohabiting in mixed urban settings, religious actions are part of the complex of practices that members of a community develop in learning the habitus of living in that community. In his writings on 'social imaginaries', Charles Taylor has argued that these form part of the 'repertory of practices' that we learn as part of a community and that comprise the background competence we use to orient ourselves and our behaviour (2007: 173). These competencies include all sorts of non-religious as well as religious elements. How do you engage in a form of protest? How do you cross a road without getting hit? How do you change lanes in traffic to access an opening before your neighbour? What are the acceptable ways to broadcast religious sound? How do you listen (or ignore) that sound? Julia Elyachar (2011) has argued that urban life is made up of thousands of ephemeral practices of movement and gesture that rarely rise to the level of consciousness but through which we constitute identity and belonging and that are an important part of social recognition. Many of these actions are the virtuosic response people evolve in order to allow for the accommodations of everyday life

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<sup>3</sup>Religious polemics are, of course, a key site for this. I examine one dimension of this in an article on Ahmed Deedat (Larkin 2008), an Islamic preacher who speaks against Christianity drawing only on Christian and secular sources.

<sup>4</sup>I do not have space to engage Peel's argument that Islam is constitutively political whereas Pentecostalism is not, but it seems to me a hard argument to support. Peel is correct to recognize that Pentecostals frequently claim to eschew party politics, but the 2015 election of Pastor Yemi Osinbajo, a senior figure in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) as Vice President to Muhammadu Buhari, indicates that the situation is more complex.

in complex environments, and religious actions are part of this. They are not necessarily always the outcome of doctrine but of this more diffuse, shared, ecology.<sup>5</sup>

In my own work I have explored these questions through the use of technologized public sound (Larkin 2014; see also de Witte 2008; Oosterbaan 2008). The urban landscapes of cities in Nigeria and elsewhere are saturated with religious sound emanating from loudspeakers used by cars, shops, itinerant preachers, choral groups, processions, mosques and churches. And this sound enters into interaction (and competition) with music coming from cubicles selling phone cards and charging batteries (all of which use loudspeakers), Nollywood shops, advertising vans and political groups. Renting a small generator, fixing a loudspeaker to the roof of a car and driving around streets discharging sound is something that is done regularly by Islamic reformists, Christian groups, advertising companies selling products and political supporters selling politicians. It is part of the repertoire of actions through which publicity is sought by varying actors and part of the common ecology of urban life. Listening or ignoring these sounds is also part of this urban habitus. Nigeria is marked by a high degree of religious conflict, but, one could argue, precisely because of the intensity of violence it is all the more surprising that *more* conflict does not break out; this speaks to the little noted fact that all over Nigeria a high degree of accommodation has been reached about how religions and the secular operate in a single social space. This is not necessarily intentional (although it can be) but more the response to living in complex environments where people innovate habits to live alongside each other. What has grown up in this ecology is a mutual form of action with roots in religious doctrine but also in this shared social space and in the form of ‘attunement’ (Elyachar 2011) that people develop together as part of their background competence of living. Yes, Nigeria is marked by a high degree of religious (and ethnic and regional) difference, but people also share common territory and common action, and we have to find a language of understanding religion that is not solely organized around difference and separation.

Entanglement is not a one-dimensional thing; it is made up of a variety of different sorts of encounters that involve differing techniques and have varying consequences. How, then, can we be more specific about these modes of borrowing, mutual confrontation or reciprocal exchanges that form the range of ways in which entanglement takes place? One way, I suggest, is through form.

## FORM

By religious form I refer to stylistic elements that emerge within a particular tradition but are then loosened from those origins and circulate into other domains. I refer to this as the lability of form (see also Larkin 2015). It is a complex

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<sup>5</sup>Elyachar (2011) argues that movement and gesture emerge in a sphere of reciprocal influence between religious and non-religious domains. Martijn Oosterbaan (2008) shows this well in his analysis of the form of life that has developed in Brazilian favelas where Pentecostal radio and *baile* funk music associated with drug gangs comprise a mutual sonic sphere. He argues that ‘Pentecostal broadcasts acquire their meaning against the background of sound and music that is defined as “worldly” instead of godly’ (2008: 126), and that both comprise the everyday sonic ecology of favela inhabitants.

process because form is both a noun and a verb. As a noun it refers to the organization of signs rather than meaning. These are things in the world: metre and rhyme in poetry, the length of shot and lighting in film, the robes a Catholic priest wears or the style in which a mosque is built. But form is also a verb, referring back to its older meaning of the use of a mould upon which wood or metal is shaped. Form forms things. It operates upon people, shapes them, makes them into particular sorts of subjects.<sup>6</sup>

In the longer chapter from which his article is drawn, Peel also uses the concept of form to explain similarities between Islam and Christianity. But he comes to quite a different conclusion to myself:

the similarities [between Islam and Christianity] are chiefly a matter of form, while the differences are chiefly ones of content or substance ... [And] while religious forms undoubtedly have real historical effects, it is above all a religion's content which will mainly determine its substantive impact over time since this is the matrix of the distinctive orientations to action which it engenders in its adherents. (Peel 2016: 195)

Peel cleaves a distinction here between what is central and what is marginal to religion, privileging one over the other. But we can often see a great deal in marginal acts that can be revelatory of deeper processes. Take, for instance, the use of the business suit by Born-Again pastors and other evangelists (the *da'wa* of Ahmed Deedat comes to mind). It used to be that the religious was demarcated through sumptuary practices: the vestments worn by Catholic or Anglican priests, the *abaya* worn by Sufi sheikhs, or the white robes of the *Aladura*. The emergence of the Born-Again movement rejected dress that was marked as religious (at least for pastors), adopting instead the secular form of the business suit, looking and presenting more like corporate leaders or bankers.

The borrowing of the form of the suit is, in Peel's sense, a small thing, not prescribed in the Bible or the Qur'an and hardly part of the deep traditions that constitute Pentecostal belief and practice. But it is, nonetheless, part of the religious style whereby pastors publicly display themselves every Sunday. In using the suit, Pentecostals take a particular form from the secular world and import it into Christian worship, making it visually central. The suit might be said to do different things. It marks a break from the religious vestments associated with mainline churches that Pentecostals seek to distinguish themselves from. It associates Pentecostalism with success in this world rather than an otherworldly asceticism. And it invokes the wealth, prestige and modernity of the corporate world, all key aspects of Pentecostal appeal.

The suit shows how the circulation of form can vivify some of the ephemeral entanglements whereby the religious and the secular world interact. We could look at these processes through the organizational structure of evangelism, the use of media, or educational styles. Yasmin Moll (2010) has shown how television producers for the highly popular Egyptian *da'i* (caller to Islam) Amr Khaled – often referred to as an Islamic televangelist – explicitly copied lighting and set design from American daytime chat shows such as *Oprah* to present Islamic

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<sup>6</sup>For a related discussion, see the concept of 'aesthetic formation' as elaborated by Meyer (2013).

education in a radically new formal style. The alienation of form from certain contexts and its migration into other ones can be traced in all sorts of different ways. Gabriel Tarde (1903) famously argued that all of culture is built upon ‘contagions of imitation’ and that society emerges through a never-ending process of copying and borrowing. This is a complex process, of course, as all copying is a form of translation; while Pentecostals wish to bring along the sense of success associated with the business suit, there are many other attachments that they wish to leave behind. At times, the labile movement of form passes unnoticed, and members of a religious community adopt it without any reflexive consciousness about its origin or even that they have borrowed anything at all. At other times a form or practice can become highly marked. This is because a form has a set of meanings attached to it that some adepts may wish to foreground and others may seek to attack. Finally, and returning to my earlier argument, forms emerge through mutual participation in a single social space in which the borrowing and cross-borrowing (of all kinds) happen with such intensity that a common repertoire of action emerges. All borrowing involves assessments whereby adherents judge whether a form is commensurate or incommensurate within a particular tradition. This is why we cannot dispense with the authoritative tradition that Peel and others (Asad 1986; Mahmood 2005) focus on, as that is what defines the core normative practice *against which borrowing is defined*. Nevertheless, this borrowing points to how religions operate – *in part* – as assemblages drawing on elements from different traditions that they carefully incorporate into their own.<sup>7</sup>

One example that brings these themes together in Nigeria is the taking over of public space on days of worship and religious practice. For decades now, Northern Nigerians have been used to the blockage of roads that occurs in the run-up to Friday prayers. The majority of Muslims see this as a technical issue emanating from religious obligation. Muslims are enjoined to congregate in prayer on Fridays and the fact of too many people trying to enter too small a space gives rise to overspill. But the taking over of religiously neutral, secular space has other meanings that do not go unnoticed. It is an assertion of presence and thus of power, an implicit dismissal of the authority of the secular state and a potentially incendiary public display to other religious movements.<sup>8</sup> And when the religious takeover of public space is seen in this light, it enters into relation with similar practices organized by other groups.

In the South, the blocking of streets for prayer is associated predominantly with Pentecostal churches, most famously the church complexes that line the Lagos–Ibadan motorway and which have frequently blocked the motorway at the end of services (see Ukah 2008 on the Redeemed Christian Church of God or RCCG). Ebenezer Obadare, who has written on the ways in which the Muslim movement NASFAT<sup>9</sup> copies Christian evangelical forms (Obadare 2016; Soares 2009; see also Janson, this issue, for a related example), argues that NASFAT moved its headquarters to the Lagos–Ibadan motorway precisely to assert a

<sup>7</sup>I emphasize ‘in part’, as Peel is correct to stress the centrality of core theologies and religious traditions in constituting religious movements. It is just that there are dynamics at work there too.

<sup>8</sup>After the Jos riots in 2001, the occupying of public roads for prayer was banned to prevent inflaming religious tensions. Muslim groups saw the ban as an attack on their religious rights.

<sup>9</sup>NASFAT is the Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria.

Muslim presence in what was marked as a 'Christian' space. When it opened its centre in 2001, it too flooded the motorway, causing a huge traffic jam. In an interview with Ebenezer Obadare, NASFAT's Assistant General-Secretary stated that they did this solely because 'we wanted them [the RCCG] to know that they are not the only ones who can block the highway' (Obadare 2016).

By taking over space, one asserts presence and thus, potentially, engages in a hostile act of power. But at the same time this acts as spectacle, a mode of publicity designed to attract new adherents. This has a long tradition in Nigeria. Massing is about contest between religious traditions and the obligations of religious doctrine, but the result is a common form of action, a common takeover of public space, a common spectacle that has been used by Tijanis, *Aladura*, Pentecostals, masqueraders, Qadiris, mainline churches and reform Muslims. This is a religious action undertaken by specific movements themselves but that affects many others who are stuck in go-slows, watching as spectators, or breaking their travel in anticipation of a future delay until a service is finished. All of these acts are religious in the sense that they are the after-effect of religious actions. A secular person stuck in a traffic jam is taking part in religious ritual in that his actions are ritually organized by religious time and practice. While the taking over of space can be and has been deeply controversial, the daily reality is that Nigerians grant a wide latitude to religions to act in this way precisely because most recognize this as part of the common repertoire of how religions are practised. This is a set of actions that, *at one and the same time*, derives from the obligations of a religious tradition (Peel's deep tradition), is a form copied from other traditions (in the case of NASFAT), and can be understood as part of the practices that emerge through participation in a common ecology. In Nigeria, adherents of all traditions rub up against each other constantly, and religious orders grow up in response to that environment as well as to their internal doctrines and theologies. Religious entanglements thus operate in different ways to achieve differing ends, and practices and actions such as the taking over of public space for religious ends cannot really be understood without reference to a mixed religious ecology and the everyday habitus of Nigerian urban space.

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