

INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN–MUSLIM ENCOUNTERS IN AFRICA

Marloes Janson and Birgit Meyer

For John – sharp and inspiring friend and mentor

In research on religion in Africa, the study of both Christianity and Islam is thriving. Alas, these fields exist more or less independently from each other. Scholars with expertise regarding either Christianity or Islam barely engage in conversations with each other. And yet, the long history of encounters between Muslims and Christians – involving a complex dynamic of becoming similar and asserting difference, of approach and detachment – calls for an encompassing conceptual framework that is devoted to drawing out similarities, differences and entanglements. It is the central aim of this special section of *Africa* to explore the possibilities and impossibilities of a comparative study of Christianity and Islam. Such a comparative approach requires that we study Christians and Muslims within one analytical frame. While there is a growing consensus to move beyond the bifurcation of the study of religion in Africa, scholars are just beginning to develop and debate productive analytical perspectives that enable a better understanding of the ways in which Christians and Muslims engage with each other in various configurations and modalities.

The call to devise better ways of understanding interactions between Christians and Muslims in Africa – and beyond – is not new. In his edited volume on Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa, Benjamin Soares stated that the dynamics of ‘their interactions in Africa are still not properly understood’ (2006: 1). Around the same time, Brian Larkin and one of us, Birgit Meyer, proposed to look at evangelical Pentecostalism and reformist Islam in West Africa as *doppelgänger*s – ‘enemies whose actions mirror each other and whose fates are largely intertwined’ (2006: 287).¹ This proposition raised a critical response from J. D. Y. Peel, who presented his position in an IAI-sponsored panel entitled ‘Studying Islam and Christianity in Africa: Comparisons and Interactions’, convened by Meyer and Peel at the Fifth European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) in Lisbon in 2013. This special section of *Africa* is based on this panel, where earlier versions of the contributions by Peel, Larkin and Janson were first presented; the contributions by Meyer, Obadare and Soares were written for this special section.² We are filled with sorrow that J. D. Y. Peel died while we were preparing this section for publication.

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¹For the study of Christianity and Islam as mirror images, see also Loimeier (2005), Cooper (2006), Marshall (2009) and Janson and Akinleye (2015).

²At the time, due to health reasons, Peel was not able to come to Lisbon. His paper was read by Meyer.

New directions in the study of religion that appreciate its material and corporeal dimensions, and that take religion seriously as a set of practices that shape the world, were productively taken up in relation to the study of both Christians and Muslims. However, the common bifurcation between Christianity and Islam still largely dominates scholarship on religion in Africa. It cannot be emphasized enough that the division of labour in studying religion along these lines – in Africa and elsewhere – is highly problematic. It ignores the fact that, despite the differences in the historical development of Christianity and Islam, in many settings in Africa Christians and Muslims have long lived side by side, often in harmony with ‘traditional’ practitioners – the boundaries between the three not always sharply demarcated (Peel 2000; 2016). Notwithstanding frequent outbreaks of religious clashes in Africa, for centuries there have been high levels of social interaction between Christians and Muslims, and interfaith marriages and reverted conversions were not uncommon (Soares 2006). So, rather than focusing on single religious traditions, it makes more sense to work with the broader notion of a ‘religious field’ in which several religious groups coexist in ever shifting dynamics of similarity and difference.

CROSSING BORDERS

This special section has two parts. It starts with a debate triggered by the already mentioned essay by Larkin and Meyer. Its main argument was that Pentecostalism and reformist Islam share a great deal of common ground and, while disagreeing on doctrine, overlap in several of the religious practices on which they depend and the social processes they set in motion. Larkin and Meyer (2006: 287–8) identified three basic commonalities between Pentecostalism and reformist Islam in Ghana and Nigeria: both religious traditions distance themselves from local religious and cultural traditions; both offer their adherents new ways of becoming ‘modern’; and both see themselves as part of global movements. Therefore, instead of taking for granted the obvious oppositions and antagonisms between Pentecostalism and reformist Islam, Larkin and Meyer opted to focus on their similarities.

In his response to Larkin and Meyer’s article, J. D. Y. Peel warns against over-emphasizing similarities between current movements in Christianity and Islam in West Africa. His response is based on his latest book, *Christianity, Islam, and Oriṣa Religion* (2016) – in press at the time he wrote the essay included here – which takes up the issue of the need for a historically grounded comparison between these three traditions in full. According to Peel, there are marked differences that basically boil down to prosperity and politics. These should not be overlooked. In recent years, the Pentecostal movement in West Africa has been dominated by a strong emphasis on individual empowerment through prosperity, healing and deliverance from evil spirits. By contrast, reform movements in the Islamic spectrum are opposed to the use of Islamic knowledge for healing or prosperity purposes and emphasize frugality. And, as Peel points out, whereas the principal feature of Salafism is pressure for the implementation of sharia law, Pentecostalism emerged in the social space outside the state. Peel concludes that ‘if we are to understand the importance of what is called “fundamentalism” in

the two faiths in West Africa, we have to make full allowance for the profound cultural differences between them, which arise from their foundational values and prior histories' (Peel, this issue).

Addressing the concerns raised by Peel, Birgit Meyer argues that the comparative study of Islam and Christianity should indeed draw out similarities *and* differences. But rather than focusing on 'fundamentalist' ideological tendencies within the two religious traditions, Meyer takes lived religious experience as a starting point. By studying religion through the vector of religious practice, the similarities between Christians and Muslims become obvious, as in their use of (mass) media, mode of proselytizing, spatial practices and architecture, and stances towards indigenous culture. The point for Meyer is to base a comparison on mediating categories within the contexts in which Christians and Muslims coexist. In a similar vein, Brian Larkin locates a comparison between Pentecostalism and reformist Islam at the level of shared religious form. For him, religious form refers to stylistic elements that emerge within a particular tradition but are then severed from those origins and move into other domains (cf. Keane 2007). For instance, in the use of technologized public sound and other means through which publicity is sought we see striking similarities in the ways in which Christians and Muslims 'attune' to their shared social space. Finally, Ebenezer Obadare draws attention to the overlapping political processes set in motion by Pentecostalism and reformist Islam. Challenging Peel, Obadare argues that Nigerian Pentecostalism does not operate outside the state but is in fact a state religion.

Peel read the responses at the end of the summer of 2015, before his illness took hold, and told us that he was 'quite happy' with them. We hope that his intervention and the three response papers will yield further debate around conceptual issues regarding the comparative study of Christianity and Islam. It is painful that Peel's clear and gentle voice will have to be missed – a great loss.

Conceptual reconfiguration requires detailed empirical research. The second part of this special section offers two articles – both exemplary, in our view – that focus in a fresh manner on the emergent interfaces between the spheres of Christianity and Islam. The challenge is to study these interfaces and the complexities of mixing from a standpoint beyond the rather well-trodden paths that take syncretism as a conceptual frame. The problem here is that, as many scholars have remarked, the notion of syncretism presupposes the distinctness of religious traditions as the default and takes mixing as a deviation. One of the co-editors, Marloes Janson, explores the expansion of Chrislam, a movement that fuses Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices, in Nigeria's former capital Lagos. The case of Chrislam illustrates that, in the religiously plural setting of Yorubaland, the idiosyncratic ways in which religion is performed in everyday living are often marked by contradiction, ambivalence, aspiration and double standards, rather than by neat divisions along religious boundaries. To account for the religious plurality in Chrislam, Janson employs assemblage theory as it proposes alternative ways of looking at Chrislam's religious mixing that are in line with how its worshippers perceive their religiosity.

Religious pluralism, in the sense of the existence of different religious traditions in one space and the multiplicity of practices of pluralism in the lives of individuals and groups who engage with different religions or religious practices, is also the key concept in Benjamin Soares' article. He argues that, although religious

pluralism has long been a central focus of studies of religion in Africa, until recently Muslim–Christian encounters have not been a major focus of attention for studies of religious pluralism in Africa. To redress the balance, Soares underscores the importance of studying different religious traditions within the same analytical frame. By means of ethnographic examples from his field research in Mali and Nigeria, he offers a fresh perspective on questions such as conversion, changes in religious practice through borrowing, appropriation, boundary making or dissolution, the intersection of religion and politics, and the changing ways of being religious. These examples show that it is impossible to understand recent developments in Muslim–Christian encounters in West Africa without taking into consideration the complexity of religious pluralism in its various forms and permutations over time.

MOVING TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

The study of religion necessarily implies some degree of comparison, whether this is stated explicitly or not. How can we do comparative religion without essentializing religious traditions as distinct entities? What could be the common ground or mediating categories that would allow us to highlight similarities and differences between historically and culturally specific forms of Christianity and Islam? What are the limits of comparison, as it is understood conventionally, for grasping entanglements and intersections between Christianity and Islam? How can we position ourselves as scholars in relation to public debates that assert the existence of fundamental differences between Muslims and Christians in general, and fundamentalist movements in particular? These are some of the pressing questions that are addressed in this special section.

Although quite different in their comparative approaches, what the contributions have in common is that they move away from the conventional understanding of Christian–Muslim relations in terms of either religious conflict (a tendency that has gained more currency since 9/11 and the recent upsurge of Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria) or what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called ‘interfaith dialogue’. Although these two approaches represent opposites – the former stressing ‘war’ and the latter ‘peace’ – they suffer from the same limitation: they take religious boundaries for granted. Challenging the tendency to study Christian–Muslim interactions one-dimensionally in terms of either cooperation or conflict, this special section calls for a mapping of actual encounters and entanglements between Christians and Muslims in a new conceptual framework – a framework that sheds light on the similarities and differences, the overlaps and tensions, between Christian and Muslim actors and organizations in Africa.

In this spirit, we aim to contribute to developing a programmatic vision for the reform of the study of religious reform, shifting the attention from a narrow analysis of Pentecostal Christianity and reformist Islam as bounded and distinct entities constituted by belief in God towards a perspective that focuses on the ways in which African Christians and Muslims actually ‘live’ and ‘do’ religion and how their ways of ‘living’ and ‘doing’ religion relate to each other. Whereas scholars of religion agree that ingrained binary thinking as exemplified in the, by now largely defunct, categories of Great versus Little Tradition, orthodox versus

heterodox, tradition versus modernity, local versus global, and religion versus secularism does not help us move forward, the binary between scholarship on either Christianity or Islam still dominates the study of religion in Africa (and beyond). Drawing on Lambek (2008), we therefore call for an opening up of the binary logic of an exclusive either/or that permeates the study of religion and for its replacement by an inclusive both/and paradigm. At a time when Pentecostalism and reformist Islam are among the world's fastest-growing religious traditions, the need for an inclusive both/and paradigm has become more pertinent than ever.

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