

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE, CONTEXT AND TRADITION, IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN WEST AFRICA

J. D. Y. Peel

The position I critique in this paper is really a complex of closely overlapping positions, some more theoretically sophisticated or better grounded empirically than others.¹ Their central thrust is to emphasize the similarities rather than the differences between current movements in the world religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, but also to a lesser extent in Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. It appeals more to social scientists than to those working in religious studies, particularly scholars of specific religious traditions. It also taps into a common lay attitude to what might be called a ‘secular common sense’, which feels impatience or distaste for all forms of what it considers religious extremism, while at the same time shying away from regarding any one religion as more prone to extremism than others. This is the kind of interlocutor who will counter an observation about violent militancy in contemporary Islam – in the context, let us say, of a discussion about Boko Haram – with ‘But what about the Crusades?’

The notion of fundamentalism is central to the argument. Originally coined by advocates of a literalist, conservative-evangelical reading of the Bible in contrast to liberal Christianity, it has become the anchor for a widespread view (chiefly held by those unsympathetic to it) of which the journalist Nick Cohen (2012) gives a perfect example: ‘as there is no great difference between Christian and Muslim extremists, why not intervene in this clash of fundamentalisms ...?’ The title of a book by Tariq Ali, veteran of the erstwhile New Left, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: crusades, jihads and modernity* (2002), shares the same perspective, seeing these movements as being at once homologous and hostile to one another. It also points to a reason for their emergence: they are both responses (albeit perverse ones) to the challenge of ‘modernity’.² More nuanced and measured accounts, such as those by Bruce (2000) and Ruthven (2007), who approach the range of phenomena respectively from the Christian and the Muslim side, also imply that, whatever cultural dress they wear, all fundamentalisms are homologous responses to a broadly similar set of causal circumstances.

J. D. Y. PEEL (1941–2015) was Professor (latterly Emeritus) of Anthropology and Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. His numerous publications included four monographs on the social and religious history of the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria. Completed shortly before his final illness in August 2015, this is a posthumous publication.

¹The argument of this article is set out at much greater length in my *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion* (2016), especially in Chapter 10.

²There is an irony to be observed here. The notion of a ‘clash of fundamentalisms’, as used by these authors, sits in a somewhat left-wing or anti-establishment discourse. Yet it seems obviously indebted to Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis (1993; 1996), which has been much criticized for being the vehicle of a right-wing, belligerent view of the world (for example, Bonney 2008).

If the antinomy of similarity versus difference conveys a general orientation in how we are disposed to view the range of religions, a corresponding antinomy of context versus tradition expresses the primary option for their analysis. An emphasis on similarity fits with the conviction that, granted the same conditions, the members of different religions will respond in similar ways. So its perspective is strongly presentist. In terms of anthropology's history, the sharpest articulation of the presentist perspective was in classic structural-functionalism. This (logically enough) all but dispensed with a notion of culture, which – as Sahlins (1985: 155) succinctly put it – is 'precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past'. So to emphasize difference is to imply that the specificities inherent within each religion's tradition themselves *make a difference* to each fresh context where that religion is received. The cumulative outcome is none other than the history of the religion in question, its tradition constantly inflected by the contexts through which it passes.

Moving from the general picture to West Africa, we at once encounter forceful arguments for the close similarity of recent movements in the two faiths, a point strongly made through such metaphors as their being 'mirror-images' or 'doppelgängers' of one another (Larkin and Meyer 2006; Marshall 2009). Larkin and Meyer's comparison is not logically ideal, since it (mainly) contrasts Pentecostal Christianity in Southern Ghana with Salafist Islam in Northern Nigeria, but it serves to make the key points. Some similarities are not to be denied: they both attack local religious traditions, endorse globalism and 'modernity', find their primary base among educated urban youth, promote a new kind of religious subjectivity, and make much use of modern media. These similarities are mainly matters of form but there are also two large areas of difference that are candidly acknowledged by Larkin and Meyer, and these concern matters of substance or religious orientation. Let us call these Prosperity – or the more inclusive Yoruba concept of *Alafia*³ – and Politics.

In recent years the Pentecostal movement in West Africa has been dominated by churches that emphasize individual empowerment through prosperity, healing, deliverance from enemies seen and unseen, and so on. Although individual Muslims cannot be personally indifferent to such objectives, they are not promoted by Salafist movements such as Izala. Rather, Izala is noted by Larkin and Meyer (2006: 304) to be expressly *opposed* to 'the magical uses of Islamic knowledge for healing or prosperity'. In fact, their treatment of Islamism presents a religion with radically different primary concerns from Pentecostalism, despite their aim of making the most of resemblances between them. But the very feeble gestures of some Ghanaian Pentecostals towards the idea of a 'Christian state' are as nothing compared with the political engagements of Islam in Northern Nigeria, from the Sokoto jihad of the early nineteenth century (Last 1967) through a series of movements in the twentieth century (Mustapha 2014) to Boko Haram's assassination of the leader of Izala in a mosque in Jos in June 2015.

³ *Alafia* is usually translated as 'peace', but it really means an all-round state of ease or well-being, including health, sufficiency, freedom from worries, and so on.

That healing, or a search for *Alafia*, and politics tend to be not just different but alternative orientations has been cogently argued by Schoffeleers (1991) for Southern Africa. This is because, he argues, ‘healing ... individualizes and therefore depoliticizes the causes of sickness’. The same would apply to those West African churches that focus on prosperity through prayer or the conquest of demons that impede the realization of personal life objectives. Yet, in contrast to the centrality of healing within African Christianity (both missionary and independent), Last (2005) argues that the Sokoto jihad involved ‘a deliberate project to take the experience of illness out of the religious sphere’; and this seems to have been strongly revived in contemporary Salafism.

In her *Political Spiritualities*, Ruth Marshall has given us the most theoretically sophisticated study of an African Pentecostalism to date. Drawing inspiration (and her title) from Foucault, she argues that Pentecostalism *does* have a ‘highly political agenda’ (2009: 204), and one that parallels radical Islamism. They both strive to create new religious subjectivities that involve a ‘work of the self on the self’, and compete in Nigeria’s public space, offering incompatible visions for the country’s future. But while she regards Pentecostalism as rooted in many of the same aspirations as Salafism, she also concedes that there are ‘important historical, socio-political and theological differences’ (2009: 206, 222) between them. So what are they?

It is important to see Yoruba (neo-)Pentecostalism, colloquially known as ‘Born-Again Christianity’, in the light of its distinct historical trajectory. With important roots in the *Aladura* churches (which themselves had absorbed earlier Pentecostal influences going back to the 1920s), its immediate origins lay in campus prayer fellowships in the 1970s, when its focus was private and pietistic and concentrated on individual concerns (Ojo 2006). In the 1980s, as it rapidly expanded off-campus and drew in a much wider membership, it acquired a high public profile, with massive revival services and the deployment of diverse media. Two shifts in its orientation developed, which were in some tension with one another. Firstly, from its initial concern with the sanctification of the self within a messianic end time, its focus shifted to a greater emphasis on this-worldly empowerment, as in the prosperity and deliverance ministries. Secondly, as the crisis of the Nigerian state deepened under the rule of General Abacha, a Northern Muslim, in the mid-1990s, Pentecostalism came to provide a potent idiom for an apocalyptic yearning for collective renewal. Born-Again discourse expressed hopes for a radical, redemptive change in the condition of Nigeria. All this faded after Abacha’s death and the return of civilian rule in 1999, which brought Olusegun Obasanjo to power as the elected president. Obasanjo claimed to be a Born-Again himself and surrounded himself with a coterie of prominent Pentecostal pastors (Obadare 2006); but if ever they ‘spoke truth to power’, there were no discernible effects on the conduct of official policy. Pentecostalism returned to its earlier concerns: redemption and empowerment for individuals. Much energy and resources went into further vigorous expansion, and the bigger churches, notably the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (Ukah 2008) and Winners’ Chapel (Gifford 2015), developed large estates in the vicinity of Lagos – RCCG’s Redemption City, Winners’ Chapel’s

Canaanland – with multiple facilities including universities. The religious empire-building of Nigerian Pentecostals goes on overseas.

The Yoruba are divided roughly half and half between Christians and Muslims. Members of the two faiths live together peaceably, with many families and marriages religiously mixed. But the Christian and Muslim so-called fundamentalisms are not on an even footing for comparative purposes. Salafism has less time-depth in Yorubaland than Pentecostalism, having appeared in only the last thirty or more years. Several other strands of Yoruba Islam – the Tijaniyya order, the popular NASFAT⁴ movement (sometimes called ‘Muslim Born-Agains’), even Tablighi Jama‘at⁵ – have more obvious points of resemblance to Pentecostalism than Salafism does. A fitter comparison for Yoruba Pentecostalism is with Salafism in its home base, Northern Nigeria, since that allows us to compare the two movements at full expression, each in its ‘home’ context.

The main Salafist body in the North since the 1970s has been Izala (its full Arabic name meaning ‘Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Restoration of the *Sunna*’), whose principal features have been bitter hostility to the Sufi brotherhoods and pressure for the implementation of sharia law (Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003). While Izala has a rationalizing and egalitarian tenor (so is, to that extent, ‘modernist’), it also stands firmly in a tradition of Islamic reform going back locally to Usman dan Fodio, whose jihad in the early nineteenth century established the Sokoto Caliphate and, through it, the prevailing Islamic order in Northern Nigeria. A key figure in the rise of Izala – and also a link with the Northern ruling establishment – was Abubakar Gumi, the former Grand Khadi of Northern Nigeria (Gumi 2001). He and the Premier of Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto, actively supported the Jama‘atu Nasril Islam (Society for the Victory of Islam), founded in 1962 to foster unity among Muslims. Increasingly seeing the Northern region as a kind of successor state to the Sokoto Caliphate, and Islam as the only viable source of public morality and social cohesion – notwithstanding the bitter and sometimes violent conflict between Izala and the Sufi brotherhoods – the Sardauna actively sponsored Islamization campaigns among non-Muslims of the North. From the 1970s onwards, popular pressure for the introduction of sharia law grew steadily, culminating in its adoption in twelve states of the high North in 2000–01. A primary motive was the desire of ordinary Muslims to hold their elites to account in terms of the moral framework of Islam that they shared, but it was also underlain (as argued by Last (2008)) by a more diffuse sense of spiritual insecurity.

Salafism and Pentecostalism in Nigeria are embedded in radically different ideological and institutional complexes. The former emerged from a crucible of Islamic state formation inspired by the example of the Prophet, and seeks to realize itself through capturing and reforming the state according to its conception

⁴NASFAT is the Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria, or the Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria.

⁵On these inter-religious influences, see also Peel (2016: Chapter 9), Soares (2009) and Janson (2014).

of justice. Pentecostalism, by contrast, has only a ‘negative political theology’ (Marshall 2009: 206): it emerged in the social space outside the state, and seeks to influence the public sphere in similar ways to any other voluntary association in civil society. It has nothing remotely like a sharia of its own to implement, and no models of violent direct political action like jihad. It is significant that, where marginalized youth in the Muslim North have joined radical religious groups such as Maitatsine or Boko Haram, in the South and in the non-Muslim North they have joined ethnic militias, such as the Odua People’s Congress (Adebanwi 2005; Nolte 2007; Pratten 2008; Higazi 2008) – and Pentecostals have been the most reluctant to join (for reasons of religious scruple).

The critiques of the Nigerian state that characteristically come out of the two faiths are oddly complementary but very different. If it is to win legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, an African state must meet two main criteria: it must be seen as just; and it must be seen to bring development. The Nigerian state falls seriously short on both counts. In focusing on the state’s *injustice*, Islamists recapitulate Usman dan Fodio’s justification for his jihad against the old Hausa kingdoms, and see the adoption of sharia as a large part of the answer. This carries a serious cost, in that it necessarily marginalizes non-Muslims within the political community. The critique of Pentecostals is more indirect, and more pragmatic than ethical. It points to the state’s *failure to bring about development*. That is the implicit message of the RCCG’s Redemption City, which Ukah (2008: 103) describes as ‘an alternative society, properly equipped with all the necessary instruments of a functioning secular state’. There is a subtle interpenetration of Christian and traditional values at work here. Yorubaland’s first ruling party, the Action Group, took its official motto – ‘Life More Abundant’ – from St John’s gospel (10.10), but the party’s Yoruba name, *Egbe Afenifere* (‘Lovers of Good Things’), evokes more traditional criteria of social value (Adebanwi 2014).

The stories that religions tell about themselves play an integral role in their self-realization. So I conclude by comparing two such stories: Abdul-Fattah Olayiwola’s *Islam in Nigeria* (2007) and Ayodeji Abodunde’s *Heritage of Faith* (2009), their Yoruba authors being respectively a Salafist and a Pentecostalist. They are very different, in ways that epitomize the differences between the two movements.

Where Abodunde treats Christian history as occupying a space alongside the secular history of Nigeria with which it interacts, Olayiwola gives no place to the secular, but presents Islam’s history *as* a political history. ‘Islam is a faith and a state,’ he insists (2007: 38). Where Abodunde’s tone is irenic towards other forms of Christianity, since his storyline is of a continuous work of the Spirit which culminates in Pentecostalism, Olayiwola is highly polemical towards all forms of Islam that fall short of the Salafist ideal of ‘rightly guided’ religious unity: the historically Muslim Hausa kingdoms overthrown by Usman dan Fodio, the Sufi religious orders with their millions of members, Ahmadiyya – all come under the anathema of *takfir*. He yearns to see the establishment of an Islamic state under sharia law, and has no time for Muslims getting involved in ‘what the colonialists have indoctrinated them to ... Nationalism and Patriotism’ (2007: 186). He treats the idea of Nigeria as a nation as a chimerical

distraction from the only identity that has value for him – membership of the Muslim *umma* – while Nigeria as a state is a mere political space that he wants to see filled with the Islamic content of sharia. Abodunde, by contrast, is a nationalist who has nothing to say about the state, but his is largely a nationalism displaced into the global religious sphere. He takes pride in the role of Nigerians in spreading the ‘dynamic and innovatory forms’ of Christian faith throughout the world, such as Pastor Sunday Adelaja’s Embassy of God in the Ukraine. Abodunde’s Pentecostalism and Olayiwola’s Salafism offer radically incompatible visions for the placement of religion in Nigerian society.

I have argued 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. So my argument has been pitched against an exclusive presentism, and the denial of a role for culture – principally in the form of religion – in shaping responses to any present context. Yet I do not propose to replace it with the opposite, equally one-sided, assumption that culture is so potent and unbending that it can realize itself fully in any context, under any social-structural conditions. That view has been denounced by Olivier Roy as ‘culturalism’, which he sees as a widely held view of Islam among people ranging from the most sophisticated (such as Bernard Lewis) to ‘the man in the street’, Muslims and non-Muslims alike (2004: 9–10). For he treats the ‘transversal’ and diachronic approaches as alternatives to one another: ‘Neofundamentalism and radical violence are more linked with westernization than with a diachronic approach [which would look] to history to understand the roots of “Muslim anger”.’ So, to understand new trends among Muslim youth, he insists, we should look for parallels with other forms of modern religiosity rather than ‘trying to reread the Koran’ (Roy 2004: 6, 26). But why should it be a matter of either/or, rather than both/and? The past is always a force in the present, as the very subtitle of Roy’s book – *The search for a new ummah* – indicates. Religions are always realized in practice through the interplay of context and tradition, of the social and the cultural, of the present and the past. Religious action is always doubly constrained: by the features of the context to which its agents have to respond and by what its tradition – beliefs, values and institutions received from the past – makes available to it. But the determination is never complete: all contexts yield options for action, and all traditions are open to revision and reinterpretation.

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