Editorial

Religious Communities and the Negotiation of Public Religion

This journal issue introduces readers to different aspects of the public nature of religion manifested in certain debates that have remained a constant feature of religious and public life in Africa. I do not want to give the impression that there is something unique or strange in these debates in the African context because the authors remind readers, if not demonstrate, that debates constitute what, for lack of a better term, one could term life of negotiation. What I term life of negotiation stems from the fact that as Africans continue to celebrate the growth of religions and the religious life of many religions at the expense of indigenous religions, the very public nature of faith requires a delicate balance that requires a more nuanced approach. One manifestation of such public negotiation is that which is going on in Africa in different areas, as the authors of this issue document. It is not clear how to characterize the old/new public debates. Still, there are calls for and real development and articulation of both a religious and public *einfihlung* that aims to promote understanding and responsible dialogue.

The essays in this issue discuss aspects of public religion in Africa through studies and take on different aspects of religious life. The first three essays offer readers perspectives on public religion in South Africa, Ethiopia, and Kenya. The fourth essay analyzes the academic study of religion and offers new proposals on the study of religion in Africa today.

Nasima MH Carrim and Zeenat Paruk invite readers to revisit complications with what practitioners of Islam think is standard practice but that continues to invite new debates, the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in the South African corporate context. Several Muslim women were interviewed for the study. Participants understood a dress code as one way to express commitment

to one's religion. It was also recognized that some religions have different dress codes for men and women. The author points out that today's debates go back to colonial biases that might also have been affected by differences in Islamic countries. For a long time, even in countries in which religious freedoms are enshrined in their constitutions, women who practice Islam have faced difficulties just being who they are and living their lives according to the teachings of their faith. Central to the confrontation is the fact that even in countries where wearing the hijab is not a problem, some argue that such coverings should not be worn in the workplace.

Carrim and Paruk deploy social identity theory that explains group identification and relationships of association and differentiation that come out of those associations. The authors also analyze the relationship between an individual and the state, exploring the idea of secularism in light of ideas like fusion, where religion is merged with the state, the dominant religion model in which tolerance is extended to other religions, and a neutrality that in some contexts protects the privilege of others to participate in religious activities and others to have nothing to do with religion. The fourth model is skepticism, or what is also called insulating, in which action is taken to shield the state from religious influences, and the hostile model where religious adherence is discouraged or not encouraged at all. It is difficult to find communities in Africa where one perspective dominates because secularism exists even though religious sentiments are glaring and dominate in many places. Carrim and Paruk point out that secularism in South Africa has a complex history because before 1994 the governing elites preferred religion, especially Christianity, but today secularism is the position of the South African government.

The idea of secularism in South Africa is not equivalent to hostility to religion or the practice of religion because the Bill of Rights protects every citizen from discrimination on all accounts. Carrim and Paruk conducted this study in South Africa, where major religious groups endorse the Charter of Religious Rights and Freedoms. In principle, Muslim women can adhere to the teachings of their faith even in matters of dress, but they still face challenges. Muslim women have reported being discriminated against in hiring practices because they wore a hijab at interviews. Some women have been terminated for wearing the hijab and, in some cases, the headscarf. Some women carried a stigma for merely conforming to their religious teachings. Thus we have a situation where the hijab and head scarf are significant issues that promote discrimination against Muslim women in many countries. The courts in South Africa have ruled in favor of women who experienced discrimination because they wore the hijab.

The study's findings demonstrate that some Muslim women thought that wearing a hijab would hurt their prospects of employment. For those who were already employed, wearing a hijab was a source of discomfort for some older white males, whereas Black and younger colleagues did not express any discomfort. Wearing a hijab was even more challenging for those considered in a lower-level job or social status.

There is still considerable discussion of the hijab in South Africa, and Muslims have to remind some public members that the hijab is not prohibited on the grounds of religious freedom. Managers have worked to promote tolerance and acceptance in the workplace, which has reduced tensions. However, some of the participants in the study pointed out that in earlier years Muslims who tried to be true to their identity felt excluded. Some participants reported that it is still challenging to build relationships with certain white clients. The issues here involve not only the hijab but eating and socializing in places where alcohol is served. The standard convention that women do not shake hands with males make others think of Muslims differently. These findings raise questions for further reflection and critical dialogue about the nature of religious freedoms in South Africa and other African contexts where some still consider the religious rituals of others to be problematic.

In 'Questioning Growth: Christianity, Development, and the Perils of Wealth in Southern Ethiopia', Julian Sommerschuh argues that Evangelicals in Ethiopia promoted economic development but reversed their position because they felt that growth that came from socioeconomic development promoted social and spiritual ills. Sommerschuh argues that the early scholarship reported that Pentecostalism promoted economic growth through its teachings of the prosperity gospel. The practical suggestions and actions that are done to attain wealth need rethinking. Studies from the Kale Heywet Church Southern Ethiopia indicate that some churches and their leaders believe that economic development has also promoted some social ills that have negatively affected members of society.

Sommerschuh conducted his research in Ethiopia, where the Sudan Interior Mission established Evangelical churches. Locals there described the experience of growth as a shift from celebrations to pursuing growth. The end of feasting has seen investment in household goods and things that will improve the quality of life, such as durable houses. Businesses have grown in the region, people have been encouraged to prioritize savings and make plans about their wealth, and people followed state programs for development, but they also attributed saving one's money to Christianity because the church encouraged people to live an ascetic life and abstain from drinking alcohol. Church leaders

urged people to pursue the growth of wealth because it would promote good living and harmony in homes. However, some thought that the emphasis on wealth was leading church members astray, reducing tithing by members, and allowing immoral things like envy, greed, and boasting to develop among members of the community. Social relations suffered because people did not forgive one another, and in the church people no longer focused on spiritual matters. Sommerschuh analyzes the view that economic growth has harmed individual and church life, and maps out how the Ethiopian church and its members began pulling away from the search for financial gain because it was a distraction to their faith. This was complicated when women of the church joined the debate and pointed out that it was affecting their marriages. Trading in the region was also scrutinized because it diverted attention from one's spiritual life. While the Evangelicals of Ethiopia abandoned things that distracted them from their faith, the Pentecostals, on the other hand, are known to confront and defeat these challenges and continue to pursue prosperity.

In 'The Vetting Ompass' Yonatan N. Gez presents the religious regulation debate in Kenya. The country has gone through revivalism that brought an explosive growth of Christian churches, especially Pentecostal. The debates in Kenya involve constitutional and legal provisions on religious bodies, but are complicated by the loss of confidence in many faith community leaders. Gez's study offers an eye-opening analysis of the heated debate on Kenya's laws and public responses to how the state should manage religious communities. The debates in Kenya reflect fears of what some perceive as the threat posed by 'cults' and religious extremism.

Pointing out that Africa is behind in passing legislation to regulate religion, Gez draws from earlier ethnographic work in Kenya. He conducted in-depth studies of Pentecostal churches and examines the debates in the lively Kenyan press on the debate on regulating religious markets. The issues involve the notion of separation of church and state. Kenya has seen the rise of new religious movements, Pentecostalism, and other groups that members of the public label as cults and groups that some have described as corrupt. The oversight of religious groups is debatable for many because it could lead to the politicization of religion, yet Gez documents attempts to regulate religious communities. He observes that scholarly attention to law and religion in Africa through the African Consortium on Law and Religion (ACLARS) has allowed scholars to study some of these issues.

In the case of Kenya there is growing hostility to some religious practices, prompting some to call on the government to regulate them. Yet Kenya has maintained a separation of religion and state in a country with a large Christian and a substantial Muslim minority. Religion thus plays a vital role

in the country's life, and sometimes seems to betray this notion of separation since many members of Kenyan society claim the nation is under God. Gez notes that religious groups are expected to register with the state, which creates a source of tension. Gez offers a revealing analysis of the process, including the slow bureaucratic process marred by corruption and founders of churches reportedly engaged in bribery to get their churches registered. Gez argues that 'the selective application of the law also cast a shadow on the process'. Gez documents the case of a church he refers to as Healing Sanctuary Mission that was told they had to pay 15,000 Kenyan shillings to get assistance. When the registration certificate was ready, they had to provide another 5,000 Kenyan shillings before the registration was released.

Gez's study raises questions about a culture of favoritism and bribery that affects religious communities and undermines the laws of the land and compromises what might have been good intentions to create conditions under which the state could accord religious legitimacy to different communities of faith. The more significant fallout from the challenge is the growing lack of trust in many Pentecostal pastors and 'the questionable teachings of the Pentecostal prosperity gospel'. Some in Kenya consider these pastors mainly 'shrewd' businesspeople who expose the gullibility of the masses.

Gez argues that the regulation debate in Kenya demonstrates how complex and compromised the system has become. He claims that other vetting avenues could play a useful role, starting with the government. The idea here is that before applications get to the government, something like a credible vetting committee could reject some of them. The groups that could do that and provide oversight of the system include organizations like the National Council of Churches of Kenya, The Episcopal Conference, the Evangelical Association of Kenya, and the National Congress of Pentecostal Churches. The religious communities could sanction congregations that do not follow the rules. In 2011 some church bodies sponsored legislation that would have granted them the power to vet religious groups and pastors, but the bill died because the Kenyan constitution guarantees freedom of worship, and further legislative action on the matter could lead to more corruption. Further attempts to pass legislation or have the government issue directives have not succeeded. Gez argues that at the heart of the debate lies the question of 'the unresolved role of religion within the state: is Kenya a secular country committed to separation between religion and state or is it a country under God?'

Ana Amaral's study 'Exhibiting Faith Against an imperial Background: Angola and the Spiritans at the Vatican Missionary Exhibition (1925)' offers a different perspective on public religion. This article analyzes a major international Christian event that promoted Catholic missions and highlighted

nationalism because the Portuguese used it to promote their missionary activities in Angola. The exhibit, which included over 100,000 objects, was preceded by other exhibits in Britain in the nineteenth century. Amaral points out the global reach and geopolitical implications of the 1925 exhibit as a political project that highlighted the interplay of missions, nationalism, and transimperialism and its 'networks of competition and cooperation'. It followed the grand plans of Pius XI to modernize the papacy using modern tools and disciplines like ethnology, and to link missionary practice with the progress in science and educational advancement, but also emphasize collaboration between the different congregations involved in missionary work. Thus the Vatican discouraged rivalries by stressing that the Church was a universal and modern community. The exhibit showcased the work of missions, awakened the missionary vocation, and supported the Catholic practice of promoting civilization and evangelism.

Amaral points out that Father Wilhelm Schmidt, the multitalented scholar who founded *Anthropos*, led the scientific committee. The exhibit had a 'general, historical, and scientific' section that covered missionary 'history, ethnology ... linguistics, medicine, statistics, and a library'. The second area held exhibits from different countries where missionary work was taking place. The exhibit included the beautiful and grotesque objects that reflected people's daily lives where the missionaries worked, showed the civilizing work of missions, and included works written by missionaries. Amaral offers a detailed description of the meticulous organization of the exhibition rooms. The third part focused on foreign missions worldwide to give visitors an appreciation of the church's universality. Scholars of African religion will appreciate the detailed description and analysis Amaral presents on the Angolan section, revealing the nationalist missionary politics of the Portuguese clergy in Angola and Mozambique to make the case that Portugal was 'one of the world's greatest colonial powers'. The missionary work in the region was showcased as a Portuguese 'patriotic endeavor'. Amaral analyzes details of the exotification of Angola through the choice of objects exhibited. A committee in Lisbon, formed to work on the Portuguese section of the exhibit, 'shared a common perspective about the missionization as a "civilizing" and "patriotic" endeavor. The Portuguese involvement as a nation resulted in the nationalization of the Angolan objects against an imperial background given to the Spiritan showcase'.

In an essay titled 'Religion in Africa', Birgit Meyer probes what she calls 'relational dynamics in an entangled world', inviting readers to think about the possibility that understanding religion could open doors to understanding the dynamics of the relationship between Africa and Europe. One might be tempted to say that Meyer is claiming too much. Still, Meyer takes what she

describes as a transregional approach to understanding the complex entanglements between Africa and Europe as Achille Mbembe has argued—that Africa is ‘inextricably connected to the world’. Meyer argues that the term ‘religion in Africa’ must be situated in a broader frame. She problematizes approaches to the study of religion in Africa that treats it as a subfield. Meyer wants scholars to think about transregional connections in the production of knowledge about religion (in Africa) in the context of imperialism and its social, economic, and political implications to clear a space for new understanding.

Meyer discusses two concepts that are critical to understanding the study of religion in Africa, translation and the presumed religiosity of Africa, interpreted in light of European Christian theological views. This European perspective may not represent African ideas of the names and references to divinity, religious phenomena, and conceptual practices that ground the distinctions between other religions and African religions. Meyer criticizes the presumed religiosity of Africans that theologians and other scholars have touted. These views are often advanced in contrast to what some see as an increasingly secularized Europe, making some Westerners view Africa as the last hope for religion. Meyer calls for the ‘denaturalization’ of these essentialized versions of African religiosity.

Meyer argues that the study of religion in Africa ought to be situated in a broader frame than has been the case, even with organizations like the African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR) and the African religion group at the American Academy of Religion (AAR). She rightly points out that even in those broad contexts the study of religion in Africa is one of the subfields that they could ignore. Meyer argues that this approach has its shortcomings because it fails to embrace ‘the transregional connections between the former European centers of knowledge production and areas of European imperial outreach to develop fresh postcolonial perspectives for the study of religion in our entangled world’. She explores how the term ‘religion’ differs from African ideas. In *Savage Systems*, David Chidester argues that Europeans thought that Africans had no ‘religious systems at all’. Still, with the entrance of coloniality, they had religion. Colonial systems were critical in comparative studies of religion in the mid-nineteenth century, which Meyer argues still ‘haunt the production of knowledge in religious studies’. These should be seen in the broad colonial encounter in Africa and examined critically to create a space for a new approach to the study of religion in Africa. Meyer focuses on two critical questions: the difficulty of translation, and the assumption that Africa is religious because of its orientation to a sense of the divine.

Meyer points out that translation involves understanding a term like ‘religion’ in a context where that term did not exist. Many scholars of religion such

as Louis Brenner want to see a more critical understanding of what constitutes a religion. Meyer discusses how missionaries carried out this project among the Ewe people by assuming the existence of *Mawu*, a high God from whom the Ewe were alienated and instead worshipped lesser indigenous gods. Missionaries claimed that the only way for the locals to return to God was to be converted to the God they preached. Meyer grounds this mischaracterization of African ideas on the problem of translation. She argues that in Ewe the term that comes closest to the concept of religion was *subosubo*, which is translated as 'worshipping' or 'serving'. These words stress practice while missionary terms emphasized belief. Other terms were invented, highlighting Christian ideas about the 'lostness' of the Ewe. Still, more importantly, the translation problem here demonstrates that the Europeans failed to understand different belief systems. Meyer argues correctly that the task of translation is not for scholars to subsume other terms and ideas but to understand and engage differences. Religion in Africa must engage in what Dipesh Chakrabarty has described as provincializing European views, and take on a different understanding of 'human-spirits relation'. Meyer correctly points out that Michael Lambek has also questioned the translation of local ideas and terms that missionaries and colonials quickly linked to European (and predominantly Christian) ideas of religion and religious symbols. Readers would concur with Meyer that decolonizing the study of religion calls for recognizing the challenges imposed by translation and imposition of foreign terms and a dominant Christian approach to understanding religion in the African context.

Meyer next problematizes 'Africa's presumed religiosity', championed by scholars 'situated in the ambit of liberal Christian theology' like John Mbiti and Geoffrey Parrinder and Pan-Africanists like Kwame Nkrumah and Leopold Seda Senghor. They defend the religiosity of Africans against Westerners' claims that Africans did not have a religion. Meyer points out related issues with these claims: the assertion of Africa's spiritual commitment to Europe's secularism or growth of Christianity today in Africa, and what some see as its decline in Europe. Meyer argues that the point here is not to deny these views but to 'deconstruct the naturalization of Africans as religious, as well as the taken-for-granted manner in which "religious" is often understood from a European angle'. Such a broad mislabeling tried to present African religions as different and portrayed Africans with what Johaness Fabian describes as a lack of coevality with secular Europe. Meyer offers a rich account of evidence, provided by Engelke, that Africans recognize and respect secularity.

Meyer argues that getting out of this mindset requires studying African religions from a decolonial perspective that embraces all of academia. It would involve African and Western scholars and engage the study of religion from

Africa, or pursue what Mbembe describes as the universal and Jean and John Comaroff have called building theory from the South. By this they mean a theoretical and scholarly engagement that will 'lay bare the larger dialectical processes that have produced and sustained it [north-south binary]'. Meyer argues that this can and should be done by seeing religion as 'an open concept' that is not yet fixed and filled, but still to be developed through research "from" Africa (and 'from' other places in the Global South). Concretely, such research would inquire into the nature of 'being in the world and relationality'. This would engage what P'Bitek's view that African religiosity is concerned with being in the world. Meyer has engaged this idea in a material approach to religion that has probed the different ways in which even missionary religion encouraged things. More importantly, Meyer argues that a critical reading of colonial missionary texts demonstrates the Ewe people were 'calculating persons, both in their religious practice and their mundane activities'. They balanced the material and spiritual, and one cannot limit the idea of religion in Africa to the spiritual alone. On relationality, Meyer argues that research demonstrates that the Ewe showed a strong sense of connectivity to other people and built identities through such connections. According to Meyer, this shows a strong sense of relationality.

Readers will appreciate how Meyer calls attention to 'studying religion from Africa in Europe', where many metropolises have become the center of the study of religion and the negotiation of differences. This is an important section of the essay that highlights not only what one could argue is a reverse of fortunes in knowledge about the religiosity of Africa, even if one must contend that this was always the case because the colonial archive that gives us many of the theoretical backgrounds to Africa religion grew out of the massive ethnographic record located in Europe and America. This reminds us of the irony that while Europe may be living a postcolonial moment, one could say knowledge about the religions of Africa is no longer the reserve of the African continent. However, Meyer is interested in broader questions that include the collection, curating, and control of African objects and knowledge in Europe and what has become a regular call for the rightful repatriation of those objects to Africa, where they were sacred artistic objects and not fetishes or charms. The problem and real irony here is that the obstacle to the repatriation of these powerful objects today may not be a dead imperial order and its economy, but Bible-waving and believing African Pentecostal Christians who see these as 'fetish, idol, and charm'.

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