CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Exploring the Dynamics of Religious Fields in Africa

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Religion can be considered as both central and marginal with regard to the work of Pierre Bourdieu: marginal because in his overall oeuvre only few publications are explicitly concerned with religion, and central because he developed some of the central concepts of his theory of practice—field, habitus and symbolic power—against the backdrop of the sociology of religion of Marx, Durkheim and especially Weber.1 One critical question raised with regard to his treatment of religion is whether his conceptualization of the religious field is applicable outside modern Western states with institutionalized churches and demarcated religious spheres. In this volume, we relate Bourdieu’s theory to the various religious fields of sub-Saharan Africa in which we work. For him, religious fields are just one variant of social fields. In our introduction, we therefore discuss his general conceptions of social fields first, before turning to Bourdieu’s specifications regarding the religious field and to the question of its applicability to the study and practice of religions in Africa. Based on the contributions in this volume, we argue that Bourdieu’s theory, with its focus on specific actors and practices, does not lend itself to construct unitary, homogeneous entities like African Traditional Religions, African Christianities or African Islam. Rather, it deconstructs these and other essentializing categories by conceptualizing specific religious spheres as fields of social forces and social struggles whose dynamics are based on the relations of exchange between religious experts and laity, and on the competition amongst the specialists (Bourdieu 1991: 17). In conclusion, we highlight some problems with Bourdieu’s approach, namely the significance of inter-field dynamics, the impact of deliberate interventions and discourses on the structure of social fields, and the dynamic potential of ruptures between objectified and subjectified social structures.

Social Fields

According to Bourdieu, all theodicies are sociodicies (Bourdieu 1991: 16), and, moving from the beliefs to the practices, he claims that the “specifically religious rite is simply a particular case of the social rituals whose magic does not reside in the discourses and convictions which accompany them (in this case, religious representations and beliefs) but in the system of social relations which constitute ritual itself, which make it possible and socially operative (among other things, in the representations of the beliefs it implies)”. Following from this insistence on the social dimension of religion, we find it most fruitful to base our discussion of African religious fields on Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social fields generally, before engaging critically with his specifications regarding the religious field.

The social, for Bourdieu, is relational, as captured in spatial metaphors, primarily one of relatively autonomous social fields in which different social games are played. A field is understood “both as a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and as a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure” (Bourdieu 1998: 32).

On the one hand, there are the social structures that define the game social actors play; and on the other hand, these social structures are produced through the strategic practices of the actors, their struggles over positions in the field, as well as over the borders of the field and the rules of the game. On the side of social structure, Bourdieu distinguishes between the objectified structure, the relations between the positions of the actors in the field and the specific regularities that define the possible interactions between them, and the subjectified structure, the habitus of the actors, “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Habitus is arguably Bourdieu’s most famous concept, and it takes center stage in his theory of practice, because its dispositions inscribed in the bodies and cognitions of the actors define their practice and drive their strategies. With regard to Bourdieu’s spatial conceptualization of both objectified and subjectified structure in the form of social fields, it is important to note that this concept forms “an abstract