CONFERENCE REPORT

BRINGING RELIGION BACK IN:
RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICS IN AFRICA

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There is an academic revival in the study of religion and politics, particularly with regard to contemporary Africa. No doubt fostered by a reflection on the rapid expansion of Christianity in Africa during the last century and on the contemporary rise of Pentecostalism and Islamism, there have been a number of attempts, from different disciplines and at different analytical levels, to make sense of the political significance of religion. At the same time, an increasing recognition of the numerous ways in which Islamic ideas and institutions relate to and influence politics opens up the possibility of reframing the vocabulary used in the study of state-society relations. With this in mind, a seminar was convened in September 2004 at Roskilde University in Denmark, where a number of scholars from across the social sciences were able to share current thinking on the role of religion in how power is organised and institutionalised in Africa. Support for the conference was received from the Graduate School for International Development Studies at Roskilde University, the Centre for African Studies and the Institute for Church History both of Copenhagen University. Our thanks go to Holger Bernt Hansen, Niels Kastfelt and Christian Lund for their help in organizing and supporting the workshop.

The workshop was concerned with relating the way religion (as both beliefs and institutions) intersects with politics. The overall aim was to find common ground for understanding the significance of religion in
various political contexts. This framework grew out of a decision to bring together researchers interested in the role of religious belief with those interested in the role of religious institutions in African politics. As a reflection of this, the seminar focused on a number of examples illustrating the interplay of religious beliefs and institutions. There was an interest in the day-to-day practice of religious groups at various social levels as well as more conceptual work on terminology and methodology. In addition to the invited speakers, the seminar asked a number of social scientists from other research areas to act as commentators and to broaden out the arena of discussion.

The opening session by Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis approached religion in terms of its ideological significance. Their presentation, based on their recent book, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (2004, reviewed elsewhere in this volume), noted that much of the academic work on politics and religion in Africa focuses on institutions, and not on religious ideology or religious ideas. They suggested that greater attention needs to be paid to understanding religious thought in Africa, and the way it shapes and explains political actions. Popular stories about witches, prophets, miracles, or the use of witchcraft, spirit mediums, or diviners, are part of the political vernacular in different parts of Africa. A definition of religion as the belief ‘in an invisible world of spirits’, spirits that have the power to make changes in the visible world, can be used to explain the way political change is enacted or understood. Ellis and ter Haar used examples from across the continent to illustrate their case concerning the way religious thought is intertwined with political practice and notions of political power are embedded in religious ideas.

René Otayek approached religion as a form of political culture and stressed the increased significance of religion in the public sphere in many African societies, as well as the emergence of more politicized forms of religion. Using Islam as an example, Otayek argued that it is less productive to analyze religion from a doctrinal perspective than to understand how it has been interpreted and organized from an historical perspective. He focused on African Muslims, their participation in the spiritual community of Islam and the practical community of religious networks. Otayek showed how the new visibility and viability of Islam can be observed mainly in urban spaces, as a new form of Islamic sociability (multiplication of Islamic associations), and in the Qur’anic schools (*medersa*). Otayek’s presentation furthermore discussed the relationship between democratization and de-secularization in sub-Saharan Africa. He argued that the recent democratic transitions in a number