

Introduction: Christianity and Social Change in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract

This introductory essay lays out the main themes of a special issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora*. It brings together seven empirically grounded papers by African social scientists of different disciplinary backgrounds. These works explore the social impact of religious innovation and competition in present day Africa. They represent a selection from an interdisciplinary initiative that made 23 research grants for theologians and social scientists to study Christianity and social change in contemporary Africa. These articles focus on a variety of dynamics in contemporary African religion (mostly Christianity), including gender, health and healing, social media, entrepreneurship, and inter-religious borrowing and accommodation. The editors suggest that the research and learning reflected in this volume may enhance understanding of religion's vital presence and power in contemporary Africa. The articles reveal problems as well as possibilities, notably some ethical concerns and psychological maladies that arise in some of these new movements, notably neo-Pentecostal and militant fundamentalist groups. Yet the articles do not fixate on African problems and victimization. Instead they explore sources of African creativity, resiliency and agency. Scholars of religion and religiosity in Africa, the authors argue, need to invest new conceptual and methodological energy in understanding what it means to be actively religious in Africa today.

KEY WORDS: Christianity and: Contemporary Africa, Gender, Health and Healing, Social Media, Entrepreneurship, Inter-Religious Borrowing and Accommodation

Introduction

Religions constitute some of the most dynamic forces in Africa today, and studies of African religious and spiritual practices have registered spectacular numerical growth. Indeed, the rise of the African Association for the Study Religion in Africa and this, its journal, give witness to this dynamism. Scholars are trying to catch up, in effect, with the dynamic numerical growth and changing cultural influence of African religions, and of Christianity in particular. Most of this work has been pursued within the academic discipline of religious studies, but the other social sciences are now following the trail as well. The constant ferment of religiosity in Africa has attracted significant social scientific attention in recent years and has produced a rich and growing body of social scientific publications. Historians, political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists alike have

been scrambling to assess the ‘religion factor’ in African life (Gifford, 2004, 2009, 2015; Olupona 2004; Meyer and Moors 2006; Carpenter 2012; Adogame et al. 2013; van Wyk 2014; Echtler and Ukah 2015; Meyer 2015; Peel 2015; Hackett and Soares 2015; Janson and Meyer 2016; Vaughan 2016; van der Veer 2016; Obadare 2016; Haynes 2017).

Religious innovation and dynamism, moreover, have generated plenty of religious competition. Religious competition is anathema to religious leaders, who preach and believe in unity and accord, but social scientists might think differently. Diversity and competition are often vehicles, if not drivers, of creative change. How does religious diversity work in African contexts? Is religious competition a destructive force, or does it enable innovation and foster creativity as well? The growth of Pentecostalism in Africa, to cite one example, has brought in a high level of competition and innovation. Pentecostals have greatly influenced their competitors—including the historic churches and even Muslims and African traditionalists—to try new ways and means to attract followers and serve the public (Gifford 2004, Maxwell 2006, Kalu 2008, Meyer 2015, Haynes 2017; Kaunda, 2018).

A competitive marketplace of religions has emerged in many African nations. Governments across the continent are adopting constitutions that accommodate and protect all religions and allow varied beliefs and practices to compete without any official preference. Distinctive religious practices and identities are becoming blurred, as are the lines and paths of social status and leadership. Any upstart Pentecostal church and its newly anointed bishop have the same status under the law as leaders of long-established Anglican or Catholic hierarchies. Free enterprise now marks the religious scene every bit as much as free-wheeling commerce does the new African economies.

Inspired by these new conditions, this special issue gathers a collection of empirically grounded papers by African social scientists of different disciplinary backgrounds that touch on various aspects of the social impact of religious innovation and competition in present day Africa.

Background, Context and Research Questions

These papers, diverse as they are, have a common origin in an exciting research initiative, ‘Christianity and Social Change in Contemporary Africa’, funded by the John Templeton Foundation in collaboration with the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. Even though this research grants project was funded in Philadelphia and administered from Grand Rapids, it was a thoroughly African effort. African scholars convened the project, made the grants decisions and guided the researchers. The project was diverse in disciplinary persuasions as well, including specialists in anthropology, sociology, communication studies, psychology, theology and religion studies. Equally distinctive of the project was the intent of researchers to share, discuss and dialogue about their findings with members of the communities amongst which the studies were undertaken. Every funded project team organized local workshops for practitioners as well as scholarly conferences and publications.

These papers are an outcome of a sub-project titled ‘Religious Innovation and Competition: Their Impact in Contemporary Africa’, which was conducted from January 2016 to March 2017 in 11 African countries. The overwhelming verdict of participants in

its 12 grantee teams is that the project engendered cooperation and collaboration at a very high level. The project has also succeeded in initiating networks of researchers and academics with common interests and pursuits. In bringing these papers together for a wider readership, it is our hope that scholarly cooperation and collaboration will be sustained and lead to individual and collective proposal writing and solicitation of research funding from other sources.¹

New academic terrains are being charted through the development of new university courses that some researchers in the project have initiated, with the intention of encouraging young and upcoming researchers and academics with interest in the intersection of religion studies, theology and the social sciences. We hope that it will help with the dismantling of some of the rigid boundaries and gatekeeping between theology and the social sciences.

This project materialised from wide-ranging consultations with African scholars involved in and committed to engaging Africa through the prism of contemporary religion and religiosity. The planning process was launched following a 2013 consultation meeting in Accra, Ghana, initiated by African scholars from many fields of inquiry in collaboration with the Nagel Institute, to prospect for project funding in selected fields (Carpenter and Kooistra 2014). Drawing on the ideas and enthusiasm generated by such engagements with Africa, Burkinabe theologian Tite Tienou, Kenyan anthropologist Mwenda Ntarangwi, and American historian and director of the Nagel Institute at Calvin College, Joel Carpenter, worked closely together on the design of the research programme from the start. A University of Cape Town based Cameroonian social anthropologist, Francis Nyamnjoh, joined the train in motion as director of the social science subproject.

The project design and approval phase took over two and half years and culminated in the making of 23 grants – 11 in theology and 12 in social science. As evidenced by a total of 188 (88 in social science and 100 in theology) letters of interest examined and 56 (32 in social science and 24 in theology) invited full proposals, the role of religion in African societies as a critical area of intellectual contemplation and research excites the theologians and social scientists of the continent in equal measure. Had provision been made to accept applications from Africans in the diaspora as well, these figures could easily have doubled.

Applications were invited from interested African social scientists, as individuals or in teams, around six key questions, namely:

1. What are the main traits of religious innovation and competition in Africa?
2. What factors are driving religious innovation and competition in Africa?
3. What impact does religious innovation and competition have on African society?
4. What roles do religious innovation and competition play in building or hindering resilience and entrepreneurship in Africa?
5. What roles do religious innovation and competition play in the increase of youth agency and the rise of urbanized popular culture in Africa?
6. What roles do technology and media play in religious innovation and competition in Africa?

¹ We have also published a dedicated issue of papers from this project with the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36:3 (2018). Our thoughts expressed in that issue's introduction are quite similar to those we share here, but the articles and authors in the issue are entirely different.

The selection committees were constituted entirely of African scholars. At a joint selection committee meeting in Accra, Ghana (December 2015) and the orientation workshop in Cape Town (February 2016), expert social scientists and theologians on the selection committees as well as the project's facilitators and mentors were gratified by the programmatic seriousness, topical richness and professional quality of the various applications. With the exception of two of the selected studies – 'The faith-based segregation of interments in Senegal's Joal-Fadiouth Commune' by Ato Kwamena Onoma, and 'New imaginations of youth agency: Boko Haram and the innovative gospel of terror in Nigeria' by Edlyne Anugwom – projects focused mainly on the social impact of innovation and competition within Christianity.

These projects' initial research papers were presented in draft form at a culminating conference in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, from 6 to 11 March 2017. The conference was attended by 69 (17 female, 52 male) participants that consisted, among others, of grantees, mentors and research directors, selection committee members, and invited keynote speakers. These speakers were Harold Netland and Emmanuel Katongole for theology and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga² and Afe Adogame for social science. In addition to four keynote presentations, there were a total of 33 grantee presentations, of which 15 were in the social science subproject and 18 in theology. The papers benefitted from comments from and conversations with mentors that were assigned to projects from the outset, as well as from discussions with the research directors, invited facilitators and keynote speakers at the launch workshop in Cape Town and at the concluding conference in Abidjan.

The findings that have emerged out of the 12 social science research groups have contributed refreshing insights into the role of innovation and competition in religion in Africa. Religion as a dynamic force of social change has shaped the cultural, economic and political landscapes of the African continent in significant ways. The rising prevalence of hybridised and innovative 'Christianities' that sits at the centre of this research project is reflective of the resilience and transformational power within African society today. If there is one thing that these varied research projects have all converged upon, it is the centring of current African religious epistemologies within their work, contributing to a flourishing discourse that bodes optimistically for future work.

Conceptually and methodologically, a core aspect of this project has been collaborative and critical multidisciplinary research around non-zero-sum-game articulations of change and continuity in African religiosity, both from theological and social scientific perspectives. The project, most innovatively, has encouraged intellectual conversations, co-elaboration and co-production among African social scientists and theologians with shared research interests in religion, social change and African dignity and agency. Bringing theologians and social scientists together to engage fruitfully with each other's tested research methodologies and ways of knowing has resulted, we believe, not only in rich and innovative ways of understanding African realities but also in more complex and enriched research approaches, which we hope other scholars of Africa will find relevant to their own work.

² As we were putting together this introduction, news reached us that Fabien Eboussi Boulaga died on 13 October 2018. May his soul rest in perfect peace. We are fortunate to have known him, and to have been enriched by his scholarship.

Basic Assumptions and Themes

A guiding assumption of the studies under the sub research project is that religions constitute some of the most dynamic forces in Africa today, and their interaction with other social forces need to be more carefully assessed. Although much work of this type has been pursued for some time now, especially within the field of religious studies, social scientific perspectives are essential, given the importance of religion as a social force, and especially in view of the social competition generated by religious innovation and dynamism.

In framing this research, we were keen to establish the extent to which diversity and competition can be vehicles of creative change in African religiosity, and not just vehicles of fragmentation and animosity, as commonly feared. Thus we were led to ask: How does religious diversity work in African contexts? Is religious competition a destructive force, or does it enable innovation and foster creativity? The growth of Pentecostalism in Africa in the past 30 years, to cite one example, has brought a high level of competition and innovation. It reopens these questions about new religious movements with fresh urgency. On the social and religious scene as well as in commerce and economics, new players and dynamics are afoot in Africa today and new questions arise about patterns and trajectories

The project also sought to be open to fresh opportunities for interdisciplinary research that might lead to new understandings of contemporary African life. We paused to ask, more than once, might these explorations and findings encourage a more positive approach to the study of Africa, where once afro-pessimism seemed the default option? We were particularly focused on evidence of African agency, resilience and creativity, as a counterpoint to the all too common tendency to focus on African problems, pathologies and victimization.

The seven papers selected for this volume bring together many themes of interest. These include:

- religious innovation and competition as well as competition-induced innovation;
- gender inequalities and gendered dynamics in religion and religiosity and their implications for the visibility of women in general, and those in or seeking leadership positions in particular;
- religion and health (somatic, psychosomatic and spiritual) and competing, conflictual and complementary constructions of legitimacy in religious health initiatives;
- creative appropriation of mainstream and new media by the leaders and congregations in Pentecostal churches and among Pentecostals in particular;
- religion and religious competition seen through the prism of rural-urban and transnational migration, urban change and vulnerability;
- extent to which the socioeconomic plight of vulnerable and marginalised groups feeds religious fundamentalism and the impact, in turn, of such fundamentalism on agency in general, and the agency of youth, women and the urban poor in particular; and
- subtle and obvious similarities and differences between present day Pentecostalism and African indigenous religions and a case for interdependence,

ecumenism and conviviality in spite of competition among the variants of Christianity in Africa.

A variety of themes emerged from our teams' studies:

1. *Leadership and Inclusiveness along Gender Lines* were the focus of several studies. These issues are central to any religion which holds equality, equity, justice and humility as core values. They are more easily articulated in principle and in abstraction than implemented and investigated in reality, especially in contexts where certain culturally informed attitudes and practices might stand in the way.

Exploring in a Kenyan context the opportunities and obstacles placed before women as both leaders and followers within these churches, the study by Parsitau sheds light on the shifting terrain of gender equality and awareness on the continent, to and from which church institutions both contribute and detract. The interesting contradictions and tensions she presents speak to the conflicted nature of gender identity and the continued struggle for legitimation, freedom of expression, and equality. A focus on gender, Parsitau makes clear, is critical for understanding the rise and proliferation of Pentecostalism in Africa. She explores some of the strategies employed by African women seeking inclusion and leadership in the dynamic field of African religiosity as they negotiate change and continuity to attract the attention for their concerns and support of colleagues. Yet they are careful not to appear to be throwing the baby of patriarchal traditions and masculinities out with the bathwater of the agentic possibilities brought their way by religious innovation and competition.

Parsitau's approach is especially significant in many an African context where stereotypes of stark gendered hierarchies are commonplace, and there is a tendency to assume that women and men cannot excel in equal measure in the business of practicing and promoting prescribed religious beliefs. The insights generated by Parsitau's Kenyan study and others in our project on the rise of female-led Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Tanzania and Ghana, provide a framework to revisit prevalent assumptions and stereotypes around gender and religiosity in Africa. How best can the divine purpose or higher vision of a religion be fulfilled in Africa by harnessing the potentialities of men and women alike, and not by assuming that either men or women are exclusively best placed to undertake that purpose, mission and vision in Africa? It is our hope that the findings presented augment what is already known of religious practices and sensibilities that prevent or allow women to take up and sustain highly visible positions of power, a phenomenon that is instructive for other social sectors in Africa. And what conversations on and around the balance of power and energy between male and female are unfolding between millennia old traditions and newer religions?

2. *The Relationship between Religion and Health* was another salient theme for our grantees. Several teams assessed the impact and relevance of religion on the physical and mental wellbeing of ordinary Africans. They highlighted how religion is interwoven and overlaid and undergirded with other belief systems, particularly relating to health, fate and wellbeing. They also reveal ways in which plurality, pragmatism and fluidity are produced and practised and how they influence belief. It is hardly enough to preach salvation as an attribute of a life hereafter, when people are often desperately seeking to make ends meet at the margins, and lives are wasting away under the burning challenges of bare existence. Who is to blame when hard work, usually prescribed as the way out of one's hardships, is not good enough to bring wealth and health? It is not satisfactory to hope to resolve the

health problems of congregants by requiring them to settle for miracles, prophecies and exorcism alone, as not every health challenge requires a miracle, prophesy or exorcism.

How then do those members of the congregation for whose attention the various approaches to health are competing relate to such competition? Are the approaches exclusionary or inclusionary in their relationship to the various ideas of health proposed by competing groups or health professionals affiliated with one form or another of Christianity? Getui's study of church-founded hospitals and clinics locates some good news on this front. These agencies, where Christian prayers and medical practice intermingle, are generally not in competition with each other, and their staff members tend not to chide their patients for seeking traditional remedies.

In her study, Yendork focuses on the impact of religions on the mental health of their practitioners, thus enriching research on the social impact of various religions in Africa. A prime characteristic of Christianity in Africa today is the increase in Pentecostalism/Charismatism based on practices such as miracles, prophecies and exorcism. These activities tend to influence the beliefs and behaviours of people who adhere to them in their quest for cosmological balance. Yendork's study reinforces the reality of religion as a complex phenomenon with both spiritual and material dimensions, requiring multidisciplinary research to understand beliefs in the interconnections and interdependencies between the mind, spirit and the body. She reveals both the positive and negative effects on mental health of certain religious practices in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Despite conventional wisdom, claims of piety, holiness, honesty, moral uprightness and humility in religion and religiosity are always in need of authentication and re-authentication. If this is the case, and if we grant the various African congregants the agency we believe they have and exercise, then this question arises: What is it about these churches and their followers that makes them oblivious of or indifferent to the negativities of practices such as miracle-making, prophesying and exorcism?

3. The resilience of indigenous African health systems and practices along with indigenous African religions demonstrates the need to factor *Interconnections, Intersections and Interdependences between Christianity and Indigenous Belief Systems and Cultural Values in Africa* into how we conceptualise and undertake research on religion and social change in Africa and among Africans. Recognising such religious entanglements should make social scientists wary of any research or discourse that privileges conversion over conversation in African religiosity (Ela 1986[1980]; Boulaga 1984[1981]; Devisch 1996; Olupona 2004; Bongmba 2012; Adogame et al. 2013; Echtler and Ukah 2015). Such resilience and entanglements invite students of religion as a social phenomenon to de-emphasise radical shifts and stark dichotomies that suggest a determination to settle for nothing less than total victory and the annihilation of competing religions or competing tendencies within the same religion. African religiosity gives priority to inclusivity and humility. It is both resilient and entangling, featuring constant negotiation and navigation amidst neighbouring religious traditions and cultures. It reflects a cultural disposition towards inclusivity or what is popularly known as *Ubuntu*. It serves as evidence that embracing innovation and competition does not always have to entail giving up something.

The incompatibility between the religious inclusiveness that pervades Africa and the religious fundamentalism that crops up sporadically on the continent is made evident by Anugwom's study of Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria. Anugwom explores the impact

of economic poverty, governance failures, and limited educational and employment opportunities for youth to account for the spread of Boko Haram religious fundamentalism in north-eastern Nigeria. The need to problematize ‘tradition’ and the ‘traditional’ with reference to African religions cannot be overemphasised, given the centrality of these categories in this research. If Africans are social actors who are selectively endorsing and contesting beliefs, values and practices, old and new, how one conceptualises and researches traditions—not as inward looking, frozen in time and space realities but as open to competition and innovation—is of cardinal importance. Even fundamentalism, often defined as radical traditionalism, is a movement driven by contemporary aspirations, tools and concepts.

In the study by Mapuranga of how Pentecostalism continues to draw extensively from rites and rituals traditional to African indigenous religions, we see strong patterns of religious sharing. The study provides evidence on how Pentecostalism has inspired innovations informed by African indigenous religions in Harare, as experienced through symbols, practices and rituals used to interact with the sacred and the divine and to activate consciousness of God’s presence and guidance. In terms of rituals, practices and symbols, Pentecostalism in Africa is much more like old wine in new bottles in how, among other things, it draws and builds on age-old cultural traditions of seeing and relating to bodies as permeable containers or envelops of spirituality, and as mediators of conversations between the visible and the invisible. The challenge is thus one of how best to capitalise on such continuity in change, and not to stubbornly insist on absolute winners and losers among different religions and faiths on the continent.

In many a situation, as the findings in several of the studies in this volume evidence, faith-seeking or religion-seeking Africans confronted with radically different options resort to compromises. Such conciliatory nimble-footedness characteristic of many an African, big and small, and many an African society, far from being a weakness, is in many regards a virtue informed by a willingness to reach out, take in and accommodate difference. It is the makings of humility, *par excellence*. This virtue could prove to be the best fortress for Africa in the face of waves of religiously motivated violence or terrorism. It is a strength – evidence of the sociality that makes one human and that provides for the resilience of humanity as a universal aspiration. Africans find room in their hearts and in their spirituality not only for Christianity in all its bloom and blossom, but also for Islam and any other religious options inspired by the continent’s encounters with foreign influences.

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At the heart of religion and social change in Africa is religion as a communicative act and as a form of transmission and reproduction of spirituality within a dynamic African setting. In this context, cultural and religious traditions are challenged to renegotiate themselves in conversation with innovations inspired by religious ideologies and practices from outside the continent, and more importantly, by the agency of Africans who subscribe in varying degrees and gradations to these innovations.

In their religiosity and everyday practices, Africans make little secret of the fact that it is possible to be what Charles Taylor terms ‘open and porous and vulnerable’ to a world of spirits, powers and cosmic forces, and still be ‘disenchanted’ enough to have the confidence of Taylor’s ‘buffered self’, exploring one’s own ‘powers of moral ordering’ (Taylor 2007: 27). Equally noteworthy is the fact that many an African does not allow their embrace of Christianity or Islam to serve as an ideological whip to flog their indigenous cultural beliefs into unmitigated compliance with an exclusive new piety (Ela 1986[1980]; Boulaga 1984[1981]; Devisch 1996; Olupona 2004; Bongmba 2012; Adogame et al. 2013; Echtler and Ukah 2015). African Christianity or African Islam simply afford Africans an opportunity to add another layer of complexity to their toolkit of personal identification (adopting Christian and Muslim names for example, without giving up their African names) and to their cultural and ethnic forms of being.

4. *Religion, Urbanity and New Social Patterns* is a theme that runs through several of our research projects. They sought insight into the new understandings, new languages and new consciousness that such intersections generate. The study we include here by Stephan de Beer and his colleagues of Pretoria and its environs provides us with a snippet view of contemporary South Africa, where South Africans are learning afresh to walk together under the guidance of Christian thinking in public life (Carpenter 2012). Over twenty years after the end of apartheid, racialized inequality and economic poverty are yet to be redressed in favour of the majority black population which continues to populate townships and informal settlements. This resiliency of apartheid creates opportunities for emerging new forms of Christianity championed by prosperity gospel and miracle-seeking Christians claiming success where the mainline churches are perceived to have failed, in creating a level playing field for all races seeking material wellbeing and salvation. However, given the vulnerabilities of the black majority in townships and informal settlements, the material and soul-saving opportunities that come their way are not without damage (van Wyk 2014). Of late, mainstream and social media have proliferated reports on problematic churches with questionable practices – with pastors in certain cases going beyond the bounds of tolerance by daring their congregants to eat forbidden, inedible, downright dangerous ‘substances’ (ants, snakes, stones, insecticides, poisons, etc.) in a show of the miracles of faith. Some pastors and prophets are accused of extravagant exploitation of their congregants, financially, sexually and otherwise, all in the name of God and the promise of salvation and material abundance.

The study by Henrietta Nyamnjoh explores the creative and accelerated appropriation of social media by Pentecostal churches to position themselves and to build and maintain networks in a highly competitive religious landscape, in which one’s entrepreneurial abilities are constantly summoned and challenged. She investigates how the quest to attract new converts, extend boundaries and confirm dominance has led to Pentecostal churches appropriating new information and communication technologies and processes for ‘spreading the word of God and doing God’s work’,³ empowering women and youth, as well as influencing religious processes beyond Pentecostalism.

³ Such appropriation of new technologies for evangelisation is not confined to Africa. At a four day summit on ‘Religious Violence against Christians’ that was held in Washington in May 2017, and brought together 600 participants from 136 countries, ‘Attendees received a swag bag with a customized iPad loaded with conference materials,’ from the organisers – the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association – which reportedly spent \$4 US million on the event. See Elizabeth Dias, ‘Vice President Mike Pence Met Privately with Top Russian Cleric’, *Time*, May 12, 2017. <http://time.com/4776717/mike-pence-russian-cleric-hilarion-alfeyev/> Accessed 12 May 2017.

Social media are deployed to conjure financial, material, and spiritual loyalty straight into the breadbasket of the man or woman of God, directly or through their franchises. We see intriguing insights into the fast-paced changes underway regarding how people view and enact their connection to God, community and church.

The modernising push towards appropriating ‘apps’ and cellular technology to do one’s spiritual work is reflective of the power of the African consumer market, as well as the innovative and fluid approaches that shape urban religious landscapes in Africa. Nyamnjoh explores and examines the role played by new media in accelerating religious discourses and innovative approaches among the emerging prophetic ministries. She also shows how the religious practices of prophetic ministries resemble and rediscover prior cultural and religious practices of indigenous African cultures and codes of conduct and decorum between leaders and their followers across genders and generations. Given the close relationship between religion and communication, and the centrality of media, information, and communication technologies to religious practices (Meyer and Moors 2006; Hay 2014; Meyer 2015; Hackett and Soares 2015), the study joins others in our group in exploring how religious innovation and competition intersect with urban change and urban vulnerability, and the extent to which processes of religious innovation and competition contribute to the healing or the fracturing of urban communities. The studies provide insight into the new understandings, new languages and new consciousness that such intersections generate.

These two studies focused on urban change and urban vulnerability give us a foretaste of the wealth of knowledge to be gained through a systematic investigation of the often taken for granted assumptions about rural-urban mobility in search of elusive greener pastures, becoming trapped in informal settlements and in poverty, and being a target for proliferating Pentecostal charismatic ministries promising gratification and salvation through miracles, prophecies and exorcism. It remains a challenge, however, to study religion and religiosity as a commodity and opportunity not always easily disentangled from opportunism, in a manner that does not trivialize or overly simplify the predicaments of those caught betwixt and between crushing poverty and the lure and allure of Charismatic Pentecostalism. Granted the popularity of these new forms of religiosity, even with academics across university campuses on the continent, future research on the phenomenon of Charismatic Pentecostalism should seek a balance in the composition of research teams between members and affiliates of these churches and those who are not.

Even so, transformation—personal and social—through religion is a critical component of the social change that has transpired in Africa for more than a century and half. The studies that we supported provide food for thought about the large-scale production and consumption of religion in an African setting – religion as a well marketed mega enterprise – as well as on the largescale resilience and revival of indigenous African spirituality. They offer lenses for understanding change and continuities in African spirituality and religiosity, and provide useful insights on the continent’s capacity to reach out, take in and accommodate innovations, and provide for a healthy, enriching competitiveness that is predicated not on absolutes, but on the spirit and practice of interconnections, interdependence, and conviviality across religions (Ela 1986[1980]; Boulaga 1984[1981]; Devisch 1996; Olupona 2004; Bongmba 2012; Adogame et al. 2013; Echtler and Ukah 2015).

Towards a Future in a Transdisciplinary Comparative Border-crossing Approach in the Study of Religion

We hope that the papers presented in this volume will enhance understanding of the nexus between religion, communication and related themes of resiliency and entanglement amid an ever-evolving religious landscape. The authors are determined to go beyond doom and gloom perspectives that are overly fixated with African problems and victimization. They are keen to explore pockets of opportunities, however circumscribed, for understanding African agency and African wellsprings of hope. This approach entails focusing on sources of resilience, resourcefulness, and hope among Africans that are brought to the fore or reinforced by contemporary religious innovation and competition. It suggests, above all, that scholars of religion and religiosity in Africa, regardless of their personal religious persuasions and beliefs or lack thereof, invest conceptual and methodological energy in researching the intricacies and nuances of what it means to be actively religious in a dynamic Africa.

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