

Studying Religions in Africa

Single or Multiple Traditions

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Abstract

The examination of a single religious tradition and the exploration of the plurality of lived practice provide two broad approaches to the study of religion in Africa. The article discusses each of these units of analysis by introducing two scholarly trends emerging in twenty-first century scholarship: the Anthropology of Christianity and the Plurality of Religion. It discusses the historical background to these trends in the contested definitions of 'religion' emerging in the twentieth century. It shows how the trends have been developed and discusses their usefulness in the author's own work. The article demonstrates that the definition of 'religion' matters and the unit of analysis influences the research trajectory and the findings. Researchers are encouraged to consider whether their subjects conform to or challenge their working definitions. The article concludes by asking for reflections on these trends by African scholars and looking forward to further discussions on approaches to the study of religion from insider perspectives.

Key words

Africa; Anthropology of Christianity; Plurality of Religion; unit of analysis

Introduction

When we say that we study 'religions in Africa' what do we mean? More specifically, what is the basic unit that we are evaluating? The study of religions in Africa has seen two broad methodological approaches: the examination of a single religious tradition and the exploration of the plurality of lived practice. Each approach has a lengthy history. Its history is bound up with the way the word 'religion' has been understood since the study of religion developed in the nineteenth century. In this survey article, I analyse the developments of these trends during the first quarter of the twenty-first century. I first introduce the Anthropology of Christianity which has focused on traditions within Christianity. I then examine recent scholarship on Religious Plurality which, in a deliberate critique of the focus on a single religious tradition, explores the points of intersection between religious traditions. The two trends are largely influenced by European and North American-based scholars, with some collaboration with

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African scholars. I conclude by considering the implications of inequalities in methodological engagement, a matter of importance to the African Association of the Study of Religion since its inception in 1992.

Understanding Religion: Historical Context

In addressing two trends in the study of religions in Africa a brief reminder of historical debates is required (Brenner 2024, 9–46). My working definition identifies religion as to do with social actions, organizations or systems that engage with supernatural or spiritual beings or notions of the transcendent. I study these religious things as ‘multidimensional social practice’, which starts with ‘the patterned regularities’ of what people do and the ‘situated knowledge’ that they share (Ammerman 2020). The word ‘religion’ became current in an intellectual tradition in Europe that encouraged a distinction between religion and other aspects of life. ‘Religion’ was modelled on specific forms of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Its definition was used to classify other religious traditions and place them in a hierarchy. Religions which possessed sacred scriptures and doctrines of faith were deemed superior to those that did not. In this schema, the spiritual traditions of Africa were often considered to be superstitions or corrupted forms of religion, a view that provided intellectual ammunition for the assertion of colonial rule (Chidester 1996; Masuzawa 2005). The biases of this interpretation of ‘religion’ have long been challenged. Yet the argument about what ‘religion’ means remains important when we ask what unit of analysis we study: a single religious tradition or the confluence of two or more? Here are some examples, taken from twentieth-century debates.

In their efforts to counteract the international denigration of African beliefs and practices two scholars of religion came to very different conclusions. John Mbiti (1970) systematized African proverbs to demonstrate human wisdom in the African past as a preparation for the Christian gospel, with a universal deity at its centre. For him, indigenous beliefs and practices rightly shape Christianity in Africa. Indeed, a proper articulation of African Christianity ought to be in continuation with God-given elements of traditional culture and spirituality. Mbiti was part of a wider inculturation movement that included theologians like Bolaji Idowu (1973), Alexis Kagame (1976) and Harry Sawyer (1970). They thought that selected African beliefs and practices were rightly part of Christianity, and Christianity was a positive development of those beliefs and practices: the best elements of two religious traditions should naturally blend into one. They envisaged this blended tradition to be a form of Christianity fit for African cultures.

Okot p’Bitek (1971), Mbiti’s colleague at Makerere University, disagreed vehemently. He considered that those who placed long-standing ritual practice and wisdom within a Christian frame were distorting those traditions. He criticized the universalizing of localized religious practices that Mbiti attempted. He thought it foolish to make African spiritual beings into a God with Christian attributes. He focused his attention on practices that were often overlooked by Christian theologians, or which they considered particularly difficult to meld with Christian belief and practice. He questioned—in a positive rather than a denigratory fashion—whether divination, spirit possession, and ancestral veneration should be called religion. If ‘religion’ is defined by modern western categories (‘Hellenistic’ categories as p’Bitek termed them) then, he argued, these activities rightly stand outside religion. Those who have taken up p’Bitek’s debate argue that the connections of these practices to healing and governance better define their purpose than the modern, western definition of religion. The practices fulfil other important societal functions and simply should not be placed in a distinct domain known as ‘religion’ (Landau 1999, 11–13).

From the 1980s an approach now known as World Christianity emerged, influenced by scholars of African religion, specifically Christianity, like Lamin Sanneh (1989), Mercy Amba

Odoyoye and Rachel Kanyoro (1992), Kwame Bediako (1995), Andrew Walls (2002), and Ogbu Kalu (2008a). It was a deliberate attempt to challenge dominant western academic assumptions, by examining new movements and practices as they emerged in Africa. Early scholars of World Christianity broadly operated in a similar vein as Mbiti, identifying ‘African Traditional Religion’ as a distinct religious tradition. For them, the study of Christianity in Africa was an appropriate unit of analysis but one that could not be studied without reference to the long-standing beliefs and practices of African people that are appropriately integrated into it. Its historical and theological position was that Christians in Africa forge new forms of Christianity through the ‘translatability’ of Christianity into vernacular idioms by local agents who domesticated Christian practices. The theological cross-fertilization between Christian religion and indigenous religions and the vibrancy and innovation of new religious movements, African initiated churches and mission-initiated churches also featured in early studies. Nevertheless, a clear boundary was drawn between Christianity and ‘Traditional Religions’ and the latter was constructed to some degree or other in relation to Christianity.

The nomenclature of beliefs and practices that have some continuity with those that pre-date Islam and Christianity is also part of the debate (Brenner 2024, 24–27). ‘Primal’ and ‘primitive’ are widely rejected because their original meaning of ‘first’ developed pejorative meanings of ‘basic’ and ‘uncivilized’. ‘Traditional’ highlights the history of a respect rituals but can be considered to assume that such beliefs and practices are found only in the past or that they remain unchanged in the present. ‘Indigenous’ has been suggested as a replacement for ‘traditional’ because it focuses on local communities of practice without reference to monotheistic practices. However, ‘indigenous’ may also fail to acknowledge the international reach of such traditions, especially but not exclusively, in the Caribbean and Latin America, nor a frequent willingness to adapt ‘foreign’ practices. The word ‘belief’ in relation to Indigenous Religions also requires scrutiny because of its association with monotheistic, scriptural based religions to be used (Brenner 2024, 24). ‘Thought’ is offered as an alternative, although ‘thought’ may not fully infer the engagement with spiritual beings that ‘belief’ often implies.

These definitions of ‘religion’—about where ‘religion’ properly begins and ends, where boundaries lie between different religious traditions and the purpose of those boundaries—are complex conceptual issues that continue to be contested by scholars. They remain live issues for practitioners too. For example, the view that divination or spirit possession or ancestral veneration are part of ‘culture’ allows some people to follow ‘cultural practices’ whilst adhering to a form of Christianity or Islam that circumscribes or forbids the practice of ‘African traditional religion’. Whilst scholarship usually has an operative understanding of Christianity, Islam, and ‘African Indigenous Religions’ as the main traditions in Africa (Grillo et al. 2019, 6–13), this threefold schema is not as straightforward as it first appears. These debates have influenced the two trends I turn to now.

Anthropology of Christianity in Africa

New or renewed approaches to scholarship arise from particular academic and social circumstances. The Anthropology of Christianity is no exception. From the 2000s some anthropologists based in western universities were deliberately turning towards the ethnographic study of Christianity as the discipline of anthropology examined its colonial heritage and its long-standing bias against studying Christianity (Bialecki et al. 2008, 1140). They did so at a time when the exponential growth of Pentecostal Churches across the globe could no longer be ignored. The rise of assertive and globally connected forms of Pentecostalism in Africa ensured that Africanists from history, theology, and religious studies engaged with this subfield in Anthropology. Since ethnographic methods and anthropological theories were already being used in Theological Education and Religious Studies departments

in (as well as outside of) Africa, an Anthropology of Christianity may not sound particularly new. However, this fresh approach intentionally scrutinized previous assumptions of the secular discipline in the western academy and it questioned previous methodological approaches used to investigate the societal roles of Christian movements and organizations. The public and increasingly Pentecostal nature of Christianity in Africa proved fertile ground for research, even as attention was given to other forms of Christianity and to other parts of the world (Cannell 2006).

Pentecostal ministries are diverse. Arising from evangelical readings of the Bible, most Pentecostals make a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians. They understand conversion as a process of being ‘born again’ that requires adherence to new set of moral values evidenced in new behaviour (frequent church/prayer group attendance, abstinence from alcohol, etc.) and new relationships (strong bonds within group, avoidance of those who might ‘lead astray’). The societal challenges of modernity and globalization facing African societies are met in Christian conversation because, it is argued, Christianity provides a framework and narrative for coping with rapid change and discontinuities (Bialecki et al. 2008, 1144). Christians then form distinct identities and maintain clear boundaries from others. Conversion normally demands a clear, unambiguous separation from indigenous beliefs and practices and from Islam, a form of rupture from an old life to a new one that is summed up in the phrase ‘born-again’. Anthropologists do not deny that Pentecostals can unintentionally pattern their practice on long-standing religious behaviour (Lauterbach 2017, 14–16), a point recognized by historians and theologians (Kalu 2008b, 170). They consider, however, that familiar patterns of, for example, spirit possession are transformed through Christian conversion into a demonology that demands exorcism. Change influences even those elements that appear to be in continuity with the past. The rupture propounded by Pentecostals is hostile to the inculturation theology approach of Mbiti and the early expectations of synthesis by World Christianity scholars.

The attention to what religious actors say about their beliefs and practices, how they use language, read the Bible, preach and engage with the transcendent became of particular interest to anthropologists of Christianity (Engelke 2007; Bielo 2009). They noted that a focus on the individual self in conversion provided a disruption to social norms and to gerontocratic authority, thus establishing new communities of authority. Their early focus on rapidly growing movements shifted somewhat during a second wave of investigations to Christian organizations, institutions, spaces, and public discourses (Robbins 2014, 162–164). An example of the way in which these come together is in the study of the discourse of ‘Christian nationhood’, which has resulted in plans for building a national House of Prayer in Zambia (Haynes 2021) and a national cathedral in Ghana. Anthropologists of Christianity take very seriously the agency of commitment (to groups, to Jesus Christ, etc.) and conviction (to ideals, beliefs, and conduct), and they track their real-life consequences.

Anthropologists of Christianity follow Talal Asad (1993) in recognizing that definitions of ‘religion’ are influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. They showed that this definition was based on a form of liberal Protestantism—and the secularism that emerged from it—that prioritized individual piety and internalized beliefs. It did not represent all forms of Christianity. However, there is a danger that the strong focus upon renewal movements within the Anthropology of Christianity simply swaps liberal Protestantism as an implicit standard by which to measure ‘religion’ for Charismatic-Pentecostalism as a measure of Christianity. The Anthropology of Christianity maintains a basic assumption that Christianity is a unit, but the sum of the case studies helps to demonstrate the extent of the heterogeneity of Christianity. This raises the question of how far Christian practices and traditions can be regarded as unified. It prompts a return to the question with which this article began: when we study ‘religions in Africa’, what is the basic unit that we are evaluating? It might appear obvious from the word

‘Christianity’ that a single religious tradition is under investigation, but some scholars have argued that using the plural ‘Christianities’ better represents the diversity of different expressions of Christianity, some of which may not be compatible with one another (Ukah 2007). Similar discussions have been conducted by anthropologists of Islam in Africa (Pontzen 2021, 2–18), although it is worth noting that the anthropology of Christianity and of Islam has largely developed alongside, and separate from, each other, with little dialogue and exchange.

The Anthropology of Christianity has attended to internal beliefs and practices in order to analyse the ways in which Christians influence societies in different parts of the globe. The subfield has also been reckoning with theories of culture, society and religion that have emerged in a secularized tradition of social science that is no longer regarded as neutral but often regarded as universally applicable in academia. In my research as a social historian examining forces of conversion in the Great Lakes region of Africa between 1865 and 1935, the impulses of the Anthropology of Christianity proved useful in interpreting the rapid and widespread interest in Christian teaching at the turn of the twentieth century (Wild-Wood 2020, 270–80). The African Anglican missionaries I studied were not Pentecostal. They did espouse a holiness spirituality that influenced early forms of Pentecostalism, and they used narratives of changed lives and transnational belonging to effect social reform. The Anthropology of Christianity’s curiosity about societal rupture permitted an investigation of the appeal of new ideas and technologies and an acknowledgement of the inequality of benefit among Christians of maintaining or adapting indigenous beliefs and practices. Acknowledging historical debates on which indigenous practices should be accepted or rejected placed the moral projects of theologians concerning inculturation in a wider historical trajectory. The Anthropology of Christianity’s theorization of conversion’s curation of the individual as a ‘moral point of meaning’ (Bialecki et al. 2008, 1147) informed my work, but, ultimately, I argued that the strong vertical bond that converts developed with Jesus Christ was accompanied by an equally strong impulse to form new Christian communities using notions of the family. Developing the individual self as moral reference point, as identified by anthropologists in contemporary Pentecostalism, was in my historic study a means to establishing new forms of horizontal bonds. My work attempted to address ‘religious encounter’ across the boundaries of Islam, Christianity, and Indigenous religions. However, I found that the historic sources available often presupposed these boundaries. Furthermore, in centring the deliberate conversion to Christianity from healing practices and engagement with many regionally active spiritual beings on committed missionary Apolo Kivebulaya, my work inevitably examined his negative assessment of indigenous spiritual practices in this enquiry, rather than providing a more equitable exploration of their historic role. One prominent criticism of the Anthropology of Christianity has been that its focus on renewalist forms of Christianity that encourage rupture from old ways of life overlooks continued engagement with other religious traditions. The second recent trend in the study of religion addresses the problems inherent in choosing a single tradition for study, and deliberately seeks movements in which adherents blend or merge aspects of different traditions.

Plurality of Religions in Africa

Many scholars have argued for a study of plurality and coexistence of religions for some time. Theologians from different religious traditions have long discussed the differences and similarities of traditions in order to construct an ethic of coexistence for their communities (Mbillah 2010). Interfaith discussions often start from the assumption that religions are bounded entities, even as the object of those discussions is to dismantle some of those boundaries. There is an increasing theological interest in the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging, but the identification with more than one faith tradition is often discussed as a conundrum to be solved (Phan 2003). Radical approaches include Catholic theologian Agbonkhamenghe E. Orobator’s

personal reflections on a complete fusion between Indigenous religion and Christianity in what he calls ‘Confessions of an Animist’ (2018). Expanding on the position of earlier scholars like Mbiti, Orobator says that indigenous beliefs and practices are the very substance of what allows him to be an African Christian. There should be no division. Scholars of religion also question the bounded nature of religious practice. They criticize the often separate scholarship on Christianity and Islam for failing to interact with each other, particularly when focused on West Africa and on the East African coast, where adherents live close together (Soares 2006). They have called for examinations of the processes of convergence and divergence between religious traditions, acknowledging the collapse of boundaries as well as the reassertion of them. They argue that prioritizing the study of one particular religious tradition prevents a proper and equitable investigation into the impact of religion on society.

Investigations into similar processes and distinctive elements in and across religious traditions have been encouraged (Janson and Meyer 2016; Obadare 2016). Researchers have examined the way in which a particular social concern is approached by different forms of religious engagement. For example, an investigation on how women responded to ill-health, misfortune, and marriage in Mozambique compared the ‘spirit wives’ possessed by the fallen soldiers of the civil war and the Pentecostal ‘Church mothers’ engaged in prayer and married to Jesus (Schuetze 2023). Innovative religious blending has also been studied. In Lagos, Nigeria, small groups of people follow Chrislam, deliberate fusions of Christian, Muslim, and Yoruba practice intended to demonstrate religious harmony (Williams 2019; Janson 2021, 58–89).

One of the reasons for the investigation of plurality lies in popular assumptions of observers that religious difference necessarily produces or encourages conflict. Religious boundaries can be unhelpful points of enquiry because they reinforce binaries that have real-life—and often detrimental—consequences for religious adherents and political actors. Furthermore, the boundaries that are reinforced may be based on earlier scholarly assumptions about the nature of ‘religion’ or religious traditions that I have discussed already. In *Beyond Religious Tolerance* (Nolte et al. 2017), the contributors deliberately questioned the dominant narratives of religious tension. A multi-faceted study of interreligious coexistence in Ede, a town among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the book challenges popular perceptions that there is a fault line between bounded religious traditions that frequently leads to violence. The contributors focus on the ordinary interactions, comparisons, and critiques that take place among Christians, Muslims, and practitioners of African religious traditions who live alongside each other peacefully and relate to one another in multiple ways. Rather than identifying an idealized social order, the authors perceive a shifting and sifting of beliefs and practices in which there is mutual borrowing and overlap, saying, ‘Personal engagements with the religions enable [...] a high degree of both self-examination and recognition of others’ (Nolte and Ogen 2017, 8). The conflict-cooperation continuum, they say, is not sufficient for comprehending all the many intersections of beliefs and practices from different traditions. They call for an exploration of multiple forms and levels of religious relations from an African perspective as a way of countering the expectation of religious division. They also note that social and political power interact with religious tolerance. Practices of tolerance are enmeshed in ‘practical strategies that reflect entrenched social interests’ as much as they represent ‘explicitly normative values’ (Nolte and Ogen 2017, 257–58).

The edited volume *Religious Plurality in Africa* (Janson et al. 2024) followed this research trajectory by examining encounters of ‘coexistence, conviviality and conflict’. It established a conceptual framework that assumes that the complexity, relationality, and multiplicity of lived religious practice is precisely the space where identities and organizations are formed and thus the space where research should be carried out. Case studies in the book observe religious coexistence in a range of settings. Examining how African people engage beliefs and practices

to address health, or politics, or family life allows new insights into what forms of religion or society are being blended, borrowed or critiqued and by whom. For example, on the Kenyan coast popular music mines practices of the Mijikenda people and sings of religious intersections that are overlooked by Christian and Muslim leaders (Meinema 2024). In Northern Nigeria, a region known for religious conflict, discourses around marriage illuminate both reproachment and distrust between Muslims and Christians (Ibrahim 2024), and an attention to the religious heterogeneous past investigates the causes of the apparent erasure of that past (Shankar 2024). These, and other case studies, show that boundaries between one tradition and another are not stable. In some contexts, they become more porous. In others they harden. Researchers should not assume that either hybridity or clearly bounded identities are inevitable. Rather, there is mobility between these states. Premawardhana (2024, 87) suggests that the complexity of religious entanglements requires an attention to the relational that moves between foci; at one time a study of ‘relations’ might be important, another time analysing religious ‘separations’ and at others ‘relations and separations’.

Studying religious plurality in its many forms produces an enquiry distinct from that of studying a single tradition by questioning the pertinence of religious boundaries and examining the situated nature of spiritual engagement. Teaching in a Theology and Religious Studies department in the United Kingdom, I have found this approach particularly useful for two main reasons. First, the nuanced discussions around the lived realities that shape and are shaped by either blurred or hardened religious boundaries challenge popular western notions of religion that suppose hard boundaries of religious affiliation causing inevitable predilections for conflict. Second, the enquiry goes beyond a comparative religious approach that often emphasises beliefs or practices sanctioned by a central authority. Rather, it attends to the actual, observable intersections (or lack of them) among communities and individuals who engage with spiritual beings. In an ongoing collaborative research project on the intersection of healing and religious traditions, it has been helpful to start with healing practices and consider what elements of belief and practice coalesce around the thought, behaviour, rituals and institutions of healing. However, there are two impediments to effective research at the intersections of religious traditions. Practically, the extent to which Islam and Christianity encounter one another varies across the continent. Those who call for attention to religious plurality often work in areas where there are significant numbers of Muslims and Christians. In some places, like North-East Congo and Western Uganda, where I have conducted research, encounters are limited although they are likely to grow. Entanglements with indigenous beliefs and practices are more apparent. Nevertheless, an attention to plurality raises new questions and foci in a range of situations. A second impediment is raised by Kai Kresse (2024, 63), who recognizes the complexity of studying plurality and asks whether multi-religious studies can be done well. Researchers often know one tradition thoroughly. I recognize the limitations of my own expertise inevitably infuse this article. My knowledge of forms of Islam is much more limited than Christianity and Indigenous religions. There is a danger of being unwittingly biased by failing to know Muslim beliefs, practices and communities as thoroughly as forms of Christianity and Indigenous religions. This concern about scholarly limitations and perspectives introduces two final points that I consider important in any future considerations of the units of analysis we study.

Future Considerations

This article has examined some published literature of the last twenty-five years to identify trends emerging around the question of what scholars of religions in Africa should be studying and how they should approach it: Do we primarily focus on a single religious tradition—and if so, how do we define it? Or do we examine the intersections and entanglements between traditions and deconstruct the commonly assumed boundaries? The article has shown that the

examination of both positions has illuminated two significant points. First, the definition of ‘religion’ matters. Researchers must consider whether their subjects conform to or challenge their working definitions. Second, the unit of analysis influences the research trajectory and the findings. The recent research mentioned here (and much that I have not been able to include) shows how scholars have been grappling with the complexity and variety of religious actors, institutions and practices in modern society in Africa. Since this article appears in the launch of the African Association for the Study of Religions journal in a new format as *Utambuzi*, it seems particularly pertinent to discuss the future direction of the study of religions in Africa and particularly the two units of analysis discussed here. I raise two concluding points.

First, I have not attempted to argue for one recent trend or the other, although I have discussed ways in which both approaches have informed my own thinking. I have been formed in an academic system that considers failure to make such a choice a sign of lazy thinking. Certainly, some consider that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. Yet I am unconvinced if a permanent choice of either Anthropology of Christianity or Plurality of Religions is required. Religion as patterned ‘multidimensional social practice’ that engages the spiritual has been developed as internal systems and institutions as well as defying the boundaries of those systems and institutions. Some religious actors perceived their engagement as radical change, whereas others saw it as a process of continuity and blending. To understand the place of religion in the world, both approaches sharpen our thinking and provide important perspectives. In my view, they need to be held in tension. Whilst the important work on ‘decolonizing’ definitions of religions continues, it seems that any theorization that assumes an either/or binary may present a peculiarly ‘western’ way of thinking. Working with two significantly different approaches without diminishing their particular challenges may provide new understandings arising from ways of thinking less well represented in academia. This brings me to the second concluding point.

Perhaps the most pertinent future oriented question asks who is considering recent trends and from what vantage point. Research undertaken in the Anthropology of Christianity and the Plurality of Religions has largely been carried out by western scholars like myself, or scholars based in the west. Yet the importance of insider perspectives to challenge and shape the study of African beliefs and practices has been raised by the African Association for the Study of Religions since its establishment in 1992. Contributors to *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Adogame et al. 2012, 16–27) asserted that African scholars have tested the methods and theories developed in western academies, blending and critiquing them (as discussed in the section above on the historic debates on defining religion). Chitando, Adogame, and Bateye urged African scholars of religion to develop new methods of study, highlighting their knowledge of languages, culture and oral traditions. How far does the analysis of the Anthropology of Christianity or the Plurality of Religions resonate with African scholars? What new approaches to religion and the units of analysis might we expect from scholars working in Africa who have a religious outlook? Scholars working within the two trends discussed here have raised some points about the positionality that influences the way in which religions in Africa are studied, but they cannot answer the question comprehensively.

Anthropologists of Christianity have asked about the secularity of anthropology and its marginalization of Christian thinkers. This discussion develops Talal Asad’s identification of different forms of secularism, and with it, the understanding that secular positions are not neutral but rather create their own biases (1993). Certain Christians or Muslims can become the subjects of anthropological research, but Christian or Muslim ideas have not been permitted to be part of the apparatus of study. In a third wave of investigations, anthropologists of Christianity have partnered with theologians to consider the role of Christian frameworks and positionality in scholarship (Robbins 2020, 19–22). The enquiry challenges the adequacy of the suspension of researchers’ beliefs and establishment of critical distance in order to better

understand a lived reality different from their own and bring parity of esteem to other traditions. This new cross-disciplinary approach transgresses the boundaries hitherto established between anthropology and theology (Lauterbach and Vähäkangas 2020) as it attempts to engage with truth claims and consider how these impact upon research (Lemons 2018). However, few theologians who are either Pentecostal or African or both have been involved in these discussions (Bongmba 2020 is an exception). What would it mean if African theologians were involved?

In a reflection on what she has learnt by studying religion in Africa with Africans, European scholar Birgit Meyer (2021, 170–76) says that when studied from Africa, religion looks otherwise than conventional European ideas suggest. Often orientated towards the world and grounded in materiality, it has a strong relational component, connecting with people and spirits. The relational element produces a distinct sense of being in the world from that found in dominant models in the modern West that emphasize the individual. This relational, down-to-earth religion is open to the new and to the foreign and is rarely closed to outside influence. If Meyers is correct, how might this form of religiosity inform the approaches to its study? The positionality of many African scholars who hold their personal religious commitments openly whilst being generous and curious about the religious commitments of others may provide distinct insights into the way in which religion is defined and what units of analysis are used. *Utambuzi* can aspire to become a vehicle for insider reflections on scholarly trends that correct, critique and shape the next twenty-five years of the field.

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