



Beyond Religious Tolerance

Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist Encounters in an African Town

Edited by

INSA NOLTE, OLUKOYA OGEN and REBECCA JONES

RELIGION IN TRANSFORMING AFRICA

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**Muslim, Christian and Traditionalist
Encounters in an African Town**

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CHAPTER 1

Beyond Religious Tolerance: Muslims, Christians and Traditionalists in a Yoruba Town

Insa Nolte and Olukoya Ogen

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially since September 2001, religion has been recognised as an increasingly important factor in personal and group identification and mobilisation. In a global environment increasingly dominated by economic neoliberalism, tensions between Islam and Christianity have become especially salient. However, a detailed understanding of the dynamics of religious conflict – and accommodation – is obscured by the overwhelming focus of analysts and commentators on the global North. In this context, attacks by Islamic groups and the perception and treatment of Muslim minorities in the culturally Christian societies in the US and Europe are often seen to confirm the existence of a ‘faultline’ between ‘Western civilisations’ and ‘Islamic civilisations’,¹ which has been transposed somewhat uncritically to different African contexts.² In this way, Africa is treated as little more than a ‘reservoir of raw fact’, which is made to fit the theories and truths produced on the basis of European and North American knowledge and praxis.³

But although the social and political transformations following the end of the Cold War reflected the politics of the global North, the complexity of their implications reveals itself more fully in the societies in the South. While Africa has its share of Muslim–Christian conflicts, not all religious violence on the continent takes place across a religious divide. In Uganda and neighbouring countries, the Christian Lord’s Resistance Army has terrorised communities for many decades irrespective of religion. In the Sudan, the self-consciously

¹ S.P. Huntington, ‘The clash of civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (1993), 22–49.

² cf. E. Griswold, *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Faultline between Christianity and Islam* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

³ J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Theory from the South or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (London and Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), p. 1.

Muslim Janjaweed militia has committed large-scale violence against co-religionists.⁴ Similarly, Islamic insurgent groups in Mali and northern Nigeria have targeted fellow Muslims far more frequently than Christians and other non-Muslims.⁵ While the implications of this phenomenon cannot be explored in detail here, the high incidence of intra-Muslim violence certainly challenges the notion that conflict is necessarily associated with religious difference.

But the opposite also applies: even in highly religious societies, religious difference is not necessarily associated with conflict. Thus Africa is also home to several states and regions where Muslims and Christians coexist without large-scale conflict. In South Africa, the country's liberal post-Apartheid Constitution has enabled a diverse Muslim minority to pursue religiously distinctive rights.⁶ In West Africa, Muslims and Christians have sought insight and inspiration from debates about the merits and content of their respective religions in different contexts over the course of the twentieth century.⁷ Although Ghanaian popular culture has been transformed by the growing influence of Pentecostalism,⁸ mobilisation for conflict by Muslims or by Christians purely on the basis of religion alone is rare.⁹ In the Yoruba-speaking south-west of Nigeria, including Ede, the town at the centre of this book, Muslims and Christians – and often smaller groups of traditional religionists¹⁰ – also live closely together.

The intricate patterns of Muslim–Christian relations in Africa suggest that here, adaptation to the global changes is far more diverse than in Europe or North America, confirming the Comaroffs' suggestion that 'the history of the

⁴ J. Haynes 'Religion, ethnicity and civil war in Africa: The cases of Uganda and Sudan', *The Round Table* 96:390 (2007), 305–17.

⁵ A.R. Mustapha, ed., *Sects & Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014).

⁶ G. Vahed and S. Jeppie, 'Multiple communities: Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa', *State of the Nation: South Africa 2004–2005*, ed. J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004), pp. 252–4.

⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁸ B. Meyer, "'Praise the Lord": Popular cinema and pentecostalite style in Ghana's new public sphere', *American Ethnologist* 31:1 (2004), 92–110.

⁹ A. Langer, 'Situational importance of ethnicity and religion in Ghana', *Ethnopolitics* 9:1 (2010), 9–29.

¹⁰ Given that traditional practice includes areas of social life that are excluded from the field of the religious in most areas of academic discourse, we use the term religion reluctantly. As important aspects of traditional practice are considered – and debated – as 'religious' in south-west Nigeria, it would however complicate matters unnecessarily to refuse this description. It is perhaps most useful to understand the 'religiousness' of traditional practice as cultural work in progress.

present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes'.¹¹ It is therefore imperative to explore the wide range of Muslim-Christian relationships globally also from a Southern, and indeed African, vantage point. And while religious conflict in Africa deserves attention, it is equally important to study those contexts where different groups live with each other without resorting to large-scale violence. As Shobana Shankar's evocation of early Christianity in colonial northern Nigeria illustrates, the encounter between Muslims and Christians can inspire mutual fascination even where religious hierarchies are explicit and politically legitimated.¹² Similarly, Barbara Cooper's study of evangelical churches in Niger shows that even as Islam constrained Christianity, it also helped to define Christian practice and expression.¹³ But only a study of successful Muslim-Christian coexistence can show the limits of existing approaches that understand religious difference as inherently problematic, and thus illustrate the possibilities for further reflection and theorising.

In the European context, relations between Muslims and Christians are often understood within the paradigm of tolerance, which has been theoretically developed by the German philosopher Rainer Forst. Forst sets out convincingly that tolerance, derived from the Latin *tolerare*, i.e. to countenance, endure or suffer, only applies with regard to practices seen as wrong or displeasing, but nonetheless considered acceptable. Tolerance is therefore aimed at practices located between that which is 'good' and therefore not in need of toleration, and that which is 'bad', and cannot be tolerated. Forst suggests that the spectrum of tolerance is complex and ranges from toleration by authoritarian permission at one end to toleration on the basis of mutual respect at the other.¹⁴ All forms of toleration are normatively dependent, i.e. reflective of values and norms that define that which is to be tolerated. Aiming to produce mutually respectful dialogue, most academic (and non-academic) engagement with Muslim-Christian and interfaith relations therefore takes place at the liberal end of the tolerance spectrum.

Despite the limited amount of work on non-conflictual Muslim-Christian relations in Africa (and, with important exceptions, beyond¹⁵), the analytical limitations to approaches highlighting the existence of Muslims and Christians as distinct religious communities are obvious. Benjamin Soares points out that

¹¹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South*, p. 7.

¹² S. Shankar, *Who Shall Enter Paradise? Christian Origins in Muslim Northern Nigeria, ca. 1890-1975* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

¹³ B. Cooper, *Evangelical Christians in the Muslim Sahel* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ R. Forst, 'The limits of toleration', *Constellations* 11:3 (2004), 315-16.

¹⁵ cf. S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

such studies struggle to take into account ‘the broad range of ways in which Muslims and Christians have interacted with each other over time’, because they assume stable religious boundaries and a static social order, which often do not exist in reality. Where African Muslims and Christians live side by side, they do more than tolerate each other: they reject, borrow and appropriate each other’s practices, and sometimes they convert to each other’s religions.¹⁶ In such contexts, the subsumption of largely peaceful religious coexistence under the notion of tolerance obscures the multiple ways in which people engage with religions other than their own.

J.D.Y. Peel’s pioneering study of the interplay between Christianity, Islam and traditional religion in Yorubaland emphasises that religious boundaries in south-west Nigeria crosscut ethnic and communal identities. Peel illustrates that both Islam and Christianity have made important contributions not only to Yoruba social life, language and dress, but also to Yoruba notions of community.¹⁷ While his argument centres on the religions as coherent traditions rather than on their everyday mobilisation by individuals, occasional references to private practices are illuminating. Descriptions of the enthusiastic participation of Muslim guests in the celebration of the New Year in church and the participation of a Christian child in the early breakfast of his fasting Muslim relatives during Ramadan illustrate that exchanges between Muslims and Christians can extend beyond notions of tolerance to joyful, educational, or otherwise beneficial encounters and to different personal and interpersonal strategies and ambitions.¹⁸

By focusing on the town of Ede, albeit in the context of Yoruba history, politics and practice, this book illustrates in detail the social implications of religious pluralism in everyday life. But how individuals draw on the knowledge and experience of religions other than their own to navigate their lives, authority, gender and social identity more generally cannot be captured by a focus on one religious community alone. Presently, anthropological work on religion and social identity in Africa focuses on either Muslim or Christian societies. It tends to explore the importance of religion in the creation of social roles either in the context of conversion to a world religion or as an aspect of religious change or reform.¹⁹ However, such approaches must also recognise

¹⁶ B. Soares, ‘Introduction: Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa’, *Muslim–Christian Encounters in Africa*, ed. B. Soares (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 1–16.

¹⁷ J.D.Y. Peel, *Christianity Islam and Orisha Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland CA: University of California Press: 2016), p. 12.

¹⁸ Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisha Religion*, p. 134.

¹⁹ Exemplary studies of different approaches in this field include R. Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997); D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise*



Map 1 Ede in south-west Nigeria

that where members of different religions are intimately familiar with important aspects of each other's religions, meaning is created both by religious expression and by the absence of other forms of expression.

This book's focus on the different ways in which Ede's citizens put religion and religious difference to work resonates with Jane Guyer's argument that Yoruba societies actively foster and encourage their members' potential for originality and difference. She suggests that this reflects both the practical importance of adaptability and potentiality, and the moral and aesthetic

of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement (Oxford: James Currey, 2006); J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

pleasures associated with the creation of diverse life trajectories.²⁰ In the context of religious plurality, this implies that religious difference is valued in itself, as difference. Shaping the town beyond appearances at first glance, the religious diversity of Ede confirms the town's cosmopolitanism, attractiveness and complexity, conferring status both on the community as a whole and on its individual members.



1 The view over Ede from the south, towards palace, central mosque and river

Guyer's emphasis on the intrinsic value of multiplicity helps us explain not only the widespread acceptance of Ede's religious pluralism but also the fact that Ede's citizens manage and engage with religious difference in multiple ways, often depending on context. Thus different forms of traditionally legitimated authority in the town – especially *obaship* and the power of Ede's deity *Şàngó* – partly rely on the ability to transcend or even transgress religious boundaries (chapters 2–4). In such contexts, reference to tolerance, as the 'suffering' or acceptance of the other, obscures the fact that transcendence and transgression draw their symbolic and political power from difference.

Yet on a different scale, some extended families, associations or churches that define themselves as distinctly Muslim or Christian police their boundaries closely and try to limit the influence of religious others (chapters 5–7). Even in the ostensibly secular space of Ede's polytechnic, the management of

²⁰ J. Guyer, 'Traditions of invention in Equatorial Africa', *African Studies Review* 39:3 (1996), 1–28.

inter- and intra-faith relations is intrinsically linked to institutional authority (chapter 8). Here an engagement with how others are tolerated is helpful in understanding the degree to which religious boundaries are put to social use.

But as chapter 7 illustrates, the usefulness of the tolerance paradigm as an objective measure must take into account that toleration itself has its own competitive appeal: while Ede's Christians rely on the 'tolerance' of the predominantly Muslim townspeople, they assert their moral (and spiritual) superiority by exceeding their hosts in tolerance. Moreover, even as the coexistence of Muslims with traditionalists and Christians at the private level is sometimes conflictual, it enables individuals to navigate religious difference in the pursuit of individual ambitions (chapters 9–11). Private participation in multiple religions and mediation between different religions are linked to particular political or gendered identities, and therefore they clearly complicate notions of tolerance as forms of engagement based on abstract normative values.

As the chapters of this book offer an insight into the many ways in which both religion and religious difference are invested with social meaning 'beyond tolerance' in Ede, they offer a tentative and fluid categorisation at best. Where we, and other authors of this book, are drawn towards macro-sociological arguments in order to step back from the complexity of local practice and debate, such arguments do not imply the existence of a stable social order based on clear categories of religious practice. This is perhaps best illustrated by the different roles played by religion in Ede's Muslim compounds (chapter 5) and in the locally prominent Adeleke family (chapter 9). Here individual chapters, read in the wider context of the book, illustrate that engagement with religion at different levels of social practice reflects a capacity for creative adaptation and ongoing change.

Importantly, the personal navigation of a shifting and complex religious landscape is not primarily driven by an instrumental engagement with religion. While not all citizens of Ede consider religion equally important (chapter 8), it is more than a categorical identity or an ideological tool. But just as religion is not 'a message about something else', it is not primarily a site of action in the realm of the political either.²¹ Most people engage with religion as a frame of reference that enables individuals to understand, manage and recast their relationships with others, but also with themselves and the truth. Thus personal engagements with the religious enable – and perhaps require – a high degree of both self-examination and recognition of others.²² As all

²¹ R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 5.

²² C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

our chapters illustrate, religious practices in Ede are intricately bound up with social hierarchies and political agency, but they are also mobilised in earnest debates about the meaning of life.

Despite Ede's clear Muslim majority, then, Ede is a religiously plural town both because it is home to a multiplicity of religious practices, and because the difference between the religions takes on very different forms and meanings. In some contexts, an emphasis on religious boundaries is strong and sustained, in others it is fleeting, and in others the importance of celebrating and transcending religious difference is emphasised. The complexity of these meanings is condensed in the local proverb, '*Èdẹ yàrá kan ni*,' meaning 'Ede is one room'. Often used to remind quarrelling or complaining parties to consider the other side's interest, the proverb suggests that Ede constitutes a community both *despite* and *because of* its religious diversity.

The next two sections of this introduction bring in two discussions relevant to this book, namely the study of religious multiplicity and coexistence, and debates about Yoruba Islam. The final part of the introduction includes an overview of Ede's religious landscape as local context for the following chapters, a description of the genesis of this book, and a short outlook.

Religious Encounter and Pluralism in Yorubaland

The Yoruba validation of multiplicity and difference has historical roots both in religious and in political practice. In 1939 the sociologist N.A. Fadipe described traditional Yoruba religious practice as a 'veritable welter of objects of worship apportioned out among individuals and extended-families on no very clearly defined principles'.²³ In addition to the worship of ancestors, many deities – locally known as *òrìṣà* – are linked either to natural phenomena (hills, rivers, thunder) or to important personalities. However, categories of divine beings are loosely defined. Thus, *òrìṣà* also include material objects such as royal crowns or, in the case of *orí*, the worshipper's own fate (literally, her or his own head). Even the deities themselves often exist in loosely defined conceptual categories, such that a deity that is male in one context can be female in another.²⁴

Although the complex and fluid web of ancestors, deities and other spiritual forces does not reflect a hierarchical or clearly categorised cosmology, it

²³ N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970 [1939]), p. 261.

²⁴ J.D.Y. Peel, 'A comparative analysis of Ogun in precolonial Yorubaland', *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 263–89.