

REFLECTIONS ON MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTERS IN WEST AFRICA

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In recent years, it seems that friction, tension and conflict between Muslims and Christians have been on the rise in many places in Africa. If one considers some of the recent conflicts between Muslims and Christians on the African continent – with major flashpoints in Egypt, Sudan, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, the Central African Republic, Kenya, and so forth – the urgency of understanding how Muslims and Christians in Africa have interacted over time seems apparent. It is striking, however, that it is only in the last decade or so that scholars have begun to devote considerable empirical and analytical attention to the study of the encounters between Muslims and Christians in Africa. Religious pluralism – that is, the existence of different religious traditions in one space, but also the multiplicity of practices of pluralism, including the personal pluralism of individuals and groups who might engage with different religions or religious practices – has long been a central focus of studies of religion in Africa. But, until recently, Muslim–Christian encounters have not been a major focus of attention for studies of religious pluralism in Africa. Among historians, social scientists and scholars of religion, there has been increased recognition of the importance of studying Islam and Christianity in Africa not separately but together, as lived religions in dynamic interaction over time. In this essay I trace how scholars have arrived at such a point and consider some of the challenges of conducting research on religious encounters, particularly those associated with studying Islam and Christianity, Muslims and Christians together. I frame this discussion in terms of some of the theoretical and methodological issues at stake in advancing the study of religious encounters in Africa and draw from some of my own research and the work of others on the topic, particularly in West Africa, to reflect upon how this important field of inquiry has developed and what it has accomplished.¹

LOOKING BACK

In what follows I will flesh out the desirability of making Muslim–Christian encounters central to the study of religion in Africa, and I will examine some of the empirical and theoretical implications of doing so. First, I would like to take a look back to review and assess how contemporary scholars have studied Islam and Christianity, as well as Muslims and Christians, in Africa. If one

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¹Space limitations prevent me from addressing the literature on Muslim–Christian encounters elsewhere in Africa, particularly in East Africa and Ethiopia, except in passing.

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considers how scholars in different scholarly traditions – historians, anthropologists, scholars of religion, theologians, and even some missiologists – have studied Islam and Christianity and Muslims and Christians in Africa over time, it is clear that until recently – with some notable exceptions (see below, as well as the references in note 6) – not many scholars have studied Christians and Muslims together. This is not to downplay the importance of the long tradition of studying religious pluralism in Africa. On the contrary, for decades the study of religious pluralism as manifested in a number of multifaceted forms has been central to the study of religion in Africa. Attention to such pluralism is exemplified by Louis Brenner's programmatic call in his 2000 inaugural lecture to study the 'histories of religion in Africa' (Brenner 2000). Although Brenner limited his examples to what he calls 'Islamic religious culture' in Africa, his urging that scholars of religion should not study religions in Africa separately but rather should focus on the 'heterogeneity and pluralism of religious concept and practice' and the exchanges of religious knowledge between Muslims and non-Muslims was a strong theoretical statement that presaged some of the recent work on Muslim–Christian encounters.

There are a number of factors that have helped limit the possibility of most scholars studying Islam and Christianity in Africa together.² First, most scholars' propensity to study one particular religious tradition, and sometimes its 'interaction' with what is now usually called African 'traditional' religion, certainly relates to the nature of education and PhD training. There are serious practical problems that prevent most people gaining the adequate training necessary to acquire the requisite expertise to deal sufficiently with both Islam and Christianity as religious traditions. Gaining such expertise is much more important, at least from the perspective of those in religious studies and the humanities as opposed to those in other disciplinary traditions and political science in particular; the latter talk about and analyse religion in Africa or elsewhere in an arguably more superficial manner – that is, with little attention to subtleties in doctrine and practice – and they frequently understand religion in narrowly instrumentalist terms. There is also the question of language learning: for example, cases where knowledge of a particular language (such as Arabic or a vernacular language) might be an asset. At least in continental Europe, there is much less funding available for such long-term and in-depth training, not to mention additional language learning, as universities face increased pressures for PhD theses to be written in much shorter periods of time than previously. Such accelerated completion dates do not bode well for the quality of training and scholarship. In addition, complex conditions on the ground in many places where there has been conflict between different religious groups can also make field research very difficult, if not impossible.

Second, following on from the first point about education and training, there is the historical weight of existing scholarly traditions and academic disciplines. In doctoral studies, many scholars studying religion in Africa have studied a particular religious tradition, occasionally a particular branch within that tradition, and sometimes that religion's encounter with African 'traditional' religion. Such a focus on a particular religious tradition often continues in many postdoctoral academic trajectories, with occasional forays into related topics within a culture or

²Some of the ideas in this and the following paragraph are developed further in Soares (2006a).

region. Exemplars here would include Jacob Olupona's oeuvre, which has largely focused on Yoruba religious expression, Louis Brenner's body of work on Islam, and Birgit Meyer's work on Christianity.

From those studying the Christian tradition, there have been numerous studies of the history of Christianity in Africa, missionary activities and 'conversion', with many such works focused on the Roman Catholic Church, different mainline Protestant churches, evangelicals, African Independent churches, and, particularly since the 1990s, Pentecostalism (see Meyer 2004). The ongoing scholarly preoccupation with waves of Pentecostalism in Africa (and elsewhere) is striking and arguably out of proportion to its actual practice. Indeed, as scholarly attention has turned increasingly to Pentecostalism (for an overview, see Adogame 2010), undoubtedly an important focus of research, the paucity of studies of contemporary mainline Protestant churches and Roman Catholicism seems even more glaring. In any case, there have also been several important broad overviews of the long history of Christianity in Africa (for example, Hastings 1979; 1994; Isichei 1995; Sundkler and Steed 2000; Meyer 2004).

For a number of reasons, there are many fewer scholars of the Islamic tradition in Africa than there are scholars of Christianity in Africa.³ At first, the long history of Islam in Africa was generally left to those trained as Orientalists, whose broader tradition did not usually deem Africa a prestige area of inquiry. Some of the scholars who were trained as Orientalists also worked as missionaries, such as the highly prolific J. Spencer Trimingham. Subsequently, in the post-colonial period, a number of historians and later social scientists began to study Islam in Africa, and there is now a younger generation of African scholars who have made major contributions to this field of inquiry. In comparison to the study of Christianity in Africa, the study of Islam in Africa remains a much smaller subfield. It almost seems to follow that the objects of study in the Islamic tradition in Africa have been narrower in scope than in studies of Christianity. For quite some time, major foci of attention have been Islam and various political formations in different periods, jihad movements before colonial conquest, particular Sufi orders such as the Tijaniyya or the Mourides, so-called Muslim reformism, and Muslim modernist movements and trends, particularly in new forms of education in a particular setting. There have also been more general overviews of Islam on the continent or in particular regions (for example, Hiskett 1984; 1994; Trimingham 1959; 1962; 1964; 1968; Levtzion and Powell 2000; Loimeier 2013). Surprisingly, such historical overviews of Islam or Christianity in Africa have rarely considered Muslim–Christian encounters in detail. Indeed, Andrew Walls' important discussion of Africa as 'the theatre of Christian engagement with Islam' in the nineteenth century stands out in the way in which it considers both Islam and Christianity (Walls 1999).⁴

As I have noted, some scholars have focused on the interactions between a religious tradition – Christianity or Islam – and so-called African traditional religion. For example, there have been a number of notable studies about the

³For theoretical and historiographical perspectives on how to study the Islamic tradition in Africa, see Launay (1992; 2006), Soares (2000; 2005; 2014), Seesemann (2006), Loimeier (2013) and Triaud (2014), to cite only publications in English.

⁴See also the case study of Methodists and Muslims in the Gambia (Frederiks 2009).

'influence' of Islam on spirit possession or of African 'traditional' religion on African Independent churches, and so forth. There were, of course, some exceptions to this trend. In the late colonial period and shortly after independence, a number of scholars working on West Africa focused their attention on both Islam and Christianity in such places as what is now Burkina Faso. For example, in his work, Elliot Skinner described how Islam seemed to spread much more rapidly than Christianity, both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, among the Mossi in Burkina Faso (Skinner 1958; cf. Deniel 1970). Since the 1970s, various scholars have conducted research on ethnic groups in West Africa among whom there are Christians, Muslims and practitioners of African 'traditional' religion. Notable studies include Simon Ottenberg's study of both Islam and Christianity among the Limba in northern Sierra Leone (Ottenberg 1984), David Laitin's work among the Yoruba in Ile-Ife (see, for example, Laitin 1986) and Olga Linares' work among Diola rice farmers in the Casamance in Senegal (for example, Linares 1992). However, with the exception of Ottenberg's article about the 'reaction' of practitioners of 'traditional' religion among the Limba to Islam and Christianity as 'belief systems', it is striking how religion was not generally the main focus of attention in such studies – indeed, it was ethnicity and shared Yoruba 'culture' for Laitin and economic production for Linares. In short, there was usually little attention devoted to actual religious encounters, even when multi-religious ethnic communities were the object of study. The main point is that even when they were not focusing on a particular tradition – Christianity or Islam – scholars rarely seem to have analysed the two religions or Muslims and Christians in dynamic interaction with each other over time.

There has, of course, been considerable scholarship on what is often called 'Christian–Muslim relations' in Africa (see, for example, Sanneh 1996; Hock 2004; von Sicard 2007; Kukah 2007), particularly by scholars in theology and missiology. Such literature, on the whole produced by Christian theologians or self-identified Christians (notable exceptions include Ammah 2007; Mwakimako 2007; and Yusuf 2007), has usually looked at how Christians and Muslims have related to each other in particular settings in Africa. However, within the literature on Christian–Muslim relations, there has been a marked tendency to treat Islam and Christianity as relatively distinct units of analysis and Christians and Muslims as relatively distinct groups or sometimes even as 'blocs' (see, for example, Rasmussen 1993) with clear boundaries whose interactions over time are investigated. Such reification of religious traditions and groups is clearly ahistorical and comes at the expense of a focus on practice. Moreover, in the literature on Christian–Muslim relations, certain scholars tend to romanticize 'traditional' Africa. For example, in some of his work, Lamin Sanneh invokes 'the old Africa, with its deep-rooted hospitality, tolerance, and generosity' (Sanneh 1996: 23), which, he claims, endures. But he even goes so far as to argue that Christianity has an allegedly greater translatability than Islam, which he conceives as a rigid and unchanging normative system seeking to expunge African 'culture', and that this makes it more compatible with Africans than Islam (see Sanneh 1989; 1994; for a powerful critique, to which I am indebted, see Tayob 2004).

Understandably, much of this literature about Christian–Muslim relations, written as it is in the fields of theology and missiology, has a markedly normative cast. Scholars in this tradition have frequently put particular emphasis on what is

called the mutual coexistence of Christians and Muslims – with peaceful coexistence often assumed to be the natural state or ideal. This, too, is understandable given the extent of the conflict and violence between members of different religious groups in various countries in recent years. In the wake of the considerable loss of life, the destruction of homes, mosques and churches, and greater awareness about the persecution of minorities in a variety of places in Africa, much focus has shifted to the presumed opposite of coexistence: conflict (or ‘clash’, to use the language of the ‘clash of civilizations’). The problem is that the complexity of the interactions between Muslims and Christians in Africa should not be reduced to either peaceful coexistence or conflict – either latent or violent.⁵

Although space limitations prevent me from going into much detail, I would like to make one additional, more general point about the study of religion. Certain scholars – especially some of those working in religious studies and theology – tend to assume agency on the part of religions, as, arguably, Sanneh does when he writes about Islam with its allegedly inherent propensity for reform, rendering it less translatable than Christianity. It is understandable that some, especially those within a particular religious community, might want to attribute agency to their religion, either Islam or Christianity: that is to say, the particular religion is deemed to have an inherent logic that is above and beyond any human agency or capacity to act in the world. However, I think that this tendency is in fact more widespread and not just limited to practitioners of Christianity and Islam. As a social scientist who conducts historical research, I want to emphasize the level of practice in my analysis – that is, Muslim and Christian religious practice. Indeed, I prefer to talk about human agency rather than the essence of a particular religion with a predetermined logic that unfolds over time (not to mention the operation of divine will).

In short, some of the conventional ways of approaching the study of Muslims and Christians and Islam and Christianity in Africa usually fail to ascertain the complexity of the ways in which Muslims and Christians have interacted with each other over time, even when they do not view Muslim–Christian encounters as either inherently peaceful or prone to conflict. Moreover, whatever the other merits of previous research about facets of Muslim–Christian encounters might have, it has usually not been able to help us understand Islam and Christianity as lived religions and how they have changed over time.

ENCOUNTERS IN WEST AFRICA

Despite the significant difficulties of coming to terms with more than one religious tradition, in recent years a number of scholars have indeed taken up this challenge to place Muslims and Christians together within the same frame of analysis. In fact, over the past ten to fifteen years, scholars working in a range of academic disciplines (especially in anthropology, history and religious studies) have been carrying out important research on some of the various ways in which Muslims and Christians have encountered each other and each other’s religious traditions

⁵This is a point that is developed further in Soares (2006a).

across the African continent. Due to space limitations, my discussion of this increasingly rich body of literature and the examples I draw from my own research will be restricted to West Africa.⁶ Much of this recent research is interdisciplinary in nature, often usefully combining perspectives from the social sciences and religious studies. It is important to note how some of the most compelling of this literature approaches different religious traditions and religious encounters from a historical perspective. In addition to pointing to some of the challenges of doing such research, the examples from West Africa below are particularly illuminating about some of the empirical gaps in the existing literature on Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa as well as some of the theoretical advances in this developing area of inquiry. Indeed, I will structure my discussion around some of the major interrelated problems that are brought to the fore by the recent literature on Muslim–Christian encounters. First, there is the question of politics and power, and the politics of representation of such encounters and religious pluralism more generally, which often sit uncomfortably with certain official narratives, normative views of religion, and some commentators’ idealized or reified portraits of religion. Second, there are the interrelated issues of readings and misreadings of the religious ‘Other’, appropriation and borrowing, and the reconfiguration of boundaries, which offer considerable insight into the complexity of religious encounters. Finally, there is a trend towards greater empirical attention to the dynamic interaction of Islam, Christianity and African ‘traditional’ religion and changing ways of being religious over time, which helps us better theorize Muslim–Christian encounters and lived religion more generally.

In the last decade, historians of West Africa (and elsewhere) have started to produce greatly detailed and finely textured studies of North American and European Protestant missionaries’ attempts to evangelize West Africans in heavily Muslim regions and the spread of Christianity among West Africans. Such work comes in the wake of important studies of colonial evangelism in East Africa by T. O. Beidelman (1982) and in South Africa by Jean and John Comaroff (1991). Recent studies of twentieth-century evangelical Christian missions in West Africa, and of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in particular, by historians Barbara Cooper (2006) on Niger and Shobana Shankar (2006; 2014) on Northern Nigeria have been particularly useful for thinking about politics and power and the politics of representation of religious encounters and religious pluralism more generally. Both authors are following the lead of J. D. Y. Peel’s pioneering work on the interactions of different religious traditions among the people who came to be called the Yoruba (Peel 2000). Cooper’s meticulous study of the mission’s activities in Maradi shows how the specific context of competition with Islam and its hegemony has helped shape how Nigerien Christians ‘perform’ Christianity over time.

In her study of one Nigerien man’s complex conversion narrative in colonial Nigeria (Shankar 2006), Shankar compares two significantly different narratives of the life of this man who came originally from what is present-day Niger. On the one hand, she uses his personal diary, which shows the complexity of his life

⁶Aside from the work I cite in the text, some of the most significant recent scholarship includes (in loose chronological order) Last (2007), Nolte (2011) and Mustapha and Ehrhardt (forthcoming), as well as the contributors to Soares (2006b).

between the two religions – Islam and Christianity – and between the vast majority of Muslims among whom he lived and the nascent group of Christian ‘converts’ who became a new community in Northern Nigeria. On the other hand, there is a quite different version of his life story as a Christian convert with unwavering and steadfast faith that is available in more official Protestant missionary sources and records. Shankar shows the fuzziness of the boundaries between Islam, Christianity, Muslim, Christian, colonizer, colonized, evangelist and evangelizer over time. In her book-length study of the history of Christianity and the Christian minority in Muslim-majority Northern Nigeria and their involvement in education and health work, Shankar extends her arguments, helping to unsettle much of the received history of religion in Northern Nigeria. Indeed, she shows how Christianity and Islam in Northern Nigeria have actually long been mutually imbricated as lived religions, and arguably even co-constituted across time (Shankar 2014).

Such scholars point to the considerable ambiguities of religious encounters in Africa, and of Muslim–Christian encounters in particular. Their work also illustrates the long and complex roots of ongoing interactions between Christians and Muslims in places such as Nigeria and Niger that sometimes lead to tensions and conflict. Such work also helps to underscore the sensitive nature of research that can challenge the accounts of other scholars: for example, those scholars of Islam in Northern Nigeria or the francophone Sahel who might prefer to ignore the presence of Christian minorities and missionaries. As we will see below, such histories can also challenge members of some religious communities whose idealized portraits of their own religion might not easily accommodate views that their religious practices or styles of religiosity might have come under the influence of another religion, accept that some practitioners combine elements from different religions, or reject a religion outright, themes to which I will return below.

In addition to helping fill in empirical gaps in the literature, such work also highlights the importance of focusing on questions of politics and power in religious encounters, as well as of the politics of representation. Indeed, an approach that foregrounds changing religious practices in the study of Muslims and Christians can help us tease out such questions of power and politics. However, taking power and politics into consideration does not reduce the question of power and politics to the relations between such groups – or to conflict and violence, for that matter – even though these might also be crucial in some cases. Rather, power and politics must be understood in broader terms, from the level of micro-politics and everyday politics in specific social settings to formal institutional politics (political parties, elections, and so forth) and state policies in a variety of areas, which can have an enormous impact on how Muslims and Christians interact with each other over time.

Although Muslim–Christian encounters were not initially a major focus of my own research in West Africa, during field research in various places in the region I regularly observed how important religious pluralism was in some of its many forms and permutations as well as how central religious encounters were to much everyday religious practice. During field research in Mali I have noticed how frequently many people disparaged religious pluralism. This was especially the case for many Muslims, who regularly inveighed against such allegedly un-Islamic behaviour as the ‘mixing’ of religions, using an array of Islamic

vocabulary about unlawful innovation (Arabic: *bid'a*), idolatry, 'associationism' (Arabic: *shirk*), and so on; this is clearly reminiscent of scholarly debates about syncretism. 'Mixing' of religions and practices from different religious traditions was a regular topic raised in sermons, public pronouncements and everyday conversations, with the imagined 'Other' an increasingly important trope. Although this might seem to suggest that such religious pluralism was often furtive, this was not always the case.

Mali is a secular state on the French model of *laïcité*, whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim. There is a very small Christian minority in Mali – in the absence of any reliable data one can estimate that perhaps 2 per cent of the population is Christian. Although most Malian Christians are Roman Catholics, there is a small number of Protestants. After the 2012 Islamist takeover of northern Mali, Islamists destroyed Muslim saints' tombs in places such as Timbuktu, ostensibly to stamp out such alleged forms of idolatry as the visitation of saints' tombs where people ask for saints' intercession with God (see Soares 2012; 2013). The destruction and looting of churches and church property in the north also ensued. Fearing persecution, many Malians – both Christians and Muslims – fled to the south. The Islamist takeover weighs heavily on the social imagination in Mali. For those Christians who have returned to some places in the north, there is apparently little in the way of public Christian life.

In the 1990s, when Tuareg and Arab groups rebelled and sought autonomy from the central Malian state, Islamist rule seemed almost unimaginable in the north of the country. In 1994, one of the two highest-ranking military officers in Niore du Sahel, a celebrated Islamic religious centre in western Mali, was a Muslim with strong ties to several prominent Muslim religious leaders and heads of Sufi orders and their lineages. I vividly remember when the military officer, whom I know personally, made a prayer request at the sole Protestant church in the town. A small group of northern European evangelical Protestant missionaries who were working for the Red Sea Mission (later renamed ReachAcross), an organization that specifically targets Muslims for evangelization, had set up the small church in their home. The Muslim military officer's prayer request was read out to a handful of Christians assembled for Sunday services on the eve of his imminent posting to the far north of the country, where separatist rebels were operating. At the time, the Muslim man's prayer request to the small community of evangelical Christians seemed more surprising to me than to the Malians and the handful of missionaries present. As I later learned, for many people, such a request by a Muslim government official for prayers and blessings from Christians was almost routine, an illustration of the kind of personal pluralism and pragmatism with which many were familiar even in a celebrated Islamic religious centre in Mali.

However, I do not think that most Muslims living in such an Islamic religious centre would have actively or publicly condoned such pluralism at the time. Indeed, many were (and are) concerned not to contravene widely held precepts against unlawful innovations and allegedly un-Islamic behaviour. Be that as it may, religious pluralism even touches some members of the most celebrated lineages of Muslim religious specialists, those with reputations for piety and known for their strict public adherence to some of the outward signs of being Muslim: these include regular ritual daily prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and the pursuit of Islamic education. On numerous occasions I have seen such

Muslims seek out the medico-religious knowledge and practices of non-Muslims. That is, when involved in the ‘quest for therapy’, to use John Janzen’s apt phrase (see Janzen 1978), they suspended whatever objections they might have had to ‘mixing’ and actively sought out Protestants, Roman Catholics, and those engaged in African ‘traditional’ practices such as spirit possession mediums or experts in *bamanaya* (Bambara/Bamanakan). The latter is the knowledge of the Bambara that includes practices involving divination, blood sacrifice and the use of power objects (*boli* in Bambara) – practices that are widely considered un-Islamic. They usually sought out such expertise and medico-religious practices, including prayer and supplications, to heal themselves or others with serious intractable ailments or complaints. This recourse to practices overtly condemned as un-Islamic or outside the realm of Islam and therefore not licit was usually clandestine or at least away from public view and generally not acknowledged publicly. Moving from these examples of what we might call instances of personal pluralism, with individuals from one religious tradition engaging in practices across boundaries (real or imagined), I now turn to debates between Muslims and Christians.

RELIGIOUS POLEMICS

Although the complex history of Muslim–Christian religious polemics in Africa still remains to be written, a number of scholars have recently produced important work in this area with regard to East Africa (for example, Chesworth 2007), the Horn of Africa (Bezabeh 2015), South Africa and beyond (Sadouni 2011; Larkin 2008). In Nigeria, with its recent history of conflict between Muslims and Christians, several scholars have focused in part on some of the religious polemics in the country (for example, Ojo 2007; Ukah 2013; cf. Last 2007). As I will suggest, polemics between Muslims and Christians in the wake of Christian evangelization and Muslim *da’wa* (Arabic: the call or invitation to Islam) is an area of research about which we still need to know much more – not only for empirical reasons but also because it has the potential to help us theorize Muslim–Christian encounters and lived religion more generally.

I want to begin with an example of such polemical debates in Mali, where one can see how Muslims and Christians represent and misrepresent each other in various media and how such representations can have lasting effects on how Muslims and Christians understand each other and interact over time. In the decades leading to independence in Mali (then called Soudan Français), Sa’ad Oumar Saïd Touré (1909–97),⁷ a prominent Muslim scholar, prolific writer of books and primers in Arabic, and founder of a modern Islamic educational institution (Arabic: *madrasa*) that borrowed pedagogical techniques from French colonial schools, witnessed Christian missionary activities in his home region of Ségou (on Touré’s career, see Brenner 1997; 2001). In the nineteenth century, Ségou was an important capital of the Islamic polity led by al-Hajj Umar Tall. In fact, Touré’s grandfather was closely associated with Amadu, Umar Tall’s

⁷In his Arabic-language publications his name is given as Sa’d b. ‘Umar b. Sa’id Jalyā Tūri al-Fūtī.

son and successor (Brenner 1997: 467), and the city remained one of the most important centres of Islamic education and learning in the twentieth century. Ségou was also the oldest and most important post for *les missionnaires d'Afrique* or the White Fathers, members of the Roman Catholic missionary order, who arrived in the town shortly after the colonial conquest of the region.⁸ With great symbolism that was probably not lost on the local population, the White Fathers held their first masses in Ségou on the grounds of Umar Tall's *tata* (Bambara) or fort (Diarra 2009: 70). In some of his numerous writings, Touré actively engaged in anti-Christian polemics, trying to debunk Christianity from a Muslim perspective (see Brenner 1997: 483–5).⁹

Apparently, at some point in the 1950s, Touré wrote a text in Arabic that seems to have been a response to Christian missionaries who had been active in the region for decades.¹⁰ In the period before composing his text, the Roman Catholic Church had established a school for catechists, and young men from Ségou were among the newly trained cohort of catechists. A number of Protestant missionaries, mostly Americans, had also become active in the region. In the preface to his pamphlet, Touré quotes from what he says is the 1947 catechism of the Roman Catholic Church in Bambara, southern Mali's most important lingua franca.¹¹ According to Touré, the catechism states that all religions other than the Roman Catholic Church are false and that all Catholics are enjoined to fight to convert these people. It continues that Satan has allies and collaborators who include, among others, pagans (*wathaniyyat* in Arabic), worshippers of idols (*al-iṣnam* in Arabic) and spirits (*jinn* in Arabic) and the dead, charlatans and Muslim religious leaders (*ulama* in Arabic, see Touré 1991: 3; or '*chefs musulmans*', see Touré 1993: 3). It also quotes a widespread non-Muslim understanding of Islam, which I have heard articulated by some Christians in Mali, including Catholic clergy. According to this way of thinking, the Prophet Muhammad had learned a little about Judaism and Christianity and then mixed them up a bit to create a new religion (*ibid.*). All of this language does indeed appear in the Bambara language catechism published in 1947 (see Vicariat Apostolique de Bamako 1947: 25–7 *passim*).¹²

Touré's intended audience for his pamphlet, which was originally written in Arabic, would have been the small but growing number of Muslims who were literate in the language, including students in his *madrasa* as well as Muslim youth more generally, as indicated by the different titles in the Arabic original ('Protection of Islamic *madrasa* students ...') and the French translation ('Protection of *madrasa* students, students, and all our Muslim youths ...').

⁸On the history of the Roman Catholic Church in Soudan Français, see de Benoist (2000) and Diarra (2009).

⁹It is useful to compare such anti-Christian polemics with the rather different 'intellectual response of Muslims' to colonial rule in Northern Nigeria in Umar (2006).

¹⁰Touré's book was eventually published in 1991 and in French translation in 1993. See also Brenner (1997), where he quotes from an unpublished text in which Touré discusses some of the same issues.

¹¹He seems to be referring to the published version of this text (see Vicariat Apostolique de Bamako 1947).

¹²However, it is noteworthy that an earlier bilingual catechism in Bambara and French does not seem to contain such language (see Vicariat Apostolique du Soudan Français 1905).

However, the audience would also include those imams and preachers who he would expect to communicate the contents to the overwhelming majority of Malian Muslims who were not literate in Arabic. Many such persons would have encountered Christian missionaries and members of the small nascent Malian Christian community and their ideas, or they might have had occasion to discuss or debate some of the theological issues such as the Trinity, or even observe specific Catholic sacraments such as communion and confession, which are discussed and illustrated in the two versions of the pamphlet published in the 1990s.

Since the 1960s, there have, of course, been enormous changes in the Roman Catholic Church's ways of interacting with non-Christians. However, Touré's pamphlet cites a Roman Catholic Church document pre-dating the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). In fact, many Roman Catholics would readily note that some of the views expressed in the Bambara catechism Touré cites are outdated and are no longer authoritative or accepted by the church hierarchy. Although the Catholic Church has been present and active in Mali since the late nineteenth century, as noted above, the number of Catholics in Mali remains very small. Even before the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church had largely stopped targeting Muslims for conversion, and this was also the case in Mali (Diarra 2009). Over the years, there have actually been numerous Catholic initiatives for the promotion of interfaith dialogue in Mali, including most recently the Institut de Formation Islamo-Chrétienne, directed by Josef Stamer, a Catholic priest and author of a short book, *L'islam en Afrique au Sud du Sahara* (Stamer 1995). For this reason, it might seem that Touré's anti-Christian polemical writings that were published in the early 1990s are anachronistic and therefore not relevant today. Perhaps this is beside the point. What it does suggest is that the Roman Catholic Church's changed policy was either unknown to authors such as Touré and other Muslims writing polemical anti-Christian texts or simply ignored, or the facts on the ground were much less straightforward. I think it also indicates how some Malian Muslims might not be well informed about Christianity (just as many Christians are often poorly informed about Islam) and therefore not able to distinguish, say, between Catholic and Protestant views on Islam and Muslims. Indeed, such readings and occasional misreadings of the religious 'Other' can be rather illuminating about how Christians and Muslims have interacted with each other over time.

THE RUSHDIE RIPPLE AND THE BONNKE AFFAIR

In 1989, soon after the so-called Rushdie Affair, when the controversy over Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* was well under way elsewhere in the world, 'the Rushdie ripple' (Gladney 1994) could also be felt in Mali. Some Muslims in Mali protested vehemently against a pamphlet in Bambara, entitled *N'Kalon Siraw*, that was published and circulated in Koutiala in south-eastern Mali by Protestant missionaries affiliated with the Church and Missionary Alliance, a North American evangelical Protestant denomination that has been very active in Mali for several decades. Echoing the discourse around Rushdie's book, some people mobilized through what was at the time the country's sole

officially recognized Islamic organization, AMUPI (Association malienne pour l'unité et le progrès de l'Islam or Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam), and claimed that the pamphlet was insulting to the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. Given that the title of the pamphlet translates as *The Road of Lies*, this is not at all surprising. Even from a cursory look at some of the literature in Bambara, French and Arabic distributed by many Protestant missionaries in that period and immediately afterwards, it is obvious that much of it would be offensive to many Muslims. At the time the pamphlet *The Road of Lies* was circulating, there was such an outcry about this publication in the vernacular by some local Muslims working in concert with local and national AMUPI representatives that the Malian government apparently intervened to calm the situation, and the Protestant group eventually made a public apology.

It seems that the use of written literature in the vernacular over the course of many decades by Christians – not least by the Roman Catholic Church and later by Protestant missionaries, as in this example of the polemical text and the earlier catechism – has helped spur some Muslims in Mali to begin to produce religious texts not only in Arabic and French (Mali's official language) but also in the vernacular. Indeed, as Francesco Zappa has noted, anti-Christian polemical texts in Bambara were among the first publications of Modibo Jara, the most prolific contemporary author of published Bambara-language Islamic texts in Mali (Zappa 2015: 48).¹³ When such Islamic texts in Arabic, French or vernacular languages are not polemical rejoinders to Christians, they are frequently new texts about Islam or translations of basic Islamic texts and primers. The latter, which tend to offer basic information about a 'generic' Islam of assumed universals, are 'catechism-like' (Zappa 2015: 54); in this way, they seem to be at least partly a response to Christian texts such as the Bambara catechism that Touré quoted in his pamphlet, as well as such polemical texts as *The Road of Lies*.

Decades after Touré had composed his anti-Christian polemic, the same text was given new life, published in a cheap edition with a glossy cover and also translated into French. His book is ostensibly devoted to refuting specifically Catholic ideas, discusses such Catholic themes as confession, and employs explicit Catholic imagery. But it seems that its publication in the 1990s was also a response to the allegedly blasphemous Protestant pamphlet and the increase in Protestant missionary activity in the country. The pamphlet is indeed addressed specifically to those who encounter Christian missionaries today, and it addresses all Christians, including Protestant missionaries in Mali.

Over time, some of the polemical debates in Mali between Muslims and Christians, especially Protestants, have become even more heated, with some worrying that they might eventually turn violent. To illustrate some of these developments I turn to German evangelist Reinhard Bonnke's first planned 'crusade' to Mali. In 1993, a small group of Malian Protestants, some of whom were attracted to the idea of miracles, healing and the 'gifts of the spirit' frequently associated with Pentecostalism, apparently invited Bonnke to lead a crusade in Mali. Before Bonnke's scheduled arrival in Bamako, the Malian capital, there was a veritable media blitz, with a sophisticated audio-visual media campaign about the

¹³See Zappa (2009) on Modibo Jara, as well as his more general analysis of Islamic intellectual production, including anti-Christian polemics in Mali (Zappa 2015).

upcoming crusade. Large, glossy colour posters flooded the central parts of the city and heralded the Christian crusade where miracles would be performed. Miracles, often in the form of healing, are indeed the centrepieces of Bonnke's crusades in the other African countries he has visited (see Gifford 1987; 1992). Pickup trucks with public address systems circulated throughout the city, broadcasting announcements proclaiming that people would be evangelized because they had been led astray. Recently opened private radio stations aired paid advertisements announcing the crusade; state-owned media broadcasts also announced Bonnke's upcoming crusade. Some people distributed handbills throughout the city. In at least one instance, such handbills were reported to have shown up at mosques. In any case, such a media blitz for a religious event caught nearly everyone's attention. Coming so soon after Mali's political and media liberalization, the level of publicity was unprecedented. Such a sophisticated media campaign was only possible through the infusion of large sums of capital and the organizational expertise of Bonnke, who has led crusades in many African countries. It is also important to emphasize the fact that Bonnke's crusades have a reputation for employing anti-Islam and anti-Catholic polemics.

In response to some Muslims' vehement protests about the upcoming evangelical crusade, the Malian government revoked Bonnke's visa, thereby effectively cancelling the event. In the official Malian government newspaper, a government spokesperson stated that it was a 'sovereign decision' to cancel Bonnke's visit in light of 'reactions' that had been 'provoked' by his visits to other unspecified African countries (Sidibé 1993: 4). Interestingly enough, there was no specific mention of the Rushdie Affair in the Malian press coverage of what came to be called the 'Bonnke Affair', even though the Rushdie Affair had been widely discussed and debated in Mali at the time. During the Bonnke Affair, many commentators warned about the dangers of rising 'fundamentalism' (*intégrisme* in French) in Mali and threats to the secular (*laïc*) nature of the Malian state, with the rights of Christians not being respected with the cancellation of the crusade. As many noted at the time, no Muslims in Mali had protested against Pope John Paul II's visit to the country a few years earlier in 1990. In fact, an official delegation from AMUPI had even attended the public events marking the Roman Catholic pontiff's visit. It is striking that, during the Bonnke Affair, the Roman Catholic Church and its representatives were conspicuously absent from the public debates about what had happened. At the time, many Malian Muslims commented on the Roman Catholic clergy's public silence as evidence of tacit support for the government's cancellation of Bonnke's planned crusade. In fact, the same government spokesperson claimed that the decision to revoke Bonnke's visa had been taken after explicitly consulting 'all the churches in our country' (*ibid.*).

The media blitz that I mentioned in relation to Bonnke's crusades raises wider issues about Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa. As several scholars have argued (see, for example, Hackett 2006; 2012a; 2012b; Hackett and Soares 2015), the media and mass-mediated religious content in particular have been especially important in raising tensions; indeed, they have sometimes even been triggers of violence between different religious groups in Africa. In fact, it does not seem possible to study Muslim–Christian encounters today without factoring in the media. As several scholars have noted, Christians in many places in Africa frequently took up mass media and new media technologies earlier and more readily

than Muslims (and practitioners of African ‘traditional’ religion), and, in some cases, Christians have tended to dominate the use of media technologies, airwaves and/or mediascapes. There are important issues of equal access, rights and self-representation here that have played out differently in various countries within the context of media liberalization over the past two decades (see Hackett and Soares 2015). However, in recent years, Muslims in Mali and elsewhere seem to have been catching up in the use of religious media.¹⁴

ISLAM AND PENTECOSTALISM

Another important focal point in the study of Muslim–Christian encounters is the area of borrowing and appropriation, a theme that Peel also developed in his work on the Yoruba (Peel 2000; 2016; Peel, this issue). As I will suggest, such a focal point is important for empirical reasons but it also requires additional thought and theorization. It is perhaps obvious that determining who borrowed or appropriated methods, styles and techniques from whom will probably never be uncontroversial, not least when different religious groups might be concerned about policing their boundaries or are in competition with each other. In settings where polemics have become particularly important, this might be especially difficult and could even increase tensions. As Peel pointed out, Christians in Nigeria might have first borrowed the practice of night vigils from their Muslim neighbours and kin in the early twentieth century, and some Muslims have later borrowed them back (see Peel 2016). As some commentators have noted (for example, Kalu 2008), some Christian groups and churches in Africa, including the Catholic Church, have borrowed and appropriated Pentecostal styles and techniques to various degrees.

But Pentecostalization is not limited to Christians; in fact, even some Muslims have recently been appropriating Pentecostal style and techniques. One striking example is NASFAT in Nigeria.¹⁵ NASFAT is a large, modern-style Islamic organization, most of whose members are Yoruba, that has been compared with Pentecostalism (see Soares 2009; Sanni 2012; Obadare 2016; Peel 2016; see also Janson this issue; 2014). Founded in the 1990s in religiously plural south-western Nigeria by upwardly mobile lay Muslims, NASFAT borrows for its organizational techniques (Sunday morning rather than Friday afternoon for communal ritual prayers, formal prayer requests during its services, sophisticated media campaigns, and so on) from newer waves of Pentecostalism with their North American connections and for income-generating activities from the ‘prosperity gospel’ that suffuses Nigerian public life. It might not be surprising that some Nigerians actually refer to NASFAT as ‘Islamic Pentecostalism’ or ‘Pentecostal Islam’. NASFAT claims to have millions of members, including many professionals, young people, and those aspiring to a middle-class lifestyle. The organization

¹⁴On the history and general use of religious media in Mali, see Soares (2005; 2010). See also studies of Mali’s celebrated Muslim preacher Ousmane Madani Haïdara in particular (for example, Soares 2005; Schulz 2006; Holder 2012).

¹⁵NASFAT is the Nasrul-Lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria, or the Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria.

promotes modalities of religious expression largely focused on piety and ethics that are non-political and compatible with living in a secular society, as well as in a neoliberal economy, as witnessed by the organization's ambitious business ventures that seek to create jobs and income ostensibly for reinvestment in Islamic *da'wa* activities (see also Janson [forthcoming](#); Ibrahim 2015). Like the major Pentecostal churches in south-western Nigeria, NASFAT has also invested in a prayer camp where its members can gather for prayer vigils, as well as a private university.

In a widely discussed article about Ghana and Nigeria, Brian Larkin and Birgit Meyer have argued that forms of Islam (reformist/'fundamentalist') and Pentecostalism in Africa can be seen as 'doppelgängers', 'mirroring' each other, as in the term 'evangelical Islamists' that they use (see Larkin and Meyer 2006). However, I think that the case of NASFAT shows how appropriation and borrowing can be even more complex than they argue. Even if NASFAT might in some ways borrow from and mirror Pentecostalism in style and organizational techniques, the organization also seems to want to distance itself from Pentecostal style and its flamboyant, charismatic preachers who operate in the same geographical spaces. In fact, NASFAT overtly rejects ostentation and actively promotes sobriety, emphatically stating its opposition to so-called hero worship in its promotional materials and official code of conduct, on its website and on social media. This critique might be equally directed against wealthy Pentecostal preachers and wealthy Muslim religious leaders, none of whom are in short supply in Nigeria. What the case of NASFAT helps to illustrate is how a particular religious group might borrow from another while its members simultaneously draw boundaries with religious Others, both Muslim and Christian, not to mention practitioners of African 'traditional' religion.

PLURALISM UNBOUND

Although many studies have looked at the interaction of African 'traditional' religion with either Islam or Christianity, it is important and indeed imperative to look at all *three* religious traditions together, at least in those places in Africa where they coexist. Some of the richest work in this vein has also been J. D. Y. Peel's research about the Yoruba (for example, Peel 2000; see also his last book, Peel 2016), which has influenced many younger scholars. In a series of publications, anthropologist Katrin Langewiesche has looked at religious pluralism in Burkina Faso, considering 'traditional' religion, Islam, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism over time (see, for example, Langewiesche 2003; 2011). Arguing against those commentators who would assert that Africans are somehow inherently more spiritual than people elsewhere, she shows the complexity of the ways in which lived religion changes over time in a context where Christianity arrived during the colonial period and mass Islamization only came in the twentieth century. Using very rich empirical material from field research in north-western Burkina Faso, she documents what she calls 'religious mobility' (*mobilité religieuse*) and illustrates how religious change – for example, conversion from one religion to another, or cases of serial conversion – is usually deeply pragmatic, occasionally reversible, and closely tied to modes of sociability and other

areas of social life such as politics, marriage, migration patterns, and the pursuit of livelihoods (Langewiesche 1998; 2011). Although, today, Muslims constitute the largest religious group in Burkina, ‘traditional’ religion, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism not only coexist in Burkina but individual Burkinabe negotiate the different religions in their daily lives, as Langewiesche shows in individuals’ complex religious trajectories, where, over time, pluralism and mobility are often the norm.

It is striking how such pluralism and lived religion can play out quite differently in other settings in West Africa, as the example of Chrislam in south-western Nigeria (see Janson, this issue) illustrates so well. I would like to provide examples of two contemporary social figures in Mali whose trajectories give us a great insight into the multifaceted nature of contemporary religious encounters between Muslims, Christians and practitioners of African ‘traditions’.

First, over the past decade, Adama Yalcouyé, best known by his moniker Soufi Adama, has developed a reputation for piety and miracles, attracting numerous followers who visit him in his home on the outskirts of Bamako.¹⁶ Although Adama, who was born in 1960, calls himself a Sufi and considers himself a Muslim, unlike many Malian Muslims he openly and liberally borrows symbols from Christianity, particularly Catholicism, as well as from ‘traditional’ religions. Unlike many Malian Muslims of his generation, Adama seems unconcerned with non-Muslims becoming Muslims. He does have a moralizing message in which he talks about the importance of honesty and the dangers of such moral transgressions as stealing and illicit sexual relations. However, unlike many Malian Muslims, Adama calls for all Muslims, Christians and other non-Muslims to unite. Moreover, Adama says that he is a ‘guide’ who can help unite Muslims, Christians and so-called animists.

Over time, I have seen how Adama and those around him seem to be forging a rather innovative synthesis of the different traditions they borrow from and use. I want to illustrate such synthesis where Adama and some of his followers combine or juxtapose Muslim and Christian symbols. Like many members of the Sufi orders, Adama often carries a string of prayer beads or wears them around his neck. But Adama often has a large, clearly visible Christian cross attached to his prayer beads; however, the cross has the Prophet Muhammad’s name in Arabic inscribed on it. When in public, Adama regularly has a long wooden staff, similar in form to the crosier that Roman Catholic bishops carry, and some of his various staffs are sometimes adorned with Christian crosses with Islamic inscriptions in Arabic on them. On several public occasions, I have seen Adama’s younger brothers wearing large white cotton caps in the shape of mitres: that is, the headdresses whose use in the Roman Catholic Church is restricted to bishops and abbots. The caps have the *shahada* – the Muslim profession of faith – and other Islamic inscriptions in Arabic hand painted in black on them.

If Adama’s prayer beads have been partly Christianized with the addition of the cross, the Catholic headgear and crosier-like staff have been partly Islamized with inscriptions in Arabic, including the *shahada*, the name of God, the Prophet Muhammad, and so forth. After prayers in the mosque in his compound or on

¹⁶On Adama, see Soares (2007; 2016). See also Bourdarias (2008; 2009).

trips into town, some of Adama's followers carry small portable crosses, some of which are painted red, yellow and green (the colours of the Malian national flag), but they also have Islamic inscriptions in Arabic on them. There is also the use of religious commodities, including laminated badges, lapel buttons, photographs and fabric with Adama's image, which have developed into a form of religious marketing. Some of his followers sometimes wear large laminated badges with photographs of Adama side by side with photographs of celebrated Malian Muslim religious leaders. On some of these badges, Adama even appears next to Pope John Paul II, thereby suggesting that the two are homologous, equal, and possibly even interchangeable. In 2007, Adama had his followers add the Christian cross to the actual structure of his private mosque; in fact, they placed several prominent and imposing crosses on the roof adjacent to the mosque's larger minarets, which had the Islamic star and crescent motif on their peaks. This mosque in Adama's private compound, with its Christian crosses juxtaposed with minarets, was clearly visible from quite a distance away.

In addition, Adama's religious synthesis goes beyond Islam and Christianity to include symbols from Bambara and Dogon 'traditions'. Unlike many Malian Muslim leaders who have actively sought to expunge and reject the un-Islamic, and among whom it would be hard to imagine the use of such obvious Christian symbols, Adama and some of his followers actively embrace a number of un-Islamic symbols and elements. As I have noted, the different staffs Adama carries often include both Islamic and Christian symbols. But several of his other staffs also use readily identifiable iconography from Mali's 'traditional' religions in addition to such Islamic and Christian symbolism. For example, miniature stylized Bambara masks, which are associated with a non-Islamic secret society, occasionally appear alongside the most well-known Dogon mask, the Kanaga. The latter is a symbol that has become ubiquitous in Malian public life, not least through the Malian government's use of it to promote Malian culture and heritage. Adama even uses the Kanaga to adorn the outside of his mosque. In fact, the Kanaga motif precedes the *shahada* in Arabic and is carved into the large wooden beam above the main entrance of his most recently constructed mosque, which was built after his first one was destroyed (see below).

As I have noted, when Adama talks about unity he often says that he wants to unite *all* people – Muslims, Christians and 'animists'. He says this should not be surprising. After all, some of his relatives are Catholics, and some of them engage in 'traditional' religious practices. In fact, he is on very good terms with non-Muslim ritual specialists. Adama is closely and publicly associated with Daouda Yattara, aka Satan, one of Mali's most prominent and even notorious non-Muslim ('animist') ritual specialists; these are often called *féticheurs* in local parlance or sometimes 'traditional priests' and 'medicine men' elsewhere in West Africa.¹⁷ The charismatic Adama is intensely focused on unity, which he calls for and seems to embody in his dress and comportment, rather than the building of an institution or formal organization such as a Sufi order. Adama has many detractors who are adamantly opposed to his ostensible 'mixing' of religious traditions; indeed, as noted above, many Malian Muslims are vehemently

¹⁷It is interesting to compare him with the Ghanaian figure Kwaku Bonsam (see de Witte 2015).

against any kind of ‘mixing’ of religions. It is worth emphasizing that many Malian Christians also oppose such mixing. But many people do indeed like and admire Adama. In fact, I have heard young Malian Catholics tell me about the challenges of living as a minority among Muslims in Mali, and how much they appreciate Adama’s inclusiveness and his hopeful message of unity, as displayed in his persona and the symbolism he employs.

It is not unexpected that Muslim reformists in Mali have been among the most vocal critics of this figure who calls himself a Muslim and seemingly wants to mix Islam, Christianity and African ‘traditions’ and who openly associates with Daouda aka Satan. In 2008, some Malian reformist Muslims were almost gleeful when, after failed mediation attempts, the Malian government (at the instigation of his critics?) forcibly evicted Adama and his family from the land they had occupied without authorization. The local government authorities arranged to have Adama’s home and the mosque with the crosses on its roof destroyed by bulldozers, ostensibly to make way for the sale of new housing lots and the construction of a new bridge across the river in this previously undeveloped part of the city.

It is striking and perhaps not without irony that a non-Muslim – a former Muslim – calls himself Satan, the personification of evil, as does Daouda Yattara – Adama’s friend (on Daouda, see Bourdarias 2008; 2009; Soares 2007; 2016). Many in Mali – both Muslims and Christians, especially Protestants – regularly compare African ‘traditional’ practices to the activities of Satan. Daouda has gained a reputation for using his ‘power objects’ (*boli* in Bambara) or ‘fetishes’ (hence *féticheur*), to which he makes blood sacrifices, to get his clients quick results. Most of Daouda’s clients are Muslims, including many youths who go to see him in order to resolve problems relating to money, marriage or health. Unsurprisingly, most Muslims go to see Daouda clandestinely because of the opprobrium surrounding his allegedly un-Islamic practices. In his public pronouncements, Daouda (like Soufi Adama) has a moralizing message that emphasizes the virtues of honesty and reciprocity. His message is not unlike those of many Christian and Muslim preachers in the country, and therefore not what most Muslims and Christians would expect from someone who fashions himself as Satan. The object of much scorn and derision on the part of Muslim religious leaders, Daouda frequently gestures towards Christians and Christianity. For example, he regularly compares Muslims unfavourably with Christians and other non-Muslims. He frequently claims that he prefers the company of Christians, who are less hypocritical about ‘traditional’ religious practices. Daouda’s experience of interacting with Roman Catholics in his home region might have made him aware of their openness to certain elements of African culture and even ritual practices, especially in the post-Second Vatican Council era. This is in marked contrast with many Muslim reformists and Islamists in Mali (and elsewhere) who seek to extirpate the allegedly un-Islamic from the practice of Islam, including elements of local or African culture. In public pronouncements and in videos, Daouda has insulted and taunted such Muslim reformists and Islamists, and some of them are rumoured to have threatened him in return. Indeed, there are rumours that Daouda’s arrest and imprisonment on charges of kidnapping and murder in 2005 were due to the machinations of his Muslim reformist detractors in the country.

As these two contemporary social figures in Mali show, borrowing and appropriation across religious boundaries, combining elements from different religions,

and the outright rejection of a religion and occasional denigration of its members can be politically charged – witness Adama’s and Daouda’s many critics and enemies despite their numerous admirers, followers and/or clients. It would be impossible to understand such contemporary figures without taking into consideration the complexity of religious pluralism in its various forms and permutations over time. This includes the long presence of missionary activities and the spread of Christianity in Mali. Indeed, lived religion in Mali can only be understood by placing Islam, Christianity and African ‘traditional’ religions within the same analytical frame and by tracing their complex interactions over time. Moreover, in failing to conform to the idealized and normative views of religion and religious practice that are often reproduced by many of our respondents but also by some researchers, this research points to the thorny politics of representation and the frequently fraught nature of religious encounters more generally.

In closing, I would like to underscore the importance of studying different religious traditions in Africa within the same analytical frame. There is a long and venerable tradition of studying religious pluralism in Africa. But even if it is widely acknowledged that it is no longer sufficient to study different religions as separate units, or the influence of one upon another, or their relations, the study of Muslim–Christian encounters is only beginning to receive the empirical and analytical attention that it merits. As I have tried to show here, placing Muslims and Christians and Islam and Christianity within the same analytical frame offers fresh perspectives on such questions as ‘conversion’; changes in religious practice through borrowing, appropriation, boundary making or dissolution; the intersection of religion and politics over time; and the politics of representation of religious pluralism. Moreover, the study of such religious encounters might even help us to rethink the history of lived religion in Africa more generally.

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ABSTRACT

Among historians, social scientists and scholars of religion there has been increased recognition of the importance of studying Islam and Christianity in Africa not separately but rather together as lived religions in dynamic interaction over time. In this article, I trace how scholars have arrived at such a point and consider some of the challenges of conducting research on religious encounters, and particularly those associated with studying Islam and Christianity, Muslims and Christians together. I frame this discussion in terms of some of the theoretical and methodological issues at stake in advancing the study of religious encounters in Africa and draw from my own research and the work of others on the topic, particularly in West Africa, to reflect upon how this important field of inquiry has developed and what it has accomplished.

RÉSUMÉ

On assiste à une prise de conscience croissante, parmi les historiens, les spécialistes des sciences sociales et les théologiens, de l'importance d'étudier l'islam et la chrétienté en Afrique non pas séparément mais conjointement, en tant que religions vécues en interaction dynamique au fil du temps. Dans cet article, l'auteur retrace le chemin parcouru par les chercheurs pour arriver à ce point de réflexion, et examine certaines difficultés à étudier la rencontre des religions et notamment celle de l'islam et de la chrétienté, et des musulmans et des chrétiens. L'auteur structure cette discussion autour de certains enjeux théoriques et méthodologiques de l'avancement de l'étude de la rencontre des religions en Afrique et s'appuie sur ses propres travaux et sur ceux d'autres chercheurs sur ce sujet, notamment en Afrique de l'Ouest, pour réfléchir sur l'évolution de cet important domaine d'investigation et sur ses accomplissements.