



edited by  
Harri Englund

# Christianity and Public Culture in Africa

CAMBRIDGE CENTRE OF AFRICAN STUDIES SERIES

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Edited by Harri Englund



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## Christianity and Public Culture in Africa

CAMBRIDGE CENTRE OF AFRICAN STUDIES SERIES

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## INTRODUCTION

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# Rethinking African Christianities

## *Beyond the Religion-Politics Conundrum*

HARRI ENGLUND

AT THE dawn of the twenty-first century, human tragedy and subsequent surveillance were not the only consequences of epoch-making terrorist attacks in the United States. They also heralded a public outcry over the impact of religion on the hearts and minds of apparently gullible believers. Not only was one religion in particular the target of the public outcry, it also attributed to Islam such powers of inspiration that contextual factors—planetary inequalities, the frustrations of Muslim immigrants in the West, the plight of Palestine, new media and communication technologies—often fell outside the purview.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, such an analysis tended to overlook the persistently motivating and constraining impact a related religion, Christianity, continued to have on political competition in the West, particularly in the United States.

By marveling at the “return” of religion as an all-consuming force, the outcry did little else than reframe the assumptions of secularization whose passing it ostensibly mourned. Following the founding figures of sociology, the thesis of secularization had assumed that modernizing societies would become functionally differentiated, with increasing rationalization spelling the decline of the public significance of religion.<sup>2</sup> What the public concern in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks shared with this thesis was the idea of religion as a subsystem that was separate from others in the structure of society. Its return to the public realm made it imperative to put the lid back on Pandora’s box before religious passions would infuse the domains of public life.<sup>3</sup>

Recent anthropological studies of Islamic movements in Egypt and the rest of the Middle East have, quite appropriately, been at the forefront of devising ways out of the impasse with the secularization thesis.<sup>4</sup> Concerned less with theorizing an abstract society than with reflecting on actual, observable practices, these studies have shaken the very foundations of progressive politics among Euro-American academics. The movements, popular among women and young men, have engaged in the redefinition of piety and commitment in which moral and social improvement is as important as technological progress. Their predilections are, therefore, compatible with social activism,<sup>5</sup> and the sounds of mass-mediated sermons that fill the air of public places shape private lives. “Within this context,” Charles Hirschkind writes, “public speech results not in policy but in pious dispositions, the embodied sensibilities and modes of expression understood to facilitate the development and practice of Islamic virtues and therefore of . . . ethical comportment.”<sup>6</sup>

Progressive sensibilities are challenged by this prioritization of personal conduct over public policy. They are also confronted by the need to rethink the concept of freedom when submission to external authority would seem to be a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality. Far from dismissing adherents engaged in ethical self-formation as belligerent fundamentalists, these anthropologists urge us to “hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry.”<sup>7</sup>

Note how, in this quote, a new understanding of religious formation holds the potential for a fresh appreciation of political practice. The domains of religion and politics are not easily kept separate for analytical purposes once the underlying view of society in the secularization thesis is rejected. Ideas expressed in, and actions taken within, apparently different domains and institutions feed into each other, and what belongs to the public sphere or the private sphere is to be investigated and not assumed. Much as this basic insight informs the chapters in this book, a note of caution must be struck. The appreciation of hybrid and complex forms has long since displaced dichotomous thought in social sciences and humanities, but it has given rise to new problems, notably the question of what the analyst can hope to keep constant when everything is understood to be in flux.<sup>8</sup> For some students of Africa, the ways in which religion and politics can get conflated on the continent become little else than a pretext to assert the primacy of the former over the latter. While admitting that Africans are not

busy with religion all the time, Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, for example, maintain that “religious thought plays a key role in political life because the spirit world is commonly considered the ultimate source of power.”<sup>9</sup> Although these and many other contemporary authors add a suitable dose of cultural relativism to such statements by highlighting religious or spiritual factors in Euro-American public life, others find in their very choice of topics for African studies an assertion of the continent’s exceptionalism.<sup>10</sup> Religious thought, particularly as it evokes and wrestles with the occult, would seem to define African experiences in a way that it does not Euro-American experiences.

The approach in this volume is different. Rather than conflating the dichotomy between religion and politics only to reiterate ideas of “Africa’s pathological exceptionalism,”<sup>11</sup> the chapters here engage in ethnographic and historical investigation on the complex ways in which Africans have variously appropriated Christian idioms beyond the boundaries of religious expression, asserted a cleavage between religions, kept secular and religious concerns separate, and sought moral and material renewal through Christian practice. In other words, African Christians have constituted, and not merely addressed, domains and categories for moral and political practice and reflection. Even the recent studies of Islamic piety mentioned above may, for all their ingenuity, carry a residual distinction between embodied religious self-formation and liberal modes of self-reflection and critical thought.<sup>12</sup>

It is debatable whether the chapters in this book cast doubt over such a distinction only because of their focus on sub-Saharan Africa rather than the Middle East and on Christians rather than Muslims. Deeper conceptual and methodological issues may account for the difference. Few of the contributors here have isolated religion as the field of their academic specialism; the perspectives they bring to bear on Christianity and public culture arise from anthropology, sociology, history, and literary criticism, as well as religious studies. As for many of the people they write about, the interest in Christianity has evolved as an aspect of engaging with other domains and experiences than religion. The upshot has been to take Christianity seriously as an aspect of life, but the contributors’ intellectual and personal backgrounds also allow them to keep its impact in perspective.

Public culture is a notion that facilitates this effort to open up the study of religion in Africa to wider intellectual and pragmatic influences. Less clearly demarcated institutionally than formal politics and more

diffuse in its spread than popular culture, public culture prompts questions about how certain events, ideas, and practices assume public significance and thereby cross over the boundaries of their own domains. Among the boundaries these questions address are spatial and temporal configurations, as when the contributors to this volume explore public culture in rural no less than in urban areas, and in colonial and early postcolonial situations no less than in twenty-first-century controversies (part I). The conceptual and pragmatic boundaries that maintain a distinction between the private and the public are likewise considered, as when the relations of intimacy and reproductive and health concerns come to occupy a major public presence (part II). This volume also takes a critical look at assumptions informing academic and popular comments on the apparently explosive public presence of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in contemporary Africa (part III). Before introducing these themes in more detail, however, it is important to know more about the ways in which the public impact of Christianity has previously been envisioned in African studies.

### Changing Perspectives on African Christianities

The history of the Christian church in Africa is complex, varied, and long. Few scholars would dare to approach that history with the panache that a lifetime of learning enabled the late Adrian Hastings to exude.<sup>13</sup> Not only did he trace the origins of the church in Africa to the earliest centuries of Christianity, he also saw in fourth-century Egyptian Christianity a paradigm for the subsequent history of African Christianity—as opposed to “the history of Christianity upon the continent of Africa.”<sup>14</sup> No longer a religion of the urban imperial elite using the scriptures in Greek, Christianity came to hold increasing popular appeal by the end of the third century when most, if not all, of the Bible had been translated into the different varieties of Coptic in Egypt. What was paradigmatic for the quickening of the history of African Christianity over one thousand years later was the attempt to take African languages seriously, often resulting in the first pieces of written literature in as yet unstandardized languages. The close involvement with languages was one aspect of Christianity’s impact on life and thought beyond the religious sphere. Conversely, few aspects of life—particularly the struggle for material survival and prosperity—would fail to influence the emergence of Christian identity among Africans.

A great historian is marked by his or her skill at discerning what can and cannot serve as a paradigm for patterns in different times and places. Hastings's history of the church in Africa is a narrative of breathtaking complexity, with different denominations, missionary orders, and African initiatives having strikingly different relations to public affairs of profound significance such as slavery, settler agriculture, and colonial rule. It is this humility before historical and political complexity that must inform studies with more modest aspirations, including the present volume.

While seeking to specify and qualify the public role of Christianity in a number of cases, this volume builds on the strengths of decades of historical and anthropological scholarship on African Christianities. Long gone, for example, is a formulaic juxtaposition between mission churches, African-instituted churches, and African traditional religion. These distinctions may well live on in popular and theological thought, and are therefore important subjects of study, but the intellectual case for questioning them was well put by Terence Ranger in 1986.<sup>15</sup> Finding their analysis in isolation from each other to be artificial and distorting, he pointed out, among other things, that churches launched by Africans were not necessarily more in the throes of social change than so-called traditional religion was and that mission, or mainline, churches were no less authentic than African-instituted churches as windows into African religious experiences. Ranger delivered his verdict on the back of several innovative studies of Christian independence in Africa.<sup>16</sup> The wider significance of these studies lay in their emancipation from the confines of structural-functionalism, whose atemporal models had so far precluded a close investigation of social change in Africa. Once it was recognized that no aspect of African social life was sealed off from the forces of change, the extension of their insights into the study of other aspects of religion was inevitable.

The late 1980s saw the rise of increasingly sophisticated approaches to the study of historical transformations through the shift of scholars' focus from Christian independence to African encounters with mission Christianity. A culturalist turn in anthropology and history facilitated this shift, much as many anthropologists and historians continued to relate their findings to the material processes of colonial exploitation.<sup>17</sup> Ostensibly devoted to showing the intricacies of African agency in the face of the missionary onslaught, a major innovation in many of these studies was the insistence on white missionaries as agents no less molded by culture than their black interlocutors.<sup>18</sup>

In order to recover the nuances of cultural ruptures in missionary encounters, anthropologists and historians had to devise new standards of method and demonstration that would make the silences of more formal archives speak. In the work of Jean and John Comaroff, in particular, a rich array of scholars' own reflections on material objects, architecture, agricultural methods, medical substances, and so on, appeared to compensate for the lack of historical records on African voices.<sup>19</sup> Yet this innovation also elicited doubts over the extent to which Africans lacked narratives as a form of historical consciousness.<sup>20</sup> More critically still, a related response was to question the implicit assumption that indigenous debate on religious transformation commenced with the arrival of Christian missionaries.<sup>21</sup> An emerging body of scholarship has indicated the extent to which conversations carried in African languages have predated and exceeded the impact of missionary interventions, with indigenous traditions of reflection making a Eurocentric history an ever more problematic venture.<sup>22</sup>

Although such recognition of African agency may bring us back to the conundrum of authenticity that the earlier work on African-instituted churches grappled with, it does raise the important question of how to acknowledge historical and cultural difference in analysis. Before the current interest in public culture, anthropologists and historians often explored this difference in terms of religious resistance to political subjugation. A range of Christian-inspired prophets and preachers stimulated more or less violent confrontations with colonial rule in different parts of Africa.<sup>23</sup> Karen Fields set a high standard for scholarship by demonstrating how religion remained integral to the apparently secular project of British colonialism.<sup>24</sup> The activities of the Watchtower movement in Malawi and Zambia in the beginning of the twentieth century troubled the colonial administration, because its practices of baptism, healing, and prophecy could be seen to carry elements of political protest.

In a similar vein, Jean Comaroff's study of Zionism in southern Africa highlighted the importance of the religious imagery and non-verbal behavior to black South Africans' resistance against the apartheid state.<sup>25</sup> Healing was a particularly potent practice under the circumstances of exploitation and subjugation. It marked a reintegration of matter and spirit, drawing together the social, spiritual, and embodied experiences that labor migration, among other economic imperatives, had torn apart. Symbolic and physical operations performed on the body through ritual were key to achieving this renewal of the person.

The studies by Fields and Jean Comaroff appeared at a time when social theorists were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Marxist models of false consciousness as explanations for the lack of revolt among colonized peoples.<sup>26</sup> The idea of subtle resistance within culturally specific modes of hegemony seemed an attractive alternative, and these perspectives on African agency provided particularly innovative examples of what the new paradigm could offer. Scholarship has moved on, however, and a general criticism directed against the literature on resistance has asked whether scholars, with their own left-liberal sensibilities, actually looked for whatever glimmers of unconventional politics that poor and marginalized people's lives could contain.<sup>27</sup> In other words, resistance as a category of thought may have been imposed on ethnographic and historical observations. The current conceptualizations of agency, as in the literature on Islamic piety mentioned earlier, emphasize the discourses and structures of subordination as the conditions of its enactment.<sup>28</sup>

A criticism more specifically aimed at Comaroff's argument about Zionism took issue with her view on these churches as sites of incipient political protest. Generalizing about so-called healing churches in southern Africa, Matthew Schoffeleers describes them as conduits of acquiescence instead of protest.<sup>29</sup> Yet wider theoretical and methodological issues continue to intrigue scholars, with some insisting on an expanded and unconventional notion of the political that takes into account church members' own idioms and experiences.<sup>30</sup>

By expanding the scope of what they consider to be political, scholars may or may not redress the limitations of resistance studies. Bearing in mind that Zionists had subscribed to a wide spectrum of political positions in South Africa, Richard Werbner asks, "What weight must we give to the explicit intent of the people themselves as against our inferences about the implicit and the unspoken?"<sup>31</sup> This empirical question requires a conceptual one as its complement: how do scholars conceptualize religion as an alternative source of political commentary and contestation? The idea of resistance as pursued by the Comaroffs, not only in their study of Christianity but also in their argument about witchcraft beliefs as a response to modernity's malcontents, certainly involves a perspective on politics as something else than what takes place within the confines of formal political institutions.<sup>32</sup> It does so, however, by making religious or occult practices seem like substitutes for a sociological and historical analysis.

At issue is whether religion is best thought to perform “a second-order process of adjustment.”<sup>33</sup> “What allows the Comaroffs,” Ruth Marshall has recently demanded, “to assume that these practices are principally modes of interpretation and understanding?”<sup>34</sup> The reduction of religion to a cognitive disposition inevitably diminishes both its practical import and its imaginative resources. It is, after all, not so much politics as religion that requires rethinking, particularly the ways in which it has, as a category of thought in academia, involved assumptions about the relationship between acting and believing.<sup>35</sup> It is a central contention of this volume that this rethinking is achieved more decisively when the concept of religion is paired with the concept of publics rather than politics.

### From Politics to Publics

The conceptual and methodological difficulties discerned in the changing perspectives on African Christianities recall the cautionary comment on the recent literature on Islamic piety movements. Problems with a cognitive approach, with the notion of religion as a second-order process of adjustment, are not solved by attributing priority to embodied, non-verbal behavior.<sup>36</sup> The great promise of studying Christianity—and indeed any religion—as an integral aspect of public culture is the way in which embodied, deeply felt experiences can be represented as coexisting with instances of deliberative and critical reason. It is here that a conceptual shift from politics to publics seems particularly productive, because sterile definitional disputes over the scope of the political and the religious can give way to an investigation of what actually assumes public significance in the historically specific circumstances of religious and political contestation. A central interest in such investigation is to uncover the multiple ways in which people seek to make their claims public; how those claims shape, and are shaped by, other public pronouncements; and what insight claims expressed in religious idioms can give into the constitution of moral and political publics.

Note how the notion of public as something that is widely (but not necessarily universally) open and accessible requires a notion of the public as its audience. The chapters in this volume explore claim making in a range of historical and contemporary contexts, but common to them all is the idea that the public is an audience whose members are not known to those who address it in order to make claims. According to Karin Barber, a public can be imagined to be limited or vast, “reaching out beyond the known community to wider populations, whether