

# Displacing the State



Religion and Conflict in Neoliberal Africa

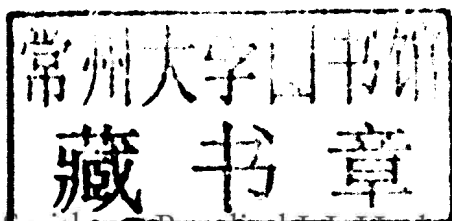
Edited by  
James Howard Smith and Rosalind I. J. Hackett

Foreword by R. Scott Appleby

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*Foreword by R. Scott Appleby*

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# Foreword

*R. Scott Appleby*

A friend and colleague in the study of Catholic modernism once remarked that the modernists, who wanted the Catholic Church to rediscover a forgotten or suppressed awareness of God's *immanence*, or indwelling presence in the individual soul, were convinced that "the world is so completely suffused with the divine presence that it was no longer meaningful for them to speak of the *supernatural*." Although accused of polytheism and paganism, as well as a dreadful heresy the pope termed *immanentism*, the Catholic modernists insisted that the indwelling presence of the divine was a *transcendent* presence, as paradoxical as that might appear at first blush. The presence of the living God, as God, they believed, was the power animating human creativity, industry, hope, and vulnerability, among other modes of the religious imagination.

Significantly, the modernists were students of comparative religion. They would find Africa today an intriguing confirmation of their theories about religion's ubiquitous presence—religion in the way they defined it, at least, as a diverse array of historically contingent expressions of the divine presence in human action.

Whether or not one is a believer in a God or gods, transcendent or immanent or immanent-in-transcendence, it is impossible to deny that Africa is a "furiously religious" place, to borrow Peter Berger's term for the "de-secularized world" in which we all live. Indeed, it is also impossible to understand cultures, politics, societies, and economies in Africa without struggling to comprehend the continent's long history of colonization (cultural, religious, military, political, and economic) and its dizzying diversity of indigenous, imported,

imposed, transplanted, and transformed religious and spiritual practices, institutions, networks, and media.

Yet surprising numbers of scholars have attempted to do just that—to ignore or treat superficially an interpretive problem that will not go away. For religion, defined to include ancestor worship as well as the sacrifice of the Eucharist, the umma as well as the clan, is implicated in almost every aspect of social life in Africa. Conflict is a constant of social life in Africa, as elsewhere, and so we should not be surprised that religions and religious actors are embroiled in ethnic clashes, resource wars, political violence, and other human rights abuses from the Maghreb to the Horn, from Cairo to Cape Town. Again, let us think of religion in this context as a complex, hybrid, fluid, lived reality rather than a neat ideal type found in a textbook or sacred scripture.

Even less examined in the scholarly literature, with some laudable exceptions noted by the editors of this volume, is the phenomenon of religious peace-building. Religion is implicated in urban, regional, and international violence in numerous ways—among others, as a direct instigator, a passive aggressor, and a breeder of intolerance that can erupt into hatred at the slightest manipulation. But religious communities and actors also help to prevent or limit violence, heal the psychic and spiritual wounds of victims, demand justice for the oppressed, mediate between warring parties, provide good offices for negotiations, and promote forgiveness and reconciliation, among other acts of “conflict transformation.”

The growing literature on peace-building views the process as continual and comprehensive of all phases of a conflict. Thus peace-builders work at one or more of the following tasks: *preventing violence* through programs of social and economic development to address inequalities, and through education and dialogue across lines of social division; *managing conflict* when it erupts into violence, through mediation, negotiation, and trust-building exercises; and *transforming conflicts* through resolution of “presenting issues” but also via longer-term structural reforms and social reconstruction after periods of violence and human rights abuses. In each of these overlapping phases of peace-building, recent research has shown, religious actors have contributed in significant ways, owing to a longstanding

record of religious service to the community and a style of presence and agency that draws upon rituals, memory, and symbols that resonate with the deepest values of a community.

This volume illustrates the diversity of religious influences on the character and dynamics of conflict in Africa by examining vivid cases, settings, and situations chosen to underscore the range of acts, ideas, social movements, and political decisions affected by what Africans believe and practice in and through their churches, mosques, media, and other religious spaces. There is no attempt to be comprehensive of any one region, much less the continent. Nor do all religious and spiritual practices and practitioners of religiously sanctioned violence or religiously empowered peace-building make an appearance in these pages. Whatever case is being discussed, however, the authors never stray far from an awareness of how religion in Africa is shaped by the legacy of European colonialism and the slave trade, the continuing effects of cultural, economic, and religious imperialism in an age of globalization, and the depressing record of corrupt and incompetent governance in many of the new African nations.

The volume has its remote origins in an international conference held in Jinja, Uganda, from March 31 to April 3, 2004, and sponsored by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame (United States). I say "remote" because, although many of the authors participated in the conference, others joined the project subsequent to the event, and every chapter has been recast around a common set of questions that provided specific content to the broad theme of the conference: "Religion in African Conflicts and Peace-building Initiatives: Problems and Prospects for a Globalizing Africa." Although several papers presented at the conference were not included in the volume, they shaped its themes and arguments, often by raising theoretical as well as empirical questions that gestated for months after conferees departed Jinja to their homes in Gulu, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Dakar, Lagos, Khartoum, Cape Town, The Hague, Bayreuth, Chicago, New York, Lexington, South Bend, and Knoxville.

A "furiously religious" world need not be incomprehensible, or flattened in its rich complexities to familiar and reductive social scientific categories. The signal contribution of this volume is that it begins

to plumb the more engrossing, and perplexing, depths of the human imagination that have inspired women and men of Africa to describe, enact, politicize, and justify their deepest aspirations and strivings within a world they experience as suffused with a presence they deem "sacred."

## Acknowledgments

While there are many people who were involved in the making of this book, and who deserve our thanks, we would like to especially acknowledge a few individuals without whom this book would not have been finished: E. Scott Appleby, director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, and his wonderful staff, notably Barbara Lockwood, who welcomed and supported us as Visiting Rockefeller Fellows in 2003–4; Rashied Omar, then director of the Program on Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding for invaluable discussions; Patrick Mason, his successor, for superb editorial assistance; Sakah Mahmud, our Rockefeller colleague, who helped lay the foundations for this book; and Jean Comaroff and Charles Villa-Vicencio for their thoughtful commentaries on the essays at an earlier stage. In sum, we are indebted to the Kroc Institute for providing a space for us to think and write about issues pertaining to religion, conflict, and peace.



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# Religious Dimensions of Conflict and Peace in Neoliberal Africa

An Introduction

*James Howard Smith*

It is difficult to imagine a place where religion's ambivalent power (Appleby 2000) has been more profoundly experienced than in Africa. In colonial Africa, for example, Christianity often bolstered, sustained, and legitimated the violent process of governance. But more recently, movements that draw their authority from "other-worldly" rather than "this-worldly" sources have mobilized African publics against corrupt and abusive temporal regimes and facilitated innovative new forms of reconciliation and cooperation.<sup>1</sup> This essay, and the volume it introduces, illustrates the power of religion in making and unmaking social and political orders in Africa. The authors represent diverse disciplines and backgrounds, but certain themes unite them, and in turn hold the volume together. The first is a shared emphasis on the socially and politically transformative power of religion, and its capacity to foster conflict and peace simultaneously. The second is that, in making sense of the relationship between religion and conflict, each essay dwells on the actual and ideal status of religion vis-à-vis the state and other secular institutions in Africa. And so, taken together, the essays question, in different ways, the relevance of the separation of the sacred from the secular, as well as the very categories themselves, in specific African contexts. This approach is prescient because the separation of religion from politics is often held to be a prerequisite for modern democratic societies, but this very separation conceals the fact that secular values are as predicated on belief as religious ones (Asad 2003). The distinction of the secular

from the sacred also undergirds temporal authority by implying that state violence is more reasonable and legitimate than its religious counterpart, an always dubious position that African history has rendered absurd. Finally, the essays in this volume respond—some directly and some implicitly—to the fact that the relationship between religious and secular categories and institutions is undergoing a profound shift in a neoliberal Africa gutted by structural adjustment programs (SAPs), as states become increasingly incapable of governing their territories and as religious groups take on many of the functions formerly reserved for states.

For post-Enlightenment secularists, the relationship between religion and politics has always been fairly straightforward: religion, because it is based on particularistic faith, is inherently non-rational and parochial, and its intrusion into politics is thus suspect at best; however, it is widely held that, because religion is grounded in morality, it is also uniquely capable of “speaking truth to temporal power” (Comaroff 2003), and so serves as a moral foundation for civil society (see Asad 2003 for an overview). For most secularists, then, religion is an essentially ambivalent force that must be controlled by more legitimate secular power, to which religious actors must ultimately submit in the interest of democracy. This position is often defended through a particular reading of European history. Religious sentiment has, according to this view, contributed to senseless and irrational death and violence, especially in the dreadful medieval and early modern past, and so the modern, democratic secular state evolved to protect people from the violent excesses of other people’s faith. Religion, in this widely held view, is vestigial—a stubbornly resilient, potentially dangerous trace of an earlier time whose social function in modern times is held to be the satisfaction of basic human needs that modern, secular societies neglect or repress, such as the need for meaning or social connection.

All of this has little to do with African understandings of or historical experiences with religion and politics. For one, most African religious thought and practice is not focused on the transcendent, but is explicitly concerned with the reinvigoration and expansion of social relationships in the present (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). For example, the idea that ancestors influence events in the present is widespread in

much of Africa, even among professed Christians, and can clearly be interpreted as a religious belief; however, the whole point about the ancestors is that they live among and impact the lives of the living, and that they want to be shown affection by being included in everyday human activities, like eating, drinking, and participating directly in political life. Moreover, modernist assumptions about how religion and politics should relate to one another, if at all—including the idea that religion may be inimical to modern political life—have little relevance to African experiences of state politics or religion, as certain religions (especially Christianity) have long been seen, by Europeans in Africa and Africans alike, as synonymous with modernity and progress.

In addition, the pairing of the categories “religion” and “conflict” implies a normative social order, or peace, that is secular and presumably state-centered. Conflict, cast as a pathology, acquires meaning in relationship to peace, a supposedly normative condition, but to what actual social-political condition does the term *peace* refer? Recent social theory has made the violent conceptual and operational foundations of states, and of secular law, abundantly clear (see, for example, Agamben 1998). The inherent violence of law and the state makes normative understandings of the concept of “peace,” which are usually synonymous with nation-state sovereignty and legal convention, seem naïve and misguided. Contemporary events have borne out the fact that peace is itself a fraught concept that often conceals the violence upon which apparent peace depends. It is interesting, in this regard, that, since the suicide bombings of 9/11 and the subsequent (2003) U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, the terms *empire* and *imperialism* have reemerged in popular and academic discourse after a long hiatus, fueling the popularity of books such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*, and feeding discussion about the true reasons for and consequences of Iraq’s so-called liberation. In this context, it has become common for scholars to connect peace with domination and to point out, as Partha Chatterjee has put it, that “the first and most important function of empire is to maintain the peace” (Chatterjee 2004, 98). Thus, in the context of real-world imperial politics, the imposition of peace exacerbates discontent and violence

which, as everyone watching the news is all too aware, is often articulated in a religious idiom (see, for example, Juergensmeyer 2008; Lincoln 2003).

Africans have been very much aware of the relationship between empire and putative peace since the beginning of colonialism. Colonial rule, one of the most violent and transformative episodes of Africa's shared history, was rhetorically framed, by its proponents, as a peace-building project: an effort to forge a universalizing hegemony over what was imagined to be the chaotically pluralistic violence of African life. One of the primary stated reasons for missionization and administrative colonialism was the protection of Africans from themselves: from their own inherent violence, from their absence of reason, and from their childlike inability to distinguish truth from falsehood (see, for example, Mamdani 1996). This underpinned the religious and secular dimensions of the colonial project, including the artificial imposition of the colonial boundaries that would later become the material and imaginative pretexts for postcolonial national sovereignty and peace.

Thus Africans experienced colonial and postcolonial nation-states as violent and coercive intrusions into preexisting, dynamic social and political orders, and not as reasonable institutions that promised the alleviation of pain and the promulgation of peace through the attenuation of religious unreason. Therefore, we should be wary of projecting onto Africa the liberal Western notion that the state is a reasonable artifice designed to replace irrational conflict and war with peace and happiness. Moreover, in many parts of the continent, Christianity fostered and legitimated class formation in Africa; conversion came to be synonymous with the acquisition of modernity and its fruits (such as schooling and formal employment), while non-Christian beliefs and practices came to be associated, for many, with backwardness and poverty. African cultural and ritual practices were at first stigmatized by missionaries, and later were coupled by real political, geographic, and economic marginalization, which shaped the way these vernacular activities, and the people who practiced them, were perceived. Schooling, which was usually predicated on conversion to Christianity, promised an avenue of escape from the restrictions created by colonial policies of indirect governance, customary law, and apartheid

rules regulating labor migration to urban centers, and so cemented the equation of certain religions, such as Christianity, with modernity and progress.

Given the relationships among religion, governance, and the making of African elites in colonial Africa, it is not surprising that most popular anti-colonial movements channeled the power of religion, often in ways that transgressed upon established secular and religious powers simultaneously. Typically, these new, popular religious movements attempted to either (1) appropriate potent aspects of colonial orders while making them more amenable to African conditions (for example, syncretic “break-away” schools and churches) or (2) completely transform political arenas by creating new, religiously inspired realities that never existed before, but which drew on earlier cultural and historical symbolic resources—such as millenarian movements, neo-traditionalist movements, Islamic brotherhoods, and, in a somewhat different vein, certain “born-again” forms of Christianity seeking a break with the past. For example, in Kenya, defense of female genital-cutting, banned by the Christian missions and government in 1929, was the issue that initially popularized and empowered the first anti-colonial political association, the Kikuyu Central Association, which launched the career of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president, who went on to write a full-scale ethnography defending the practice. The new African independent schools and churches that formed, at first in response to the ban, were able, over time, to collapse and transcend the powerful oppositions that had been central to colonial rule—most important, the divide separating African things from European things.

Other anti-colonial movements focused specifically on mobilizing the power of the past in opposition to abusive authorities. In Zimbabwe during the 1960s and 1970s, traditional spirit mediums, in constant dialogue with ancestors, led the Shona guerilla war against the colonial regime, and greatly enlarged the scale of the anti-colonial resistance (Lan 1985). And throughout the continent, new religious movements have challenged colonial and postcolonial regimes, deploying ritual and magic to unite large groups of people, while simultaneously offering an alternative, often millennialist, vision that runs counter to the state (Hackett 2010; Comaroff 2001). Examples of

socially marginalized groups mobilizing cultural resources to resist and reinvent oppressive social orders are too numerous to detail, but include the Tanzanian Maji Maji rebellion of the 1910s, the eastern Congolese Simba secessionist rebellion of the mid-1960s, and Alice Lakwena's Acholi insurrection against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's government in the 1980s. Throughout colonial and post-colonial Africa, armed insurgencies drew on culturally and historically entrenched idioms, framing them in an innovative way in an effort to generate new, inclusive social and political orders.

Postcolonial African regimes seeking to consolidate their control over territories that were nation-states in name only sought, like their colonial predecessors, to manage religion and religious differences as part of the political project of nation-building. In many new nations, educated Christian elites, many of whom had acquired prestige and position as colonial functionaries within colonial systems, monopolized the avenues to and symbols of success in the postcolonial period. Supported by mainline church leaders, in many postcolonies politicians and educated civilian leaders used the entrenched belief that African life and culture was synonymous with "witchcraft and savagery" to cajole populations to leave "traditional" cultural and religious practices behind in the interest of national development. But this was certainly not the only variation on the theme of religious politics, as others sought to ground the state in more authentically African cultural repertoires: for example, in 1960s Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko banned Christian baptism and names, while Africanizing dress and criminalizing the tie as part of his attempt to forge an outwardly egalitarian national culture with himself at its center. In 1970s Mozambique, FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the anti-colonial guerilla insurgency-turned Marxist-Leninist government, tried to make its influence felt in regions where it was unknown and its motivations suspect by taking dramatic measures against Christian church leaders and "traditional" ritual and religious authorities alike (Lubke-mann 2008). In response to the demonization of African culture by colonial and postcolonial authorities, and in an effort to create a truly decolonized African sensibility, many African intellectuals and cultural leaders have long tried to resurrect African religious concepts and practices by making them look more like their direct competitors,



especially Christianity. For example, they have resorted to the politics of capital letters and acronyms in order to make African religions resemble something like a church, while sanitizing and homogenizing what were, in actuality, incredibly diverse cultural practices (and so these diverse beliefs and practices are now called, in African academic circles, “African Traditional Religion” or the even more official and organized sounding acronymic “ATR”).

In short, throughout the continent, arguments about what counts as religious and irreligious continue to be linked to now thoroughly Africanized ideas about modernity, progress, and the ideal foundations of political community. These debates erupt in emerging public spheres, and largely define public debate about a range of issues. For example, I once watched an African Pentecostal preacher in Nairobi try to demonstrate, through elaborate interpretations involving numerology, that condoms were part of a satanic conspiracy spearheaded by whites, in consort with African elites, to kill off the poor and appropriate the land of the deceased. An irate and well-dressed African businessman responded to him, and the growing crowd, with the provocative question, “But how can the whites be devils, since they are the ones who brought light to a dark continent?!” And, for a conference on religion, conflict, and peace-building in Africa held in Uganda, I was part of a panel on African neo-traditionalist political movements, including the Congolese Mai Mai and the Kenyan Mungiki. After the presentations concluded, a sizable group of African religious leaders stood up and vocally complained, “That is not religion!” These social movements, they argued, were the violent work of the devil, who seeks to turn society backward by playing on the immature passions of the poor.

In the post-Cold War era, the imposition of neoliberal economic policies has further blurred, and at times inverted, whatever boundary can be said to have existed between religion and formal politics in Africa. During the 1980s and 1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF)– and World Bank–mandated deregulation of African economies led to currency devaluation, slashed public services, the erosion of political patronage, and, ironically, increased corruption. As a result, governance has become progressively more fragmentary and multiple, and in many places no single political entity exercises the