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Challenges for the Sociology of Religion in the African Context: Prospects for the Next 50 Years

On the occasion of Social Compass's 50th anniversary as a leading journal for the sociology of religion, the author was asked to define the challenges which this discipline will face in the African context in the next 50 years. After retrospectively sketching both the African situation (with its three pillars of historic African religion, Islam, and Christianity) and some Africanist themes in the sociology of religion, globalization is discussed as a major challenge: how does it affect religion and identity, and how does the model of the formal (self-)organization which it favours, have an impact especially with regard to representation and resilience of African religious forms? The second major challenge clusters around the problematic state of civil society in Africa: in the face of disorder and violent conflict. Here the pivotal question is: can African religious forms contribute to the societal consensus that is central to modern statehood?

Key words: Africa · Christianity · civil society · consensus · disorder · globalization · identity · Islam · resilience · traditional religion

A l'occasion du 50ème anniversaire de Social Compass, l'auteur a été invité à esquisser les défis que la sociologie de la religion va devoir relever dans le contexte africain dans les 50 prochaines années. Après avoir rappelé rétrospectivement à la fois la situation religieuse en Afrique (avec ses trois piliers que sont les religions africaines originelles, l'islam et le christianisme) et certains thèmes africanistes étudiés en sociologie des religions, l'auteur aborde le thème de la mondialisation, qu'il qualifie de défi majeur: comment affecte-t-elle la religion et l'identité, et quel est l'impact du modèle d'organisation (ou d'auto-organisation) formelle favorisé par la mondialisation sur la représentation et la capacité d'adaptation des formes religieuses africaines? Le deuxième grand défi a trait à la situation problématique de la société civile en Afrique, eu égard notamment aux désordres et aux conflits violents. De ce point de vue, la question centrale est de savoir si les formes religieuses africaines peuvent contribuer au consensus sociétal qui est au cœur de l'Etat moderne.

Mots-clés: Afrique · auto-organisation · christianisme · consensus · désordre · Etat · globalisation · identité · islam · organisation formelle · religion traditionnelle · représentation · résilience · société civile · sociologie de la religion · violence

No Prospect without Retrospect

The sociology of religion in Africa has been only briefly represented at the ISSR's conferences and in *Social Compass*. Attending the sessions on the North Atlantic region I realized how different from those researchers' experiences the study of religion in Africa has tended to be. Theoretical continuity vis-à-vis the founding fathers of the sociology of religion, and of sociology *tout court*, is far more apparent in North Atlantic studies than with regard to Africa. The urban, industrial class society; the formal organization as that society's main social technology—especially in the religious field; the self-evidence of the capitalist economy in league with an effective bureaucratically organized state; and the great extent to which citizens entertain a societal consensus in which the rationality of the state and of the economy appear to them as virtually inescapable—this was North Atlantic societies' format when the sociology of religion emerged from their midst a century ago, and whatever changes have since taken place, that format can still be made out, especially from the distant perspective Africa affords us. Thus, the North Atlantic sociologist of religion derives confidence from the fact that the phenomena under investigation are continuous with his native social experience, and have inspired his discipline from its inception.

In Africa, however, the generally recent (19th–20th century), incomplete, ineffective, and by now greatly eroded (Davidson, 1992; Mbembe, 2001), implantation of the North Atlantic model of state and society has meant, for much of the 20th century, that the Africanist sociologist of religion is on relatively unfamiliar grounds, facing a plurality of fragmented and historically heterogeneous forms of ritual practice which have resulted in only a precarious, partial and (to judge by the level of internal violent conflict) ineffective societal and political consensus; moreover, these forms have been largely studied by other social sciences than the sociology of religion (notably anthropology and history).

Yet, over the past 50 years, the social-scientific study of religion in Africa has grown from a mere trickle to a massive undertaking, now pursuing a variety of paradigms largely unheard of at the beginning of that period. The older studies¹ concentrated on church dynamics; church independency; religious organization as an urban adaptive mechanism; syncretism (as an unsatisfactory designation of processes of interaction between “historic” African religion, on the one hand, Islam or Christianity, on the other); healing cults; prophetic movements largely interpreted as protest against the colonial state; and the parallelism or complementarity between a local society's secular and religious structural and symbolical themes. Studies along such lines have not exactly faded away but they no longer constitute the bulk of Africanist religious studies. Instead, the following themes have come to be prominent: identity; youth; globalization; intercontinentalization; commodification; multiplicity of reference; agency; complex interactions between Islam, Christianity and historic (i.e. “traditional”) African religion; fundamentalism; disorder, violence, human rights, the collapse and—hopefully—subsequent reconstruction of civil society and the state; the environment; witchcraft and modernity; divination; health implication of religious

beliefs and practices; the details of Islamic social and political life in Africa, and its transcontinental connections; representation; and epistemology. Ethnicity, gender, popular culture, territorial cults, royal cults, possession and mediumship, the sacralization of space, cosmologies, and modes of production linger on from among the themes of the 1970s–1990s.

Meanwhile, the African continent itself has moved from relatively effective colonial domination via the euphoria of the 1960s–1970s, to economic and political decline in subsequent decades. In the past 50 years, the trajectories of Islam, Christianity and “historic” African religious forms—the three main pillars of Africanist religious studies—have been very different, and all three of them largely unpredictable. Worldwide, the rise of Islam to a spiritual and political power complex of the first magnitude, as well as the relative decline of organized Christianity in the North Atlantic region, has constituted two processes which over the past half-century have greatly influenced the dynamics of these world religions *on African soil*, as well as scholars’ perceptions of these dynamics.

Sociologists will appreciate that the most powerful and most amazingly successful *social* technology implanted on African soil in the course of the 20th century, has been the formal, voluntary or bureaucratic organization as defined along Weberian lines, which (despite all its malfunctioning) yet within a century has almost completely transformed all spheres of African life, from the state to education and health care, and which particularly has come to provide the dominant model of religious self-organization, among Christian churches, but increasingly also in the Islamic domain and even in the domain of African historic religion.

While the spread of the two world religions to Africa, and their subsequent developments there, in themselves have been part of an earlier phase of (proto-)globalization in the course of the past two millennia, the most recent decades have seen an intensification of globalization in the narrower sense, governed by technologies of communication and information that have dramatically reduced the social cost of time and space to an unprecedented minimum.

Fifty years ago it would have been impossible to predict these recent developments. Giving prospects for the next half-century is no simpler, for there is no reason to assume that the pace of religious, social, political and technological change in the world is slackening now that mankind has managed to survive, barely, into the 21st century.

The Challenges of Globalization in the African Religious Context

How Globalization Affects Religion

Recent globalization has resulted in a blurring of the above ideal-typical difference between Africa and the North Atlantic region. Under postmodern conditions typical of globalization, North Atlantic societies, too, have experienced large-scale erosion of meaning and consensus, fragmentation of identity, and erosion of the nation-state by elusive intercontinental

corporate powers in the economic domain. In Africa, the percolation of global *linguae francae*, of global media such as television, the cell phone, and the Internet, of globally circulating manufactured consumer goods, and of globally available religious expressions such as Islamism and Pentecostalism, has brought the forms of African social and religious life closer to those in other continents today. Increasingly also for Africa, the neat compartmentalization of the world into continents has become an idea of the past. Not only have the concerns of North Atlantic political, ideological and economic hegemony and of Islamic counter-hegemony found their way to what used to be distinct and distant local settings in Africa. Also the religious, ethnic and cultural expressions which used to be restricted to local settings in Africa, in the course of recent globalization have spilled over to Africans' diasporic communities world-wide. Recent technologies make it possible for local African religious and artistic expressions to assume a new global and commodified format; this offers them a new lease of life albeit that in the process they have become greatly transformed, shedding much of their original local symbolic frame of reference. For the first time in post-Neolithic history distinctive local and regional African religious expressions (music, dance, divination, specific cults, more diffuse personal spirituality) have gained a substantial presence and impact in the North Atlantic *also among people not of recent conscious African descent*. The latter effect is caused both by the increasingly diasporic demographic presence of Africans, and by their appropriation of recent communication technologies also for the expression of local (and not just global) religious ideas and practices.

If the decline of organized religion in the North Atlantic goes hand in hand with the destruction of socially underpinned, collectively shared meaning, could it then be that the resilience and continued flourishing of religion in Africa have implications, not only for the African continent but worldwide? Already we have had, for decades, a situation where Africa is the major growth area of both Christianity and Islam; African religious personnel have been known to be subjected to a brain-drain, with, for instance, African parish priests filling some of the open ranks in the North Atlantic Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy. However, it is not only established, organized religion which is fed back from Africa into the North Atlantic region, but also diffuse notions of magic and evil, for instance around the concept of "voodoo", which has become detached from any original meaning and content it had in the original context (in *vodun* in Benin/Togo/Nigeria), and now has become a blanket term in global circulation, to denote any African spiritual force murkily defying global rationality.

Christianity and Islam have been among the most significant globalizing projects ever since the era of proto-globalization, and religions have loomed large in globalization studies from the very beginning.² Here the standard was set by Ranger (1993, cf. 1975!). Recent work on Pentecostalism puts the Christian side of globalization in Africa in relief (Corten and Marshall-Fratani, 2001. On the Islamic side, Kane (1997; cf. Stoller, 1999, 2002, and Dilley, in press) examines the historical role and structure of Sufi orders in West Africa. In the context defined by globalization, the break-down of

the state, and mass migrations, Kane argues that the networks which Sufi orders create, function in fact as a substitute for the state in the provision of social security. With increased mobility, the Sufi networks have now been strengthened over ever greater distances, often well beyond Africa.

However, globalization has also had an impact on historic African religion. Much research has concentrated on the collective imagination, the fantasies, which globalization brings about especially in the periphery of the global system. Economically and socially marginalized, Africans have developed strands of reasoning that seek to explain and provide solutions to this exclusion. Research conducted on the issues of witchcraft and magic in Africa in the context of globalization has come to be dominated by the work of Geschiere (1995, 1998). For him, the obsession with witchcraft in many parts of present-day Africa is not to be viewed as a survival. On the contrary, it is particularly present in the more modern spheres of society. He notes that also in other parts of the world modern developments coincide with a proliferation of “economies of the occult” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999). The power of contemporary African discourses on occult forces, according to Geschiere, is that they relate people’s fascination with the open-endedness of global flows to the search for fixed orientation points and identities. Both witchcraft and spirit cults exhibit a surprising capacity for combining the local and the global. Both also have specific implications for the ways in which people try to deal with modernity’s challenge. Writing of commodities in the global space, van Dijk (1999: 72) challenges the common “enchantment” approach to this topic, because it “seems to primitivize the other’s capacity to deal with the uncertainties and the porous quality of social life which result from engagement with the global economy”.

Personally, I have sought to correct Geschiere’s presentism, advocating instead that witchcraft in Africa today is about the “virtualized boundary conditions of the kinship order”—an order whose basic format at least goes back to the Neolithic, as does its basic defiance through witchcraft, even though under modern conditions of globalization the specific forms and occasions of witchcraft beliefs and practices have been subject to specific changes (van Binsbergen, 2001).

The Challenge of Identity

The recent globalization process, with its profound changes in the nature of post-capitalism and the North Atlantic state, has led, throughout the world today, to a situation where (superimposed upon a structure of worldwide inequality along continental, national-constitutional, regional, class, gender and age lines, and largely obscuring the latter from view) there is a representational structure of *identity*. From the local to the global level, politics is less and less conceived as a struggle for scarce material resources, but as a struggle for recognition of identity (Taylor, 1992). Religious forms, in Africa and elsewhere, have lent themselves to the production of contrastive identities within the socio-political arenas at all levels. They have (often as a result of the local historical contingencies of Christian and Islamic proselytizing in Africa) either reinforced existing ethnic, linguistic, regional and class

boundaries, or offered alternative (usually more universal) identities in the light of which non-religious identity boundaries can be crossed or rendered irrelevant. Empirical studies exploring these processes have formed an established genre of Africanist religious research for decades.

Challenges arise here in a number of ways. The first challenge concerns what has emerged as a major paradigm in the interpretation of organized religion in the postmodern North Atlantic region: *believing without belonging* (cf. Davie, 1994). In Africa, it is very much still “believing *and* belonging”, in the sense that especially in Christianity (but increasingly also in Islam and even in African historic religion) formal self-organization is the obvious context for belief and ritual.

In the second place we have to consider the proliferation of new boundaries and new identities under the very impact of globalization—contrary to the naïve expectation that globalization is all about unimpeded flow. Political processes, especially those of an imperial nature, have carved out geographical spaces within which a plurality of identities tend to be mapped out. An unstructured, diffuse social field cannot be named, nor can it inspire identity. The apparently unlimited and uncontrollable supply of intercontinentally mediated images, symbols, ideas and objects which is swept across contemporary Africa by the media, commodity distribution, the educational services, cosmopolitan medicine and world religions, calls for new identities. People seek to define new boundaries so as to create or salvage their identity in the face of this incessant flow. By imposing boundaries they may either appropriate for themselves a specific part of the global supply, or protect themselves in order to keep part of the global flow at a safe distance. Such boundaries are in the first place constructed by human thought, as *conceptual* boundaries. However, they are mainly maintained and ever again re-constructed, in *interaction*; and for such interaction the relatively new formal organizations of Africa constitute the most obvious context. Let us for instance consider such a widespread phenomenon as the laundering of globally mediated commodities and of money in the context of contemporary religious organizations. We have seen how many African Christian churches appear as a context for the managing of elements belonging to the inimical domain of commodities, consumption and the market. But much the same process is at work among syncretistic or neo-traditional cults.³ If such organizations can selectively manage the global and construct a security screen of identity around their members, they are at least as effective in keeping the local (ancestors, spirits of the wild, local deities) out of their charmed circle of identity, or allowing it in only at severe restrictions. There is a remarkable variation in the way in which local religious forms are allowed to be voiced in a context where the globally mediated religious forms (Islam, Christianity) are clearly dominant. Creating identity—“a place to feel at home” (Welbourn and Ogot, 1966)—means that the Christian or Islamic converts engage in a social process that allows them, by the management of boundaries and the positioning of people, ideas and objects within and outside these boundaries, to create a new community which, in principle, is independent from whatever pre-existing community

attachments they may have had on the basis of their kinship affiliations, rural homes, ethnic or political affiliations.

This second point implies the third, which has been elaborated by the cosmopolitan African philosophers Mudimbe (1988) and Appiah (1992) in their critique of Afrocentricity and ethnic identity politics; these philosophers are claiming that African identities today, including religious identities, are so deceptively constructed that we should only deconstruct them.

In an Africa rife with the reification of, and conflict over, identities, such a theoretical *caveat* is likely to have less practical implications than a fourth type of challenge in the domain of identity. This arises when local and global identities percolate and merge to form a tangle with far-reaching political implications. For instance, the identity constructions of Igbo immigrants in Hausaland, Northern Nigeria (notably: “will they convert to Islam or not?”), are no longer primarily determined by a consideration of the networks of local and regional trade and other economic opportunities, but by the Islamist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001, and their aftermath. Whereas assuming a Christian identity (although perceived as a path to modernity) was rarely a sufficient condition for an African person’s acceptance in North Atlantic circles, possessing or assuming an *Islamic* identity now in principle incriminates the same African person by virtue of the deceptive construction, by American–British hegemony, of a collective enemy of the North Atlantic political and economic order and security. Of course, the expansion of Christianity in Africa has been part of a North Atlantic hegemonic project from the 19th century onwards, and in this sense the recent projection of extra-African concerns on African processes of identity is nothing new under the sun. We should resist the temptation to turn Africanist religious studies into a hegemonic exercise puppeteered from the Foreign Offices in Washington and London. Instead, we should try to find a sociological answer to the question—no longer particularly Africanist—as to why Islam has such a massive and increasing appeal in Africa today. Islam appears as an alternative route to modernity, ensuring (or at least promising) a meaningfulness, dignity, boundedness, and (as a stepping stone to Islamic diasporas in the North Atlantic region) worldwide *belonging*, which Northern hegemony denies the vast majority of the inhabitants of Asia, Africa and Southern America. It may be time to break out of our decades-long fascination with identity for identity’s sake, and re-address ourselves to the study of underlying *inequalities in resources and power*.

The Challenge of Formalization, Representation, and Resilience

The increasing dominance of formal organizations after the North Atlantic model has inevitably an impact on the representation of African religious forms. The insistence on formal (self-)organizations in the religious domain offers the possibilities of firm boundaries, as stipulated by the socio-legal format of such organizations, their registration with the state, and their clear distinction between who is a member and who is not.

However, the plurality of religious organizations in contemporary Africa should not make us close our eyes to the fact that in social practice the

boundaries between them tend to be very porous: people shop around for religious affiliation, many have multiple memberships or at least affinities, and in practice one easily shifts from one organization to another for reasons of convenience, sociability, existential appeal, more than of doctrine.

Representation is an ubiquitous feature, even a precondition, of social life. The very perpetuation of religious forms, even in the hands of their own qualified adepts, depends on representation, which enables these participants to coordinate the social process of their ritual organization, to recruit and instruct newcomers, and to present themselves both self-reflectively and towards the outside world.

From the introduction of writing to that of the Internet, technological innovations have revolutionized the domain of self-presentation of African religious forms: from self-reflexive ethnography (introduced already a century ago, when early Kongo converts began to produce written texts describing their traditional religion; cf. Janzen, 1985); subsequently raised to the genre of “retrodiction” (“evoking historic African religion as if one still believed in them”) which Mudimbe (1997) has identified for the Roman Catholic clerical intellectuals living “the articulation of difference” in late colonial Central Africa; to self-representation through photographs, film, video, and especially on globally available websites today. Adopting a new technology of representation also means making aspects of African religion available for circulation and appropriation outside Africa, even among non-Africans.

The reformulation in a new organizational format is a major reason why, over the past decades, *African historic religious forms* have displayed a far greater resilience than could ever have been predicted considering the onslaught of North Atlantic secular rationality, the state, Christianity, Islam, and biomedicine. For such major domains as territorial cults, puberty rites, chieftainship (which throughout Africa involves royal cults), possession and mediumship, and divination, there is considerable evidence to the effect that, far from disappearing under modern conditions, these have made a remarkable comeback in the late 20th century. North Atlantic research on these topics has not produced this resilience, but merely recorded it and identified its probable causes. The available studies suggests two other factors of resilience in addition to their reformulation within formal organizations:

1. These institutions are time-honoured ways, of proved effectiveness, to deal with perpetual central issues facing local societies (authority, order, the management of conflict, role preparation, gender and age differences, the acquisition of an effective social identity).
2. These institutions draw on sources of cosmological meaning and self-identity whose continued relevance may have been eroded by recent globalization, yet are far from destroyed by it.

Meanwhile, the most obvious context for the resilience of historic African religion is provided by formal organizations in the context of the world religions: Christian churches, Islamic brotherhoods and mosque-centred congregations. However, we have already pointed out that these organiza-

tions' adoption of historic elements is highly selective and transformative, generally reducing such elements to a muted and implicit state in which they have become deprived of dynamics of their own.

The Challenge of Disorder, Conflict and Violence: Religion and the Civil Society in the African Context

Religious forms in Africa either reinforce or cut across existing socio-political, ethnic, regional, class, age and gender identities and their boundaries. Therefore, whenever we encounter religious processes in Africa (be they in the Islamic, Christian or historic African domain), conflict is always within our field of vision, and violence is never far away.

The empirical documentation of the varieties of violence and their religion-related contexts constitutes a meaningful and urgent field of research, not only from an analytical but also from a humanitarian point of view. Post-colonial African states have often failed to extend economic and physical security to their citizens, and in about a dozen African countries the state only exists on paper. This has had a profound impact on the religious domain: established forms of religious self-organization come under pressure, or may even collapse; there is a resilience of other forms (especially historic ones) and their mobilization for survival, protest, and liberation; world religions' intercontinental connections are used to create contexts of negotiation and reconciliation to reduce or terminate conflict, and to further democracy; political, regional and ethnic conflict may be articulated in terms of two rival world religions (Islam versus Christianity), sometimes as an invitation to massive violence.

The challenge here lies particularly in the formulation of more adequate models of social analysis. A powerful tradition in the sociology of religion (that of Durkheim) puts religion at the centre of the construction of the social order, and hence lets religion appear as a context in which conflict is attenuated and reconciliation may be negotiated in avoidance of violence. This approach has proved reasonably enlightening for socio-political processes at the grassroots level of the village, the localized ethnic group in a rural setting, and the urban ward. Here the participants' dominant frame of reference tends to be modelled after kinship, and religious groups with their rituals enhance the intra-kin social process or provide the alternative of fictive kinship. Religious institutions in Africa (Islamic, Christian, and historic African) tend to offer highly effective social technologies of reconciliation at the local level (van Binsbergen, 1999b). However, at the regional and national level, and in the light of worldwide processes leading to the negative stereotyping of Islam in untutored North Atlantic eyes, religion has proved to be more a divisive than an integrative force in Africa. All the same, religious organizations, both Africa-based and international, have been active in reconciliation with regard to recent ethnic and racial conflict in, for instance, East Africa and the Republic of South Africa (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

A central challenge, therefore, inspired by the performance of African religious forms in the social and political domain, is: *can African religion contribute to the construction of societal consensus as the backbone of civil society?* Can the two world religions, each separately or in combination, ever succeed in binding the extreme fragmentation of African socio-political experience into a consensus at the regional, national, even international level?

In principle, the answer on this point is rather affirmative despite (cf. Mbembe, 1997) far-reaching qualifications. In addition to the adoption of the formal organization, and closely related to this process, the transformation of African societies in the course of the 20th century has consisted of the creation of a new, national societal order, and the religious underpinning of that order by elements derived from a world religion. In the northern half of Africa, where Islam was often dominant well *before* the advent of European colonial rule, this process evolved more gradually than where (very roughly: in Africa south of the 10° North parallel) Christianity emerged as the main world religion in question (although, more recently, under pressure from a rapidly increasing Islam). In Islamic Africa the process subsequently intensified with the global rise of Islamism in the last decades of the 20th century. As to Christianity, so closely associated with the colonial state, modern education and health care, in much less than a century it has managed to establish itself as an implicit “Great Tradition”, not so much eradicating historic African religion but relegating it to the rural and the private sphere, as an unobtrusively surviving, often even resilient, “Little Tradition”.

Although there are notable exceptions (e.g. Benin and Swaziland, where historic ecstatic and royal cults are frequently mediated towards the public sphere and the centres of national power), by and large, in contemporary Africa, historic African religion tends to be inconspicuous. While surviving as a private expression in the kinship domain and as a local public expression in many rural contexts, it is as a rule not conspicuous in the urban areas and at the political centre. This does not mean that African historic religion is absent from modern life, but that it has largely gone *underground* (cf. van Binsbergen, 1993, 2002), since its numerous private adherents are generally unwilling or incapable to publicly withstand the allegations of primitiveness, heterodoxy, evil, which have been projected upon these local religions expressions ever since the introduction, on African soil, of Islam and Christianity. It is these two world religions which dominate the public sphere and which may, and often do, offer such (admittedly limited) ideological consensus as national African societies yet display in the postcolonial era. Historic African religion still plays a role there in a number of ways. It may be explicitly co-opted (albeit in a form which has lost its dynamics and meaning) to the public centre, at selected places and times (e.g. independence celebrations and other political ceremonial) to help construct a sense of national identity through folklore. It may be nostalgically re-invented (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) not so much by politicians but by intellectuals, in order to derive, from the realm of ancestors and precolonial kingship, alternative solutions for contradictions which the world religions, given their strong links with the political centre, cannot in themselves reconcile—such as in the case of *ubuntu* philosophy in Southern Africa today (van Binsbergen, 2002). How-

ever, historic African religion is mainly articulated in the public and central sphere in order to provide a *contrast* with the norms and values claimed to inform that sphere. When this happens, African historic religion appears in a negative light—as witchcraft, Satanism, human sacrifice, paganism. This state of affairs may also lead to a point where antisocial violence assumes the trappings of a cult of evil re-invented on the basis of the selective appropriation of elements of African historic religion devoid of their original context (Toulabor, 2000). By contrast, when civil war confronts what is seen as an exploitative national or colonial state associated with a world religion, more intact and original forms of African historic religion may be adopted as important props of identity (e.g. in Southern Senegal, and in the Zimbabwe liberation struggle).

Comparison with the situation in other continents (most nation-states in the Americas, Europe, North Africa and the Middle East) suggests that when one world religion effectively dominates the national political space, this may create the kind of societal consensus conducive to a viable national polity. The presence of competing world religions of comparable strength within a national space often goes together with violent conflict, as in India (Hindus/Muslims) and the Balkans (Christians/Muslims), and the same may be said about denominations of world religions, such as Protestantism/Anglicanism in Northern Ireland, the religious wars in early modern Europe, and the struggles between *sunna* and *shi'ite* Islam in Iraq. In Africa, some major violent conflicts have been fought in postcolonial states comprising rival Muslim and Christian populations (Sudan, Chad, Nigeria in the Biafra crisis). However, one needs only consider the many postcolonial African cases of regional and ethnic conflict without a major component of world-religion rivalry (e.g. Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea) to realize, for Africa and beyond, the one-sidedness of Huntington's (1996) stress on world religions in the "clash of civilizations". Not any allegedly irreconcilable contradiction of world religions, but other features of the postcolonial African states (personalized leadership, shallow constitutional tradition, prominence of ethnic and regional conflict, elite appropriation of the state and its international relations), of their national economies and of their global political and economic environment would explain such conflicts.

With the continued decline of African postcolonial states, the world religions tend to provide the organizational backbone of civil society as well as its mouthpiece. This implies that they are in a highly strategic position to mediate between Africa and the North Atlantic and Middle Eastern political and religious organizations active in the fields of development cooperation, education, and human rights. The role of Christian and Islamic organizations in the democratization wave and the call for "good governance" which swept across Africa around 1990, shows the advantages of such a situation. However, this implies a further marginalization of historic African religion from the public domain and the political centre; also the filtering of North–South contacts via a local African, religiously-underpinned development elite contains the risk that the local grassroots level no longer actively participates in the intercontinental production and circulation of

knowledge, which then tends to become a circulation of ignorance under what I have elsewhere described as the Janus effect (van Binsbergen, 1999c).

Revelation and Revolution, the Comaroffs' (1991–1997) monumental study of Tswana Christianity, may leave the superficial reader with the impression that the implantation of a world religion in Africa was inevitably a process of hegemonic subjugation. However, processing largely familiar material through the sieve of their Foucauldian discourse does not make the Comaroffs overlook the converts' agency. Africans' adoption of Christianity was generally not a passive process of hegemonic submission. Very soon (cf. Shepperson and Price, 1958) it became an act of appropriation and empowerment. In this connection, Mudimbe (1997) has stressed, for first-generation African Christian intellectuals, the role of Christianity in the "liberation of African difference", while Mbembe (1988) highlighted similar processes in his *Afriques indociles*. Christianity has created, in the course of the 20th century, a "mutant cultural order" (Mudimbe, 1997), comprising, far beyond the individual Christian thinkers whom Mudimbe highlights in this connection, many of the African Christian middle classes towards the end of the 20th century: the literate and Christian format appropriated as self-evident yet subjected to personal selective transformation, the public rejection of an ancestral past and of African historic religion, the increasing inability to derive any spiritual resources from the latter, and the effect of being propelled into a mutant cosmopolitan cultural and spiritual solution that is African by the adherents' original geography and biology, but not in substance.

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NOTES

¹. The space allotted here does not permit adequate referencing; see, however, http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/turin%20paper.pdf.

². I am indebted to my colleagues Rijk van Dijk and Jan-Bart Gewald for allowing me to use here material from van Binsbergen et al. (in press).

³. For example, in an urban variety of *sangoma* mediumistic cults widespread in Southern Africa (van Binsbergen, 1999a, 2003).

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