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FIFTH EDITION

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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sacred books, namely the Old and New Testaments for Christianity, and the Quran for Islam. The founders of these two traditions, their primary sources, and their geographical origins remain the same for all the adherents of these faiths regardless of the different interpretations. African traditional religions have no sacred books, their beginnings cannot be pinpointed, and each of the many traditions is practiced by one African group with no reference whatsoever to the religion practiced by other groups. Each African group exists as a complete social, economic, religious, and political entity with no missionary designs. With the many basic, common elements, there are also some differences in religious beliefs and practices that speak against generalizations. As unrelated and independent as African groups may appear, they nonetheless share some of the same basic religious beliefs and practices. These common, basic features suggest a common background or origin and lead to African traditional religions being treated as a single religious tradition, just as Christianity and Islam have many denominations or sects within themselves but continue to be treated as single entities.

Since this chapter is only a survey and an introduction to African religions, I concentrate on the basic, common elements and point out some of the significant differences as we go along. After I discuss the basics of each religion, I look at current trends and issues involving religion in Africa.

Perhaps a question may be raised concerning the sources of information on African traditional religions since there are no sacred scriptures or clearly defined and documented dogmas. Indeed, many studies have recently appeared on different aspects of African traditional religions, but hardly any of them speak from the tradition they present. They are primarily the works of sociologists, anthropologists, and theologians, many of whom have had little or no experience of these religions as their own faith. Consequently, the African arts, paintings, sculptures, music and dance, myths and rituals, archaeological findings, and oral tradition become extremely important as sources of information. I begin this survey with African traditional religions, and the examples that I use will be drawn from the sub-Saharan region.

African Traditional Religions

Although African traditional religions have no sacred books or definitive creeds upon which to base any analysis of these religions, from the sources referred to above, the following religious phenomena seem to be basic and common to most of them: (1) belief in a Supreme Being; (2) belief in spirits/divinities; (3) belief in life after death; (4) religious personnel and sacred places; and (5) witchcraft and magic practices. In this section of the survey, I will focus on these aspects of African traditional religions.

Belief in the Supreme Being

The African perception of the universe is centered on the belief in a Supreme Being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. God, as far as the African traditionalist is concerned, is the ground of all being. Humanity is inseparably bound together with all of God's creation since both derive their lives from God, the source of all life. This strong belief in God appears to be universal in traditional societies. The question to be asked is: How is this God perceived?

Names in African societies tell a whole story about the family—its history, relationships, hopes, and aspirations. African societies have so much to tell about God as they relate to God; hence, each society has many names for the Supreme Being. These names are expressions of the different forms in which God relates to creation. In other words, God in African traditional thought can only be known in the different relationships as expressed in God's names. For example, among my people in Zimbabwe, God is *Musikavanhu* (creator of humankind) and *Musiki/uMdali* (creator), which affirms that God is the originator of all there is. But *Musikavanhu* goes beyond the idea of creator to the notion of the parenthood of God. Hence, God is also designated *Mudzimu Mukuru* (the Great Ancestor). As parent, God is also the sustainer of creation. God's creativity is continuous and is celebrated with every new birth, and each rite of passage is an expression of gratitude to God for having sustained the individual and the community that far. These names also affirm the belief in the continuous creativity of God. Similarly, in the names *Chidziva Chepo* or *Dzinaguru*, God is perceived as the giver and the source of water. Each time it rains, God is sustaining creation in a visible way. This explains, in ceremonies relating to drought, why people appeal directly to God. So also the name *Samasimba* (owner of power/almighty) affirms God not only as the most powerful being, but also as the source and owner of all power.

The African traditionalist does not perceive God as some Supreme Being in merely speculative terms. African thought in general is not given to speculation. That which is real has to be experienced in real-life situations, directly or indirectly. God can, therefore, be real only insofar as God has been experienced in concrete life situations in different relationships with people and the rest of creation. In other words, African traditional thought cannot conceive of God in abstract terms as some being who exists as an idea mysteriously related to this world—distant, unconcerned, uninterested in what goes on here below. African thought can express itself only in concrete and practical terms. Consequently, Africans' view of God can arise only out of concrete and practical relationships as God meets their needs. In that way, they experience God's love and power (see McVeigh, 1974; Mbiti, 1970).

In terms of African thought, there can be only one Supreme Being. Interestingly enough, before the encounter with Christianity, some African

societies already had some concept of the Trinity. This seems to have been the case in some African societies, as demonstrated by Emmanuel K. Twesigye in his research into his people's traditional religions in southern and western Uganda. In an interview with an old traditionalist, Antyeri Bintukwanga, Twesigye uncovered the following information:

> Before the Europeans came to Uganda and before the white Christian missionaries came to our land of Enkole or your homeland of Kigezi, we had our own religion and we knew God well. We knew God so well that the missionaries added to us little. . . . We even knew God to be some kind of externally existing triplets: *Nyamuhanga* being the first one and being also the creator of everything, *Kazooba Nyamuhanga* being his second brother who gives light to all human beings so that they should not stumble either on the path or even in their lives. . . . *Kazooba*'s light penetrates the hearts of people and God sees the contents of the human hearts by *Kazooba*'s eternal light. . . . The third brother in the group is *Rugaba Rwa Nyamuhanga,* who takes what *Nyamuhanga* has created and gives it to the people as he wishes. . . . You see! We had it all before the missionaries came, and all they did teach us was that *Nyamuhanga* is God the Father, *Kazooba* Jesus Christ his son and not his brother as we thought, and that *Rugaba* as the divine giver is the Holy Spirit. (Twesigye, 1987:93)

In traditional societies God is believed to be eternal, loving, and just, the creator and sustainer of the universe. God's existence is simply taken for granted, hence the absence of arguments for or against the existence of God. Atheism is foreign to African thought. The most widely used name for God among my people is *Mwari,* which means literally "the one who is."

A question often raised is whether God is actually worshiped in African traditional teligions. Some Western observers have concluded that African people do not worship God but rather have no religion at all, are animists, or worship ancestor spirits or many gods. I will examine this issue in conjunction with my discussion on ancestors and lesser divinities in the next section.

Belief in Divinities and Spirits

The Supreme Being is believed to be surrounded by a host of supernatural or spiritual powers of different types and functions. Their nature, number, and functions vary from region to region, and they may be either male or female, just as God in many African traditions is perceived as being both male and female. The numerous divinities, called *orisha* among the Yoruba in Nigeria or *bosom* among the Akan of Ghana (and sometimes referred to as "lesser divinities" in order not to confuse them with the Supreme Being), are found in most western African traditions but generally not in eastern and southern African traditions. These *orisha* are subordinate to the Supreme Being. They are believed to be servants or messengers of *Olodumare* (God).

God has assigned to each one of them specific areas of responsibility. For example, the divinity *Orun-mila* is responsible for all forms of knowledge, and he is therefore associated with divination and the oracle at Ile-Ife in Nigeria. The *orisha* are believed either to have emanated from the Supreme Being or to be deified human beings. Some of the divinities are associated with the sky, earth, stars, moon, trees, mountains, rivers, and other natural elements (see Idowu, 1962).

Perhaps more universal among African traditionalists is the belief in ancestor spirits, called *vadzimu* among the Shona people of Zimbabwe or *amadhozi* among the Zulu/Ndebele traditions. These are spirits of the deceased mothers and fathers who are recognized in a special ceremony, usually held a year after they have died. This ceremony is called *umbuyiso* (the bringing-home ceremony) in Zulu/Ndebele or *kurova guva* by the Zezuru. From that moment, the deceased person becomes an active "living dead" member of the community and is empowered to function as a guardian spirit and to mediate with God and other ancestors on behalf of his or her descendants. Among my own people, it is to these spirits that most prayers and sacrifices are made, but often the prayers are concluded by instructing the ancestors to take the prayers and offerings to *Musikavanhu* (creator of humankind) or *Nyadenga* (the owner of the sky/heavens).

The significance of ancestors among Africans has led to the common misconception that these spirits are worshiped. Traditionalists categorically

Many African societies have used masks to represent ancestors and other spiritual figures. These dancers are Dogon of Mali.

deny that they worship their ancestor spirits, but rather worship God through them. Ancestor spirits are departed elders. African peoples in general have a very high respect for elders. If, for example, one has grievously wronged his or her parents, it would be utterly disrespectful and unacceptable to go directly and ask for forgiveness. One would have to go through some respectable elderly person to whom one would give some token of repentance to take to the parent. Similarly, when a young man and his fiancée decide to get married, the prospective father-in-law will have to be approached by the young man's parents through a carefully chosen and respectable mediator. In the same spirit, a person cannot approach a chief or king directly, but must have his or her case taken to the chief through a subchief. Even more so, God—the transcendent, the greatest and most powerful being, the Great Ancestor and creator of all—must be approached through intermediaries. The ancestor spirits are believed to be closest to both their living descendants and to the Supreme Being, and are thus most qualified to function as intermediaries.

Ancestor spirits are not the objects of worship. They are guardian spirits and intermediaries. They are believed to be responsible to God for all their actions. As family elders they must be respected and if not, just like the living elders, they can get angry and demand that they be appeased. Quite often, the name of the Supreme Being is not mentioned in petitions; still, it is believed that God is the ultimate recipient of all prayer and sacrifices. Although not worshiped, the ancestors in some traditions are closely associated with the Supreme Being, so much so that it becomes difficult to determine in some of the prayers whether the address is to God or to the ancestor. Take, for example, the following prayer of the Shilluk, who rarely address God directly. Nyikang is the founding ancestor of the Shilluk.

> There is no one above you, O God (Juok). You became the grandfather of Nyikang; it is you Nyikang who walk with God, you became the grandfather of man. If famine comes, is it not given by you? . . . We praise you who are God. Protect us, we are in your hands, and protect us, save me. You and Nyikang, you are the ones who created. . . . The cow for sacrifice is here for you, and the blood will go to God and you. (Parrinder, 1969:69)

One of my Shona informants told me that, as far as the Shona are concerned, God and the ancestors are one; an address to one is an address to the other. This means that, even if at times one does not hear the name of God mentioned, it does not mean the people do not worship God. God and ancestors are closely associated and work very closely with each other. For example, they believe that children are a gift of *Mwari* (God) and the *vadzimu* (ancestors). So, frequently one will hear the people say *kana Mwari nevadzimu vachida* ("if God and the ancestors are willing"). When faced with misfortune, they will say: *Ko Mwari wati ndaita sei?* ("What crime does God accuse me of?"), or they will say *mudzimu yafuratira* ("the ancestors have turned their backs"; that is, on the individual or family, hence the misfortune) (Moyo, 1987).

There are different categories of ancestor spirits. There are family ancestors, family being understood in its extended sense. These have responsibility over the members of their families only and it is only to them that the members can bring their petitions, never to the ancestors of other families. Then, there are ancestors whose responsibilities extend over the whole tribe and not just over their own immediate families. These relate to the founders of the tribe and are represented by the royal house. They play an active role in matters that affect the entire community or tribe such as drought or some epidemic. They are called *Mhondoros* (lion spirits) among the Shona people.

Most significantly, ancestor spirits serve as intermediaries. However, there are times when most of the African peoples will pray and make sacrifices to God directly. When, for example, one is in critical danger—face-to-face with some man-eating animal, or when thunder and lightning strike, or drowning—then one would approach God directly.

Belief in Life After Death

Death is believed to have come into the world as an intrusion. Human beings were originally meant to live forever through rejuvenation or some form of resurrection. So, most African peoples have myths that intend to explain the origin of death. There are, for example, some myths that depict death as having come in because some mischievous animal cut the rope or removed the ladder linking heaven, the abode of the Supreme Being, and the earth, the abode of humankind. Such a rope or ladder allowed people to ascend to and descend from heaven for rejuvenation. Other myths see death as punishment from God for human disobedience. God and human beings lived together until a tragic event that led to the intervention of death, which then separated God and people.

Despite the loss of the original state of bliss and the intervention of death, it is generally believed that there is still life beyond the grave, that life may take several forms. In some traditions, the dead may be reincarnated in the form of an animal such as a lion, a rabbit, or a snake. In that form one cannot be killed and, if reborn as a lion, one can protect one's descendants from the danger of other animals. Or the person may be reincarnated in one of his or her descendants. In general, people believe there is a world of the ancestors and, when one dies, one goes on a long journey to get to that world. The world of the ancestors is conceived of in terms of this world; hence, people are buried with some of their utensils and implements. That world is also thought of as overlapping with this world, and ancestors

are believed to be a part of the community of the living. The terms *living dead* or *the shades* are approximately accurate English renderings of those invisible members of the community (see Mbiti, 1969; Berglund, 1976).

That there is life after death is also affirmed in the belief that a dead person can return to punish those who have wronged him or her while still alive. One of the most feared spirits among the Shona is the *ngozi*, a vengeful spirit that will kill members of the family of the person who wronged the individual while still alive until payment or retribution has been made.

In general, people believe they are surrounded by a cloud of ancestors with whom they must share everything they have, including their joys and frustrations. Their expectation of the hereafter is thought of in terms of what people already know and have experienced. People know there is a future life because they interact with their departed ancestors through spirit mediums.

Religious Leadership and Sacred Places

There are different types of religious leaders in African traditional religions. These can be either male or female. Where the tradition has regular shrines for specific deities, there will be some resident cultic officials. At the shrine at Matongeni in Zimbabwe, for example, the priestly community is made up of both males and females, with roles clearly defined. The Yoruba and the Akan have regular cultic officials presiding at the shrines of their divinities. They offer sacrifices and petitions on behalf of their clients. Among most of the Bantu-speaking peoples, heads of families also carry out priestly functions on matters that relate to their families.

Another category of religious leadership, perhaps the most powerful, is that of spirit mediums. These are individual members of the family or clan through whom the spirit of an ancestor communicates with its descendants. They can be either male or female, but most are female. Among these are family spirit mediums and the tribal or territorial spirit mediums such as Mbuya (grandmother) Nehanda in Zimbabwe. The territorial spirits wield a great deal of power and, to use the example of Zimbabwe, they played a very significant political role in mobilizing people in their struggles for liberation from colonialism. The first war of liberation in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) was led by Mbuya Nehanda, a spirit medium who was eventually hanged by the colonial regime. During the time of the second war of liberation, her mediums as well as other spirit mediums worked very closely with the freedom fighters by mobilizing the people and sanctioning the war. The freedom fighters, most of whom claimed to be Marxist-Leninist, soon discovered that they could not wage a successful war without the support of the spirit mediums (Ranger, 1985:175–222; Lan, 1985). Thus, the mediums have political as well as religious roles to play. Through these

mediums, people discern the will of the ancestors, get an explanation for the causes of whatever calamities they may be enduring, or obtain advice on what the family or the tribe should do in order to avert similar danger. Mediums are highly respected members of the community from whom people seek advice of any nature.

The other important category of religious leaders is that of the diviner. Again, diviners may be either male or female. Communication with the spirit world is vital for African traditional religions. Through divination, people are able to communicate with their ancestral spirits and the divinities. These are consulted in the event of some misfortune, sickness, death, or calamity. They communicate with the spirit world to determine the cause of the problem and to seek possible solutions. There are different methods of divining, using, for example, palm nuts, bones, a bowl of water, wooden dice carved with animals and reptiles, seashells, or pieces of ivory. Divination would normally be conducted at some location such as a hut set aside for that purpose. In Yorubaland, Ifa divination centered at Ile-Ife is the most famous. The system is very elaborate and uses palm nuts (Awulalu, 1979; Bascom, 1969).

Finally, since religion permeates all aspects of life, the kings and the chiefs also carry out some leadership roles. Where the whole nation or tribe is involved, it is the responsibility of the head of the community to take the necessary action to consult the national or territorial spirits. It is also their duty to ensure that all the religious functions and observances are carried out by the responsible authorities.

With regard to sacred places, reference has already been made to shrines that serve particular divinities such as those among the Yoruba of Nigeria or the Akan of Ghana. Among the Zulus of South Africa, there is a room in each homestead with an elevated portion (*umsamu*) where rituals to the ancestor spirits are performed. The cattle kraal is also associated with ancestors and is, therefore, an important place for ritual action. Sacred mountains and caves are almost universal among African peoples. They are often associated with ancestors or any of the divinities. Religious officials will ascend these mountains or go into those caves only on special occasions. Such mountains are also often associated with the abode of the Supreme Being. In Zimbabwe, there are several such mountains that serve as venues for prayer and sacrifice, particularly in connection with prayers for rain in cases of severe drought.

Witchcraft and Magic

To complete this study of the African traditional religions, it is also necessary to look at the negative forces in these religious traditions. African traditionalists believe that God is the source of all power, which God shares

with other beings. The power of the divinities and ancestors, or that derived from medicine, is primarily viewed as positive power to be used for constructive purposes. However, that same power can also be used for destructive purposes, in which case it becomes evil power. Witches and sorcerers represent those elements within African societies that use power for the purpose of destroying life. (In general, witches are female and sorcerers are male.)

Witchcraft beliefs are widespread in contemporary Africa even among educated Christians and Muslims, typically as a response to the insecurities of modern life (see Ashford, 2005; Moore and Sanders, 2001). Even children are being accused and in rising numbers, as reported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in a report on West and Central Africa (UNICEF, 2010). It is generally believed that witches can fly by night, can become invisible, delight in eating human flesh, and use familiar animals such as hyenas or baboons as their means of transport. Witches are believed to be wicked and malicious human beings whose intention is simply to kill, which they do by poisoning or cursing their victims. Witches, sorcerers, and angry ancestor spirits are usually identified as the major causes of misfortune or death in a family.

Magic has two aspects: to protect or to harm. On the one hand, it is used to protect the members of the family, as well as their homestead, cattle, and other property, from witches and other enemies of the family or the individual. On the other hand, magic can also be used through spells and curses to harm or to kill. Beliefs related to magic and witchcraft clearly belong to the category of superstition. They represent ways in which people try to explain the causes of misfortune or social disorders. Misfortune, sickness, or death may also be explained as an expression of one's ancestors' displeasure regarding the behavior of their descendants (see Evans-Pritchard, 1937).

In conclusion, it must be stated that African traditional religions continue to influence the lives of many people today, including some of the highly educated as well as many African Christians and Muslims. It must also be pointed out that African religions are not static. Contacts with Christian and Islamic traditions have brought about transformations and syncretism in all three. As Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin (1995:124) remark, "There is an amazingly close overlap between the basic ideas of Islam and Christianity, and of the African religions. Neither Islam nor Christianity is foreign in its essence to African religious ideas"; the reverse is also true. Although Christianity and Islam have added distinct elements to African religions, each has been and continues to be adapted to and shaped by Africa's indigenous religious heritage, as I will show in the following sections.

Christianity in Africa

Up to 1900, the vast majority of Africans followed African traditional religions. Since then, however, the number of Christians and Christian churches has expanded rapidly. By some estimates there are 360 million Christians in Africa, a number that may almost double to 633 million Christians by 2025 (Rice, 2004). The Pew Forum reported 470 million Christians as of 2010. This makes Christianity the largest religion in sub-Saharan Africa with 57 percent of the population. In fact, more than one in five Christians in the world lives in sub-Saharan Africa (Pew Forum, 2010). Recently, growth has been most noticeable in the African Independent Churches (denominations or churches that separated from the European-dominated churches) and in foreign-based evangelical Protestant, especially Pentecostal, churches. Since so much has been written on Christianity as a religion, it is not necessary for our purposes to deal with its beliefs, so I will focus instead on the historical development of the religion on the African continent. Special attention will be paid to those aspects that give African Christianity its own identity.

Early Christianity in North Africa and Ethiopia

Christianity in Egypt dates back to the first century. According to the ancient historian Eusebius, writing about 311 CE, the Christian church in Egypt was founded by Saint Mark, author of the second Gospel and a companion of Paul, a tradition still maintained by the Coptic (Egyptian) church. By the end of the first century, Christianity had penetrated into rural Egypt and had become the religion of the majority of the people. Egypt has one of the oldest Christian churches, surpassed perhaps only by Rome in terms of longevity of tradition and continuity in the same locality (King, 1971:1). Recent discoveries of some Christian and non-Christian documents at the Nag Hammadi caves in Egypt show that quite early in the history of Christianity, Egypt had become a center for many different and even conflicting Christian groups and a center for theological reflection and debate (Robinson, 1982). The city of Alexandria was the home of outstanding theologians such as Origen, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, and others, whose writings on the different aspects of the Christian faith have influenced the church throughout the ages. The great "heretic" Arius (died 336 CE), originally from Libya, provoked a controversy that rocked the church for several decades when he taught that Christ was only a human being. The controversy produced two creeds, namely, the Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds, which are used together with the Apostles' Creed as definitive statements of the Christian faith throughout Christendom. The two creeds were formulated at the two great councils of Nicaea in 325 CE and of Alexandria in

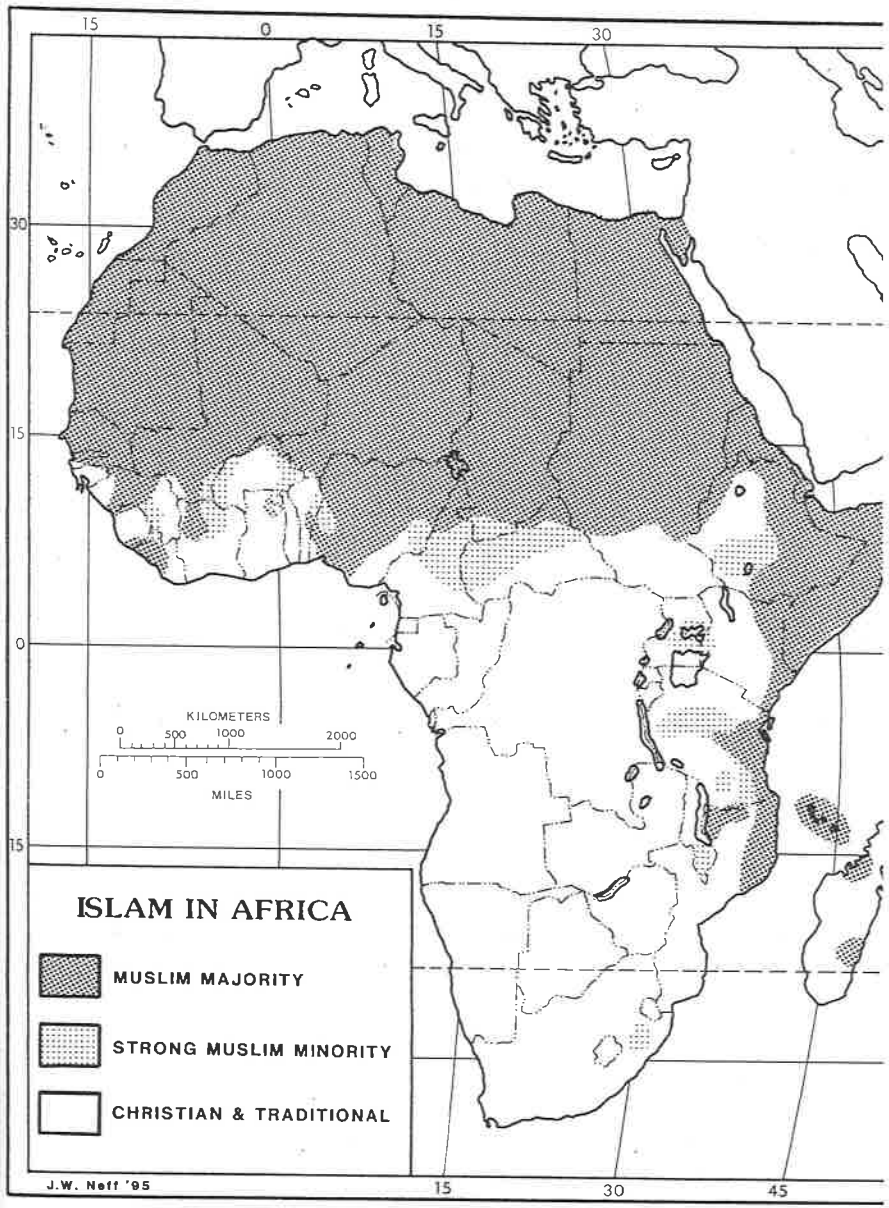
circumstances a capital offense and failure to report a homosexual to the authorities a crime as well (see Chapter 10).

Islam in Africa

Both Christianity and Islam are widespread and are the dominant faiths in Africa, and they are expanding (see Map 11.1). Approximately 234 million Africans (29 percent) are Muslims, according to the Pew Forum. Although there are almost twice as many Christians as Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, if North Africa is included, the continent is almost evenly split between the two faiths (Pew Forum, 2010). While Muslims can be found in every African country, they are concentrated in areas bordering the Sahara Desert. Islam, which means "submission to God," was founded in the seventh century in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad. Influenced by Judaism and Christianity, Islam established monotheism and a scripturally based religion first among Arab tribesmen around the towns of Mecca and Medina. Allah (God) revealed to Muhammad how he wanted his followers to live and structure their communities. This revelation is found in the Quran and is believed to be the literal word of God. Muslim Arabs, like Jews, believe they are descendants of Abraham, and they respect the Old Testament and the Prophets. Muslims also revere the New Testament and regard Jesus as a prophet. Muhammad, however, is the last and greatest of the Prophets, and the Quran is God's supreme revelation. Unlike Judaism, both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions; as such, they have been the major contenders for the religious allegiance of Africans. Rather than discussing the faith and doctrine of Islam, I will focus on the historical development of the tradition in Africa and its distinctively African features.

The Spread of Islam: The First Wave

Soon after the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, his followers embarked on wars of conquest, first among Arabs and then non-Arab peoples in northern Africa and elsewhere. Most of Egypt was taken over by the Muslims by 640 CE. By then, Egypt's rulers supported the Byzantine Orthodox church while many Egyptians were Coptic Christians who did not accept the Orthodox church's teachings or authority. Many welcomed Arab rule as less oppressive than they had experienced under the Byzantines. The Arabs established themselves initially as a ruling and powerful minority, but Christians were treated as "protected people" (*dhimmi*) who were allowed to practice their faith and regulate their affairs through their own leaders. Still, Christians were second-class citizens required to pay a special tax (*jizya*) in lieu of military service. Nonetheless, educated Christians often held prominent positions in the new Muslim state. Conversion to Islam was gradual.



Map 11.1

There was some localized persecution and pressure to convert, but most did so for other reasons; for example, attraction to Islamic tenets, commercial advantage, and desire to avoid the *jizya* and second-class status. By the end of the eleventh century, Christianity in Egypt had become a minority religion (Mostyn, 1988:190).

After Egypt, the Arabs moved on to Roman northern Africa, where they defeated the Christians, who were primarily based in the towns, and the Berbers, who had remained untouched by Christianity in the rural areas. J. S. Trimingham observes that

> the North African Church died rather than was eliminated by Islam, since it never rooted itself in the life of the country. Although considerations such as the prestige of Islam derived from its position as the religion of the ruling minority and the special taxation imposed on Christians encouraged change, the primary reasons for their rapid conversion were the less obvious ones deriving from weaknesses within the Christian communities. Among these were Christianity's failure to claim the Berber soul and its bitter sectarian divisions. (Trimingham, 1962:18)

The conversion of the pagan Berbers of northern Africa was a slow process. After their initial military conquests, the Arabs located in the towns. They gradually intermarried with the Berbers, who became increasingly Islamized and Arabized. Many Berbers were incorporated into Arab armies. This period of conquest and gradual Islamization of northern Africa is reported by the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun:

> After the formation of the Islamic community the Arabs burst out to propagate their religion among other nations. Their armies penetrated into the Maghrib and captured all its cantonments and cities. They endured a great deal in their struggles with the Berbers who, as Abu Yazid has told us, apostatized twelve times before Islam gained a firm hold over them. (Trimingham, 1962:18)

Whereas Islam spread to northern Africa in the aftermath of conquest, the spread of Islam south of the Sahara was primarily the result of peaceful, informal missionary efforts by Arabized Berber merchants who traded manufactured goods from the Mediterranean lands in exchange for raw materials such as gold, ivory, gum, and slaves. They followed the established trade routes, many of which had existed long before the rise of Islam. Wherever they went, Muslims established commercial and religious centers near the capital cities. The Nile River provided access to Nubia, Ethiopia, and Sudan. From Sudan, some of the traders went across to western Africa. The introduction of the camel also made it possible to cross the desert from northern Africa and establish contacts with western and central Africa (Voll, 1982:80; Lewis, 1980:15–16).

Muslim communities were established fairly early in several states in western Africa. In Ghana, for example, already by 1076, there was an established Muslim center with several mosques almost competing with each other (King, 1971:18). By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam was the religion of the rulers and elites of many large African states such as the Songhai empire (Voll, 1982:14). (See Map 2.4.) Islam appealed to African elites for several reasons. One was its association with Arab-Muslim civilization and its cosmopolitanism. Islam was also very compatible with or at least tolerant of African religious and cultural practices such as ancestor veneration, polygamy, circumcision, magic, and beliefs in spirits and other divinities. In fact, most African believers were barely Islamized, perhaps observing the Five Pillars of the faith—belief in one God and that Muhammad is his prophet, alms (*zakat*) for the needy, prayer five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and pilgrimage (*haj*) to Mecca—but often ignoring elements of the sharia (Islamic law) or other Islamic practices (e.g., veiling women), which they found incompatible with local custom (Lewis, 1980:33–34, 60–62; Callaway and Creevey, 1994).

In eastern Africa, Islam was spread by Persian and Arab merchants beginning in the late seventh century. These merchants established coastal trading towns with local Africans all the way down to southern Africa. Through intermarriage and commercial contacts, a unique Swahili language and culture developed. There was little movement of traders or Islam into the interior until the late tenth century, however, because there were few centralized kingdoms to attract them (Lewis, 1980:7). (See Chapter 3 for additional information on this period.)

Islamic civilization contributed much to Africa's own cultural development. Islam is a way of life (*dar al Islam*) affecting all spheres of human activity. It emphasizes literacy and scholarship, traditions that Islam promoted in previously nonliterate African societies. Islam's stress on the community of believers (*umma*) demands the subordination of regional and tribal loyalties that often separated Africans and impeded the growth of larger political units. Sharia, as the framework for community life along with Islamic Arab administrative and political structures, provided models for Africa's state builders and gave built-in religious legitimacy to the claims of rulers over the ruled (see Mazrui, 1986:136–137; Davidson, 1991:28–29; Lewis, 1980:37).

The Spread of Islam: The Second Wave

By the eighteenth century in western Africa, Islamic consciousness was spreading from the upper classes to the masses. This new wave of Islamization was being carried by African Muslims through militant mass movements under the religious banner of jihad (holy war). The desire of pious

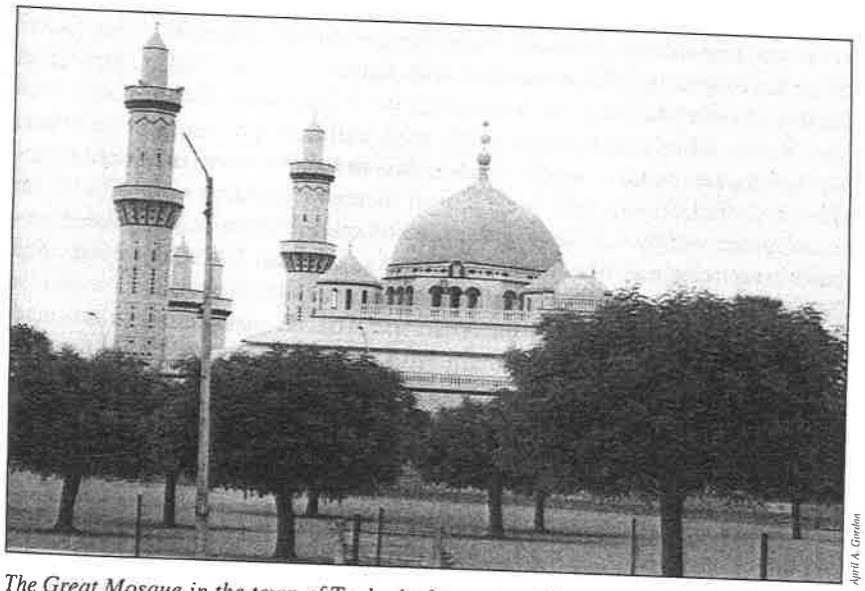
Muslim leaders such as Uthman dan Fodio in northern Nigeria (early nineteenth century) was for social, moral, and political reform. The imposition of more rigorously Islamic theocratic states on lax African believers and non-Islamic peoples was the goal. Jihad thus became a religious justification for wars of conquest and political centralization (Mazrui, 1986:184–185; Voll, 1982:80–81).

The new wave of Islamization was not solely the result of militant movements. Various Sufi (mystical) religious orders or brotherhoods (*tariqas*) dedicated to a more faithful adherence to Islam were at work. One of the earlier ones (sixteenth century) was the Qadiriyya, introduced to the great Muslim center of learning Timbuktu by an Arab shaikh (leader) (Lewis, 1980:18–19). In the nineteenth century, the Tijaniyya from Fez, Morocco, gained many followers. The Qadiriyya greatly influenced Uthman dan Fodio, whose jihad movement led to the founding of the Muslim caliphate at Sokoto (Voll, 1982:80–81). (Again, see Chapter 3.)

Sufi brotherhoods under the inspiration of their religious leaders (*marabouts*) were able to mobilize large numbers of people for political and economic as well as purely religious ends. Among these ends was resistance to European imperialism in the nineteenth century. Using the ideas of jihad and the brotherhood of all believers, Muslims were able to organize resistance on a wider scale than African political units or ethnicity would allow (Mazrui, 1986:284). In Senegal, the Mourides transformed jihad into economic enterprise as *marabouts* organized their followers to produce peanuts on brotherhood land. Even today, the Mourides are a major political and economic force in Senegal. They attract many followers for practical reasons but also because of their liberalism in enforcing Islamic law (Voll, 1982:249–250).

In eastern Africa, Mahdism galvanized mass religiopolitical opposition to European imperialism in Sudan. The Mahdi in Islam is a messianic figure sent by God to save the believers during times of crisis. The Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed and his followers defeated the British at Khartoum in 1885, although the Mahdist forces were eventually defeated (Mazrui, 1986: 151–152).

European colonialism and missionary Christianity did not halt the spread of Islam in Africa. In western Africa, colonial rulers made peace with Muslim leaders by protecting their conservative rule over their people and prohibiting Christian proselytizing or mission schools in Muslim areas (Voll, 1982:247). Muslims won many new converts for a variety of reasons. The racism and segregation policies of the Europeans contrasted sharply with the Muslim belief in the equality of believers. Also, in many cases, Muslim army officers under the British and the French treated Africans kindly, dealing with their grievances. They were tolerant in helping fellow Africans adjust African customary law to Islamic law (Zakaria, 1988:203).



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The Great Mosque in the town of Touba is the center of devotion for Senegal's Mouride brotherhood. Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Mourides, is buried here.

Indirectly, colonialism promoted Islamic expansion through the introduction of improved communications and rapid social change (Voll, 1982:245). Islam proved able to adjust and change as well as to meet new needs and conditions.

Islam Since Independence

Islamic organizations and practices have undergone remarkable changes in order to cope with Western influences, including Christianity. In some cases the process has involved accommodation and new interpretations of Islam. In other instances, Christianity and Westernization are seen as enemies of Islam and failed experiments, unable to solve Africa's many problems. Such views have spawned a growing number of fundamentalist movements.

Initially after independence, conservative nineteenth-century organizations either died out or transformed themselves. In Sudan, the followers of the Mahdi formed a modern political party that competed in national elections. In Nigeria, also, conservative and reformist Muslims formed political parties, partly in competition with Christians in non-Muslim sections of the country. Few of these political parties, however, were explicitly Islamic. The Mourides of Senegal reorganized and assumed modern economic and political roles to maintain their influence (Voll, 1982:145–250).

The spirit of jihad and forced conversion were largely replaced by a respect for religious pluralism. This was undoubtedly a result of the long

history of mutual accommodation between African traditional religions and Islam in the past as well as contact with Christianity. In most sub-Saharan African states, Muslims are a minority or, at least, not the only religious community, a fact that tends to reinforce Muslim support for secular states. Muslim leaders readily accepted non-Muslim leaders such as Léopold Senghor (a Catholic), who was president of Senegal for many years. Pluralism is also promoted by the fact that family and ethnic loyalties still take precedence over religious ties for most Africans (Zakaria, 1988:204–205). (See Chapter 9 for more on the centrality of the family in Africa.)

For the masses of Muslim Africans, African traditional beliefs and practices have continued, although with some adaptations to conform to similar practices in Islam. In writing about the Wolof of Senegal, John S. Mbiti concludes:

> In spite of the impact of Islam, there is still a much deeper layer of pagan belief and observances. . . . Men and women are loaded with amulets, round the waist, neck, arms, legs, both for protection against all sorts of possible evil, and to help them achieve certain desires. Most frequently these contain a paper on which a religious teacher has written a passage from the Koran, or a diagram from a book on Arabic mysticism, which is then enveloped in paper, glued down and covered with leather, but sometimes they enclose a piece of bone or wood, a powder, or an animal claw. (Mbiti, 1969:245)

These are basically African elements, not Islamic, and are practiced by most African groups.

A survey of African indigenous Islamic communities in other parts of Africa also reveals the persistence of African-based practices. As is true of many Christians, ancestor veneration, the wearing of amulets to ward off misfortune and to protect cattle and homesteads, and beliefs in magic, witchcraft, and sorcery have continued with little discouragement. New elements include the use of charms. Also, as Mbiti (1969:249) observes, "In addition to treating human complaints, the medicine men perform exorcisms, sometimes using Koranic quotations as magical formulae."

African Muslims, as well as African Christians, are seeking to redefine or modify their religion and religious identity in response to modern needs and problems. For many Muslims, this means finding a way to incorporate more orthodox Islamic practices and beliefs into those of their pre-Islamic African religious and cultural heritage. Moreover, many African Muslims are seeking new religious responses to meet the political, economic, and social challenges they are facing. This has led a small minority of Muslims to seek a fundamentalist reaffirmation of Islam, often influenced by fundamentalist movements in North Africa and even Iran (cf. Hunwick, 1995; Ilesanmi, 1995; Voll, 1982:250, 337; Brenner, 1993). However, as the Pew

Forum found when it surveyed African Muslims in nineteen countries in 2010, although most Muslims (and Christians) are deeply religious, both mostly believe that people of other religions should be free to practice their faith (Pew Forum, 2010). Yet it is also true, as I will discuss below, that Muslims find aspects of modern life in Africa to be of concern to them and see religion as a proper response.

Among those adapting to contemporary concerns, Sufi brotherhoods have been at the forefront in providing accommodation between the demands of Islam and popular aspirations, both religious and secular. One such movement is Hamallism, a branch of the Tijaniyya. Hamallism is a social and religious reform movement that stresses the full equality of all people and the liberation of women. It opposes the materialism and corruption of conservative Islamic leaders. Before independence, Hamallists opposed those Muslim leaders who cooperated with French colonialism. Hamallism influenced political leaders like Modibo Keita, former president of Mali, and Diori Hamani, former president of Niger (Voll, 1982:254). On the other hand, anti-Sufi movements such as the Izala in Nigeria and Niger (Movement for Suppressing Innovations and Restoring the Sunna) have attracted many from the urban merchant class with their opposition to *marabouts* and an emphasis on individualism and putting wealth into investments (Grégoire, 1993).

In Sudan, Islamic fundamentalists have gained dominant influence over the government. Their efforts to impose sharia on the entire country, including the non-Muslim south, led to a devastating civil war since 1983 that only ended in 2005 (see O'Fahey, 1993). The fundamentalists obliterated previous nonsectarian, modernist Islamic movements such as the Republican Brothers, founded by Mahmoud Mohammed Taha. The Brothers sought a reform of Islam in light of modern realities, including advocating the equality of men and women. Taha was executed in 1985 for "heresy" (Al-Karsani, 1993).

Elsewhere, and similar to the new Christian churches that are searching for a more African Christianity, some Muslims are promoting controversial new forms of Africanized Islam. In East and West Africa, the peaceful Ahmadiyya movement (originally from India) owes its modest success to its vigorous missionary efforts. The Ahmadiyya translated the Quran into Swahili and other local languages (the first to do so) since most African Muslims do not know Arabic. Currently, there are at least 500,000 Ahmadiyya believers in sub-Saharan Africa. Members are often prominent in government and business circles and more secular. They have made significant efforts to promote the status of women; for example, women are allowed to pray in the mosque with men. The Ahmadiyya are seen as heretical by more orthodox believers (Haynes, 1996:195). Much more controversial and violent was the Maitatsine movement centered in northern Nigeria. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cameroonian

Mahammadu Marwa claimed to be a new prophet of Islam. Marwa was killed along with 100 other people when his followers sparked a violent confrontation with police in the city of Kano in 1980. Rioting by his followers in 1990 left 5,000 people dead. A successor to the Maitatsine movement was the Kalo Kato sect, meaning Giants of the Living, whose members were involved in an uprising in Kano in 1980 and in Yola in 1992 in which thousands of people died (Haynes, 1996:188–191).

Since the rise of al-Qaeda and Islamic terrorism, there has been mounting concern about fundamentalist Islamic extremists gaining ground in Africa. These fears have intensified since the terrorist attack on the United States in 2001 and the subsequent launching of the war on terror. The United States regards Africa as a "breeding ground for terrorism" due to such factors as widespread poverty, failed states, and poor governance by undemocratic and corrupt governments ("Faithful," 2003). To counter this possible threat, the United States has formed a coalition with the governments of nine Saharan states and spent $500 million to combat the spread of jihadist radicalism that could threaten African nations, such as Nigeria, which provides 15 percent of the United States' oil ("An Awkward Friend," 2005:44).

Despite these fears about Islamic extremists, research shows that African Muslims are mostly moderates, and radical fundamentalism has made few converts in Africa (see Haynes, 1996:212; Sanneh, 1997:214–215; Pew Forum, 2010). The few civil wars that have occurred that involve Muslims and non-Muslims, such as in Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire, are mainly about oil, land, or political rights rather than religion. Only in Sudan was there an effort to impose an Islamic state or sharia. In northern Nigeria, where twelve states adopted sharia criminal codes, it was largely in reaction to high crime rates, corruption, and the ineffectualness of Nigeria's secular courts to stem these problems. Reportedly, many Muslims in both Sudan and Nigeria are disillusioned with the results of such efforts to use Islam to solve their problems. Most reject fundamentalism and want to live peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbors (Pew Forum, 2010; Rice, 2004; "Faithful," 2003).

In reality, the small but growing fundamentalism in their midst divides many Muslims. Some Muslims are secularists and progressive reformers seeking to modernize their societies. Others are mostly nonviolent traditionalists. Even most fundamentalists are oriented to local issues rather than linked to internationalist Islamic organizations or radical groups like al-Qaeda (see Quinn and Quinn, 2003; Shinn, 2005). The Pew Forum found, for example, that most Muslims do not support religious extremism or violence. Local issues such as crime, corruption, and unemployment are people's major concerns. Interestingly, both Christians and Muslims are ambivalent about the impact of Western culture. Majorities of both faiths worry that Western culture (i.e., movies, television, and music) is having a negative

impact on morality; yet at the same time, they admit that they like Western entertainment! Finally, and perhaps most significant in terms of the potential appeal of radical Islam, both Muslims and Christians are among the most optimistic people in the world in believing that their lives are getting better (Pew Forum, 2010).

There are exceptions to this pattern of Muslim moderation. In "failed state" Somalia, for example, several avowedly pro–al-Qaeda radical groups, have violently competed for power and rendered the country virtually ungovernable by any central authority. One such group is Itihad al Islami (AIA), an al-Qaeda–affiliated group that has declined in influence since the 1990s. AIA's goal is to establish an Islamic state, and it engaged in terrorist attacks against Ethiopia and Kenya in the mid-1990s (Shinn, 2005). Currently, two formerly rival fundamentalist groups, Hizbul Izlam and al-Shabab, have for the most part merged under al-Shabab. Their control is greatest in south and central Somalia, even though they have limited popular support ("Somalia Radio Stations," 2010). Al-Shabab has been waging a brutal war to overthrow the weak UN-backed Somali government in Mogadishu, the capital city, since 2006. The goal of al-Shabab is to impose its radical version of sharia on the country. Recently, the group announced its formal affiliation with al-Qaeda ("Somalia's al-Shabab," 2012; Hanson, 2010). Also of concern is al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), which originated in North Africa. AQMI has been involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping tourists for ransom, and violent attacks on security forces and civilians in Niger, Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali. AQMI is having some appeal, primarily to "disaffected youth" whose prospects are limited by the poverty and lack of employment opportunities in their countries (MacFarquhar, 2011).

In northern Nigeria, the extremist group Boko Haram, which means "Western education is forbidden," has been attacking government targets, Christian churches, and even Muslim clerics who oppose them. Such violence is justified by Boko Haram's goal of replacing Nigeria's secular government with a sharia-based government. Boko Haram claims to be affiliated with al-Qaeda and is determined to continue to engage in bombings and other acts of terrorism, mostly in northern Nigeria. As of 2012, its campaign of violence has claimed almost 1,000 lives (Mark, 2012; Nossiter, 2010a, 2010b; "Scores Killed," 2009; Goujon and Abubakar, 2006).

Although the Pew Forum reports that most Muslims and Christians are tolerant of each other's faiths and have positive views of each other, an unfortunate by-product of the war on terror and continuing economic and political problems in Africa is growing tensions and animosities, especially between the more fundamentalist elements of each religion. Muslims from Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states are pouring money into Africa to expand conservative Islam, which conflicts with the more tolerant Islam espoused by most African Muslims. At the same time, Christian

missionaries (mostly from the United States) are pouring money and missionaries into Africa to promote conservative Christianity (Rice, 2004). Extremism can be found among both groups. For example, many Christians regard Islam as the enemy in a virtual war for African souls. Many also see Islam through the lens of the US-led war on terror, which they strongly support and perceive to be a war against Islam. Some Christians even support the war on terror because it is killing Muslims (Rice, 2004). Both Nigeria and Uganda are countries in which growing sectarian clashes, sometimes resulting in hundreds of deaths, have occurred in recent years (see Nossiter, 2010a, 2010b; Rice, 2004; Gordon, 2003:201–227). In the Horn of Africa, where Christians and Muslims historically were often on friendly terms, the invasion of (Muslim) Somalia by (largely Christian) Ethiopia in 2006 to prevent Islamists from taking over the country has resulted in radical Muslims viewing Ethiopia as an enemy of Islam and has heightened tensions between the two faith communities (Ehrlich, 2010).

Christians as well as Muslims have formed violent political movements that seek to overthrow secular African governments. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Another group in Uganda is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) under the leadership of Joseph Kony, who considers himself a prophet. The LRA has been at war with the Ugandan government since 1986. Its goal is to replace the government with one based on Moses's Ten Commandments. The LRA has killed thousands of people and abducted more than 20,000 children, who have been forced to fight and kill and become sex slaves to LRA commanders (Cocks, 2003; "Uganda's Child Rebels," 2003). The LRA has also been active in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where thousands of people have been abducted, killed, subjected to sexual violence, and forced to leave their homes (see UNHCR, 2011; Rights Monitoring, 2011). Obviously, any religion in the wrong hands and under circumstances favorable to it has the potential for extremism and violence.

Conclusion

Although it is not possible to do justice to so broad a topic as African religions within the space of a chapter, I hope this survey has illustrated the breadth of the continent's religious traditions and current trends. Historically, African traditional religions and Islam have generally been able to accommodate each other, but there have been strong voices within the Muslim community in the past and today that have been critical of the less than rigorous practices of African Muslims. African Christian churches, on the other hand, have often been openly negative toward African traditional religions, but at the same time many traditional religious beliefs are still practiced by

Christians. The indigenous denominations that succeeded missionary Christian churches have been more accommodating of traditional religion in their rituals and beliefs so that African Christians could feel at home. Pentecostal and other evangelical churches have a mixed record in this regard. It seems that colonial and early missionary efforts to destroy African cultures and religions have led to a crisis of identity that, ironically, has helped to perpetuate practices of African traditional religions as a major aspect of African cultures.

Africans, like people everywhere, embrace religions they feel speak to their experience and their need for identity and meaning, religions that promise some kind of justice and redress of their existential problems. In Africa, a meaningful religion is one oriented toward promotion of human interests in good health, economic well-being, and human development, as well as managing social relations and easing conflict (Kiernan, 1995b:25). After decades of misrule and economic and political decline, people are seeking solutions to, or at least relief from, suffering, lack of progress, uncertainty, and disruptive social change. The question in Africa, as well as in many other areas of the world, is whether emancipatory and tolerant religions rather than religions of intolerance, repression, and even violence will be embraced as people seek to meet their worldly and spiritual needs.

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