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(10) MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTERS IN AFRICA

Jacob Olupona

The historical trajectory of contact and encounter among Muslims and Christians is multifaceted, extensive, and fascinating. My central thesis and overall argument of this essay is this: Islam and Christianity must be understood as they have evolved in Africa, reflecting the conditions and aspirations of local people. Consequently, in African states where they exist side-by-side, there is potential for both co-existence and conflict. This is evident throughout the continent, reflecting conditions of various historical periods – pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial.

Often overlooked is the fact that Islam and Christianity contain similar themes and aspects of their trajectory, which I will highlight here only briefly. First, early Christianity and Islam took refuge in Africa, nurtured there while still fledgling and vulnerable. When King Herod intended to slay the Christ child, Joseph and Mary took him to Egypt for safety, until an angel informed them it was safe to return. In addition, in the patristic period, North Africa and Egypt in particular, stood firmly at the heart of Christianity while a significant number of early Christian converts and writings came from these areas long before Christianity took root in much of Europe.

Similarly, with respect to Islam, during the early part of his calling – often referred to as the great age of Islam – the Prophet Muhammad sent some of his followers to the Christian king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), called the Negus, to escape persecution in Mecca. When asked to surrender the Muslim refugees, the Abyssinian king defended them on the grounds of the similarity in theology and religious practices among Christians and Muslims. Shortly afterwards, the prophet made the *hijra* (holy flight) to Medina, the City of the Prophet, where he established his first Ummah. It was then that the Muslim refugees returned safely. In addition to Africa providing safe haven for the Messiah and his family and to followers of the Prophet, this reference is often cited as proof that Christians and Muslims co-operated with each other at the earliest instance.

About a century after the death of the Prophet, Arabs expanded their territory beyond Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. They spread into North Africa where they encountered North African Christians in the Roman provinces. To establish Islam in the region, they attacked Christian Copts and Berbers who failed to resist Islamic incursions. Consequently, today Islam enjoys a strong presence in these regions outside the Holy Land, cradle of Islam, the *Hijaz*.

North Africa must be recognized as the home of great African theologians – Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, and of course St Augustine (354-430 AD), the Bishop of Hippo. Augustine was born in Tagaste, Numidia (now Suk Ahras), Algeria. I have always imagined the many benefits for both Christians and Muslims in keeping the home of Augustine intact for devoted pilgrims to visit. Moreover, just as North Africa was an important intellectual centre for early Christians, under Muslim rule it was also home to the earliest and most prestigious institutions of higher education, such as the famous Al-Azhar in Cairo and the Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, the oldest university in the world. It welcomed students from the Mediterranean world, including Gerbert of Aurillac, known as Pope Sylvester II.[1]

Although certainly on the decline after the Muslim conquest of North Africa, Christianity was still practised in the region. The rising Umayyad Empire made treaties with several Christian kingdoms in present-day Sudan. The only pocket of Christianity practiced continuously until today is the Coptic Church in Egypt. However, since the early mass conversion to Islam in North Africa, Christian-Muslim

[1] Clarke, Suzanna; *A House in Fez*, 14.

relationships on the continent are more contentious and uneven. In certain regions and states where Muslims constitute a sizeable number, as in Nigeria, Sudan, and Egypt, political and religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians remain contentious. Compelling evidence suggests that these conflicts have more to do with the ways in which Muslim and Christian structures reflect political and social identities and relationships in various pre-colonial states and societies in Africa. At the same time, it must also be said that in other places – such as Senegal, which is overwhelmingly Muslim – relationships between Muslims and Christians have continued to be very amicable.

Christian and Muslim relationships have been affected historically by Africa's encounter with colonialism and the western world. One of the first important moments of contact took place through transatlantic trade, particularly in slaves, and again, both religions have had an ambivalent relationship under this dark period. Slavery was a lucrative, well-established institution in West Africa at the time of this particular trade (albeit very different from forms of American chattel slavery). Many Muslims had little problem trading slaves with Christian Europeans.

However, in 1673, a cleric named Nasr al-Din lead a brief but largely unsuccessful *jihad* to stop the sale of slaves to Europe on the coast in present-day Senegal and Mauritania.[2] From the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, the persistent abolitionist movement ultimately ended the trade in enslaved Africans. It was spearheaded by the British anti-slavery movement, articulated in Christian evangelical expression through Methodist, Baptist, and Anglican missions. Britain, the European power that brought Atlantic slavery to its zenith in the eighteenth century, was home to the abolitionist movement, leading by the end of the nineteenth century to the decline and subsequent demise of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery.

Ironically, both Christianity and Islam grew most rapidly during the colonial era. While colonial practices for some Muslims provided an opportunity for Christianity to thrive and flourish at the expense of Islam, for others, colonial authorities such as the French in Senegal or the British in northern Nigeria, advanced the power of Muslim rulers to sustain colonial power. Although not all Muslim leaders embraced European colonial powers, and some provided military resistance, many found that colonial rule provided a period of peace and infrastructure, allowing Muslims to spread their message more effectively than ever before. They reasoned that living under a Christian power permitted Muslims the free practice of Islam without violating any theological principles.

At the same time, western colonial authorities were always wary of the challenge Muslim leaders could pose to their administration. Westerners often actively worked against Islam. In some contexts Muslims inevitably equated colonialism with Christianity. New political structures certainly favoured Christian converts, and the products of Christian mission schools, as well as western military technology and medicine. Thus, many of the first presidents and prime ministers of African countries were disproportionately Christian, even when the majority of their citizens were Muslim.

Christians had a similarly ambivalent, but often much closer, relationship with colonial administrators. Western missionaries were often given resources and protection to allow them to carry out their work in conversion, education, and medicine. Western colonial authorities aligned themselves with missionaries relying on graduates of their schools to fill positions allotted to native Africans. At the same time, when the evangelical mission was at odds with the political order and profit of the colony, administrators often limited the influence of missionaries as we have seen earlier, both often at loggerheads.

Still, the general trend of both religions in Africa was to grow, and to grow rapidly. During the twentieth century, Christians grew from about 10 million to about 250 million; Muslims grew from about 34 million to approximately 300 million.[3]

[2] Boubacar Barry, *Le royaume de waalo*, 135-159.
[3] Encyclopedia of African History (A-G), 165.

Before the early 1960s, the Golden Age of African Independence, Christian and Muslim subjects co-existed with tolerance despite occasional skirmishes and violence. Even in predominantly Muslim countries, such as Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso and several parts of West Africa, peaceful relationships prevailed. At times peaceful co-existence was made possible largely through indigenous African religions and culture championed by traditional rulers, such as the sacred kings and chiefs. Africans were concerned primarily with liberating themselves from their colonial masters. They could ill afford to engage in religious wars as they focused on independence.

During the struggle for independence, a strong sense of nation-building embraced all religions – Islam, Christianity, and traditional indigenous religions – an integral but short-lived development. After independence, particularly by the 1970s following more than a decade of ineffective authoritarian regimes, religion steadily became an instrument of divisiveness in various states.

First, the military intervened in religious affairs particularly in Nigeria, where ethnicity often intersects with religion. Sha'ria (Islamic Law) was highly contested. Even Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) incited protests among Christians and Muslims.

Second, radical groups of Christian and Islamic organizations queried the state over governance and power allotted to each other. Each wanted to define the nation's identity solely in their own terms. The rise of global Islam and global evangelical Christianity affected local expressions of religion, even at a grassroots level. Deterioration over the last ten years incited conflict, despite attempts by the state and the people themselves to promote peaceful co-existence.

For example, in 1958, in Ghana, a Christian-sponsored interfaith group on Muslim-Christian relations under the Islam in Africa project was established to promote peaceful co-existence and to discuss social and economic development among local communities. The initiative now labelled Programme on Christian Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) is now housed in Kenya. Underlying the skirmishes in post-independence Africa, the politics of religion and the quest of nation-states vied to define their identity largely either in religious or secular terms. During the 1960s, ethnicity was the determining, dominant factor in the contested terrain among subgroups. In the last ten years, however, the focus shifted to religious matters. Open warfare in Nigeria and the Sudan escalated when both demanded that the nation-state be organized to define economic and political power according to its own construction of the state as it competes for material goods and resources.

Adherents of both religions agree that religion is an immensely important aspect of their lives. Many believe that religion must govern the political economy. While Christians insist on a secular state government, others – including leading religious figures – make tenuous alliances with secular political figures seeking to blur the lines between church and state. Simultaneously, Muslims have put forward serious challenges to secularism, calling for a polity subjected and constructed by the law of Islam (Sha'ria). Islam is a way of life, they argue, that covers economic, political, social, and educational welfare. Subsequently, the state is caught between the two factions of faith, each fighting to possess the soul of the nation as they struggle for supremacy.

The current religious and political crises should never be underestimated. Islam and Christianity are spreading most rapidly, gaining increasing importance. Africa nurtured both religions, allowing them to flourish in their early stages. It protected them from persecution in the first instance and provided rich intellectual centres in the second, after they were firmly established. Although Islam quickly eclipsed Christianity in Northern and North-Eastern Africa after the Umayyad conquest, the two co-existed to one degree or another, even during colonial and economic exploitation. Recently, however, the two faiths struggle to gain converts and control of the state. Africa has played a crucial, often overlooked, role in the history and growth of each religion. Given current demographic trends, it will be an equally important site for vested interests in the world's two most populous religions.

Part I: Introduction into African Christianity

Muslim-Christian Relationships and Religious Extremism

The complex Muslim-Christian relationship is linked with global religious extremism. Narratives of extreme hostility, together with uncommon co-operation, heroism, and even martyrdom abound worldwide. In the last ten years, the rise of Islamic militant groups in Africa has shattered Muslim-Christian relationships. Two groups – the Al-Shabaab militants headquartered in Somalia and Boko Haram Islamists in Nigeria – have significant influence and proliferation. Al-Shabaab has spread to the entire region, the Horn of Africa and Kenya. Al-Shabaab joined with Islamic militant groups in the Middle East, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq, successfully recruiting mercenaries from these regions. Al-Shabaab has inflicted severe blows to Somalia and Kenya, as well as innocent Christian citizens of Kenya in regions close to Somalia. Similar to most militant Islamic groups in the world today, Al-Shabaab is taking over the region, declaring themselves as Islamist territories in order to practice their own form of Sha'ria. It is proven that Al-Shabaab, though an autonomous Islamic militant group, has close connections with Boko Haram Muslim extremists in Nigeria.

Boko Haram is an Islamic militant group that at its beginning operated mainly in north-eastern Nigeria, and emerged around 2010. Its official Arabic name is translated as 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad', indicating its concern for the total emancipation of Muslims and a commitment to impose Sha'ria rule in Nigeria. Boko Haram means literally, 'Western education is forbidden' in the Hausa language, originating from the perceived hatred for western values and western education, which they believe emanates from Christian-secular tradition and society. They have launched military operations and guerrilla war in Nigeria. After its founding in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram aligned itself with worldwide Islamic movements, including ISIS. It supplies significant technological support in military logistics, ammunitions and personnel.

At its early stages, Boko Haram targeted Christian communities and churches in northern Nigeria. It quickly escalated in targeting Nigeria's state structures, particularly police and military barracks, as well as international organizations, including the United Nations. Boko Haram abducted some 300 girls from a Government school in Chibok, a most disturbing development in Nigeria's escalating crisis. Moreover, Boko Haram suicide bombers now target public areas, bus stops and markets, inflicting terror and destruction of property and human life. Although it is fair to say that both Christians and Muslims and the state are united in a campaign against Boko Haram's incursions in Nigeria, it is difficult to pinpoint why they continue to grow in strength.

Despite horrific attacks, uncommon stories of unity, love, and co-operation abound in the face of violence and terror. The dreaded Al-Shabaab attacked a bus filled with Kenyan travellers and attempted to separate Christian passengers from Muslims. Their plan was to kill the Christians, as a usual practice. Defying the terrorists, Kenyan Muslims protected their fellow Christians. Salah Fareh, a Muslim teacher, bravely refused Al-Shabaab's demand. He sustained a bullet wound in the December attack and died earlier this month.[4] In northern Nigeria, moderate Muslims remained silent out of fear when Boko Haram destroyed Christian churches. At the same time, the vast majority of victims of Boko Haram have been Muslims themselves, many because they were considered by Boko Haram to be agents of the state.

More recently, Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogues are taking place, condemning the violent acts of Boko Haram. For a while, the staunchest resistance to Boko Haram came from local vigilantes, who are overwhelmingly Muslim themselves. This fact is often overlooked with respect to groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab or ISIS because they are deeply committed to what in Islam is called Takfir – the practice of condemning those who identify other Muslims as unbelievers and thus unworthy of being treated as proper Muslims. Hence, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab or ISIS should not actually constitute a strong

[4] 'Kenyan Muslim who Shielded Christians in al Shabab dies', in: BBC News, January 19, 2016: www.bbc.com/news/world-africa.

challenge to Muslim-Christian dialogue since in many ways such movements attack the majority of Muslims in the same way that they attack Christians. Some have already come to this realization, though these horrific acts are capable of inflaming Christian-Muslim sectarianism. When viewed as a common threat, adherents of both Abrahamic faiths and the state need to stem the bloodshed by joining together.

In another context, in regions such as the Congo, political impasse pits a Christian majority against a Muslim minority over the question of who governs the state. In his recent visit to the region, Pope Francis used his visit to appeal to both groups to see themselves as members of the same Abrahamic religious family.

We should add that the aggressive invasion of evangelical Christianity worldwide – particularly Pentecostalism in Africa – has triggered a Muslim backlash, responding to the perceived Christian domination of the public sphere. Muslims in Southern Nigeria have adopted the aggressive techniques of evangelicals – keeping night vigils, organizing crusades, and engaging in public proselytization on Sundays, previously considered to be sacrosanct as a day of worship.

The competition and unhealthy religious rivalry between Christians and Muslims in places such as in Nigeria has also been played out in what for lack of a better term we may call the politics of pilgrimage. One clear example in Nigeria is over the issue of state sponsorship of pilgrimage to the holy lands in Saudi Arabia and Israel. Just as Nigeria sends the largest number of Muslim pilgrims from a non-Islamic state to perform the *hajj*, Nigeria also sends the largest number of Christian pilgrims in the world to Israel yearly. Though in principle pilgrimage in Christianity does not constitute a mandatory religious act as it is in Islam, nevertheless, it has become the most visible demonstration of Christian piety in Nigeria. Nigerian Christian pilgrims to Israel on their return bear the label JP (Jerusalem Pilgrim) after their names as a show of piety. In a similar manner, the Muslim *hajj* returnee is customarily addressed as *Alhaji/Alhaja*. Such titles apparently bestow honour on the recipients.

Today's unsavoury hostility among Christians and Muslims arises from the struggle to influence and control the state. It has triggered unnecessary and horrific skirmishes along former lines of colonial occupation. It is strengthened by disinvestment from local officials. Colonial rule destroyed states' historical socio-economic and political boundaries of language, commerce, and religion. With reckless and utter disregard for the welfare of the people, western powers carved up their colonial empires to extract enormous wealth in land, resources, and people. The fallout from colonial rule continues today in Africa as African leaders themselves have not proven to be better than the colonialists. Sadly, religion has become an open ground of struggle for competition between rival groups and Muslim and Christian communities are caught in these political and economic crises.

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