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Religion & Politics in Africa

Stephen Ellis & Gerrie ter Haar 2004, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*. London: Hurst & Company, 263 pp., ISBN 1-85065-735-1, pbk. (= Hurst Series in Contemporary History and World Affairs, 1)

The authors

The authors of this book have travelled extensively in Africa in the past two decades for the purpose of observing current political practices and the role of religion in it. Stephen Ellis is a Senior Research Fellow of the African Studies Centre at Leiden, The Netherlands. In 1999, he published *The Masks of Anarchy* on the religious dimension of the civil war in Liberia. Gerrie ter Haar is professor of Religion, Social Change and Human Rights in the Institute of Social Studies at The Hague, The Netherlands. Apart from her *Spirit of Africa*, on the healing ministry of Milingo (1992), and *Halfway to Paradise*, on African Christians in Europe (1998), she edited three volumes: *Strangers and Sojourners*, on religious communities in the diaspora (1998), and, together with J.J. Busitil: *The Freedom To Do God's Will: Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change* (2002); and *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Vision for Peace* (2004). She is currently preparing a volume on witchcraft beliefs and accusations in contemporary Africa.

The book

The book has an introduction and nine chapters. In the introduction, the authors explain why they have written this book. It is because African politics cannot be understood without the serious study of modern African religious thought, for it 'provides [Africans] with a means of becoming social and political actors' (2). Moreover, many Africans regard the spirit world as the ultimate source of all power (4).

The authors opt, in chapter 1, for a Tylorian operational definition of religion as ‘belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world’ (14). Religion thus defined includes for Africans belief in the possibility of effective communication with that ‘parallel universe’ (75). Because of that belief, they easily impute ‘to politicians the ability to manipulate mystical powers’ (16). The authors define politics as debates and activities about ‘who gets what, when, and how’ (15, 20). In their study of religious thought in Africa, they follow an *emic* approach by conceding to African believers ‘the right to express matters in terms they [themselves] think appropriate’ (18), including ‘their perception that the invisible world is real’ (17). Traditional religious ideas have an impact on modern African politics in ways that are difficult to discern for Westerners, e.g. in religious activities, or in activities Westerners deem superstitious (21). By appealing to Ranger’s ‘dynamic model’ of religious exchange of ideas about spirits over vast regions of Africa in both precolonial and modern times, the authors adopt a unified view of (sub-Saharan) Africa: whereas Europe and the West (199n33) share the heritage of Enlightenment, Africa takes a religious worldview. Political authority was based on it both in the past and the present. The authors also follow Horton in viewing religion as a system of explanation, prediction and control.

In chapter two the authors detail their sources of information about the beliefs most Africans share. One source is stories told at night time and rumours circulated by *radio trottoir*, ‘pavement radio’. They are tales about spirits and witches, about magicians causing men’s penises to vanish with a single look, and about the clandestine trade in human body-parts. These rumours reflect what African publics find believable and entertaining. They consist both of plausible stories about fist fights in a cabinet meeting in Ghana as well as rumours that are implausible according to the canons of Western science, e.g. that a head of state has been ‘doctored’ and is now is ‘invulnerable to bullets’. These rumours also identify persons held responsible for life’s misfortunes, as do scapegoat mechanisms and witchcraft accusations. They may result in frightful forms of self-policing. They are plausible to Africans because they fit into existing mental frames of reference by means of which Africans attempt to understand the world and events. Like religion, rumours too constitute a system of explanation.

A second group of sources are the locally produced chap-books, videos featuring people possessed by spirits or attacked by witches, and the testimonies of personal religious experiences, such as that of a journey into the world of spirits. The authors hold that they reflect the growing 'preoccupation of Africans with how power is exercised in their societies', and that they function an oblique criticism of misgovernment.

A third group are miracle stories of healing, of apparitions by the Virgin Mary, and by Jesus Christ himself, and of healers who died and returned to life charged with the task of healing and casting out devils.

A fourth kind are the rags-to-riches stories about people who suddenly became wealthy, famous and powerful; and a fifth the popular stories attributing AIDS to witches, or to people in power, or to the West.

In all these sources, fact and fiction are difficult to disentangle. The authors regard them as 'biospiritual modes of explanation' with moral implications, about which people keep an open mind, because their truth or falsehood cannot be established, but which they are also inclined to believe because they are consonant with their religious outlook.

Chapter three is on 'spirits'. It first tells the story of Evangelist Mukendi's visit to the under-water-world beneath Kinshasa where 'witches' and fallen angels are said to feast on human flesh, to have universities and airports, to fly in and out to Europe and the US, to be ruled by women, and to promote the evil above ground which Mukendi repudiated as 'satanic'.

The authors then refer to various beliefs about the spirit world in modern Africa, such as those of the Mami Water (mermaid) cults, the AICs and Pentecostal churches, the Sufi brotherhoods, and the 'Christian healer', Emmanuel Milingo, former Archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia. They note a fundamental change in the perception of spirits in the 20th century from mainly morally neutral spirits in traditional societies to mostly evil demons to be exorcised in modern urban Africa. The authors regard spirit possession as a religious term, expressing the perceived communication of believers with the spirit world by spirits assuming human form in some of them. They summarise the theory of I.M. Lewis about 'central' posses-

sion as legitimising established power, and ‘peripheral’ possession as attempts to improve one’s marginal position in society. It shows that spirit possession often served political goals. The authors provide examples of how African politicians have used belief in spirits for political purposes, publicly, e.g. at election time, as well as privately by consulting religious specialists.

Chapter four is on secrets, secret societies and arcane spiritual power in Africa. Kenneth Kaunda was a devout Christian and moderate socialist but secretly had two Indian gurus on his payroll who wielded much influence in his entourage. Many heads of state in Francophone Africa belong(ed) to Freemason or Rosicrucian societies, whereas those of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin and Central Africa are rumoured to have been, or to be, involved in (neo-)traditional indigenous cults and ‘secret societies’ and to have committed killings for ritual purposes. Some heads of state were said to possess powers similar to those attributed to witches, to practise sexual perversities, and to appoint ‘marabouts’ with an evil reputation into high positions. Politicians court religious leaders with mass following in order to try to exert influence over them.

In chapter five, on ‘power’, the political use of religion by two Ghanaian heads of state and by their political opponents is mentioned first. *Osagyefo* (‘Redeemer’) Nkrumah was rumoured to have been addicted to bloody rituals, and J.J. Rawlings was ‘Junior Jesus’ to some, and ‘Junior Judas’ to others. In Mobutu’s Zaire and Samuel Doe’s Liberia, likewise, rumours about them drinking blood ritually to stay in power were rife.

They manifest ‘a widespread preoccupation with evil’, as do the theologies of evil of the charismatic churches, and the epidemics of witchcraft accusations in, e.g., the Congo, where parents accuse their own children of being witches. Protection from evil is constantly being sought in new churches, ‘medicines’, healers, and spiritual leaders deemed to have access to spirits or spiritual powers, among them female ones, e.g. as heads of AICs, or as female Muslim sheikhs in Senegal. They may also be drawn into politics directly, as were the prophetess Alice Lakwena in Uganda, the healer Mary Akatsa in Kenya, *Osofo* Vincent Kwabena Damuah in Ghana, and Rev. Canaan Banana in Zimbabwe. When African states were forced by IMF and the World Bank in the 1990s to introduce democracy, many

former dictators managed to stay in power by encouraging the belief that they possessed great spiritual powers of a sinister, satanic, intrinsically vicious kind, e.g. by associating with marabouts and magicians. The new freedom of press was also used by some religious leaders to express political critique in religious language.

Chapter six, on wealth, opens with the ‘confessions’ of a Nigerian Christian convert that he had been taught occult skills of money-making, had used them to cheat people, and had accepted money for casting deadly spells. The authors propose that wealth, credit and capital, are, like spirits, not visible to the naked eye, and are viewed in Africa, like spirits, as neither inherently good nor bad, but as belonging to nature and its fertility, and so are ‘presumed to have an important religious element, since they involve the creation of new life’ (120). Their sudden drain or increase are explained as theft or trickery by fellowmen, or as involving evil pacts with Mami Water, or other dire ritual bargains involving payment of human life-force to the spirit world. To counter such suspicions in Africa’s ‘wild economies’, wealth must be legitimised, by laundering it, as Houphouët-Boigny did by building St. Peter’s basilica in Yamoussoukro, or by godly banking, as do the Mourides of Senegal and the Pentecostal churches of the prosperity gospel type. In Africa, the authors conclude, a volatile material world is mirrored in a confused spirit world.

In chapter seven, on morality, the authors argue that in Africa societies were ruled by a sense of justice flexible enough to allow the absorption of even radical innovations. That dynamism was frozen by the introduction of law in the colonial era. As a result, the feeling that justice is lacking is translated into spirit idiom, more in particular in that of ‘witchcraft’, a concept used uncritically by anthropologists, who thereby assisted in the construction of ‘witchcraft’ as a social fact. As the belief content of witchcraft accusations is non-falsifiable, witchcraft accusations are impossible to refute, for they refer to a belief rather than to an action. The authors warn against ‘culturalist’ legislation in Cameroon empowering the state to prosecute alleged witches, and similar proposals in South Africa, as directly contrary to classical precepts of law. They find evidence in languages and tracts that politicians who came to power by coups were widely assumed to have done so with the assistance of sinister spirits, and some to have required a ‘blood sacrifice’. They

also discuss the bonds of moral solidarity between close relatives, and their (ab)use by politicians for mobilising imagined communities, such as ‘tribes’, for political purposes. These bonds and clientelist politics also underpin the phenomenon of corruption, increasingly widespread because of poverty, states which cannot be relied on to provide basic necessities, and the need, therefore, to maintain wide networks of personal connections, also in the spirit world.

Chapter eight is on ‘transformations’, changes that dramatic and radical as to require re-categorisation. The authors distinguish between personal transformations by ‘techniques of the self’, and collective ones by social engineering. Examples of the first are born-again Christians and members of new Islamic movements, but also spirit possession, shamanism, rebirth and mystical experiences of travel through space and time. Examples of the latter include Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement in Uganda in the late 1980s. Modern secular states, totalitarian as well as democratic, discipline their subjects by impersonal, bureaucratic means of social engineering and by the modern communication media. People form their subjectivities at the point where state control and ‘techniques of the self’ meet. The authors attribute to religion a ‘redoubtable capacity to manage change at both individual and social levels’ (172), which they say was central in governance in Africa in precolonial times and is salient now. The authors wonder whether in the years to come personal and social transformations will be managed in Africa by scientific and economic elites working through bureaucracies and the media, or through neo-traditional religious elites invoking a mythical golden age.

Chapter nine is on histories, e.g. that of the social scientific analysis of the religions of Africa which, say the authors, has habitually considered perceived spirits merely as translations of secular forces and oversociologised them. Because it considers the practices and beliefs of African religions irrational and fails to study their specific contents, it is unable to grasp their meaning, and understand how they function as political instruments. The authors reject interpretations of religious revival in Africa by anthropologists as due to globalisation and ‘millennial’ capitalism. They also dismiss analyses of events in Africa based solely on theories about developments in Europe and North America; but also interpretations in terms of an authentic, timeless Africa. The collapse of formal history in parts of Africa allows religion and conspiracy theories, e.g. about Satanists spreading AIDS, and about

the machinations of the great powers excluding African nations from their rightful place in the world, to step in to provide connections with the past, and models of the place of Africa in the world order, and to reconfigure available resources for a successful life today. The authors see the religious field of Africa as ‘chaotic’, ‘wide open to entrepreneurs’ without ‘any sense of moderation or checks and balances’(190). Even so, they hold that ‘the current religious renewal in Africa may be read in part as an effort to end this spiritual confusion by creating new patterns of stability’ (191). Shifts in its religious worldview as well as in thinking about power are needed for new institutions to develop, as occurred in earlier European history. The authors discern serious obstacles for such a development, because African elites and their foreign partners have little incentives to change the present state of affairs, and African spiritual knowledge stands little chance of validation by modern scholarship. Islamic revivalism has brought religion into the heart of political debate. The role of religion in the African political scene is part of a wider trend of reaction to Western modernisation and an aspiration to connect to local traditions.

Appreciation

These summaries cannot do justice to the book but show that it is an important publication, with which the authors must be congratulated. On its back cover, it is correctly praised by others as ‘fascinating, insightful and timely’, ‘wide-ranging and thoroughly-researched’, and ‘required reading for anyone concerned with Africa today’. It is also very well written, with notable (and debatable) one-liners, such as ‘[In Africa] spiritual power is a vital political reality’ (106). It is also innovative, in the sources it uses, and in its broad approach to religion and religions in Africa, conceptually by including beliefs in witchcraft, ‘medicines’, and other ‘magic’, which other authors regard as mere superstition, as valid and important material for the academic analysis of religion in Africa (and anywhere else); and comparatively by demonstrating that developments in a wide range of religions in Africa exhibit important similarities that need to be analysed in an identical manner.

Its major virtue, however, is, I hope, however, as yet embryonic. It should, I suggest, stimulate much debate, for it needs to be read critically and to be tested thoroughly before

we accept its outspoken theses and implied suggestions as validly established academic knowledge. Let me briefly indicate a few points for debate.

Reservations

One is that a defining trait of this book is that it is thoroughly ‘panafricanist’, not in a political or ideological, but in an academic sense. Its deliberate scope is the whole of Africa south of the Sahara, and it brushes aside as irrelevant Africa’s cultural, religious, political and numerous other diversities, in particular in matters of worldview. I happen to disagree. Their taking ‘Africa as a single arena’ (21) causes them to present or suggest generalities, particularly in the matter of religion and politics, as true for the whole of Africa by incidental examples from particular parts, periods or developments of, c.q. in Africa.

One example is their expansion of the ‘vital force’ theology, invented in the 1940s by a Franciscan friar, trained in Neo-Thomistic scholastics, Placide Tempels, into a constitutive part of religion in all of Africa: ‘the notion that every living being contains a life-force has been recorded over many decades from all parts of Africa’ (94). Such a statement rhetorically collapses a very specific and contingent development into a generality of such a large scope that it, first, can hardly be tested, and secondly repeats an invented tradition and contributes to an emerging ideology, c.q. theology.

Another example is their claim that in precolonial Africa ‘religious specialists functioned as checks and balances in systems of governance [and] ensured that power was not abused’ (189); but that ‘colonisers sought to separate religion from power, and church from state’ (190). The first part is not supported by e.g. the political history of Akan societies in what is now Ghana before 1896. And the second ignores the diversities and intricacies of the several colonial systems in Africa between 1870 and 1960, and the metropolitan state-church systems in Europe informing them.

Curiously, the book is also ‘Eurocentric’. Its central thesis that Africa is religious, and that its religiosity plays a foundational role in African politics, is mirrored in the thesis that Europe/the West is heir to the Enlightenment and has banned religion from the public sphere. Though there are, of course, marked differences in the roles religions play in public affairs in Africa and in the West, the dichotomy upon which much of this book rests, e.g. in its opposition of the roles of law and bureaucracy in Europe to that of justice as the ‘living law’ in (precolonial) Africa (142-149), does injustice to the complexities of both the history and present state of affairs in both Africa and Europe.

I mention only two more points. In a few places in their book, the authors reproach other Africanists of failing to perceive that they are as much believers of ‘invisible realities’, such as ‘capital’, ‘credit’, ‘wealth’, ‘markets’ and ‘democracy’ (115-116, 177, 195), as Africans are believers of ‘spirits’ or ‘witchcraft’, for they are all ‘mental constructs’: ‘products of the human mind that are themselves invisible but in which they believe’ (48).

Indeed, all human notions, whether directing and governing human social or religious behaviour, or whether they are abstract concepts or in some other way articulate, or inarticulate and even subliminal notions, do all have in common that, as psychical processes in human minds, they are invisible. As such, however, they are empirical, for they are the raw material of all human societies, cultures, religions and histories, and the verifiable object of the academic disciplines investigating them. For these invisible psychical realities are expressed and made manifest in numerous ways by means of behaviour, words, writings, dress, buildings, institutions, and in numerous other ways.

Religious notions, however, involve a double invisibility: the psychical, yet empirical and verifiable one which they share with all human notions constituting human mental worlds; and the transcendental, meta-empirical one that believers postulate for their notions of God, gods, spirits, the Holy Spirit, souls, ancestors, which can neither be verified nor falsified by neutral, non-believing, sympathetic observers, not even when believers postulate them to be ‘manifest’ in observable, tangible form, as in ‘witches’, ‘medicines’, etc.. So, it is incorrect to imply that faith in God and ‘faith in credit, an entity no more visible than the deity’ (131), are comparable phenomena (116, 177, 195). They are not. And terming statistical probability ‘the theology of modernity’ (132) is not an apt, but a misleading metaphor.

Lastly, Islamic radicalism has since 9/11 put religion in ‘the heart of the political [and academic, JP] debate’ (195). It is on the slipstream of this event that this book proposes a similar place in the academic study of the religions of Africa for their role in African politics. I am not sure that the authors have been entirely successful in achieving this aim, for much of the ‘proof’ they adduce for their thesis remains, at least for me, as intangible and insubstantial as the rumours, conspiracy theories and beliefs in which they are contained.