

Praenotandum, 15.03.2017: This article was published in *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research* 37, 2: 156-173. Page numbers are inserted in the text below between square brackets and are set in bold. I have reformed the footnotes by transferring the references to an end bibliography. I have also made several small changes in the text.

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IS AFRICA INCURABLY RELIGIOUS?, III A REPLY TO A RHETORICAL RESPONSE

‘The secularism of African tradition is a dimension still inadequately explored’¹

We reply in this article to Kehinde Olabimtan’s polemical response to our article, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious?: Confessing and Contesting an Invention’ [of Tradition], both published in this journal in 2003. We first review the setting of this exchange: the theological character of the journal *Exchange*, and then point to Olabimtan’s strategy of polemically presenting our analysis in the terms of the old ‘war’ between atheist and religious scholarship on religions. Having carefully summarised the ‘weapons’ he used in his ‘counter-attack’ on our analysis, we dispassionately respond to them by pointing out first that our analysis was not inspired by an atheist approach to religions, but by methodological agnosticism, and then reply to Olabimtan’s other misrepresentations of us and of p’Bitek. We conclude by pointing out ‘bridges’ between his and our approaches, which Olabimtan did not explore.

True to its name and intent, *Exchange* 32, 4 (2003) carried a response by Kehinde Olabimtan² to our article, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention’, that had appeared half a year earlier, in [157] *Exchange* 32, 2.³ In his *Editorial* to *Exchange* 32, 2 (2003), the editor, Karel Steenbrink, presented our analysis as a ‘massive attack on the myth of the enduring African religiosity’, and invited African theologians to reply to it.⁴ Because the editor expected, or had intimations, that more counter-attacks were being written, he requested that we defer our response to Olabimtan’s reply for some time. No other responses have, however, been forthcoming.⁵ So, it is time now to reply to Kehinde Olabimtan’s response. However, before we respond, we need to briefly review the setting of our exchange.

The setting

In retrospect, it was perhaps unwise that we offered this article for publication in *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Studies*, with its distinctly Christian theological affiliation and readership. It is unlikely that e.g. *Journal of Religion in Africa* would have portrayed our article as ‘a massive attack on the myth of an enduring African religiosity’, as did the editor

¹ Hastings 1985: 173

² Olabimtan 2003

³ Platvoet & van Rinsum 2003

⁴ Steenbrink 2003a

⁵ At least one more response was being developed in late 2003, but was shelved after its author had contacted Platvoet to check whether his interpretation of our article was correct.

of *Exchange*, thereby attributing an explicitly polemical intent to it.⁶ Which he repeated in his ‘Editorial’ in *Exchange* 32, 4 by terming our article ‘quite provocative’ and suggesting that the ‘clash’ was not ‘simply [one] of methodological choices’.⁷ Nor would *JRA* have invited African theologians to rush to its defence in the next issues of *Exchange*.⁸ *JRA* would have presented it as a historical analysis, with methodological intent, of how an ‘invention of tradition’ has affected the study of the indigenous religions of Africa.

Some of the blame for the polemical impression, however, lies also with us. We should have used the technical term ‘invention of tradition’ in full in the sub-title of the article. Its reduction, for brevity’s sake, to ‘an invention’ does carry regrettably ‘reductionist’ overtones. ‘Contesting’ may also have given the impression of a polemical, instead of a historical, intent. The pair ‘confessing and contesting an invention [of tradition]’, however, referred to Mbiti and Okot p’Bitek as the two protagonists in our historical analysis, not to our personal position or purpose. That was to present ‘a critical, reflexive exercise in the methodology of the Western study of the religions of Africa, whether by European or African scholars’.⁹ But it is fair to add that our own approach to [158] the study of the indigenous religions of Africa is much closer to p’Bitek’s than to that of Mbiti.

Even so, there is patently also a need for a critical dialogue between more Christian and more secular emphases in the academic study of the religions of Africa, indigenous and other, both at the Utrecht home base of *Exchange* and with its Christian theological readership in Africa. At Utrecht, turbulent changes have taken place in the past decade. Three should be mentioned. One is that IIMO lost its independent position as an inter-university research institute in Missiology and (Christian) Ecumenics and became a research and teaching centre in Intercultural Theology in the Faculty of Theology of Utrecht University. Another is that the Utrecht Faculty was merged with the Faculties of Philosophy and Arts into the Faculty of Humanities. In the Sub-faculty of Theology, a further reduction of chairs occurred. Not only were Missiology and Ecumenics fused into Intercultural Theology,¹⁰ IIMO itself was also amalgamated with the by then, by accidents of disease and deaths, virtually defunct department for the historical and comparative study of (Non-Christian) religions, and soon taught part, and now all its courses. Thereby an empirical approach to *godsdienswetenschap*, the neutral, non-confessional study of the religions of humankind, was replaced with that of Intercultural Theology. Our participation in an IIMO research seminar in 2001-2003, and this article on the recent invention of tradition that Africa is incurably religious, were at that time characterized by the leader of that seminar as a very different, but welcome additional perspective on the religions of Africa and their study.

A neutral perspective, that does not privilege Christianity, is also needed to complement theological scholarship on the religions of Africa in Anglophone Africa. Despite its being organised in Departments of Religious Studies in Faculties of Arts in secular universities, much of it was,

⁶ Steenbrink 2003a: 98

⁷ Steenbrink 2003b: 290

⁸ Steenbrink 2003a: 98

⁹ Platvoet & van Rinsum 2003: 153

¹⁰ Steenbrink 2003b: 289-290

and remains, theological in kind, and mainly serves to provide an academic complement to the theological training of ministers of the mainline, particularly the Protestant, churches in the Anglophone nations of Africa.¹¹

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Deflecting atheism's arrows

Olabimtan's eighteen page response provided the editor of *Exchange* with the 'massive [counter] attack' he was yearning for. It is eloquently written. It uses the weapons of rhetoric superbly. It makes a number of valid points, and thereby ends up much closer to our approach than is comfortable for one whose overriding need and intention is to defeat an opponent, if not to slay an enemy, by whatever weapons polemics provide. An eighteen-page article is quite immoderate for a response. But its size shows that our analysis has touched a raw nerve in modern Protestant Anglophone African theological scholarship: it is still obsessed with deflecting atheism's arrows. Or, as says Olabimtan himself, by approaching the subject of Africa's religiosity from 'a very sensitive end' and drawing from 'prejudiced, yet poignant sources'¹² about Africa's 'pragmatism and tantalizing fascination with material success' (338), we were causing a much 'greater stir' than we admitted when we 'pretended' to engage in merely an exercise in reflexive methodology (339).

Two aspects of Olabimtan's response must therefore be analysed: the weapons by which he meant to vanquish us; and the points on which we agree. The structure of his article forces this order on us. Although the academic study of the religions is not well served by a polemic in the vein of the age-old battle between religion and science, we must first engage in the unpleasant task of responding, as dispassionately as we can, to the way Olabimtan chose to re-open this war before we can point out the bridges he did not blow up between 'religionist' and 'agnostic' approaches to the academic study of the religions of Africa.

Olabimtan's weapons

To win a war one must have, or create, an enemy. Olabimtan does the latter by refusing to see us as we present ourselves. No *emic* approach¹³ can be suffered [160] here. Olabimtan is convinced

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Platvoet 2006 for an analysis of the theological nature of nearly all the contributions to both the defunct *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1956-1979, and its newly revived successor, *GBT-NS* 1,1 (July 2006). Anglophone Africa has quite a number of theological journals, but only one *Journal for the Study of Religion* (of the Association for the Study of Religions in Southern Africa, ASRSA, presently edited by David Chidester at Cape Town University, Cape Town, South Africa), and one devoted to Hinduism, *Nidān: Journal for the Study of Hinduism* (edited by P. Pratap Kumar at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban-Westville, South Africa).

¹² Olabimtan 2003: 339. The further references to the page numbers of Olabimtan's article are added in the text between round brackets to forestall a multiplication of footnotes.

¹³ Anthropologists distinguish between 'emic' and 'etic' approaches in the study of (other) cultures (and religions). 'Emic' refers to the insider perception of reality of those whose culture anthropologists study. Rendering insider views (as) accurately (as possible) is at the heart of anthropological research of cultures and religions. Likewise, the major contribution of religionist scholarship to the academic study of religions is its insistence that the beliefs of other religions must be described as accurately and with as much empathy as the tools of scholarship and the suspension of one's own religious and cultural norms/values/biases will permit. The conceptual tools of *epochè* (suspense of normative judgement) and empathy were therefore made a crucial part of the methodology of Phenomenology of Religion by Van der Leeuw (cf. e.g. Van der Leeuw 1970: 650-662, 665-666).

that we merely ‘feign an agnostic position in the debate’ (333) and merely pretend to engage in a reflexive exercise (339), says Olabimtan. That wilful disregard of our true methodological position, methodological agnosticism, is necessary for him to be able to wage his war with us on his own terms, that is in the qualities and position he ascribes to us.

He asserts that we are atheists who ‘by giving substance to p’Bitek’s atheistic position [...] demonstrate [our] allegiance to the old, secularist school’ (333). So, we promote ‘the mechanistic worldview that the enlightenment [...] espoused’ (333). And we fail to ‘acknowledg[e] that [our] epistemology is far removed from that of the context [we] are addressing’ (323). Moreover, we ‘take it for granted that [our] Western scientific perspective is normative for the academic study of religions’ (322). Because we deny, says Olabimtan, “‘the unseen realms postulated by religions’” (323), we are discussing merely the mechanics and intellectual component (beliefs) of religion and not its substance (323). And, as ‘science thrives on differentiating reality’, he maintains that we too differentiate religion from magic and promote a ‘dichotomized view of religion’ that is alien to ‘the unified view of Africans’ (323). Therefore, we are ‘reductionists’ who presume that religious consciousness is limited to overt acts of ritual (144); and also because we ‘controvers’ [dispute] that ‘it is possible to arrive at a reasonable conclusion, even “scientifically” however tentative, on the religiosity or otherwise of Africans’ (326). And we ‘acknowledge [...] only tacitly that the different strands of methodology are products of Western intellectual history’ (332-333). In addition, we ‘railroaded [our]selves into p’Bitek’s omissions and easily aligned [our]selves with the bandwagon that trivializes human response to “swift and unsettling change” as “invention of tradition” in order to undermine the credibility of the assertio [that Africans are incurably religious]’ (333).

Our feigned agnosticism, Olabimtan asserts, rest on two invalid presuppositions. One is that a ‘religionist’ approach is unscientific because ‘the religious worldview of transcendent reality cannot be authenticated’. The other is that ‘[s]uch generalisations [e.g. that Africa is incurably religious] seem always to contain more ideology than fact’. Both are invalid in the eyes of Olabimtan because ‘the history of twentieth century has violently demonstrated that the so-called scientific method of inquiry no longer holds the ace in investigating societies’ (333), for ‘the two major wars of the twentieth century mark the Waterloo of the exultant claim of science to truth’ (328), and ‘prove the dismal failure of the enlightenment movement’ (333), which ‘*may* have seen the best of its days prior to the violent turning point of the two major [161] wars of the twentieth century’ (338, our italics).¹⁴

The data on ‘secularism’ in Nairobi and adjacent rural Kiambu, collected by Shorter & Onyancha, are dismissed by Olabimtan (334) by means of three rhetorical questions as “‘extrapolations from very limited historical data” safe one: their finding that Departments of Religious Studies gradually eliminated the positivist climate in Anglophone African universities which the University of London had cultivated in them in the 1950s (334-335). After having spent seven

¹⁴ We will return below to the curious shift from Olabimtan’s numerous polemic assertions, in the body of the article, that he is absolutely right, to his expression, at the end of his article, of a fervent hope that the future may yet prove him right.

more rhetorical questions on that statement, Olabimtan feels he is finally able to establish securely against us the pervasiveness of African religiosity by referring, by means of eleven more rhetorical questions, to Africa's 'burgeoning churches and proliferation of new religious movements' and by pointing out that the dominant response to economic hardship in Africa has not been revolution but religion (335-336).

As Olabimtan regards us as epigones of p'Bitek,¹⁵ he may best slay us by first defeating p'Bitek, the avowed atheist. He does that by alleging, without providing proof, that p'Bitek 'took it for granted that the Western scientific method of inquiry is fixed and will remain the eternal norm and verity in the study of religions' (327). And by asserting, again without substantiation, that p'Bitek held that 'the evolution of thought is independent of the currents of history' (328). That, he says, involved him in a contradiction: 'while he expects African religions to be studied as if they cannot and have never mutated, in the same breath, he envisages that the impact of modernity on them will combine with the seed of self-destruction they supposedly carry – atheism – and free Africa forever from religion' (328-329). Lastly, Olabimtan asserts, again without proof, that p'Bitek failed to see that the utilitarian character of African religions predisposed them to adaptation (331).

A dispassionate answer

All these representations by Olabimtan of our position and arguments are not true, or at least not true in the way he presents them. Nor are his representations of p'Bitek correct. We do understand his psychological, or theological, [162] need to link anyone with the 'camp' of 'the enemy', who does not belong to his own 'camp'. But the *historical* fact is that, perhaps unknown to him, in past half century in the academic study of religions a methodological position has been developed in between the warring camps of atheist positivist 'reductionism'¹⁶ of atheist scholars of religions and the 'religionism' of theologians and some other scholars of religions¹⁷ who study religions on the assumption that the 'transcendental realm' and its inhabitants, postulated by religions, are real and are actively engaged in the perceptible universe.

That intermediate position is *not* an atheist position, nor even an agnostic position, but one of 'methodological agnosticism'.¹⁸ It is 'agnostic' for reasons of methodology only: it affirms that

¹⁵ He says that we take 'his biased and over-stretched argument' forward by observing that Africa's utilitarian religiosity persists in its Christianity and by 'latch[ing] on to the tenuous argument' that that pragmatism 'renders Africans secularist and irreligious' (334).

¹⁶ Both qualifications 'positivist' and 'reductionist' are polemical labels imposed by religiously inspired scholars of religions on 'secular' scholarship of religions. They have often served to dismiss its findings as biased, untrustworthy or irrelevant. 'Religionism' as a label for religiously inspired approaches to the study of religions may, of course, likewise be used for polemical purposes in the methodology of the study of religions.

¹⁷ Notably a few anthropologists, e.g. Victor and Edith Turner, Jan van Baal, etc. Evans-Pritchard, though a convert to Roman Catholicism and privately religious, be it in his own peculiar way, was methodologically not a 'religionist'. His criticism of the positivism prevalent in the anthropological of religions before 1950 is one of the historical sources from which the methodological agnostic paradigm in the academic study of religions in The Netherlands and elsewhere emerged from the 1960s onwards. p'Bitek's critique that Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt 'hellenised' the African indigenous religions they had investigated is however pertinent.

¹⁸ As it is merely an agnostic position for reasons of methodology, it may be, and actually is, combined with any personal position in matters of cosmology, whether religious, agnostic, a-religious, irreligious or atheist of the more

the empirical ‘science of religions’ cannot pronounce on the truth or falsehood of religious affirmations. Precisely because religious beliefs are affirmations about the meta-empirical, empirical science – and there is no other¹⁹ – cannot pronounce conclusively, before a forum of neutral, non-committed scholars, on either the truth or the falsehood [163] of meta-empirical postulations.²⁰ Being outside the perimeter of the empirical world, or hidden within it in non-observable, non-testable manners, the meta-empirical and infra/intra-empirical cannot be made subject of scientific investigation, and so can neither be scientifically verified *nor falsified*.²¹ Which puts its truth and operation outside any support by, but also outside any destruction by, empirical science of religions.

Methodological agnostic scholarship in religions pursues two kinds of knowledge about religions: historical and ethnographic about particular ‘religions’ – of which, strictly speaking, there are as many as there believers –, and generalised insights won from their comparative study. And it tries to acquire them, and in particular the first, by two major means: description that is as accurate, objective, sympathetic and detached²² as the admittedly historically and culturally determined tools of scholarship will permit; and contextualisation: the detailed investigation of the historical circumstances in which religious beliefs, experiences, practices and organisations have emerged, function, flourish and die or are transformed. Whereas description was the privileged tool of religionist research into (other) religions, and contextualisation that of social-scientific scholarship, often in a positivist climate and at times with an explicitly reductionist intent, methodological agnostic scholarship combines them, but uses the explanatory force of contextualisation explicitly without the aim, or pretension, that it explain(s) religion ‘away’.²³

convinced or even militant kind, save one: that of the radically orthodox believer who takes his or her religion for the one and only truth and as the exclusive way to ‘salvation’, and therefore regards all other religions as deceit and ways to ‘perdition’. Historical analysis shows that this ‘theological reductionism’ is incompatible with academic scholarship in religions. It has not contributed to its growth but for a few, highly polemical exceptions. One is ‘the missionary linguist, islamologist and theologian of a militantly confessional kind’, Hendrik Kraemer, Professor of Living Religions in the Faculty of Theology of Leiden University from 1937 to 1948. For an analysis of his ‘contribution’ to scholarship of religions, cf. Platvoet 1998: 135-138

¹⁹ Meaning that science has only the several empirical worlds for its objects: the physical (including the astronomical and sub-atomical) and biological natural, non-human world(s); and the historical or cultural, human worlds. The latter comprises the various worlds created in the past and the present from human mental constructs, e.g. societies, economies, cultures, arts; and also religions as sets of beliefs, practice, organisation and (reports about) experiences in respect of various ‘transcendent realms’.

²⁰ Which is different from the (moot) question whether ‘the religious worldview of transcendent reality can [or cannot] be authenticated’. History shows that the great majority of humankind in the past and the present have regarded it as ‘authenticated’. Which is different from its being scientifically established in ways that even disbelievers cannot disregard.

²¹ Cf. Platvoet (1990: 183-187) on the (one-tier and multiple-tier) cosmologies and ideologies underlying positivist and religionist approaches to the study of religions.

²² Cf. above note 13. We should add, however, that the requirements of accurate representation and suspense of one’s own normative position do not imply that the scholar of religions must assent to the belief assertions described; nor therefore that scholars of religions must be believers themselves. A scholar of religions must suspend not only the truth claims of his own cosmology, ideology or religion but also those of the religions he studies. He studies them as they appear in history, as historical, contextual events.

²³ We should add that contextual explanations may be quite uncomfortable for believers. Even if they cannot establish the falsehood of beliefs, they can diminish their plausibility greatly. Though not conclusive, they often cause believers to abandon them, especially when they grow more knowledgeable and critical,

Even Okot p'Bitek, who publicly confessed that he was an atheist, practised unwittingly methodological agnosticism *avant la lettre*, before the term was invented, when he pleaded that the study of African religions be given its rightful position in the curriculum of African universities. He wrote: 'However, the [164] important issue is not whether African deities and religions will or will not die out. It is a fact that the vast majority of Africans today hold the beliefs of their religions. [... T]heir religions must be studied and presented as accurately as possible, so as to discover the African world view'.²⁴ The problem of p'Bitek is certainly not, therefore, that he - as Olabimtan asserts - 'does not believe in the existence of a transcendental realm and defiantly stands outside its category trying to explore its configuration only in the search for glimmers of hope for his atheistic vision of postcolonial Africa' (329). Rather he tried to cope with what Du Bois has labelled his 'double consciousness'.²⁵ Having been trained in Western scholarship, he vehemently opposed what he saw as the distortions of 'the African worldview' by Western scholars, European and African.²⁶

So much for Olabimtan's assertion that we owe an 'allegiance to the old, secularist school', promote a 'mechanistic' worldview' (333), and fail to acknowledge that [our] 'epistemology is far removed from that of the context [we] are addressing' (323). We do not! Nor do we 'take it for granted that [our] Western scientific perspective is normative for the academic study of religions' (322). We have nowhere asserted that in our article nor in any of our other publications. On the contrary, 'reflexivity', i.e. the explicit recognition of the historical and cultural determination of science, is the major trait of modern scholarship in religions. If we contextualise the religions we study, then we must surely also contextualise ourselves as scholars of religions. Science, more in particular the historical, cultural and social sciences with their weak, mainly 'qualitative'²⁷ tools [165] of research, are themselves part, and products, of particular histories and cultures, and must, therefore, subject the outcome of their historical and cultural investigations continuously to mutual, dispassionate scholarly criticism in order to point out, and reduce to its lowest possible level, the cultural biases that are inevitably operative in any historical and cultu-

²⁴ p'Bitek 1971: 113

²⁵ The term 'double consciousness' was coined by the Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) when he wrote: 'It is a particular sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body' (Du Bois 1986²/1903¹: 2).

²⁶ Cf. van Rinsum 2004: 23-38

²⁷ Olabimtan takes qualitative research for a social-scientific method by which 'essential and common traits are deduced from wide sampling to establish the character of a society' (325). This is, however, a quite unusual conception of qualitative research. It is usually understood as that type of research that cannot, or must not, be done quantitatively. Whereas quantitative research develops research tools that eliminate the subject, and the subjectivity, of the researcher completely, or as completely as is feasible, in order to acquire 'hard facts', qualitative research hinges on involving the person of a researcher and his or her professionally trained subjectivity: his or her empathy, detachment, neutrality, ability to understand, and to discern and describe and contextualise the reasons for a behaviour, etc. Whereas quantitative research requires that very many quantifiable data are assembled about the what, where and when of e.g. the voting behaviour of an entire population by random sampling, that these are abstracted from much of their social setting, and that they are processed mechanically, qualitative research is small-scale, uses focused samples, and aims at in-depth understanding of the why and how of the thoroughly contextualised human behaviour of a small number of actors through methods of interaction, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews.

ral research. Therefore, said the anthropologist Köbben, social science [and that of religions] needs to be a democratic process of organised scepticism.²⁸ The outcome of research is therefore never final nor normative, but always provisional and hypothetical: a perspective and proposal to be coolly but critically examined for what it may reveal, or hide, in extremely complex cultural realities.

It is a different matter altogether that methodological agnosticism is currently regarded as that persuasive a position and has attracted that many followers, with a wide variety of private positions in respect of religion and its truth claims, that it is regarded by many as not only the most sensible, but also the most successful methodological paradigm, and is, therefore, *held* to be ‘normative’ in the weak sense that this is the approach in which senior scholars train junior scholars and which they require them to follow when they engage in the academic study of religions. That ‘normativity’ is therefore also a historical contingency. It is the conviction, currently shared by a number of leading scholars, that they must teach this approach to their successors. It merely expresses that this paradigm has gained an ascendancy over other paradigms. The history of paradigm change, uncovered by Thomas Kuhn, should be sufficient antidote against any assumption that we regard our approach as normative. Nor is it ‘the Western scientific approach’, as Olabimtan asserts. It is merely *a particular* scholarly approach.

As for Olabimtan’s assertion that we promote a dichotomised view of religion by differentiating religion from magic (323), one of us redefined ‘magic’ in 1982 as ‘*religious* behaviour towards one or more “unseen” beings with more or less strong pragmatic, or “instrumental” intentions’ (our italics). And he noted that ‘the division of the behaviour of believers into “religion” and [166] “magic” is always an external imposition by observers, co-believers, or believers of other religions’. He added that this alien, polemical, depreciative category should be deleted altogether from scholarly vocabulary.²⁹ We should also point that this denigrating dichotomisation was used constantly, not only by most anthropologists but also by ‘religionist’ scholars of religions,³⁰ African and other.³¹

²⁸ Köbben 1974: 88

²⁹ Platvoet 1982: 26

³⁰ Platvoet has waged a ‘crusade’ throughout his scholarly career against the use of the ‘pagano-papist’ notions of ‘magic’, ‘superstition’, ‘syncretism’ and other polemical notions by scholars of religions. They have been used not only in the past two centuries by militant atheists against religion(s), but also from a much early date by intellectualised religions with claims to salvific unicity against each other, any other, and especially against preliterate religions, as well as by warring factions within religions (e.g. the long history of their violent, pagano-papist use by Protestants against Roman-Catholic ‘papisty’), and by theologians and other Christian intellectuals against the ‘magic’ and ‘gullible superstitions’ of ‘folk’-believers.

³¹ E.g. Idowu (1973: 147) writes that we must carefully distinguish between magic and religion, and [...] between prayer and incantation’. Whereas religion, in his view, is submission and appeal (189, 193, 194), magic is the attempt on the part of man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit (190). It ‘seeks to wrest power for its end, [...] to serve no other will but its own, [...] to bring spirits under control, or to persuade spirits by coercion’ (193). He considers that the constant intermingling of religion and magic in African traditional religion is ‘due to the weakness in man’s concept of God, or the weakness of man’s faith’; and that ‘religion does not need magic to keep it going; and man’s self-reliance will fail him and does fail him’ (197). Mbiti (1969: 10) writes also that ‘religion is not magic, and magic cannot explain religion’. He uses the *force vital* theory of Placide Tempels (16) to develop a ‘dynamist’ view of ‘magic’ as the use of ‘mystical power’ (197), i.e. as a primitive left-over of religion’s evolution that is regrettably still pervasively present in African indigenous religions

Olabimtan also asserts on the one hand that we are ‘discussing merely the mechanics and intellectual component (beliefs) of religion and not its substance’ (323), and on the other that we, as ‘reductionists’, presume that religious consciousness is limited ‘to overt acts of ritual’ (324). There are two problems with these two statements; and there is a tension between them. One [167] problem is that he does not tell us what ‘the mere mechanics’ of religion are, and what he regards as the ‘substance’ of religion. The other problem is that we do not make any statement on p. 344 to the effect that religious consciousness is limited ‘to overt of acts of ritual’. It is he who credits us with this position because he regards us as ‘reductionists’. The tension between the two statements is that the study of beliefs and rites is quite a traditional way of studying religions and usually delivers quite a different description and analysis of a religion than a ‘mechanistic’, or purely intellectual, or purely ‘ritualistic’, representation. And if the ‘proper’ manner of the study of a religion is at issue, Olabimtan may rest assured that we hold that all aspects of a religion, or religions, should be investigated: experiential, cognitive, ritual, moral, social, political, economical, military, etc. That is, both the religious function of religions, as (postulated) communication with ‘unseen’ worlds, beings and processes, should be investigated thoroughly as well as its numerous non-religious functions in their contexts, human societies. Heuristically, however, it is true that we would privilege ritual as the most fruitful area of investigation in train with the central position ‘ritual studies’ has acquired in the academic study of religions in the past few decades.

Olabimtan’s assertion that we ‘railroaded [our]selves into p’Bitek’s omissions’ is in patent disregard of the fact that our article is as much a critical historical analysis of p’Bitek’s contribution to the academic study of the religions of Africa, in particular its indigenous religions, as of that of Mbiti. We did not portray p’Bitek as norm or hero, but showed what weapons he found to fight his battle against the ‘hellenisation’ of the indigenous religions of Africa. He found them in the ‘God-is-dead’ theology emerging in the 1960s in Anglo-Saxon Christian theology; in functionalism as current in the 1950s in (Western) anthropology; and in Frazer’s evolutionary scheme: humankind’s inexorable progress from magic to religion to science. Precisely because p’Bitek was thinking in terms of evolution, that is in terms of cultures that change along a certain path, it is unfair and incorrect to credit him with an a-historical fixity of thought by asserting that ‘p’Bitek took it for granted that the Western scientific method of inquiry is fixed and will remain the eternal norm and verity in the study of religions’ (327); that ‘the evolution of thought is independent of the currents of history’ (328); and that ‘African religions [...] cannot and have never mutated’ (328).

Olabimtan adds: because of this a-historical mode of thought, p’Bitek failed to understand that ‘the so-called scientific method [...] is fast loosing ground to [...] the postmodern’ and is

as a ‘village logic’, the logic of which he fails to understand, but which he takes to be valid for Africa (211, 215). How about ‘primitivizing’ Africa!! The views of ‘magic’ of Idowu and Mbiti are in line with those of Van der Leeuw. He portrays ‘magic’ as a way of acting upon the world that is not bothered neither by logic nor by facts (Van der Leeuw 1970: 529). Magic, he says, is a religion the business of which is power, but which has no need of God. It is an autistic religion in which the magician has arrogated to himself the position of God (531, 534). Wherever religion is found, magic is found also, but magic is a religion that has no need of the supernatural (531).

‘only a phase in the study of [168] Western cultures’. The postmodern, however, appeared only after p’Bitek’s death. And his analysis of different developments in the religions of the Nilotic societies in respect of ‘dominant deities’ in chapter 9, ‘What then is Jok?’ clearly shows that he did not perceive African religions as never having mutated and as incapable of change.³²

Olabimtan’s assertion that p’Bitek failed to see that the utilitarian character of African religions predisposed them to adaptation (331), is a blunt misreading of p’Bitek’s writings. It was p’Bitek himself who stressed the functional, utilitarian and dynamic role of religions in explaining and interpreting misfortune and ill-health. But the accusation was actually not directed at p’Bitek but served to re-open the debate on the ‘conversion’ of ‘Africa’ to Christianity and Islam initiated by Robin Horton in his famous articles in the journal *Africa*.³³ In a curious argument, in which Olabimtan first credits African indigenous religions with a liberal ethos and syncretistic adaptability, he then reproaches them for not having generated iconoclastic prophets, but only prophets intent on maintaining the inherent fixity of their traditions (331).³⁴ He then argues against Horton that ‘the history of African conversions to Christianity has demonstrated time and again [that] the old order [African indigenous religions] persists in the new [order], purified and imbued with higher ethical concomitants of religious consciousness [...]’, for ‘their noble vision continues in the new [order], while the *diabolical* and the *superfluous* are purged out’ (332). No further comment, Your Honour!

The last point to be touched upon is Olabimtan’s repeated assertion (328, 333, 338) that the claim of science to truth has met its Waterloo in the two world wars of the 20th century (328); that this ‘violent turning point’ (338) and ‘the postmodern’ ‘signify a critical turning point in the intellectual history of the modern world and [...] herald a change in Western study of African religions’ (328). He also maintains that ‘the dismal failure of the enlightenment [169] movement’ caused ‘an alternative view to prevailing irreligion’ to emerge in the ‘traumatized’ West that opposes the ‘the mechanistic view [of] the enlightenment’ with ‘an appreciation of [...] the plausibility of a transcendent reality’ (333).³⁵ He is entitled to these views. They undoubtedly assuage his fear of the threats that non-theological scholarship of the religions of Africa constitute for

³² p’Bitek 1971: 70-79, esp. 74-76

³³ Horton 1971, 1975a, 1975b

³⁴ To substantiate this argument Olabimtan refers to a book on conversion in ancient religions and early Christianity between 330 BCE to 350 CE, published in 1933 by the classical scholar Nock who never wrote a page about the indigenous religions of sub-Saharan Africa. His reproach that African indigenous religions lack ‘iconoclastic prophets’ is, apart from its inappropriate privileging of certain OT religious functionaries, historically incorrect as is demonstrated by the bloody suppression of the *Domankoma*, or *abonsamkomfo*, movement by the *Asantehene* Mensa Bonsu in 1880 in Kumase (cf. Platvoet 1991: 163-16).

³⁵ Olabimtan regards ‘religionist’ scholarship in religions as proceeding from this rediscovery of ‘the plausibility of a transcendent reality’ (333). He may be forgiven for that impression in view of the fact that most Departments for Religious Studies in the Anglo-Saxon world and in former Anglophone colonies and dominions were founded after 1950, and were, and quite a number still are, ‘religionist’, especially in Anglophone Africa. However, like biblical criticism, religionist scholarship in religions is an offspring of 19th century Protestant liberal theology. Its origin can be securely dated to the 1860s, and its roots go back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, i.e. to around 1800. For its history in Dutch *duplex ordo* theology before 1960, cf. Platvoet 1998a; for the paradigm change from religionism to methodological agnosticism after 1960, cf. Platvoet 1998b; and for an analysis how Dutch political, social and religious history since 1850 fostered and/or constrained these developments in state-supervised *duplex ordo* academic theology and in the *simplex ordo* academic theology supervised by the different churches, cf. Platvoet 2002.

him. We only point out that they find no support in the history of West European societies in the second half of the 20th century. In them secularisation has proceeded at a much faster pace than before 1950. A religious revival of any significant size has not occurred and is unlikely to occur in the coming decades. And ‘the enlightenment movement’ has become so powerful in academic theology, Protestant as well Roman Catholic, in the past half century that, at least in The Netherlands, that it has virtually ‘de-theologized’ academic Christian theology. Much of it has become indistinguishable from *godsdienswetenschap*, the neutral, secular, non-privileging study of religion. Both the Dutch RC church and the PKN (main Protestant) church felt impelled, therefore, recently to institute drastic institutional reforms of the theological education they supervise for the purpose of ‘re-theologizing’ the theology that is taught to their future priests and ministers. Olubimtan’s exultation at an epistemological revolution in Western scholarship and a significant return to religion and religiously inspired scholarship in Europe is disconfirmed by history. In this respect, ‘the West’ appears to have been hardly ‘traumatized’ by its violent history between 1915 and 1945.³⁶

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Bridges

Polemical scholarship usually blows up all bridges between it and ‘the enemy’. Olubimtan also does likewise, at first sight. On closer inspection, however, a surprising number between him and us remain available for us to cross.

One is that we share a non-differentiating approach to ‘religion’ (323): we reject its dichotomisation into ‘religion’ [proper] and ‘magic’ and consider ‘magic’ an alien, biased and denigrating imposition. Another is that we both accept that African indigenous religions, and much of current African Christianity, is ‘essentially utilitarian’ (323), and that acknowledging it implies no condemnation or denigration, but the acceptance of the historical fact that pragmatism is *the* main trait of most human religion(s).

A third trait on which we agree is that in African indigenous religions – and again in virtually all other religions – ‘the phenomenal world and the hierarchically graded spirit world interpenetrate’ (325), i.e. believers take the ‘unseen’ not only to be ‘transcendent’ but also ‘immanent’: the ‘spiritual’ or ‘mystical’ is, in the eyes of the believers, not only ‘meta-empirical’ but also ‘intra-’ or ‘infra-empirical’, and is thought of as also, or even mostly, taking on material forms.³⁷ Precisely this ‘materiality’ of the ‘spiritual’ in all folk religion has constituted the main stumbling block and major intellectual offence for intellectuals, religious and non-religious.³⁸ This was, and is, increasingly so in the modern West in which the huge development of the natural sciences since Newton had immense consequences for its cosmology: it forced the ‘spiritual’ to retreat to the ‘transcendent’ and placed an ever thicker cosmological ceiling between the spiritually empty perceptible realm and the (postulated) meta-empirical world(s) of spiritual beings, causing

³⁶ A detailed history of the dramatic developments in Dutch ‘academic theology’ in the last three decades remains to be written. For preliminary sketches, cf. Platvoet 2009; Platvoet 2014: 74-79

³⁷ Cf. e.g. Platvoet 2004

³⁸ I.e. as ‘magic’, ‘superstition’, ‘idolatry’, ‘paganism’, ‘fetishism’, ‘juju’, etc.

communication with it or them to atrophy³⁹ and religion to be conceived as meaning, concern or cosmology instead of as communication.⁴⁰

[171] Olabimtan, moreover, restricts himself to defending the ‘pervasiveness’ of religion in the societies of Africa, past and present, and only attempts by a flood of rhetorical questions (334-336) that it Africa is ‘deeply’ religious instead of inherently religious. He ignores our argument that the concept of the ‘pervasiveness’ of religion in African indigenous societies has its origin in a sociological analysis and says nothing about its religious ‘depth’. Olabimtan does also not attempt a defence of the *homo religiosus* theology underlying the religionist approach.

Lastly, in his concluding pages, aptly entitled ‘Beyond the academic disputation’, he cites the poignantly prophetic passages from Blyden (336-338), and then proceeds to rephrase his earlier polemical certainties into a number of question marks expressing Olabimtan’s fervent hope that Africa will prove true to the task Blyden imposed on it:

‘Has this [religious vocation] been the way of Africa? And *will it be* its way? This is the crux of the matter [...] and the *concern is whether* Africa will deepen its religiosity beyond the present aesthetic value, pragmatism and tantalising fascination with material success’ (338, our italics).

‘In final analysis, what matters is *what Africa will contribute* to human civilisation by sustaining and nurturing human religious consciousness. *It may be* that in a world in which reality is constantly differentiated [i.e. a-religiously perceived], Africa will make its contribution to human civilization by sustaining and nurturing human religious consciousness. It may also [even] be that when this [differentiating] trend would [!] have spent itself, [...] the West [...] will return where it started [...]’ (339, our italics).

presumably, at its religious ‘origins’ in pre-enlightenment times.⁴¹ The likelihood of this dream coming true for Europe is at present quite dim, if not grim. And if even Olabimtan, as protagonist of the pervasive religiosity of Africa, must abandon his certitudes as soon as he moves beyond academic disputation, we, who are indeed ‘not disinterested in the matter of African religiosity’ (339), have adduced ample data and analysis for nurturing scepticism that Olabimtan’s dream will become true.

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In conclusion

Olabimtan and Platvoet met in person during the Third AASR Conference in Africa in the University of Ghana from 5 to 8 February 2004, and had occasion there and then for a *tête-à-tête* discussion of their views. By then, it had become clear to Olabimtan that his article contained quite

³⁹ A process that begun in Western Christianity already in the Reformation which reduced the ‘sacraments’ from six to two and violently denounced RC rituals as pagan superstition. In the Dutch RC church, similar processes of withering of religious communication have occurred since Vatican II: the sacrament of confession has virtually disappeared.

⁴⁰ On the shift from definitions of religion as communication to religion as meaning, cf. e.g. Platvoet 1990: 189-191.

⁴¹ Meaning the wars of religion in 16 and 17th centuries that tore Europe apart for nearly a century? Or medieval Europe, full of ‘papist superstition’? Or earlier still, the long and muddled transition in which Europe’s indigenous religions became powerful undercurrents in Christianity?

a number of inaccuracies, misrepresentations and polemical insinuations that were unhelpful in a critical examination of an unwelcome analysis. He regretted that he had reacted so quickly and so fiercely. We met and parted as friends, and have been in touch since. It is hoped that African scholars of religions will adopt a more dispassionate attitude than Olabimtan's towards analyses of Africa's religious diversities that seem to disconfirm the general notions that they entertain about them, particularly if these notions are dear to them and constitute part of their present identity. The African scholar and poet Okot p'Bitek has played a pivotal role in questioning them. His admittedly polemical analyses deserve careful critical consideration by African scholars.

An excellent example of a dispassionate analysis of Africa's 'hybrid', 'cacaphonic' religiosity is Mabilia Kenzo's contextualising exegesis of Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* (1992).⁴² Kenzo's emphasis, heuristically and analytically, on human agency is valid and fruitful. However, the dichotomy he proposes between agency analysis and 'cultural determinism'⁴³ is a rhetorical device that allows him to privilege his own approach and portray Olabimtan, p'Bitek, us and Metogoas 'cultural determinists' who would regard culture (including religion) as merely a 'control mechanism', 'self-contained', 'clearly bounded', 'internally consistent and unified wholes of beliefs and values transmitted to every member of their respective groups as principles of social order'.⁴⁴ That is unfair, even to Olabimtan. That is clear, not only from Olabimtan's fervent hope that Africa will prove true to its task, but also Kenzo's own remark about the 're-traditionalisation of Africa'⁴⁵ which 'goes a long way in showing how bounded human agency is'.⁴⁶ For, he adds, cultures both constrain human agency and enable creativity, be it that 'creativity and innovation is [are] always through the structures of one's culture'.⁴⁷

His critical remarks about Olabimtan's response to us⁴⁸ are, however, apposite, as is his conclusion that 'the emphasis on human agency in our [Kenzo's, JP] essay demythologizes the idea of the incurably religious African'.⁴⁹

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⁴² Kenzo 2004: 258

⁴³ Kenzo 2004: 249

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⁴⁸ Kenzo 2004: 247-249

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