1 Introduction
Reforming the Study of Religious Reform

Religions are lived, and it is in their living, in the full and tragic necessity of people’s circumstances, that we encounter them, study and write about them, and compare them, in the full and tragic necessity of our circumstances (Orsi 2012: 13).

‘Welcome to Lagos; here everything is possible’ were the words with which my research collaborator Dr Mustapha Bello greeted me when I first arrived in Nigeria’s former capital in 2010. That ‘everything is possible’ in this megacity I soon discovered when we drove by a three-storey building that, as Mustapha pointed out to me, hosted a mainline church, a Pentecostal church, and a mosque. Although he described himself as a ‘die-hard Muslim’, Mustapha did not seem to have any problem with a mosque sharing the same space with a church. Underlining the pragmatism that characterizes Lagosians, he argued that this was an ‘economic use of space’. While in this particular building different religious institutions occupied different floors, I also came across movements mixing Islam and Christianity, sometimes in interaction with ‘Yoruba religion’, during the course of my nine-month ethnographic field research in Lagos.

Although ‘Yoruba religion’ – which is premised on the belief that the material world is continuously affected by unseen powers such as the orisas or personalized deities – still plays an important role, Islam and Christianity have dominated the religious landscape in south-west Nigeria, a region called Yorubaland, since at least the 1950s. Islam arrived in what today is called Nigeria as early as the eighth century. Despite its expansion, Islam remained marginal until the time of Usman dan Fodio’s jihad in Hausaland (modern northern Nigeria), which resulted in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate; the largest state in

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As I will discuss in Chapter 5, there is no such separate entity as ‘Yoruba religion’; what is called ‘Yoruba religion’ in the literature is a tradition that is very much part of Yoruba Islam and Christianity. For lack of a better alternative, I use ‘Yoruba religion’ in inverted commas (see also Brenner 1989).
West Africa until it was conquered by the British in the early twentieth century. The Sufi orders triggered a movement of mass conversion to Islam in Nigeria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Islam was already firmly rooted in Nigeria, Christianity started expanding only in the nineteenth century. Whereas the Muslim penetration of Nigeria has traditionally been associated with African traders and missionaries, Christian evangelists from Europe and the United States found it much harder to find acceptance in local communities. After a slow start, however, the nineteenth century witnessed an evangelical revival. The ‘social gospel’ (Shankar 2014) of Western education and medical mission proved to be the ultimate proselytizing instrument, as a result of which Christianity emerged as the dominant religion in Nigeria by the end of the colonial period.

The years just after the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70), when the growth in oil revenues raised hopes for Nigeria’s national development, were a time of religious revival, when Islamic reformist and Pentecostal Christian movements mushroomed (Vaughan 2016). Whereas Islam and Christianity had initially developed largely independently, they now became competitors for converts and access to state facilities and distribution of resources. Within the context of the Muslim–Christian competition for supremacy in Nigeria, Christianity – and Pentecostal Christianity in particular – moved centre stage with the inception of democratic rule in 1999, and has been more or less hegemonic ever since (Obadare 2018). According to Marshall (2009), Nigeria is the cradle of the ‘Pentecostal revolution’ in Africa, that is, the source from which many of the doctrines and rituals associated with Pentecostalism on the continent have originated. These doctrines and rituals aim at individual and collective renewal through a process of conversion based on the idiom of new birth: becoming born-again means becoming a new person, set free from one’s personal sinful past and corrupt cultural traditions. In this spirit, Pentecostalism carries the promise of hope: the hope of a better life, if not in this world then at least in the hereafter. Indeed, the Nigerian Pentecostal theologian Nimi Wariboko (2014) explains the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Nigeria by arguing that it presented itself as a moral alternative to the failed promises of the postcolonial state and as capable of moving the country into economic development.

Since the 1970s, Pentecostalism has profoundly changed the religious landscape in Nigeria, resulting not only in political cleavage along religious lines but also fuelling religious borrowing. In an effort to win converts and occupy urban space, mainline Christian and even Muslim movements in the south-west have copied styles and strategies from the religious superpower, Pentecostalism. Hence, it could be argued that the
Pentecostal revolution has provided the impetus for Muslim reform. Religious competition may thus induce mutual appropriation without religion automatically becoming weaponized. In this spirit, my monograph aims to develop a new comparative framework for the study of religion that is not organized around demarcation and separation, but is devoted to drawing out similarities and differences, overlaps and tensions, between religious traditions.

Despite the mutual appropriation between Islam and Christianity, Nigeria is often portrayed in the media, as well as in the academic literature, as a country torn by violence between Muslims and Christians – an image that has gained more currency since the upsurge of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria in 2002. This rivalry, I argue, is just one aspect of Muslim–Christian manifold relations. This is not to say that I smooth over the detrimental effect of religious clashes. There is plenty of religious difference, also in the peaceful Yorubaland, but the case studies I present illustrate that difference does not automatically lead to violence or polarization; religious divergence could as well be the ground for a range of modes of copying, competition, and reciprocal exchange (Larkin 2016: 635) (Figure 1.1).
Highlighting that in practice the boundaries between religious traditions are not as sharply demarcated as depicted in the media and academic literature, many of the Lagosians with whom I worked during my field research described themselves as ‘religious shoppers’ who, contrary to Mustapha Bello who self-identified as a committed Muslim, had changed their religious allegiances or shifted between them. Whereas Rohregger (2009) uses ‘religious shopping’ as an etic term to refer to multiple religious affiliations within Christianity, my interlocutors used it as an emic term for multiple religious affiliations not only within but also across religious denominations. Because religious shopping is for Lagosians part of a local stock of images that they draw on in everyday living, it is well suited as a tool to study religion through the lens of pluralism: an analytical concept referring to the coexistence of different religious traditions in one site where religious practitioners engage simultaneously with different religious traditions (Eck 2007; Bochinger 2013; Berger 2014; Soares 2016).

A 39-year-old Yoruba man nicknamed ‘Prince Charles’, because he descends from a royal family, narrated his life story characterized by religious shopping, I used to have a booming business in electronics imported from China. I made big money, lived in a huge mansion, and owned three cars, but I lost everything. At the time of my birth, my family had made a pact with Mami Wata. In return for wealth, I was ordained to make a sacrifice before the age of 40. I’m turning 40 this year and I still didn’t sacrifice. That’s why things started going wrong. Since I don’t want to return to my ancestors’ traditional beliefs, I tried to turn the tide by shopping from one church to the other. I even worshipped in the Hare Krishna temple. One day I went to visit an old friend from university, who is a drug lord. Although I know that drug trafficking is Satanic, I was so desperate that I wanted to work for him. My friend taught me how to swallow kola nuts, as a way to prepare me for swallowing cocaine as a drugs courier to Europe. Close to my friend’s place, I noticed a whitewashed compound with strange symbols on the fence. This made me curious and I decided to go inside. It must have been God calling me. That’s how I discovered Chrislam [a Yoruba religious movement that mixes Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices; see Chapter 3]. Because Chrislam combines the best of both [Christianity and Islam], I’m expecting my breakthrough any moment.

As this narrative illustrates, religious shopping not only refers to moving in and out of religious movements but also to the mixing of elements from divergent religious traditions: in Prince Charles’s case ‘Yoruba

2 Mami Wata is a mermaid-like spirit that is worshipped throughout West Africa known for her spiritual power and sumptuous seductions, luring her devotees with luxuries into her water kingdom (Bastian 1998).
religion’, Christianity, Islam, and even Hinduism. According to the self-identified religious shoppers with whom I worked, if one is in need of deliverance – understood by the Yoruba notion of alafia, a condition of well-being with health and prosperity as its main components – one cannot afford to be picky. Instead, one picks and chooses in the hope that by combining elements from different religious traditions one increases one’s chances of having a good life. This conception of religious shopping aligns with the popular description of Yorubaland as a ‘religious marketplace’ (see Chapter 2), where religious practitioners act as consumers, choosing between the various religious options available to them, and where local criteria of religious value tend to prevail, inducing the religious entrepreneurs competing for a niche in the market to borrow each other’s commodities.

Religious shopping needs to be studied against the backdrop of entrenched depictions of Lagos as an ‘apocalyptic megacity’ (Koolhaas 2001), that is, an urban landscape that evokes eschatological images of uncontrollable growth, poverty, disease, violence, and corruption (Figure 1.2). Indeed, in a context of uncertainty and instability, where one out of two Nigerians lives beneath the poverty line (Human Development Report 2006), it makes sense to strategically mobilize

![Figure 1.2 Lagos as an urban apocalypse.](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Photographer:** Akintunde Akinleye

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potency from multiple religious traditions in one’s search for health and wealth by engaging in religious shopping. Thus, while Lagosians such as Prince Charles recognize religious boundaries between Islam, Christianity, and ‘Yoruba religion’, they cross them creatively while shopping around Lagos’s religious marketplace in the hope that the mixing and matching of divergent religious elements allows them to live life more profitably, thereby converting doomsday scenarios of living in Lagos into opportunities for improvement and bliss.

Religious shopping challenges normative conceptions of religion as an integrated, internally consistent belief system. These conventional notions are highly problematic because they ignore that in a pluriform religious setting such as Yorubaland, Muslims and Christians have long lived side by side, often in harmony with practitioners of ‘Yoruba religion’; the boundaries between the three are not always sharply demarcated (Peel 2000, 2016a). My point here is that if we want to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of multifaith settings where Muslims, Christians, and practitioners of ‘Yoruba religion’ interact, align with, and copy from each other, we must bridge the common divide in the study of religion along theological boundaries and go beyond ready-made binary oppositions such as Islam versus Christianity, monotheism versus polytheism, and ‘traditional’ local versions of religion versus the ‘world religions’. It will then emerge that religious practice is not so much a matter of ‘either/or’ – a binary logic that permeates the study of religion – but rather of ‘both/and’ (Lambek 2008).

By analysing how religious shoppers mix and match divergent religious elements and cross religious boundaries, this book sheds light on practices of religious pluralism that transcend the either/or binary logic. By critically engaging with religious pluralism, I am answering Sanneh’s (1975) call for a better grasp of interreligious encounters: ‘It is important for us to begin to build on the rich legacy of personal meeting and

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3 Although the scholarly emphasis on religion as a consistent belief system has long been criticized (e.g. MacGaffey 1983; Ottenberg 1984; Fabian 1985; Hackett 1989; Kirsch 2004; Lambek 2008; McIntosh 2009, 2019; Spies 2013, 2019; Peel 2016a; Soares 2016; Nolte and Ogen 2017; Werbner 2018), there is still a tendency to study religious traditions as distinct.

4 Both ‘traditional’ and ‘world religion’ are controversial concepts for various reasons. Although ‘Yoruba religion’ is often referred to in terms of an African Traditional Religion (ATR), the label ‘traditional’ misrepresents the religious reality on the ground. A significant proportion of the Yoruba population still participates in indigenous as well as Muslim and/or Christian rituals, which questions the conventional ‘traditional’ religion versus ‘world religion’ dichotomy (Peel 2016a; see Chapter 5). Unlike what the label of ‘world religion’ suggests, Masuzawa (2005) criticizes it as an apparatus of nineteenth-century European intellectual thought that constructs other religious traditions outside the West as reflections of itself.
Introduction

Communal encounter that is a hallmark of Christian–Muslim relations in numerous parts of Africa’ (108). Sanneh’s prediction that interreligious encounter, which he illustrated with a vignette of a Christian man reciting a Muslim prayer, heralded the arrival of an ‘age of religious convergence’ (107) has not come true. Three decades later, Soares (2006: 1) wrote in his landmark volume on Muslim–Christian encounters in Africa that the dynamics of their interactions are still not properly understood. Around the same time, Larkin and Meyer (2006) proposed to look at reformist Islam and evangelical Christianity in West Africa as doppelgangers: ‘enemies whose actions mirror each other and whose fates are largely intertwined’ (287). In their opinion, rather than taking for granted the opposition between Islam and Christianity, we should explore their convergence.

While these authors have moved away from ingrained conceptions of religion as bounded and distinct, there is still a persistent tendency in African studies to approach Muslim–Christian relations on the continent in terms of either religious conflict (a tendency that has gained more currency since 9/11 and the upsurge of Boko Haram) or what scholars attempting to advance ecumenical ideas have called ‘interfaith dialogue’. Although these two approaches represent opposites, they suffer from the same limitation: they take religious boundaries for granted. Challenging the tendency to study Muslim–Christian interactions one-dimensionally in terms of either conflict or cooperation, this monograph maps the actual intersections between Muslims and Christians and how they relate to practitioners of ‘Yoruba religion’. In a nutshell, my main argument can be summarized as follows: in order to fully understand how religion is practised in a multifaith setting, we must tackle the compartmentalization of the study of religion by taking religious pluralism – as manifested in the practice of religious shopping – as our starting point. This entails that we approach religion first and foremost as lived practice and experimental mixing.

5 In his follow-up article, Soares (2016) concludes that even if it is now acknowledged by some scholars that it is no longer sufficient to study different religions as separate units, the study of Muslim–Christian encounters is only beginning to receive the attention that it deserves.

6 For the study of Islam and Christianity as mirror images in Sub-Saharan Africa, see also Loimeier (2005); Cooper (2006); Marshall (2009); Janson and Akinleye (2015); Obadare (2016); Janson (2016b); Ibrahim (2017a, b). However, according to Peel (2016b) in a critical response to Larkin and Meyer’s (2006) study, there are irreconcilable differences between Islam and Christianity, notably in the call for shari’a law and an Islamic state. Yet, although not taking jihad as their model to bring about religious reform, many current Pentecostal churches dream, more or less openly, about a Christian nation (Marshall 2009); hence the title of Obadare’s (2018) Pentecostal Republic.
While doing research in the Gambia, I learned that many Muslim youths portray themselves as ‘Born-Again Muslims’ (Janson 2014, 2016a). Issued from the Christian lexicon, the ‘born-again’ concept they use to refer to themselves signals, as they explained to me, the influence of Chrislam preachers from Nigeria on local constructions of religious identity. I was intrigued by these itinerant preachers who practise a mixture of Christianity and Islam and wanted to know more about them. Having quickly exhausted my leads in the Gambia, I decided to go to the source. In 2010 I switched research fields from Lilliput nation the Gambia to the ‘giant of Africa’, that is, Nigeria. The move was quite a culture shock, not only because of the scale of my new field site but also because – being raised in a scholarly tradition that perceives religions as mutually exclusive – I initially found myself somewhat uneasy with Chrislam and analogous movements that mix religious traditions.

I was not the only one who felt uneasy: every time I presented my research data on religious pluralism at conferences and seminars in the United Kingdom and Europe, my listeners’ primary reaction was laughter. They seemed to feel unsettled, not knowing how to make sense of pluriform religious movements such as Chrislam, thereby reducing them to something trivial against the backdrop of the more ‘serious’ religions, that is, Christianity and Islam. This reaction of downplaying pluriform religious movements that cannot be easily pigeonholed was very different from the response of many Lagosians when they heard that I was conducting research on movements that mix elements from various religious traditions. Although they did not necessarily agree with these movements, they echoed Mustapha Bello’s words in the opening vignette and dryly remarked: ‘Welcome to Lagos’, thereby suggesting that religious pluralism is immanent in the ways Lagosians practise their faith.

My Western colleagues’ and my own initial uneasiness with religious pluralism could be explained by the conventional Abrahamic understanding of religion as a bounded regime. Movements such as Chrislam propose a comparative model to escape mono-religious approaches, and provide an emic perspective on religious pluralism that forces us to rethink our assumptions of internal consistency and boundedness. To overcome essentialist notions of religion that are

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7 With its approximately two hundred million inhabitants, Nigeria is Africa’s most populous country.
8 Once the reaction to my presentation about Chrislam was less lighthearted. Afterwards, I received hate mail accusing me of heresy.
Living Religion

grounded in Western ideologies, the first step is to substitute the concept of ‘religion’ for the more fluid notion of ‘religious tradition’. Rather than using reifying terms such as ‘Islam’ and ‘Christianity’, comparative religion scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962) understood the religious lives of individuals and groups to be derived from what he called ‘cumulative religious traditions’, which evolved under the diverse influences of historical and cultural contingency. Instead of autonomous entities defined along the boundaries of a distinct content, a focus on religious traditions invites us to study religions in relation to each other. Religious encounters are then no longer viewed as encounters between discrete entities along a conflict-cooperation continuum but as relational processes, accounting for the incoherence, inconsistency, and unpredictability of lived religious practice, thereby allowing a more accurate picture of the dynamics of religious pluralism in Lagos.

However, substituting ‘religion’ for ‘religious tradition’ does not lead us much further if we stick to the common bifurcation between Islam and Christianity in the scholarship on religion. As Meyer and I have demonstrated in a special issue of Africa (Janson and Meyer 2016), the division of labour in studying religion along these lines is highly problematic because it ignores the fact that, despite the differences in the historical development of Islam and Christianity, in multifaith settings religious groups and individuals have long coexisted. This prompts us to develop a more inclusive anthropology of religious pluralism (Lambertz 2018: 33n.17), that is, an anthropology that shifts the attention from a narrow analysis of Islam and Christianity as separate units structured around

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9 Along similar lines, Jonathan Smith (1998) – another early critic who engaged in the deconstruction of the category of religion – argued that religion has been invented by scholars of religion. “‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon’ (281–2).

10 According to Bochinger (2013), given its normative connotation we should refrain from using the term ‘pluralism’ and use ‘plurality’ (Vielfalt) instead. Whereas pluralism seeks to promote the peaceful living together of various religious traditions, plurality describes actual religious encounters, whether peaceful or not. In other words, whereas pluralism refers to an ideology, plurality serves as a descriptive term (Berger 2014: 1). My approach to religious pluralism is more in line with that of political philosopher Connolly (2005), for whom ‘deep pluralism’ embraces both the descriptive and normative. As I will show in Chapter 2, for the Yoruba people religious pluralism denotes lived practice as well as an ideology for peaceful coexistence, referred to as olaaju.
distinctive theologies towards a perspective that focuses on the ways in which religious practitioners live religion.  

A focus on lived religion entails that we rethink the ingrained conceptualization of religion as doctrine, belief, and dogma, which is dictated by what Asad (1993) calls a ‘Protestant legacy’ that needs to be located historically but should not be taken as being universally valid, and concentrate instead on practice and being-in-the-world. This move away from orthodoxy (correct belief and doctrinal conformity) may help us in better understanding Lagosians’ religious shopping. For religious shoppers such as Prince Charles, religion is less a matter of belief and doctrinal conformity and more of orthopraxy (correct religious practice), which allows them to navigate between religious traditions and mix elements from different traditions. On my question why Lagosians felt attracted by the new religious movements that are central in this book, an often-heard response was, ‘They give me the tools to solve my problems’. Rather than belief, many Lagosians tend to privilege the performative power of religious practice that helps them cope with the contingencies of urban life – a life in which, according to several interlocutors, ‘one doesn’t know in the morning if and what one’s going to eat in the evening’. Since religion is in this context of precarity not primarily about doctrine but about practical concerns, the pragmatic mixing of diverse – and sometimes contradictory – religious elements is permitted as long as it helps to overcome the challenges faced in everyday urban living.

Here it should be noted that the ‘everyday’ in Lagos is not akin to the taken-for-granted version of ‘life as usual’. Rather, it stands for disorder and precariousness (see also Vigh 2009; Adebanwi 2017). To my common ‘How are you?’, the typical answer was not, as one would expect in small talk, ‘I’m fine’ but ‘I’m managing’ or, in Pidgin English, Body dey inside cloth (literally meaning I’m still wearing clothes’). Although this response made me tongue-tied, it is an obvious answer in a context of uncertainty caused by the dire economic situation. The Nigerian economy went into a downturn following the slump of the oil market in the 1980s, but, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), has plunged into recession since 2016 (Noko 2016). The current economic recession is a popular topic of discussion in the press and in danfos, the minibuses that are an essential mode of public transportation in the lives of millions of Lagosians. Without any prompting, my fellow passengers often shared their views regarding the causes of the Nigerian recession. President Buhari’s poor

11 Scholars who have focused on lived religion include Marsden (2005); McGuire (2008a); and Schielke and Debevec (2012).