Book Review


This volume is a comprehensive and illustrative study of the social role of religion in West Africa. Olufemi Vaughan explores the political landscape of Nigeria from the early nineteenth century to the contemporary era from the historical perspective of global colonialism. In considering the formation of the modern state and society, an ethno-anthropological approach has been adopted to examine different regional Christian and Muslim communities and indigenous people. What were the roles of Islamic reformation and Christian missions in the transformation of precolonial Nigeria? How did Islam, Western religion and colonial rule coexist in the Northern and Southern provinces? How did Islam and Christianity respond to the political development of the Northern and Middle Belt regions during the decolonisation process? The author analyses the ‘public policy dimensions of the critical role of Christian–Muslim relations in the governance of Nigeria’ (p. 12) and not only contends that the theory of ‘the separation between religion and state’ is not useful, but that the ethno-religious structure adapted to the rapidly shifting social and political conditions of this West African nation.

*Religion and the Making of Nigeria* begins with an introductory section that examines the existence of the Sokoto Caliphate in the Hausa region of Northern Nigeria and the emergence of the Christian missionary movement in the Southern and non-Muslim Northern region in the pre-imposition era of British colonial rule. The Muslim reformism of the Sokoto Jihad is explored in a case study of Usman dan Fodio, who sanctioned military campaigns against the non-Muslim communities. Numerous Western groups (i.e., the Church Missionary Society [CMS], the Catholic Missions and the Southern Baptist Convention) entered Yoruba and other Nigerian communities by launching elementary, secondary and vocational education activities as a critical expression of progressive social transformation.

Vaughan examines the complex interactions between Hausa-Fulani Muslim rulers and British colonial rulers from 1903 to the 1950s. The British system of ‘indirect rule’ is described as a rule under which colonial administrators devolved their authority to the domestic rulers (largely influenced by the qadiriyya order) but retained some control over the judicial system. The author maintains that power flowed downwards from the colonial authorities to the power brokers of the Sokoto Caliphate, and that the colonialists ‘set the stage for the consolidation of an ethno-regional power structure vested in the educationally advanced Southern Nigerian Christian elite and Northern Muslim rulers’ (p. 68). During the decolonisation process, Christianity was not viewed as playing a formal political role; rather, it is argued that Christian objectives advanced British interests by transforming indigenous religions and local traditions. The alien activities challenged the hegemony of the Hausa-Fulani emirate rulers in the Middle Belt and non-Muslim areas of the Northern provinces. Similar to the way in which the custom for marriage was transformed from polygamy to monogamy, the Yoruba communities were influenced by a
charismatic revival that opposed indigenous African cosmologies and worldviews. Further, the constitutional conferences convened from 1946 to 1959 are comprehended as a preparation process for Nigeria’s self-rule and subsequent independence. The 1951 Nigerian Constitution Conference focused on legal issues related to sharia and the common law. Another ‘two successive constitutions in 1954 and 1960 provided for the implementation of regional autonomy, federalism and revenue allocation’ (p. 90).

The struggle between Muslim and Christian movements continued with the involvement of the ethno-regional and ethno-religious elites. In the First Republic (1960–1966), religious, ethnic and regional identity became a communal conflict in Middle Belt communities. The major politico-religious conflicts of the postcolonial period are illustrated through the narratives of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the 1978 sharia debate, the controversy over Nigeria’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Yan Tatsine riots. Conversely, the book demonstrates the new wave of the Pentecostal movement that was assumed to involve the transformation of the inner core of Christianity. The Pentecostal revolution grew during the national upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. The Holiness Pentecostal movement, with its deliverance doctrines, attracted millions of disillusioned Christians. The mid-1980s also witnessed the development of Prosperity Pentecostalism through Benson Idahosa’s Church of God Mission and Zoe Ministry International. The Nigerian Pentecostal movement was transnational and had global networks in the 1990s and 2000s. The social phenomenon is demonstrated in the way that the new Christian movement, by providing an alternative hope for Nigerian citizens, significantly contributed to the social stability of the nation.

The Northern protagonists of expanded Islamic law effectively introduced sharia in the colonial period; however, the limitations of expanded sharia reveal the complicated process of the configuration of power in postcolonial Nigerian politics. ‘Sharia (was) understood as an attempt to re-establish the dar al-Islam and an argument for Northern Nigeria’s membership in a global Muslim community’ (p. 171). The sharia movement had the support of notable figures, including the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and the People’s Redemption Party (PRP). Meanwhile, the Nigerian Fourth Republic was aware of the religious and regional opponents of expanded sharia, including the Southern, Middle Belt and Northern-minority Christians. They, who declared themselves the defenders of the democratic republic, were concerned that the Islamic reform might undermine Nigeria’s democratic transition. Political critics caused social riots that destroyed lives and property. However, the two parties ultimately reconciled, accepting the theory of coexistence. Thus, this volume explores how the entangled histories of Islam and Christianity are embodied in the structures of society and how these religious forces profoundly shaped the colonialisation and decolonialisation of Nigeria and postcolonial Nigeria today. The role of indigenous religious communities receives less attention, but this transcultural study is a useful source for scholars and students of African studies, colonialism, regional politics, ethnology, religious studies, sociology, Pentecostalism, Christian mission, and legal studies.

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