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The Crown and the Turban: Muslim and West African Pluralism

By Lamin Sanneh. Boulder, Colorado, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997, xiii + 290 pp.

The Crown and the Turban is a new, valuable, and controversial contribution to two debates. First, it is a part of the debate on Africa's triple heritage: African tradition, Islam, and Christianity. Second, it contributes to the debate on "secular" versus "religious" governance.

For the first debate, the author argues that Muslims in West Africa are part of two encounters. First, they encounter the indigenous people and societies and particularly their traditional religions and political institutions. Second, they encounter Europeans who colonized and still indirectly dominate West Africa. The reason for tension, the author claims, is what he calls "Islamic politicalism" and Muslim militancy on one hand and African tolerance and European secularism on the other.

However, African Muslims are in an advantaged position compared to African Christians. African Muslims are indigenous and Islam is considered an African religion. Moreover, African Muslims demonstrate a political confidence

based on an authentic tradition and long experience of Muslim rule in precolonial West Africa (p. 1).

Nevertheless, the author argues that Africa offers a fresh opportunity to the adherents of the two missionary faiths, i.e., Islam and Christianity, vis-à-vis the pluralist challenge of indigenous societies. Muslim and Christian Africans are already favored relatives in the African household but without the prodigal right or presumption to dispossess it or each other (p. 181).

For the second debate, the author argues that Africa offers the promise, and the attendant hazards, of formulating and resolving the most crucial of debates for religious modernization: the debate on secular versus religious governance (p. 182). In the final analysis, the author approves and defends the secular governance as opposed to the religious one.

The central premise of this book is that Muslims took a favorable view of Africa's religious openness, found affinity with certain practices, capitalized on shared understanding, exploited gaps in local techniques and resources, and then—after enough head of steam had built up—asserted the primacy of Muslim Scripture, law, and practice. It is this dynamic historical theme of affinity and challenge, of accommodation and primacy, that this book tries to develop with the transmission and establishment of Islam in African society.

African pluralism and the Muslim outreach thus came to a natural convergence with the implementation of new and diverse Muslim communities whose life became entwined with the interests of the colonial, secular, and Christian forces that were penetrating Africa. The author argues that the crowning outcome of this complex process is far from assured, but the salient fact of turbaned devotees expanding their influence in society by the progressive introduction of Islamic religious and political ideas gives the process its identity and direction (p. 12).

Some of the materials of the book appeared in earlier forms in scattered places. A nineteen page bibliography and an eight page index are suffixed. The book opens with a photo of a Qur'an school student and his teacher. The audience the book addresses is composed of those who are interested in African studies, comparative religion, or political science.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1, "Islam and the African Context: Social and Religious Synthesis," discusses the encounter between Muslim and non-Muslim societies in Africa. In this part, the author is interested in the intervening stages before any decisive political triumph of Islam, in how and where Islam engages traditional African religions and what imprint it bears from its close proximity with African materials. Thus, behind the public profile of state sponsorship lies the ample terrain of religious accommodation, a terrain Islam elevates with its own prescription but one that has been thoroughly worked with traditional tools (p. 8).

The main idea in this part is that the dynamic medium-term view we get of Islam and traditional African combining, separating, and again coalescing confirms that Muslims are involved in a developing historical process of change and consolidation of challenge and reaffirmation. Ultimately, Muslim Africa would exhibit much of the confidence and flexibility, the focus and diversity, the commitment and tolerance that have been constitutive of African societies themselves (p. 9).

In the first two chapters, "Muslims in Non-Muslim Societies of Africa" and "Islam and the African Religious Synthesis," the author argues that in this encounter, Muslims possess the advantage of being African, although as new

converts, such Muslims may be minorities with little vested interest in indigenous cultures. They preserve their difference, adopt an exotic culture, and reject assimilation. Yet they are never alien or unconnected to the communities concerned.

In chapter 3, "Slavery, Clerics, and Muslim Society," the author argues that slavery fits, or has been made to fit, into the social and religious life of the Muslim African. The institution is regulated by Scripture, law, and custom, resulting in its full integration with Islam. However, given the pre-Islamic roots of slavery in Africa, there are indigenous forms of the institution that Islam has not introduced or disrupted and that have survived into the new religion. Thus, the progress of Islam in Africa has not conflicted with the practice of slavery.

On the contrary, the author continues, slavery has facilitated the spread of Islam and given it greater range with slave dispersal. It has also been the occasion of some of the most painful encounters between Muslims and European colonial powers that moved to outlaw slavery. However, the survival of the clerical tradition, which slavery had done so much to promote and with which it was intertwined, suggests the survival of at least the vestiges of slavery in aspects of clerical practice, such as in education and farming and in the norms of cast status that attached to the descendants of slaves. In other words, slavery has been of positive value to Muslims (p. 9).

In part 2, "Islam, Africa, and Colonialism: Religion in History," an important argument is that nineteenth-century colonialism must be placed in its particular historical and cultural context and that one such context is the rapid change through which Muslim West Africa had been passing. Such rapid change drew colonialism into the events and thereby imposed certain constraints on it (p. 67).

The resilience of Islam—its natural advantages of learning, organization, discipline, duty and devotion, and self-sacrifice; its elevated moral and ethical system; its code of personal piety and public order; its strong historical sense; and its cosmopolitan ethos—all of that made it a force difficult to ignore and hazardous to encourage. Very little in the metropolitan calculations of colonial rule prepared the new executive powers for dealing with the religion as a two-edged sword, and that miscalculation was to have long-term consequences both for the West and Africa (p. 71).

A crucial feature of the cleavage that was to confront colonial power was the rural-urban configuration. In a good deal of precolonial Muslim Africa, the overwhelming strength of the local economy was in rural districts where it was controlled by religious masters or by leaders who were taking guidance from the religious masters. In the particular case discussed in chapter 4, "Tcherno Aliou, the Wali of Goumba: Islam, Colonialism, and the Rural Factor in Futa Jallon, 1867-1912," the author describes in detail the active nature of what he calls "rural Islam" at this time and the strong leadership it generated in the centers held together by observances and rituals centered on charismatic personalities. The entanglement of Tcherno Aliou, a leading member of this charismatic circle, with French colonial officials provides a dramatic illustration of the limits of the metropolitan policy advocated by the colonial authorities.

In chapter 5, "Saints, Virtue, and Society in Muslim Africa: The History of a Theme," the author assesses saintly authority in its social roots and historical context. The aim is to establish the roots of the tradition, show its connections and divergences with analogous indigenous categories, and describe its social expressions in personal and communal life. The conclusion he reaches is that sainthood did not lead to the privatization of piety or to withdrawal from world-

ly affairs. On the contrary, saints and their followers stake their reputation as much on worldly success as on personal charisma and are as enamored of the political crown as of the religious turban, and the colonial effect of their dual heritage has been to promote religion as both power and charisma (p. 69).

In part 3, "Education and Society: The Roots of Muslim Identity," the author argues that education has been a fundamental theme throughout the continuing process of change, adaptation, and conservation of the Islamic tradition in Muslim African societies. Long before the advent of the modern West, Muslim Africans have expended impressively disproportionate resources on Islamic education. For these societies, the irrepressible framework of all learning is religion and what religion sanctions or can be made to sanction (p. 117).

In the third chapter of this part, the author describes and analyzes Muslim education within the Western context. Chapter 6, "A Childhood Muslim Education: Barakah, Identity, and the Roots of Change," is an autobiographical piece that portrays the world of the Qur'an school from within by focusing on a child's view of the institution and its leadership.

In the author's view the Qur'an school is a radical departure from the criteria of Western-style schools in several important respects: in how the Qur'an school is set up and its manner of recruitment, in the leadership of teacher and community, in its view of knowledge as rote memorization and the correct pronunciation and articulation of the word, in offering firm propitious portions of the sacred text as powerful medicine to improve intelligence and combat evil spirits, in its manner of recognizing and rewarding children's ability, in its complete ignoring of the mother tongue as a suitable vehicle for instruction, and in the absence of any idea of economic employment as the goal or expectation of training. With the Qur'an school has survived its formula of uniting religion and learning and placing God at the center of education (pp. 118-119).

Chapter 7, "The Arabic Language in African Education," expands this theme and its continuity in the African state by focusing on the Arabic language itself and the ancillary position it customarily occupies in the modern education syllabus. The special character of devotion to the Arabic language in African education is connected to the divine status Muslims assign to the language. The author further argues that this perception strengthens Muslim objections to the secular status quo and their wish to assume political power to extract the requisite concessions for themselves.

This Muslim attitude to secularism may be one reason why in the highly charged atmosphere of religious political activism, Muslims have tended to regard education as a touchstone. Consequently, the Qur'an school has remained an extremely durable institution, and its spontaneous proliferation in Muslim Africa has invested it with correspondingly social and political significance. The Qur'an school is crucial in Muslim efforts to mark out boundaries and set forth rules of identity for practice and self-understanding (p. 119).

Chapter 8, "Action and Reaction among Freetown Muslims: Factionalism, Pluralism, and Muslim Agency," describes Muslims in a modern West African city and their struggle to modernize the institution of learning in reaction to strong competition from Western and Christian schools. Muslims have been keen to participate in the new world order, but for a very different reason: to grasp the opportunity to repudiate, hopefully once and for all, the reigning confidence of the West that its secularism is the universal destiny for all humanity. In any case, Muslims thrive in that qualified, multifaceted cultural setting, even though they remain embedded in the ethnic factionalism of their milieu.

The subject of chapter 4, "Muslims and the Secular National State in Africa: Politics and the Religious Potential," which is concerned with the political sphere, is the religious dissent against the secular national state. The author argues that, without the benefit of the long evolution of the Western secular state tradition and the fruitful role of religion in preparing the soil and demarcating the boundaries, the new independent societies of Africa were exposed to the distortions and excesses of secular dogmatism. The African national state identified its right to govern with the obligations of the moral community, especially with ethnicity as a moral base, transposing faith and trust in an ultimate moral order to an unqualified loyalty and submission of its citizens.

As committed Muslims see it, the state as it has operated in Africa or elsewhere is hard to ignore: It is an explicit rival religion supported by an effective system of rewards and inducements as well as sanctions and penalties. Such Muslims feel they can respond to this situation only by questioning the rule that confines religion to the sacred and removes it from the secular realm. The author argues that Muslim scrutiny is no longer (if it ever was) restricted to a two-sided contest with Western secularism but involves the centuries-long African pluralism in which Christian Africans are intimately involved.

A sharp debate has been developing between conservative and liberal Muslims that questions whether temporal Islam with worldly jurisprudence, or ethical Islam concerned with personal choice, is the answer for the challenge of the secular national state in Africa. While the conservative position is that religion without authority is worthless, the liberals respond that religion without personal choice is meaningless, with the implication that religion and state law should be separated (pp. 180–181).

The development and consequences of the enduring but uneven legacy of the modern West in Africa provide the subject of chapter 9, "Religion and Politics with Reference to Africa: A Comparative Religious Critique." The modern West has been the bearer of two massive but uneven influences, one secular and the other religious. The secular influence has expressed itself in the autonomy of the national state, and the religious in the organization and extension of the missionary movement.

In the context of religion in Africa, and in particular Islam, the author finds gaps in the operation of the national state, raising questions about its effectiveness. The proximity of religion and politics in practical situations discounts any rigid separation of the two. However, the author maintains that an important distinction needs to be drawn between politics as instrumental and expedient and religion as heritage of normative injunctions lest the state become above all sanctified (p. 202).

In chapter 10, "The Crown and the Turban: Public Policy Issues in Christian Muslim Relations, with Special Reference to Africa," the author searches, through comparative analysis, for the religious underpinning of democratic liberalism and the connection between the political enterprise and the life of faith. In this light, he assesses Islamic objections to the notion of religion as only personal faith based on private persuasion and choice; however, he thinks such a notion might be fruitful of tolerance, pluralism, and the autonomy of the secular state.

This issue is dealt with in three stages: Christianity and the demise of territorial Christendom, Islamic territoriality and the countertradition, and the roots of controversy—caesar crowned or turbaned? In the conclusion, the author argues that democratic liberalism and religious pluralism have their basis in the notion

of religious freedom that sets so much store by persuasion and personal conviction. The convergence of democratic liberalism with religious freedom invests religion with a public rationale, and on that basis we may promote interfaith relations in our time (p. 206).

Representing a crisis in the Western mind, in the final analysis, the author cannot think of a third way out of the dichotomy of secular-religious governance. He considers any Islamic governance as a religious one in the ecclesiastical sense. However, while he approves of secularism as the separation between religion and politics, he disapproves of it as the separation between religion and life in general. Yet he still considers that building a good link between religion and life is a personal choice, preferring the Western hierarchy of value system where freedom is the highest and supreme value.

In addition, the claim that both African traditions and the newly emerged African Christianity have common values on the ideal relationship between politics and religion and that both are challenged by Islam's political doctrines and Muslims' political practices (p. 204), is deeply questionable. Through the author's presentation itself, it seems that African traditionalists are closer to African Muslims than to African Christians. African Christianity is the West's product. We should keep in mind that the West conquered Africa by hard and soft integrated powers: militant colonization and illusionist Christian missions.

Thus, the claim that African tradition and Christianity are theoretically in the same trench and the call for an ally against African Islam and Muslims are attempts to politically mobilize the followers of the two indigenous groups in Africa, i.e., African traditionalists and Muslims, against each other. In other words, it is a call to further fragment Africa, and then for the West to dominate it further.

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