Religion and Transformation in West Africa

The main objective of the conference was to explore the relationship between social and cultural institutions and religious practices in contemporary West African Societies. Twenty papers were presented covering a wide spectrum of topics and countries. The conference participants debated public policies, dress codes, sharia, and gender issues.

The first keynote address was delivered by Prof. J.K. Olupona who emphasized the need for a clear-cut methodology for the academic study of various religious traditions. He pointed out that thematic studies of religious traditions, rather than studies on particular faiths, would bring the field further. He also advocated that religious leaders play a role in not only bringing about a democratic renaissance in West Africa, but that they work towards sustaining these democracies. Desmond Tutu’s role during the Apartheid and post-Apartheid political developments in South Africa served as a case in point. He emphasized the urgent need for religious leaders to be active in social issues such as corruption, indiscipline, abuse of power, and ensuring good governance and rule of law.

Abdulkader Tayob brought to the fore the need to distinguish between a scholar of religion and a religious leader in another keynote address. He was of the conviction that the two perform different roles in society. He made it explicitly clear that, as a scholar of religion, Desmond Tutu is not his role model. However, he was quick to add that most participants will disagree with him. He dwelt on the problem of Muslim representation in government. In Ghana for instance, there is always the problem of which body represents Muslims at the national political level. Currently, there is a struggle between the office of the national Chief Imam (spiritual leader) and the Federation of Muslim Councils, the legitimate mouthpiece for Sunni Muslims in dealings with the government. He further dealt with the emergence of Islamic reformist movements and the Islamic ideological debate about the need for religious leaders to be active in social issues such as corruption, indiscipline, abuse of power, and ensuring good governance and rule of law.

Another theme that generated much discussion was the dress code in some Nigerian universities. Muslim female students began wearing face veils, leaving some university authorities with the problem of identification of female students during examinations and official university activities. To overcome the problem some universities came up with a dress code, part of an attempt by university officials to curb the global renaissance of Islamic movements; especially after the introduction of sharia in Northern Nigeria since the reintroduction of democracy. This development was surprising to the Ghanaian participants because Ghanaian tertiary female students prefer western fashion, which is seen to be incompatible with the African culture. Yet, at the same time, there is also an upsurge of the use of the veil by Muslim female students in the tertiary institutions in Ghana.

The implementation, structures, and problems of sharia in Northern Nigeria generated a great deal of discussion (presentations by Muslim Dawood and Lateef Mobolaji Adetona). Lateef argued that the sharia was becoming an issue in the Southwest especially among the Yoruba in Nigeria where independent sharia committees are emerging under the supervision of the Supreme Council for sharia. Eventually sharia law will be implemented at the federal level.

The conference was supported by the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR), the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) Leiden, the University of California, Davis and ICCO-Zest, the Netherlands. More than thirty scholars from the Netherlands, the United States, Britain, Nigeria, the Gambia, and Ghana, participated in the conference.

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The conference organizers plan to publish selected papers in an edited volume.