

Introduction: Sermon in the City: Christian and Islamic Preaching in West Africa

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Over the last two decades scholars have devoted a significant amount of time to uncovering and theorizing what has been termed the resurgence, renewal, revival, or even the return of religion in the public sphere. Scholars may disagree on how to appropriately term these developments, but part of their consensus is that we can no longer afford to overlook such phenomena in our attempts to make sense of contemporary Africa. This process has challenged many of the assumptions scholars have made about religion and the public sphere, but it has also drawn attention to a number of issues among which three seem to be the most crucial here. What are the markers of this renewed and dynamic presence of religion? What are the forms this visibility and audibility have taken? What does this development give us anew to observe and theorize? A significant effort is still needed to grasp the scope of these processes, their sociology, political implications, and what they reveal about religion and religiosity today.

This special issue seeks to contribute to this effort by focusing on Christian and Muslim preaching in Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria. It is grounded in the October 2014 conference ‘Sermon in the City’, co-organized by the editors together with Marloes Janson and Kai Kresse, at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. The conference focused on the way in which preaching lends itself to speaking to and intervening in urban dynamics and reverberates with everyday religious experience, discursive practices, politics, and interactions in sub-Saharan Africa. The topic of the conference itself came out of the realization of the growing significance of new styles of preaching among Christians and Muslims in Africa, and thus of the need to engage with this development

academically. By bringing followers together, informing the way they conceive of themselves as religious subjects, and mobilizing various entrepreneurial and mediation skills, preaching epitomizes new modes of being religious in urban Africa (Austnaberg 2012; Meyer 2004; Tayob 1999).

How do we conceptualize the multifaceted interaction between urbanity and religiosity that the performance of sermons in the city illustrates so well? The urban environments contain various dynamics in which religion has been particularly important, not only in affecting the environment itself but also in shaping conduct in everyday life. The sociality and subjectivities that enfold, especially with the recent appropriations of Islam and Christianity that have propelled Salafis and Pentecostals to the front row, have transformed the religious scene in many African cities, as the contributions to this special issue also show. Since the 1990s the city has also become a *divine domain*, linking the experience of living in the city to that of being religious (e.g., Bekker and Fourchard 2013; De Boeck and Plissart 2014; see also Becker, Klingan, Lanz, and Wildner 2014). The city has opened up to religious initiatives and actors who have gradually transformed its landscape by promoting new pious ways of living and being together. These transformations obviously call for detailed scholarly attention.

On their part, city officials throughout the continent have long taken notice. When asking city clerks in various African metropolises about religion, it is likely that the first thing they will point to is the potential for public disturbance that expressions of religiosity—framed as ‘noise’—carry today. In April 2016 the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) lodged a complaint about a bill referred to as ‘The Kaduna Preaching Bill’, drafted by the governor of Kaduna, Nigeria. This bill is intended to regulate worship in the city and, among other things, requires that ‘all public religious services end by 8:00 PM’. ‘Too loud preaching in mosques and churches’ (The Express Tribune 2015) motivated the initiative, which is now subject to much public discussion. Qualifying the bill as abusive and as an attempt to curtail religious freedom, the CAN proceeded to call on Muslims to join forces with Christians to combat the proposed bill. A state official interviewed by BBC Hausa justified the bill by claiming that it aims at securing order, and preserving peace and everyone’s right to the city (BBC Hausa 2016). He suggested that the intervention of state and city authorities was needed to save the city from being overtaken by religious worship. Across Africa preaching and nightly sermons are placed in the spotlights of public debate. In 2015 Lagos authorities shut down churches and mosques because of their ‘noisy worship’ and their loud sermons (The Express Tribune 2015). In August 2013 authorities in Cameroon found it necessary to close

down Pentecostal churches, in part because of their preaching activities. As in Niger, in Mali authorities ordered preachers and religious organizations to register, allegedly in order to 'avoid anarchic preaching and mosque construction' (Gaoh 2006). This step is rooted in the idea that religion has gone into overdrive and needs to be brought back under control. Established religious authorities themselves have also complained about the ways in which the fiery sermons of young Salafis threaten peaceful coexistence and the image of Islam. In many quarters of Niamey, for example, Muslims have consistently complained about the 'nightly chanting and dancing' of churches that 'disturb their peaceful prayer and worship' (Umar 2014). In reaction, Christians have depicted these complaints as insensitive.

It is worth emphasizing that these complaints, criticisms, and policing initiatives have generally targeted Pentecostals and Salafis, the two religious movements that have gained exceptional visibility in urban Africa and often coexist in the same spaces. They promote reformist religiosities that are usually highly critical of established secular and religious orders and authorities. In fact, since the 1990s Pentecostalism and Salafism have been at the centre of these transformative processes with regard to Christianity and Islam (Meyer 2015; Sounaye 2016; De Witte 2003; Fourchard et al. 2005; Marshall 2009). Since then both trends have prompted and in many cases actively supported the emergence of new actors, who introduced novel practices and innovative discourses. Particularly in urban Africa, we are witnessing not just the construction of new churches and mosques, but also the marked rise of preaching personalities who mobilize their charisma, deploy skills and arts of persuasion to build their authority, assemble new publics, and mobilize their audiences.

This is the departure point of this special issue. Abdoulaye Sounaye and Benedikt Pontzen both address the popularity of young Salafis who identify with the Sunna and stand in conflict with adherents of Sufi orders in Niamey and in Muslim wards in Asante, Ghana. Bruno Reinhardt examines the formation of preachers in a Pentecostal Bible school in Ghana, while Murtala Ibrahim analyses similarities between the preaching in Christ Embassy, a major Pentecostal church, and the Islamic NASFAT society in Abuja, Nigeria, which embraces certain Pentecostal forms in its religious practice. Focusing on different aspects of preaching among Christians and Muslims in Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria, the authors share a focus on the emergence of new preaching styles and their implications for the broader religious spectrum and urban setting. In his afterword Abdulkader Tayob places these studies of preaching sermons in a broader historical and comparative framework that includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Sermon practices prove to be potent forms of being religious in the city, testifying to the multifaceted and continuously entangled religiosities in Africa today. Whether in Christian or Muslim contexts, preaching has become one of the main practices situated at the centre of urban life (De Witte 2003; Shipley 2012; Sounaye 2013). It has become the sign par excellence of a renewed presence of religion and the manifestation of forms of religiosity that bridge the individual and the communal. Across cities, preaching spreads to street corners, markets, stadiums, and cultural centres, literally occupying the city day and night. The voice of the preacher has claimed the aural space of the city, contributing greatly to the making of its soundscape (cf. Hirschkind 2006; Schulz 2012; Larkin 2004, 2008a, 2014). Preaching has become the aural background of many conversations, ceremonies, and domestic chores, shaping the ambience of the tailor's shop, the civil servant's office, the taxi, or the street restaurant.

Christian and Islamic preaching has usually been an important occasion to construct authority and a critical tool for a religious leader to acquire, establish, and expand his (or, more rarely, her) influence. Currently, as Sounaye's and Reinhardt's analyses show, new Salafi and Pentecostal preachers have become authoritative figures through such practices (see also Shipley 2012; Brigaglia 2012; Larkin 2008b). Emerging as new leaders, they have legitimized struggles and engagements with social order to promote alternative moral norms and sociopolitical orders. T.B. Joshua, the founder of the Synagogue Church in Lagos, and Sheikh Albani of Zaria are two of those figures in Nigeria who have taken preaching to unprecedented level and have become iconic figures. Influential in both local and regional contexts, their use of preaching to address new publics and create faith communities has been the main factor in establishing their authority as public and religious figures. By their very personality and the networks they create and inspire, they have influenced modes of sociality across urban Africa. This process illustrates not only how religion has been transformed as an object of sociological inquiry, but also how preaching can be political as it mobilizes competition, attacks, and counterattacks, resulting sometimes in violent confrontations between religious traditions but also within the same tradition. Preachers contend for arguments; demonize each other; compete and vie for attention; and seek economic gains, social influence, and political power. As personalities in public life, the opinions they voice are among the most mediatized. This often has a major impact on social cohesion and political stability, as was the case in Nigeria during the 2015 presidential elections (Mbaka 2015) and the antipolio campaigns in the 2000s (Campbell 2013). In many urban environments in Africa they occupy security officers with their 'dangerous sermons'. This has made preaching a critical dimension of urban life. It constitutes a pertinent object of scholarly research

through which the intricate nexus of religiosity and urbanity in contemporary Africa can be fruitfully explored.

Yet despite being an efficient social engineering practice used to build communities, attract followers, and thereby introduce new modes of sociality in urban Africa (Gomez-Perez and Madore 2013; Brigaglia 2012; Tayob 1999), so far preaching has remained relatively underexamined. As longstanding, authorized discursive practices in Christianity and Islam, sermons are embedded in these religious traditions and at the same time subject to historical transformations. Located in the interface of tradition and creativity (Tayob 2014; see also Tayob 1999), sermons are fruitful research foci that offer privileged access to the dynamics of religious transformation. How and why have new preaching styles acquired such significance among Muslims and Christians in Africa? What can their study reveal about authority conflicts, for instance among protagonists of Salafi and Sufi, or Protestant and Pentecostal convictions? What accounts for preachers and their audiences being gripped (or not) by a sermon?

The contributions to this special issue understand preaching as a recurrent discursive practice embedded in the traditions of Christianity and Islam that requires a certain degree of authority on the part of preachers, but also potentially bestows authority on them. As an authorized religious form, sermons are grounded in tradition and by the same token actualize it in relation to specific circumstances. As Tayob's afterword points out, sermons are both 'established and known rituals' and 'speech performances that may and often do vary from one occasion to the next' (this issue, pp. 132-144). Exactly for this reason, new styles of sermon preaching are such apt entry points to the study of religious conflict and change. The contributors to this special issue adopt a relational and performative approach to sermons, paying attention to the power dynamics between preachers and their audiences, and asking about the overall effects of sermons. The point here is that sermons are to be understood as complex speech acts that convey a sense of divine presence. As 'sensational forms' (Meyer 2010), sermons operate within a wider religious aesthetics that shape subjectivities and communities. Extending the study of the art of preaching beyond content to questions of form, sensation, and aesthetics is a productive entry point to better grasping the appeal of current Christian and Islamic reform movements in urban Africa.

Here it is particularly important to take preaching as a performance in which rhetoric, style, and the art of persuasion are at work. Importantly, this implies paying attention not only to the content expressed in a sermon, but also to its rhetorical arrangement, modes of delivery, and aesthetic effects on the listeners. The persuasive power of a sermon is not limited to oratory alone but involves all the senses. Approaching sermons as aesthetic forms is not to

downplay the politics of preaching, but rather to illuminate aspects of these politics via a focus on the forms that shape the content and to which a sermon owes its mobilizing power. This attention to form brings to the fore the notion of religious aesthetics as the mode through which religiosity is expressed and experienced. Melodic voice, elaborate rhetoric, music, dancing, trance, gestures, refined and shiny sartorial practices, and so on have all become significant new markers of religiosity in urban Africa. In this context one only needs to attend a sermon at Christ Embassy in Abuja (Ibrahim, this issue) or follow a class in the Anagkazo Bible and Ministry Training Center (Reinhardt, this issue) to note how preaching offers a full display of the aesthetic that characterizes private and public expressions of religiosity.

Drawing attention to the forms and expressive modes through which sermons are performed, the articles in this special issue seek to show that there is more than content or text to grasp in both Christian and Muslim sermons, whether they are performed in mosques, churches, private homes, streets, or simply through audio-visual media. Sermons are sites of the manifestation of religious aesthetics, be they Salafi, Sufi, Pentecostal, or typical of NASFAT. More than any other form of religious discourse, preaching illustrates the 'power of the spoken word' (Furniss 2004). Sermons involve an 'oral communicative moment' that draws audiences, constitutes publics, and even builds communities (Furniss 2004; Schulz 2011; Sounaye 2014). Preaching may well be understood as a stage on which religious norms and values are articulated and intra- and interreligious tensions and contradictions are exposed. The main concern of this special issue as a whole is to understand, from a comparative perspective, how preaching has become a space for social interaction, a tool for the consolidation and construction of authority, a site where alternative religious actors emerge, as well as a platform for new mediation techniques and the genesis of new religious aesthetics.

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