

Their success is predicated on an ability to produce a theological message that appeals to new followers, to attract financial investments, and redistribute them within a specific community.

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Religious Entrepreneurship

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*Islamic and Christian societies in Africa are at the heart of thriving religious developments amid challenging economic and political transformations. This article introduces the special issue by laying out the current state of the literature on religious entrepreneurship and religious transformations and demonstrates how our contributors position themselves vis-à-vis this literature. It explains how, by analyzing select individual trajectories of Islamic and Christian religious entrepreneurs, contributors to this special issue shed light on logics of upward social mobility whereby these individuals seize the new opportunities provided by social and political liberalization. But beyond the notion of individual success, these entrepreneurs are deeply embedded within various social networks, without which their trajectories would be impossible to decipher.*

Islamic and Christian societies in Africa are at the heart of thriving religious developments (Corten and Mary 2000; Fourchard, Mary, and Otayek 2005; Triaud and Villalón 2009). Studies of religion in Africa highlight the extent to which this diversification has been tied to logics of socioeconomic and political liberalization. Neoliberal reforms imposed by international financial institutions and donor countries have generated harsh socioeconomic drawbacks, including cutbacks in public sector jobs (and the financial and social status that come with them), declining public social services, and rapid urbanization without proper social and sanitary infrastructures (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 2001; Freeman 2012; Mayrargue 2009, 2014; Soares 2017). These dire economic conditions, as Yonatan Gez and Yvan Droz (this issue) remind us, echoing Marc Sommers (2012) and Alcinda Honwana (2014), have left scores of young African citizens “stuck” (Sommers 2012) in their attempts at moving up the social ladder, becoming a “waithood generation” (Honwana 2014, 28). This situation has laid the foundation for inter- and cross-generational relationships that oscillate between conflict and negotiation (Gomez-Perez and LeBlanc 2012); however, patriarchal

influence may no longer be so pervasive in a context simultaneously marked by displacement and new gender roles. For instance, Alessandro Gusman's contribution to this special issue describes the deparentalization of the Congolese community in Kampala, a result of most members of the older generation having been killed or having remained in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Across Africa, the last several decades have seen women come to play highly active and visible roles in transnational and migratory networks (Chant 1992; Falquet et al. 2008, 2010; Verschuur and Reysoo 2005). Indeed, the analysis of female trajectories reveals fluctuating and reconfigured gender relations (Adjamagbo and Calvès 2012; Buggenhagen 2012; Gomez-Perez 2018; Gomez-Perez and Brossier 2016). This includes changes in the relationship between gender and Islamic authority, especially in West Africa (Frede and Hill 2014; Madore and Gomez-Perez 2016), as reflected in a broad range of situations where women's Islamic activism has contributed to reproducing dominant social norms (Augis 2005; Janson 2016), to questioning social norms (Gomez-Perez 2016), and to the emergence of an Islamic feminism (Saint-Lary 2019, 243–69).

Simultaneously, most African states have undertaken political liberalization reforms since 1990, loosening up the conditions of association and expression, allowing citizens to organize outside the state-sanctioned political, social, and religious organizations. In this context, the Muslim and Christian religious fields have become vibrant, diverse, and dispersed, with a "profusion of sites of production and dissemination"<sup>1</sup> (Lasseur and Mayrargue 2011) and a proliferation of religious radio stations and TV channels (Grätz 2011; Hackett and Soares 2014; Meyer and Moors 2006).

Changes in religious dynamics have also occurred in the context of war and insecurity. This is the case in the Central African Republic (CAR), where corrupt practices have encouraged political violence, overlapped politics and religion (Muslim-majority Séléka rebels versus vigilante groups called Anti-Balaka), and created a new form of ethical leadership that promotes a moral discourse critical of corrupt elites (see Pastor Augustin Hibaile in Gino Vlavonou's article). It is also the case in Uganda, where young Congolese pastors have achieved a rapid social mobility within the community of refugees who have fled the violence in the Eastern provinces of the DRC (see Pastor Schadrac and Mama Kati in Gusman's article).

These major transformations have fostered the emergence of what Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier (2001) call "nouvelles figures de la réussite" (new figures of success), who include role models for the capitalist pursuit of personal wealth; however, the originality of this special issue lies in looking beyond such rock-star pastors (Marshall-Fratani 2001; Meyer 2004; Obadare 2018; Ojo 2007) to shed light on entrepreneurial figures who, although still well known, are less flamboyant. These pastors tend to come from modest or poor backgrounds (such as the Congolese Pentecostal refugee-pastors in Uganda, as seen in Gusman's article, or K-Tino in Cameroon, as seen in Séraphin Balla's article), to belong to minority ethnic groups (such as

Pastor Hibaile in the CAR), or to have obscure social origins (such as Murid Shifa in Ethiopia, as seen in Yekatit Getachew Tsehayu and Terje Østebø's article). They also include a smaller number of women from prominent or middle-class families, including the owners of hajj travel agencies in Senegal (Muriel Gomez-Perez and Cédric Jourde's article), Aminata Kane Koné (a highly educated Ivorian Muslim woman profiled by Frédéric Madore), and Nestor Toukea (a Cameroonian pastor profiled by Balla).

By analyzing various individual trajectories, the articles in this special issue highlight logics of upward social mobility whereby these men and women seize the new opportunities provided by social and political liberalization, with the aim of overcoming dire economic conditions and becoming "'someone' in society" (Lauterbach 2010, 260). A number of scholars have analyzed the trajectories of these figures using the concept of entrepreneurs. Ali Gümüşay defines an entrepreneur as "someone who exploits opportunities often through the recombination of existing resources while bearing the uncertainty in the undertaking" (2015, 200). Maryam Fozia, Ayesha Rehman, and Ayesha Farooq point out that "the main features of entrepreneurship are identified as risk taking and action orientation" (2016, 18). Ute Röschenhaler and Dorothea Schulz (2016) and their colleagues (notably Hill 2016; Lauterbach 2016; Sounaye 2016) historicize and rejuvenate the notion of the entrepreneur in Africa. They understand entrepreneurs in the time of neoliberalism as social actors and "cultural entrepreneurs," as "individuals who quickly perceive the chances of the moment and seize novel opportunities to initiate new forms of generating income in the realm of cultural production" (Röschenhaler and Schulz 2016, 1). In the realm of religion specifically, these individuals can be understood as "religious entrepreneurs" (Eggers 2020; Kadya Tall 2003; Lauterbach 2010; Sounaye 2016), "cultural entrepreneurs" (Röschenhaler and Schultz 2016), or "moral entrepreneurs" (Ould Bah and Ould Cheikh 2009). They have been particularly dynamic in Pentecostal churches (Coleman 2011; Freeman 2012; Gifford 2004; Haynes 2012; Lauterbach 2016; Marshall 2009; Meyer 2007) and in Muslim reformist movements, both outside and inside Sufi orders (Augis 2005; Fourchard, Mary, and Otayek 2005; Østebø 2009; Soares 2017; Sounaye 2016; Tammam and Haenni 2004; Triaud and Villalón 2009).

The concept of religious entrepreneur could be interpreted as a celebration of the individual, the sacred unit of analysis of neoliberalism and new management thinking, as well as individual skills and capabilities to thrive in a merciless market ("to hell with the losers!," as Husam Tammam and Patrick Haenni [2004] nicely capture this perspective), but researchers underscore the fundamental social dimension inherent in religious entrepreneurship. To be sure, the economic and political liberal reforms of the 1990s enabled the proliferation of religious movements, churches, and associations, and thus allowed this religious entrepreneurialism to flourish. But against this vision of entrepreneurship (grounded in a purely individualist and materialist perspective, where the means for success are individual abilities and

the end is restricted to the satisfaction of an individual's material needs), the key to achieving success, and the very meaning of success, are to a large extent embedded deeply in the social realm. Almost all the entrepreneurial figures our contributors analyze confirm the importance of socialized means and ends, with the exception of one or two cases—the case of Pastor Dieunedort Kamdem in Balla's article and, to a lesser extent, that of Murid Shifa in Yekatit and Østebø's article.

The contributors to this special issue emphasize the link between the relationship with oneself (personal ethics, personal religious experience, life trajectory) and the logics of belonging to a community of faith. From this perspective, strategies for networking and mobilizing resources rely on certain personal characteristics. The latter include an aptitude for problem-solving, taking initiative (as demonstrated through Mama Kati's fundraising activities and the efforts of hajj travel-agency owners to create community-based economic consortiums called *groupes d'intérêts économiques*), taking risks, acquiring professional experience, overcoming challenges, reacting positively to new situations, and showing flexibility. The corresponding strategies include relying on family and social networks (including participation in associations, in the *tontines* system, or in a prayer economy where believers offer money to religious leaders in exchange for prayers and blessings) and trusted neighborhood groups for aid and protection (Buggenhagen 2012; Lyytinen 2017; Soares 2017; Sommers 2001); using modern tools (including small media, digital media, display advertising, and videos posted online; see Madore's profile of Koné, Vlavourou's profile of Hibaile, Balla's profiles of Kamdem and K-Tino, and Gusman's profile of Schadrac); and developing local, transnational, and international networks (like the female hajj travel-agency owners in Senegal profiled by Gomez-Perez and Jourde). They thus echo what Abdoulaye Sounaye identified in the case of Islamic entrepreneurs, who "use their skills, positions, networks, connections, etc. to initiate various activities, lead communal initiatives, and mobilize segments of urban dwellers for their projects" (2016, 40).

All of this suggests that these religious entrepreneurs need to find a balance between innovation and social acceptance, or what Karen Lauterbach describes as "processes of invention and creativity" and "processes of imitation and reproduction" (2016, 19). As members of communities, religious entrepreneurs cannot depart entirely from hegemonic norms and practices (Comaroff 2012; Haynes 2012; James 2019; Lauterbach 2016, 20–23; Röschenhaler and Schulz 2016, 8). Although these religious figures certainly show a willingness to take risks, the authors are careful to describe how they actually take a range of positions in relation to hierarchies, norms, and practices. Gender hierarchies contribute to the making of an unequal religious field. As some of the contributors to this special issue show, female religious entrepreneurs, be they Pentecostal pastors (Gez and Droz; Balla), hajj travel-agency owners (Gomez-Perez and Jourde), or Islamic social media icons (Madore), have faced daunting challenges as they have sought to prosper in a world dominated mostly by men, becoming self-reliant and carving

out spheres of autonomy while collaborating with male kin and allies and professing to be respecting dominant gender and religious norms. In the case of Muslim women, this is particularly important, given the often-negative view associated with innovation in Islam, which echoes the notion of *bida'a*, or “wrongful innovation.” Hence, to borrow from Joseph Hill’s notion of “wrap,” women “‘wrap’ themselves—not just their bodies but also their actions and social presence—so as to reconcile their new performances of authority with norms of feminine piety” (2018, 11).

In sum, we ought to reflect not only on these individuals’ social capital, their ability to build and supply networks profitable to them and their followers, but also on their place within multiple generations of religious actors operating in a competitive and diverse religious landscape and facing a complex and variable—and sometimes coercive—political context.

Whereas some are careful not to disrupt social and religious hierarchies, others seek indirectly to challenge these power structures. The hajj travel market provides an example of social reproduction insofar as it prevents peripheral social actors from gaining a foothold within dominant social structures. By contrast, despite having never claimed any family connection to Sheikh Issa Hamza, who established the commemoration of Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1078–1166), in Masqan (Ethiopia), the great figure of Sufism, Murid Shifa is seen by many as a protector of the community and a facilitator of miracles, who mediates between Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani and the people of Masqan.

Regarding social norms, religious entrepreneurs tend to assimilate, confront, or circumvent them. For instance, Vlavenou describes how Pastor Hibaile’s decision to pursue doctoral studies in the United States has allowed him to draw on prevailing local notions of bigness in the CAR, where studying abroad is considered highly prestigious. Madore describes how, in Côte d’Ivoire, Koné has adopted a more critical approach to ideas surrounding women’s equality and emancipation in Islam. Thus, after joining the Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans de Côte d’Ivoire (Association of Muslim students of Côte d’Ivoire) in 1998, she went on to challenge the ways the organization reinforced male Muslims’ patriarchal interpretations of Islam. She has addressed taboo subjects, such as sexual violence and the abuse of girls in schools. Some hajj travel-agency owners in Senegal are careful to emphasize that their husbands have no say over their agencies, to highlight the level of social autonomy and emancipation they have achieved.

In terms of practices, Yekatit and Østebø provide a particularly illuminating profile of Murid Shifa. This religious figure has introduced numerous changes to Jillale Liqa, including making Darama (“contribution”) into a central feature of the celebrations commemorating Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. Thus, Murid Shifa receives gifts of money and goods, keeping the cash for himself in what many consider a breach of traditional norms. Nevertheless, he has been successful in serving a market that began to emerge in the 1990s, when an increasing number of female migrants began leaving for the Gulf

states and other parts of the Middle East to work in domestic service. He sells protection to these women through rituals. In fact, he has managed to reshape the prayer economy by introducing the notion of prepaid *baraka*. He therefore collects payments from young female migrants not only after they reach their destination—in gratitude for his help—but also before they apply for a visa and before departing Ethiopia. As soon as the women offer him their gifts, they immediately receive his blessings. He has allowed women to take part in religious rituals along with men.

This special issue presents profiles of self-made individuals that suggest a new understanding of prosperity. Instead of self-enrichment (and notwithstanding the examples of Murid Shifa in Ethiopia and Kamdem in Cameroon), this understanding focuses on striking a balance between personal and interpersonal needs (Daswani 2015). Furthermore, it reflects an awareness of difficult social contexts (thus, Gusman describes how Pastor Schadrac avoids using the new church to enrich himself because he recognizes the challenges faced by members of Kampala’s Congolese refugee community) and the search for new subjectivities (as discussed by Balla). Far from the image of the self-centered *nouveau riche* pastor or shaykh, most of the individuals our contributors analyze are “moral subjects” who advocate for specific “ways of living” (Marshall-Fratani and Péclard 2002, 5), overcome social injustice, and promote positive Islamic values (compare Mardore’s profile of Koné with Balla’s profile of Kamdem, accused of exploiting people’s misery for his own personal gain). They are people driven by an unwavering faith, who claim to have a special relationship with God, to have been “invested” with a divine mission, to have been personally chosen by God. They reveal their agency through courage and perseverance (see Pastor Margaret Wanjiru’s ecstatic declaration that “God is dealing with me” in Gez and Droz’s article, as well as Schadrac’s narrative in Gusman’s article) and by demonstrating professional ethics that are aligned with religious precepts (see Gomez-Perez and Jourde’s description of how female hajj travel-agency owners seek to reconcile the needs of their businesses with religious imperatives).

All these factors have led many of these religious figures to gain admiration and social recognition within communities of various sizes, thereby establishing themselves as figures of success (see the situation in Kampala as discussed by Gusman). As Lauterbach states, “becoming a pastor also means attaining social status that is recognized not only by members in church, but more widely in society” (2016, 31). Meanwhile, charisma and performativity are important concepts that weave their way through the articles in this special issue. On the one hand, head pastors rely on charisma to promote the churches they embody, whereas Gusman describes how Mama Kati draws on her charisma to transform acts of deliverance and healing into a solid business model. On the other hand, performativity (Frede and Hill 2014; Hill 2018) provides a new way of understanding not only gender norms and the dimensions of religious authority, but also processes for achieving visibility and legitimacy:

Anyone perceived to know more than those in her or his milieu may potentially act as an authoritative personality in that context, even if the same person might not act as authoritatively in the company of scholars. Thus, people of all educational and social backgrounds can potentially demonstrate Islamic knowledge and act as an authoritative figure. (Frede and Hill 2014, 152)

These entrepreneurial figures see the religious field as a space of political and moral economy to be conquered. Their success is predicated on an ability to produce a theological message that appeals to new followers, to attract financial investments, and redistribute them within a specific community (James 2019; Lauterbach 2016; Marshall 2009; Osella and Osella 2009). As they set out to start and develop their religious enterprises (Triaud and Villalón 2009), they must decide how to align themselves with or differentiate themselves from other religious entrepreneurs, as well as what communication strategies to adopt using the media, information and communication technology (ICT), and other tools (Grätz 2011; Hackett and Soares 2014; Schulz 2012; Sounaye 2013). They need to navigate across various levels—local, national, international, global. Specifically, they must acquire a thorough understanding of the local communities in which they evolve (Drønen 2013), while capitalizing on long-established national and transnational networks (religious, commercial, diasporal), or join emerging transnational networks capable of providing new financial, social, and cultural opportunities (Fourchard, Mary, and Otayek 2005). Traveling abroad to obtain degrees in theology, develop new business partnerships, or visit disciples and followers in the diaspora become necessary activities.

A key question centers on the notion of success. After all, this is what “new figures of success” draw our attention to. Rather than straightforward success stories, most of the itineraries presented by the contributors to this issue are characterized by a degree of fragility and liminality. Some, such as these Congolese pastors in Uganda, have built new churches among marginalized communities of refugees (Gusman in this issue); others, such as these Senegalese women (Gomez-Perez and Jourde in this issue), have become the owners of profitable hajj travel agencies in what used to be a men-only economic sector. Some women who belong to prominent Sufi lineages mobilize their family’s religious networks of disciples, which provide substantial sums of money and numerous pilgrims—which explains their success in part. Religious entrepreneurs may strive for “successes,” “self-aggrandizement,” or self-fulfillment as they search for new subjectivities and pursue upward mobility, or their trajectories may be diverse, complex, and nonlinear (except for Koné), encompassing partial successes and failures. As Röschenhaler and Schulz rightly point out, “entrepreneurs positively embrace the risk of failure” (2016, 1). If risk-taking is indeed a major feature of these entrepreneurs, failure to achieve one’s goal is a common outcome. Understanding these partial or minor successes, as well as these failures,

requires that we pay attention to the conditions in which religious entrepreneurs evolve, the constraints these conditions impose. Scholars must pay close attention to the inequity of the religious field. Resources and the power they bestow are not equally distributed among all the actors evolving in it, the normative and material access costs can be high, and the means to survive in it in the long haul are not easily preserved. Gez and Droz describe a Kenyan context marked by a highly competitive and increasingly scrutinized religious marketplace, amid public perceptions of an oversupply of Pentecostal churches. They are right to point out that, under these circumstances, Pentecostal religious figures cannot rely on professionalization to guarantee their success (as witnessed by the difficulties experienced by Nganga wa Kago, following schisms in his church) and sometimes face hard times, which leave them vulnerable (as in the case of the street preacher Pastor Patrick). Vlavonou describes how, in the CAR, Pastor Hibaile has benefited from international recognition in the form of leadership awards and from the initiatives he has launched as the founder of CIDEL (Centre International pour le Développement de l'Éthique du Leadership), even if the latter are not always well received by the current university administration. In Cameroon in 2013, K-Tino ended her music and dance career, which had a reputation for being erotically charged, to devote her life to serving God. But four years later, she released an album, acknowledging that she had become a different person with a reconciled life, as an artist and a family woman (Balla in this issue).

The challenges these religious entrepreneurs face may include the state, rival religious entrepreneurs, or social norms and hierarchies. For instance, by virtue of their visibility, the influence they exert over their followers, and their capacity to legitimize and criticize the government through evocative and inspiring religious representations and narratives, they inevitably draw the attention of the state (Bompani and Valois 2018; Gifford 1998; Kolapo 2016; Marshall 2009; Meyer 1998; Obadare 2018).

The state has the potential to become a key supplier (of formal or informal financing, building permits, authorizations of any kind), a regulator and arbiter (settling internal conflicts or regulating the broader religious and economic fields), but also a threat (withdrawing a license, seizing properties and land, or harassing leaders and followers). Furthermore, with the rapidly changing political landscapes of many African states, the friendly state officials of today may be replaced by foes tomorrow; years of tirelessly built collaborative relations with some state officials can be wiped out the morning after an election that brings a new, and unfriendly, government in power. Borrowing from Albert Hirschman's (1970) typology, the relations that religious entrepreneurs may develop with state officials can be captured through the "loyalty-voice-exit" triptych: they may forge collaborative ties of some sort with the state (through networks tying state politicians to religious entrepreneurs, or through formal institutionalized collaboration). Gez and Droz highlight the risks associated with involvement in politics when they describe how Pastor Wanjiru, elected to parliament and appointed

assistant minister for housing, was brought down by allegations of having misappropriated ministerial funds. She lost her bid to be elected as the senator for Nairobi in 2013. This is also the case of K-Tino and Pastor Kamdem, who openly support the Biya regime in Cameroon, and the case of Diarra, in Senegal, who collaborated extensively with every administration from President Diouf to President Sall, helping the state hajj agency fill out its quota of pilgrims. They may confront the state (voicing concerns, expressing harsh criticisms), as seen in the case of the first generation of female travel-agency owners, whom we call the pioneers, who opted to fight the state so as to be recognized as legitimate private partners in the hajj travel business and to obtain a license as private agencies, in a context where the state held a quasi-monopoly over the organization of the pilgrimage, from the 1960s to the end of the 1990s. Or they may avoid any form of contact with the state whatsoever, as illustrated by some hajj travel-agency owners in Senegal, or Pastor Kamdem in Cameroon, who vigorously refuse to be involved in politics.

These approaches can overlap to some degree, and individual religious figures sometimes position themselves differently according to circumstances. For instance, Pastor Hibaile, although he has never been active in a political party and has never run in an election, nevertheless rubs shoulders with the political elites he accuses of being corrupt. His institution, CIDEL, established in 2005, has provided leadership and anticorruption training to various ministries (Finance, Justice, Interior, Public Security, Defense), the National Military Academy, and local authorities (Vlaponou in this issue).

To tackle these theoretical and empirical questions, this special issue brings together articles that look at a variety of cases from Islam and Christianity, in West Africa (Ivory Coast, Senegal), Central Africa (Cameroon, Central African Republic), and East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda). The articles are written by a mix of junior and senior scholars and by insiders, outsiders, and partial insiders to the field. The authors draw on a range of disciplines, including anthropology (Balla, Droz, Gez, Gusman), history (Gomez-Perez, Madore), political science (Jourde, Vlaponou), and religious studies (Østebø, Yekatit). They rely on many of the same methodological approaches, including semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, focus groups, and informal discussions, as well as analysis of local media and published video recordings. By conducting in-depth fieldwork in the countries covered by their articles, they have been able to share unique data and original insights.

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## NOTE

1. All quotes from French-language sources have been translated by the authors.

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