

CHANGES AND PARADOXES IN RELIGION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND SENEGAL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: This study is an analysis of the structure, controversy, paradox and the practice of two different religions within two different countries which are Senegal and the United Kingdom. Although, Senegal and the United Kingdom are known for their statutes of religious countries, the practice of religious recommendations is mingled by the populations of both countries with things that Islam and Christianity are forbidden. On the basis of these paradoxical realities in the area of religious faith and practice in both countries, many questions rise to elucidate origin of this phenomenon and the social consequences.

Keywords: Animism, faith, religion, doctrine, paradox, Christianity, Islam

CHANGEMENTS ET PARADOXES DE LA RELIGION AU ROYAUME-UNI ET AU SÉNÉGAL : UNE ÉTUDE COMPARATIVE

Résumé: Cette étude est une analyse de la structure, des controverses, des paradoxes et de la pratique de deux religions différentes dans deux pays différents que sont le Sénégal et le Royaume-Uni. Bien que le Sénégal et le Royaume-Uni soient connus pour leurs statuts de pays religieux, la pratique des recommandations religieuses est mêlée par les populations des deux pays à des choses que l'Islam et le Christianisme interdisent. Sur la base de ces réalités paradoxales dans le domaine de la foi et de la pratique religieuse dans les deux pays, de nombreuses questions se posent pour élucider l'origine de ce phénomène et les conséquences sociales.

Mots-clés : Animisme, foi, religion, doctrine, paradoxe, christianisme, islam.

Introduction

The United Kingdom and Senegal are two different countries which are dominated by two different religions such as Anglicanism and Islam. In this dominance of religions many Changes and paradoxes can be underlined. Since the reformation, Anglicanism has emerged to be the leading religion in the United Kingdom but today it is in a point to decline because of the growth of the religious faith crisis. In the same way, Senegal is a country which has been dominated by Islam for many years, but many Islamic Senegalese have never abandoned practices of Paganism or Animism they inherited. Max Weber believed that religion could be a force for social changes. Religion is also an example of a cultural universal because it is found in all societies in one form or another. However, what happens when the practice and structure of religion have changed? Also, what happens when people mingle religious practices with practices which their religions forbid? No one

can deny that religion in the United Kingdom is turning in a new way. The mixing of Islam or Christianity with traditional pagan practices is among the paradoxes of religion in Senegal because Islam and Christianity banished those practices. According to the Oxford dictionary, Religion is the belief in Spiritual Beings; it is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude; so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine Religion a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. That is to say things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community. It is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. However, if religion (Islam or Christianity) is set to be oriented by worshipers as Linda Woodhead and Vincent Montaigne have sustained, it becomes relevant to be studied and analyzed.

In fact, many documents, surveys, and books such as the British Social Attitude survey have justified that religious changes and paradoxes happen in both countries. In the United Kingdom past, religion was centered in every domain. The Church controlled the population, and everybody was obliged to worship the head of the Church's religion at the reign of Henry VIII, Mary I and Edward VI for example. Religion was very important to British people; the buying of indulgence had denoted how the Church controlled its people. Seemingly, religion plays a key role in Senegalese society. With 95 per cent of the population being Muslims, Senegal is named an Islamic country. Since the birth arrival of Islamic religion in the country, it cannot help growing. However, the practice of Islamic religion in Senegal is mingled with many other things what Vincent Montaigne called "Islam Noir". Many Senegalese people mingle Islamic recommendations with the belief and practices different from Islam such as the animist practices.¹ This work is an analytical and comparative study of the structure of two different religions in two different countries such as Senegal and the United Kingdom. Before starting this work, the hypothesis we got was that there are many religious paradoxes in both countries because, many people of the two countries mingle and practice religious recommendations with religious taboos. The plan of the work is structured in two parts. The first one entitled Religious Changes focuses on the different changes of religion in both countries. The second one which is entitled Religious Paradoxes in Both countries will underline the similarities of religious paradoxes in both countries.

1. Religious changes

1.1 Religious changes in Senegal

Senegal has a population of about 17 million people. Islam is the dominant religion in the country, practiced by approximately 95.9% of the country's population; the Christian communities, at 4.1 per cent the population, are mostly Christians but there are also diverse Protestant denominations. One percent has animist beliefs, particularly in the southeastern region of the country. Although most Senegal's inhabitants consider themselves Muslim,

¹ See the book entitled "Islam Noir" written by Vincent Montaigne.

there are still many customs and behaviors throughout the country that derive from traditional animism.²

In both the metropolitan regions and village settings, animist beliefs and practices are still present despite many influences including Islam and colonialism. Animist practices often work in conjunction with the very schools of thought that deem them forbidden.

Peter Balonon-Rosen (2013 : 3)

Animism has several elements that define it in the Senegalese context.

Generally, it is the religious view that natural physical objects of the earth hold a spiritual power and that two worlds exist: the physical one of man and earth, and the invisible one of spirits and God. The customs and traditions of animism do not come in the form of organized religion and are passed along as habits and rituals from generation to generation.

Peter Balonon-Rosen (2013: 4)

Senegal has many diverse ethnic groups within its borders, each with its own history, language, and culture. Interactions between these groups and with non-African cultures have produced a multicultural people proud of their origins. Typically, a person's allegiances extend toward the family first, and then, in descending order, to an ethnic group, a religion, the home village, Senegal, the region of French West Africa, and finally, Africa. Personal relations, including doing favors and returning them, are extremely important in daily life. According to the Senegalese concept of hospitality, or "Teranga", one freely shares with family and friends; this is considered integral to good relations. Many critical cases or arguments depicting Senegalese politics, under an Islamic thumb, result from these arguments. The various positions and commitments that determine them do not only contribute to a paradox of "Islam in Senegal," but also clarify the issues and trends that characterize and demonstrate the difference between the letter of the law and the "hard reality." (Camara, 2010: 860). Modern Senegal is overwhelmingly Muslim. Official statistics characterize the population as ninety-four percent Muslim, five percent Christian largely Roman Catholic and one percent animist. The Senegal official statistics do not accurately convey the reality of religious life in Senegal. Islam and Christianity are infused with indigenous religious beliefs and traditions. Senegal's first president, famed poet L.S. Senghor, who was a Catholic raised by missionaries, testified about the continued existence of indigenous faith in both Christian and Muslim African men and women.

² See The 2020 Senegal Demographic Agency Census

As today a Moslem Head of state will consult the “sacred wood”, and offer in sacrifice an ox or a bull, I have seen a Christian woman, a practicing medical doctor; consult the serer “Pangol” (the snakes of the sacred wood). In truth, everywhere in Black Africa, the “revealed religions” are rooted in the animism which still inspires poets and artists, I am well placed to know it and to say it.

Senghor (1981)

This is a perfect illustration of how animist practice is important in Senegalese societies. In fact, it is also important to notice that Animism came first in Senegal. Senegalese traditions and cultures were centered on Animism. People didn't know Islamic practice. Babacar Sédikh Diouf (2004), a researcher, author of articles on the culture and religion of the Sereer (a socio-linguistic community of Senegal) rejected the term animism to describe this religion. He did it in these terms: “Animism! Even Senghor, who restored the dignity of the Black man, with the concept of “Negritude”, accepts it whereas he should have proclaimed an actual religion.” To make his point, Henry Gravand takes the example of the serer community and cites:

African religion, seen through the Sereer religion, has most of the traits of a religious trend: it has a theory, latent, but coherent, oriented toward sacred transcendence as source of life, communication and participation. An ethic proposed by the old tradition, with a sense of right and wrong, a popular cult. Places of worship, a corpus of prayers. A mystical life, reserved for initiates. A well-prepared staff, from Pangool [ancestors' spirits] priests, seers, healers and leaders of religious worship, the Saltigi, not to mention a multitude of celebrants dedicated to family and local cults. A whole life based on the religious experience. It is a true religious path, whose central theme could be formulated as follows: the divine in man.

Gravand, Henry (1990 :142)

The serer community is one of the Senegalese communities that are more centered on animism. The practice of animism is believed and conserved by the serer ethnic. The arriving of Islamic and Christian religion has changed but not totally suppressed animism. Knut Graw conducted anthropological field research in Senegal focusing on the sociocultural and existential significance of ritual practices, such as divination and dream interpretation. (Knut Graw, 2005).

In many (Middle Eastern) Islamic societies, the activities of healers and diviners are looked upon with suspicion by the representatives of their respective religious orthodoxies. Sometimes they are even banned by the state. In Senegal and Gambia, however, divinatory and therapeutic rituals unfold in the center rather than at the margins of Islamic practice.

Knut Graw (2005: 28)

In fact, Graw bases an important part of the divinatory ritual on the Islamic practice of saddaka (giving charity to individuals in need). First, he rightly observes that: “both in Senegal and Gambia, being a specialist in divination or healing are practically synonymous to being a religiously learned person and vice versa.” Second, he states:

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that even those divination techniques that are historically not associated with the Islamic esoteric sciences, such as the widespread technique of cowrie-shell divination, refer to the Islamic charitable practice of sadaqa as their most important ritual remedy.”

Knut Graw (2005: 28)

Cowrie-shell divination is indeed widespread, and it has nothing to do with Islam, but its most important ritual remedy is also totally rooted in the indigenous religion rituals. The strong link between West African Islam and the arts of divination and healing is in conformity with the indigenous religion and its belief that learned men and women have the power to decipher the messages sent from the invisible world. Hence followers of the African religion do not care whether the spirit you are calling upon for help and guidance goes by the name of Allah, Jesus, or any other. It is not blasphemy in their religion. The famed tolerant nature of West African Islam cannot be understood if one overlooks its indigenous beliefs' source. Indeed, it is of the essence of the traditional African faith to accept healing and divinatory practices in all forms and shapes. It is a religion that by essence embraces plurality of beliefs as it embraces a plurality of sacred spirits. There are no “infidels” in its dogma, only individuals. The Lebou, an important ethnic group of the region of Dakar, are mainly Muslims but they still very much adhere to their pre-Islamic beliefs as is shown in the following news article excerpt:

Showing his disagreement with the rapid advance of some buildings on the coast, he [Sheikh Saliou Diop, customary head of the Lebou community] denounced the construction of the tunnel Soumbédioune “without the consent of the master of the place” (the tutelary guardian spirit of the place, Leuk Daour). A sentiment that was expressed yesterday during the traditional Lebou ceremony of sacrifice the “saraxu Ndakaaru.” A day that saw Lebous go in turn on the beaches Begni, Terrou Baye Sogui and Soumbédioune. During the ceremony, cows, cola nuts and milk curds were given as offerings to Leuk Daour, guardian spirit of Dakar, to implore his grace so that peace prevails throughout the country.

Diop (2008)

Animism is the belief that non-human entities are spiritual beings, either intrinsically or because spirits inhabit them for a period. Unlike supernatural forces, animist spirits may be inherently good or evil. Often, these spirits are thought to be the souls of deceased relatives, and they are not worshiped as deities. While animists believe everything to be spiritual in nature, they do not necessarily see the spiritual nature of everything in existence as being united, the way pantheists do. Animism puts more emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual soul. In pantheism, everything shares the

same spiritual essence. There are no distinct spirits and/or souls. Because humans are considered a part of nature, rather than superior to, or separate from it, animists see themselves on roughly equal footing with other animals, plants, and natural forces, and subsequently have a moral imperative to treat these agents with respect. In animist societies, ritual is considered essential to win the favor of the spirits that ward off other malevolent spirits and provide food, shelter, and fertility. Shamans, also sometimes called medicine men or women, serve as mediums between the physical world and the world of spirits. Animism is thought to be the belief system that laid the groundwork for the notion of a soul and the animation of traditionally inanimate objects, allowing every world religion to take those basic principles in other direction (Diop (2008)).

1.2 Religious change in the United Kingdom

No one can deny that religion in the United Kingdom is declining. Many authors, documents and surveys have shown religious changes in British societies. According to many British Attitude Surveys British people are turning to become irreligious.³ The 36th British Social Attitude Survey has sustained that the past two decades have seen international conflict involving religion and domestic religious organizations putting themselves at odds with mainstream values. Against this backdrop, it compares religious identification, behavior and belief among the British public. It found a dramatic decline in identification with Christian denominations, particularly the Church of England; a substantial increasing in atheism and in self-description as very or extremely non-religious; and very low confidence in religious organizations, but tolerance of religious difference. This situation can be just called a faith crisis given that the crisis describes the turning point of a change, when an important change takes place, a time of great disagreement, confusion, and suffering. Furthermore, faith is defined as a great trust or confidence of something or someone. Therefore, if we focus on what the 36th British Social Survey has related, we will say that the United Kingdom is living a faith crisis which is deferent from religious crisis.

A religious crisis simply describes the problems or conflicts in the way that religion was ruling. For example, the story of the Tudors dynasty relates many religious crises. The birth of the Anglican Church related a religious crisis. According to Jenela Novacic (2014:2), “Christianity has been facing a sudden decline in Great Britain in the last fifty years. This is mostly due to globalization and the changes in lifestyle that it has brought about. Christians have faced these changes in different ways”. The birth of a new religious identity in the United Kingdom is a perfect illustration of religion’s change within the population.

The latest data on religious affiliation from National Census’s British Social Attitudes survey revealed that the proportion of people in Britain who describe themselves as having no religion is at its highest ever level.⁴ Faith crisis in the United Kingdom is related to the fact that the most part of the population does no longer pay too much

³ See the 36th British Attitude Survey.

⁴ British Social Attitudes, religion and belief. “British Social Attitudes: Record of Brits with no Religion”, published on 04 September 2017

attention on religion practices. The concept of crisis of faith is most applied to religious beliefs; since faith is a fundamental tenet of many religious ones in the United Kingdom and the gravity of religious decision is perceived by many to be great enough to describe a period of extreme doubt as a crisis.

This phenomenon has taken a very huge growth today, and it should be seen as a serious problem because, no one can deny that Christianity has been playing an important role in the United Kingdom. If we visit again British history, we will see that religion played a big role. Linda Woodhead, the British Social Attitude Survey and surveys that had been done in religion field, many British people have the ability to sustain that they belong to “None”. To be clearer, they belong to a new religion or to a new position towards religion. In fact, the “None” community doesn’t practice any religion, they do not focus or pay much attention on religion or religious dogma. In fact, this position is different from Atheism because, Atheism fully rejects religion and its practices. The Nones are rising in Britain in a slow, unplanned, and almost unnoticed revolution. It has been happening for a long time, but the tipping point came only very recently, the point at which many United Kingdom adults describes their affiliation as no religion rather than Christian. (Woodhead, 2010).

2. Paradoxes in the practices of Religion

2.1 Religious paradoxes in Senegal

Scholars have offered us many different definitions of religion. According to this definition, religion is the human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God. In Senegal, about 94 percent of the population are Muslim, five percent is Christian (mostly Catholic), and one percent is animist or follows indigenous beliefs. The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Both Muslim and Catholic holy days are national holidays, but Islam dominates social and political activities. The marabouts (Muslim religious leaders) influence voting patterns and economic practices and have a strong impact on the country’s development. The marabouts (religious leaders) became powerful during the drive for independence. They were the movement’s most vocal and supportive leaders and drew many animists to Islam because of their popularity. Many Senegalese, especially in the south, combine their formal religion (Islam or Christianity) with indigenous animist practices and ceremonies. Most people in the country believe in spirits and genies and often wear a “gri gri” (charm) around their arms, stomach, or neck to protect them from illness and evil spirits. For instance, a woman who is having headaches may pin a “gri gri” in her hair to protect herself. However, in the United Kingdom, the impact of modernity has changed a lot. Tradition is being abandoned, culture is disappearing and religion is dying.

2.2 Identical Paradoxes

In recent years, diversity of religion and belief has been increasingly recognized within educational and social policy debates, as a strand of social difference distinct from ethnicity and culture, and worthy of attention. English and Welsh society have become

progressively more diverse in religious terms since the turn of the 21st century. Data from the Office for National Statistics (2015) shows that whilst the number of people identifying as Christian fell significantly in the period between the 2001 and 2011 census, there were marked increases in those choosing to describe themselves as having no religion. (Hemming, 2018) Belief is defined as a feeling of being sure that someone or something exists or that something is true. It is a feeling that something is good, right, or valuable: a feeling of trust in the worth or ability of someone. Islam appears to have been introduced into the area as early as the eleventh century. Historically, in most West African societies Islam first spread through scholars who were schooled in the Islamic esoteric sciences and who offered their services to the leading members of local non-Islamic aristocracies. Around the time of the 13th century, many rulers also began to convert to Islam. However, most people maintains their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps because of the divided religious nature of society, Muslim rulers maintained several rituals and customs rooted in traditional culture and religion.⁵ Marabouts are traditionally Muslim religious leaders and teachers in Senegal, but may take the form of Koranic scholar, leaders of religious communities, or fortune tellers. Marabouts proved to be one of the greatest *mélanges* of animist traditions and Islamic practices. Marabouts have the position of being intermediary between the spiritual world and the earthen one. Though the prevalence of Islam in Senegal grew as time progressed, the people of Senegal reacted to the introduction of Christianity by European colonizers the same way they had to the introduction of Islam. Many who accepted Catholicism also maintained Muslim and indigenous traditions. Furthermore, Christians, Muslims, and followers of the indigenous faith freely associated with each other. In his memoirs, Ousmane Camara, former head of the Senegalese Supreme Court, gives a testimony of the close and amicable coexistence of the Islamic and indigenous faiths in his own family:

While my father is a devout Muslim, a friend and close collaborator of the Imam Ratib (Muslim cleric in charge of directing prayers at the mosque), Thierno Kandji, muezzin and treasurer of the mosque, my mother is a priestess of the African traditional religion. She keeps in the backyard of our house an altar—to my young eyes a “magic square”—where coexist in a carefully organized chaos jugs, pestles half buried in the earth, gourds with strange multicolored designs, cowries tinted red from chewed kola nuts. At dawn, as soon as my father leaves the house for the mosque, my mother rushes into her backyard where, with a gourd filled with curd milk, she proceeds to libations in honor of her family’s guardian spirits. From time to time, unbeknownst to my father, she gives to my sister and I ritual baths.

Camara (2010)

This is a perfect illustration of religious paradoxes. Many Senegalese people are Muslims but keep on practicing animism although the Islamic religion forbids these

⁵ Depending on the specific region, time, and ethnic group, some rulers were more devout toward one religious tradition or another and incorporated that religion into official state actions. Generally, however, rulers adopted a middle-of-the-road approach to religion. See LEVTZION, *supra* note 23, at 183–84, 190; Creevey, *supra* note 23, at 270–71 (noting the stronger presence of Islamic lineal hierarchies among the Tukulor compared with the Wolof and Serer peoples).

practices. However, according to Linda Woodhead and the British Attitude Surveys, a new religious identity called the “the None” is emerging in the United Kingdom. The “nones” are defined by Linda Woodhead as people who still consider themselves Christians but do not practice Christianity. They do not attend Church masses.

The “nones” are rising in Britain—in a slow, unplanned and almost unnoticed revolution. It has been happening for a long time, but the tipping point came only very recently, the point at which a majority of UK adults described their affiliation as “no religion” rather than “Christian”.

Woodhead (2016: 246)

This emerging phenomenon may be considered very dangerous for the stability of both countries because religion precisely Christianity has always been at the heart of everything in the country. However, it can be called “paradoxical identity” because it is paradoxical to consider oneself to be part of a religious community without identifying oneself in terms of practices. When we talk about religion we talk about rules and dogma that cannot be changed. Religion does not accept to be mingled with what it has forbidden; if it is done it is where we consider paradoxes.

Conclusion

The United Kingdom and Senegal are two countries located in two different continents and are rather different from everything. However, in terms of religion, the two countries have many points in common in religious domain. British people are becoming faithless, and many documents have sustained that there is a religious faith crisis in the country because most part of the people no longer practice Christianity. However, most part of Senegalese people have never abandoned their animist practices and still practice Islam or Christianity. When analyzing these two situations we can conclude that both countries are facing religious paradoxes and the emergences of a new religious identity.

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