Preface

African dynamics, if I may borrow the phrase from the title of a book series (Brill), have been marked and perhaps even shaped by religious ideas, agendas, and actors. This has become even more conspicuous since the 1990s, with many countries transitioning to constitutional governance, adopting political liberalism and promoting civil liberties. As we are now realising, far from being a mere bystander in the last few decades, organised religion – Islam and Christianity, in particular – has been central to those dynamics, as it offers new opportunities for civic action, refashions modes of social organisation, and inspires alternative visions of communal life. Cultivating, mobilising, and building on religious identities has, in that context, become a major trend. In Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, it is hard to find a sociopolitical context that has remained untouched by these developments. Obviously, not all countries have been affected the same way; religiosity has not always taken the same form, and religion has not always referred to the same traditions, norms, and values.

Thanks to the Big Two, as one may call Islam and Christianity, a new interest in religiosity arose, becoming relevant even in settings in which it was rather unexpected. Take the case of university campuses, which, until recently have primarily promoted an intellectual culture and a political environment that hardly recognised any value in religiosity. In fact, opposition to religious ideas and institutions was a norm, and often necessary for individuals seeking to legitimise their credentials and secure status. Historically, and in Africa too, university campuses have been prime loci of the cultivation of secular and Marxist ideologies, known for their criticism of religion.

As Madore's book shows, a closer look at university campuses would have us rewrite the story today. Not many can hold and defend the radically secular and irreligious stance that was so dominant in those settings just a few decades ago. A multitude of religion-inspired initiatives have emerged across campuses, while individuals, groups, and organisations have found ways to wed religious imagination and social creativity that feed new perspectives on religion, secularism, and education. Keeping true to their reputation as dynamic sites of contestation, activism, and resistance, university campuses too, have offered religious actors and agendas a socially strategic stage, to say the least.

Of course, the fortunes of religion on campus need to be historicised in relation to other trends both on campus and within society. That is exactly what Madore's intervention as a historian offers us. There is no need to say that, for the social scientist, it is not enough to claim that religion has been a factor; one must demonstrate it. Let's then ask the question: what part does religion play in the making of university campuses? Some may think of the question as nonsensical and redundant,

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especially given the claims that the university is a secular institution. However, we know that the historical trajectories of many universities in Africa and beyond challenge the radical secular narrative: both in their past and current states, education policies and the universities they lead to, have been intricately tied to religious ideas and institutions. Furthermore, in many contexts, discipleship, studentship, and scholarship find motives in religious norms while religiosity manifests itself in educational settings under various guises.

I don't mean to say that religiosity has always determined the university as an educational institution. Following this book, I rather urge a bit more historical perspective. Along the way, I also invite us to acknowledge how religiosity – in its various formulations – has conditioned the experience of being a student, lecturer, or simply administrator. How did this happen? Perhaps a credible answer can only be given if we become aware of the blind spots of our historiography and engage with them. That means we might need, for example, to drop some of our assumptions about the university and pay attention to actual campus life, the student experience, and the skills that are cultivated and promoted on campuses, underground, or away from official structures. We might also need to remember that under various sociohistorical conditions, religion shaped curricula, even at times giving birth to the educational system all together. Following Madore's book, the point I would like to make is that a history of education in Africa – and perhaps even worldwide – would be ill-advised to overlook the religion factor.

As I write this preface, and reverberating with numerous other cases across West Africa, a controversy has broken out in Senegal. The prime minister has levelled criticism of restrictions on the hijab (Muslim veil) enforced by Christian schools in the country. Quite a paradox! One might say that for a few decades, governments in the region were scrambling to keep religious identity politics out of schools and curtail the influence of religious institutions in the name of laïcité, secularism. Looking at these and similar developments in Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, or Niger, one might even argue that religiosity has become not only an asset, but a key fortune. It has inserted itself deep into the university moral economy, making religion an essential part of the ecosystem of higher education and, along the way, has continuously changed the terms of the relationship between religion and education.

By relating the trajectory of organised religion, Madore's book tracks the formation of tertiary education in Benin and Togo. It allows us to broaden our perspective, in particular as it helps bring nuance to our view of the secular form of the university in those countries. It contributes a well-documented tale of the presence and appropriations of religion on university campuses. I take it as an invitation to further investigate the trajectory of educational institutions. Focusing on Muslim and Christian organisations, it tells the story of communal identities, social creativ-

ity, and political consciousness in a setting in which religion is hardly expected to feed such modes of existence. For both the historiography of education and a social history of religion, such a perspective matters. And not only because it documents campus experiences, but precisely because of the ways in which it helps us think about the future of the university. I am convinced that rethinking the university, as the recurring calls across Africa go, could use a perspective that looks beyond the official and academic narratives, and which digs into the actual and the social.

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