Introduction - Religions in Angola: History, Gender and Politics


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Introduction

Religions in Angola:
History, Gender and Politics

Angola is a land of contrast. A land of many riches and much potential as well as a territory burdened with a heavy past and with many challenges lying ahead.¹ This evaluation is valid for its religious world which is diverse, dynamic and rapidly changing yet traumatised, divided and facing an uncertain future. The historiography of religions in Angola has been very thin until the 1990s and this is why SSM has always wanted to do a special issue on this country. In the last ten years the literature on religion in Angola has grown significantly, even in English, with new research in the history, sociology and anthropology of faiths and faith institutions.² There remains much to be researched however, whether old issues not yet investigated or new questions which have been revealed by recent research. The collection of articles which follows aims at advancing our understanding of religion in Angola – as well as advancing other theoretical or conceptual questions.

This special issue is not as encompassing as we had hoped for originally. We tried to get, and almost succeeded in getting, a text on the new anti-liberal orientations of the Angolan state in relation to religion. We also had a proposal, which did not come through, for a text on Islam, a religion which has all but been banned in Angola since 2013 – the state denies this but the Islamic community says 50 of its 70 mosques have either been closed or

¹ Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, Magnificent and Beggar Land. Angola since the Civil War, London: Hurst, 2015
destroyed. Not getting these texts was unfortunate, but we cannot be all-
encompassing and cover all interesting or under-researched topics and
religious groups, especially when we are limited to 200 pages for a double-
issue of the journal. The range of religious institutions and themes dealt with
in the coming pages is still wide and it is by and large representative of the
country's religious diversity and the latter's historical depth.

This special issue opens with a text which analyses the convergences existing
in the religious and political imaginaries of Tokoist churchgoers in Angola
today, looking in particular at their apocalyptic reading of the present social
and political situation. A second article takes us back two centuries earlier to
investigate a series of Catholic women's economic activities and analyse how
they worked to ensure their inheritance passed on to the women of their
choice. The third article is about the Congregationalist church at the start of
the 20th century, looking at the transfer of American educational models and its
after effects and heritage today. The next text focuses on a single American
missionary and, through her writing, on issues of gender for her and some of
the Angolan women with whom she worked. The fourth article examines the
history of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Angola with special attention to the
reasons for their repression. Finally, the last text is a long and engaged review
of Didier Péclard's new book on religion, identity and politics in the Planalto
from 1940 to independence.

These articles are all original and innovative in that they offer a view of
religion away from the dichotomous political prism which has predominated
the study of Angola for too many years. For one the articles do not focus
merely on the colonial period, in particular the period of high colonialism of
the Estado Novo, when the Catholic church was dominant and Protestants
were marginalised. One article studies a much earlier period, another looks at
the postcolonial period, and two articles look at churches rarely considered
within this Protestant vs. Catholic model – the Jehovah's Witnesses and the
Tokoist church. For another the articles in this issue are not about the politics
of religion in the narrow sense of whether they were aligned with the colonial
state or with the African nationalists – a classic in the discussions in Angola.
Rather they look at the politics of gender, the heritage of earlier international
missionary relations, and the parallels and transfers between religious and
political imaginaries. Such themes are innovative per se and particularly
innovative in the context of the study of religion in Angola.

Within Southern Africa, Angola belongs to the Lusophone group of countries
which was colonised by the Portuguese state and have kept Portuguese as their
official language after independence. Angola is Catholic in its majority – the
second most Catholic country in Southern Africa after Lesotho – but it also has
a strong Protestant presence. African "traditional" religions are supposedly
very weak (if this is true) and the country would therefore be more than 90%
Christian – see statistics below. During colonialism, Catholicism was favoured
and actively supported by the state administration while Protestantism was
marginalised if not repressed. The Congregationalist, the Methodist and the
Baptist churches managed to have an important social and political role

3 António Cascais, “Encerramento de mesquitas em Angola gera polémica”, Deutsche Welle,
28 November 2013, online at http://www.dw.com/pt/encerramento-de-mesquitas-em-
angola-gera-pol%C3%A9mica/a-17259658 (accessed 9 September 2015)
nonetheless, if from the margins. After independence, the state became very anticlerical due to its ideological commitment to scientific Socialism, and repression ensued, with the Catholic church suffering most because of its past and predominant position. Between repression and a civil war which began with independence in 1975, religious institutions could do little more than survive and offer basic services to their followers during the 1970s and 1980s.

### Table: Size of Religious Group, ca.2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Christians</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestants</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazilian evangelicals</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional African religions</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Since the end of the civil war in 2002, the landscape of religion, and for religion, has changed significantly in Angola. For one, charismatic, evangelical and Pentecostal churches have grown fast under the impulse of Brazilian, Nigerian and Congolese missionaries and they have started to remake the religious landscape of the country. This dynamic begun concomitantly with the political liberalisation of the late 1980s, possibly linked to the party in power's own transformation as suggested by Pepetela in his perceptive novel Generation of Utopia (1992), but it has accelerated dramatically in the 2000s. For another, the state's mediation of religion has undergone a new transformation. After a short liberal opening in the 1990s, the state has toughened its control of religions and, in recent years, engaged in a fight against “religious proliferation” and non-Christian faiths. The National Institute of Religious Affairs (INAR) registers institutions very selectively (only 83 by 2015) and merely tolerates the institutions not registered or refused registration (1,200 institutions according to INAR). In early 2015 the state interaction with religious institutions took a turn for the worse when the police repressed violently a millennial sect called A Luz do Mundo, a scission

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of the Adventist church) leading to tens of deaths. While this latter case may prove an exception, it remains clear that the religious landscape of Angola is undergoing significant transformation and that the state intends to keep a firm hand in shaping it.

Eric Morier-Genoud

editor-in-chief

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