Introduction

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Introduction: Crossing religious and ethnographic boundaries

The case for comparative reflection

Leslie Fesenmyer, University of Birmingham
Giulia Liberatore, University of Edinburgh
Ammara Maqsood, University College London

Abstract:

This Introduction to the Special Issue traces the history of the development of the sub-disciplines of the Anthropology of Christianity and of Islam to suggest that these ‘monistic’ tendencies have obscured exploration and theorisation of inter-religious coexistence and encounters for people’s lives and the societies in which they live. These sub-disciplinary boundaries have further led to an unintended ‘provincialization’ of both geographical spaces and theoretical debates, and stalled the development of a theoretically robust anthropology of religion. This Special Issue argues for the value of comparative work on multi-religious encounters within particular contexts, as well as by thinking comparatively on a global scale, as a way to generate new questions and considerations in how we study religion. The final section offers a short overview of the contributions to the Special Issue.

Keywords: Anthropology of Christianity; anthropology of Islam; anthropology of religion; inter-religious coexistence; encounters; comparison;

Corresponding author: Giulia Liberatore (giulia.liberatore@ed.ac.uk)
During a reading group discussion at Oxford, the three editors of this volume reflected on how ‘religious others’ would pop up, every now and again, in their fieldwork, but that they had struggled to pin down their presence in their ethnographic writing. Leslie Fesenmyer had frequently heard her Pentecostal interlocutors comment on the presence of Muslims in East London and elsewhere. Noting the Islamic madrassa that opened in the store front down the block from their church, for instance, they spoke of their own desire to start a school. Giulia Liberatore, conducting fieldwork amongst Somalis in London, was interested in how young people spoke about ‘practising Islam’ by invoking idioms of disjuncture, rupture, and event, which she found to be foundational to the development of the anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2014) but less of an interest to scholars of Islam. And, Ammara Maqsood, while working amongst upwardly-mobile pious Muslims in Lahore, Pakistan, was always perplexed why her interlocuters commonly brought up examples of Christians and Christian lives. In a context where Hindus are a historic and national ‘other’, with a small and, largely, downtrodden Christian presence, she was surprised at how often comparisons were made with, what her interlocuters viewed as, ‘Christians in the West’ and their practices.

The impetus for this Special Issue comes from several directions. While each editor has conducted research with practitioners who identify with a specific religious tradition, Islam or Christianity, it was not until we convened the reading group that we became aware of our interlocutors’ shared preoccupations: how to be good Christians or Muslims; how to live according to the Word of God or the Qur’an and the Sunnah; and how to reconcile religious commitments and other obligations and aspirations. The anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of Christianity reflect these empirical concerns in their attention to the moral or ethical life of pious individuals. However, despite these commonalities, there appears to be little conversation between the sub-disciplinary strands. Such monistic tendencies within the
anthropology of religion have arguably side-lined attention to the interplay between people’s religiosity and the wider, often multi-religious and non-religious, worlds they inhabit.

Elsewhere, when comparisons and crossovers have received attention, they are often limited to specific regions with emphasis on socio-historic specificity (Nolte, Ogen and Jones 2017; Janson and Meyer 2016a, 2016b; Bigelow 2010) that has not translated to a larger conversation on how such processes may relate to wider changes and similar happenings across the world.

These similar preoccupations and shared theoretical interests have articulated with a flourishing of religion globally in the face of secular expectations of its decline (Casanova 1994). While religion’s resurgence since the late 1970s may not surprise anthropologists, who recognise the centrality of religion to what it means to be human, anxieties about how people of different faiths coexist and concerns about religiously-inflected flashpoints across the globe have also proliferated during this time. Many such worries stem from an underlying presumption that religious differences are fertile ground for conflict. Outside anthropology, much research on religious pluralism is approached in terms of conflict or interfaith dialogue, either stressing war and violence or, alternatively, peace and tolerance. It also tends to be insufficiently grounded in the realities of the lived world. Without denying the historical and contemporary conflicts which play out along religious lines and are made sense of through religious idioms, it is too reductionist to approach religiosity in such binary terms.

Anthropology is uniquely situated to shed light on contemporary religiosity, its histories, and the many forms it takes because of its attention to how people live their religion, that is, ‘what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women and children are fundamentally shaped
by the worlds they are making’ (Orsi 2003: 172, emphasis in original; Marsden 2005; Ammerman 2007; Janson and Meyer 2016a). In examining sites of coexistence, imaginings of religious others, and the mixing and borrowing that occurs across religious (and non-religious) lines, anthropologists can and do illuminate the dynamic and ongoing construction of religious ideas, beliefs, and practices (cf. Janson and Meyer 2016a). Such an approach stands in stark contrast to a notion of religion as a bounded and discrete system of internally consistent beliefs, which, in pluralist contexts, encounter one another as fully constituted religious traditions. Nonetheless, when studying people who identify with one religious tradition, the sub-disciplinary boundaries of the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity arguably obscure exploration and theorisation of inter-religious coexistence and encounters for people’s lives and the societies in which they live.1 Conversely, anthropologists who take multi-religious encounters and pluralist settings as starting points face a bifurcated field when it comes to theorising these lived experiences.

Monistic tendencies within the anthropologies of Islam and Christianity – whose development we trace below – have led to an unintended ‘provincialization’ of both geographical spaces and theoretical debates. In other words, particular themes have become limited to one sub-field and ignored by another, even though, as the discussion above suggests, they have ethnographic relevance. For example, discussions within the anthropology of Islam on moral ambivalence and fragmentation echo concerns within the anthropology of Christianity on rupture, continuities, and discontinuities. In both sub-fields, attention is paid to the tensions and nuances ‘between the world of daily life and the world of ultimate religious meaning’ (Robbins 2003: 196). Yet, they have approached these questions through separate frameworks, and with little cross-fertilization. Similarly, the anthropological study of Muslims – ‘good’, ‘bad’, or struggling – tethered, as it is, to Foucauldian notions of
ethical self-fashioning, is often a site for drawing out oppositions between secularism and piety. Meanwhile, questions about Christians’ relationship with secularism and secularity are less of an academic concern,² despite a history of philosophical and legal debate on the topic.

We argue that these divisions – of academic labour, ideas and spaces – are problematic; they have contributed to the reification of sub-disciplinary, ethnographic, and religious boundaries and stalled the development of a theoretically robust anthropology of religion. At the same time, we are, of course, mindful of the irony in suggesting that the category of religion can advance efforts to de-provincialize the sub-fields.

In the spirit of complicating these divisions, this Special Issue aims to stimulate thinking and reflection across these boundaries in an effort to grasp how people live their religion and, in doing so, how they relate to those of other religions and no religion. Accordingly, spanning sites in Asia, Europe, and Africa, the articles consider multi-religious settings, focusing in some cases on followers of the majority religion and, in others, on practitioners of a minority religion. The articles included in this Special Issue were selected for the questions they raised, and the themes and concepts they developed, and can be seen to constitute somewhat ‘arbitrary locations’ (Candea 2007) or partial viewpoints from which to engage with issues of coexistence. Notably, rather than offering a broad spectrum of denominations within Islam and Christianity, most of the contributions focus on Sunni Islam and Pentecostalism, while two articles explore instances of what we might call religious creativity, which defy classification according to a world religion. Several of the contributions focus on West African contexts (Janson, Nolte, Sarró and Temudo, Osella and Soares, this volume), reflecting a broader trend in anthropological work on encounters and coexistence in this part of the world, known for its long-standing multireligious contexts and histories of tolerance.
and coexistence (Janson and Meyer 2016; Peel 2016; Soares 2006). Furthermore, migration and diversity (Fesenmyer, this volume; Hausner, this volume) feature prominently as realities that shape or contextualize multi-religious encounters, particularly in pluralist European settings, again reflecting the ways these topics – and related ones of multiculturalism and conviviality – dominate debates on coexistence in Europe. Paradoxically, by privileging certain contexts and themes, we too run the risk of ‘provincialising’ this emerging field of anthropological work on multi-religious encounters. Yet our aim in this special issue is not to be prescriptive but to open up a field of research by developing new ways of approaching the entanglements and divisions that occur across religious boundaries.

Together, these articles are indicative of the possibilities for cross-cutting discussion, comparative conversations and analytic approaches that are available, if we choose to pursue them, to study a broader range of religious communities. It is our hope that this special issue might spur research on these topics in new sites, as well as urge a rethinking and reinvigorating of, what have often become, ‘standard’ ways for studying inter-religious interactions in specific regions. For instance, we might ask ourselves why West Africa is well-researched in terms of multi-religious encounters but there is, despite the extent of wide-ranging religious diversity, a dearth of recent literature on the topic in South Asia?3 In turn, such questions offer ground for further reflection on the underlying assumptions about the category of ‘religion’ and what constitutes a ‘religious community’ in different regions, that promote certain modes of study and limit others.

In addition, such inquiries have the potential to link back to older histories of connections and interactions, many of which colonial encounters spurred or transformed. To continue with the example of South Asia, historical work on nineteenth century reform movements informs us
of the far-reaching impact of colonialism on Islam and Hinduism. Many of these movements were in reaction to and positioned in direct opposition to colonial rule. Yet in their aspiration to cleanse religious life from ‘impure’ and ‘superstitious’ local practices and, in addition, in their organisation structures, they often borrowed from colonial officials and worldviews. For instance, three of the founders of seminary at Deoband – the centre of the Deobandi movement which, presently, is one of the largest reformist subsect in Sunni Islam in South and Central Asia – had been sub-inspectors in the education department in the colonial government and, despite their opposition to ‘western’ influences, borrowed many aspects of the modern education system (see Metcalf 1978:112; 1982: 94). Meanwhile, other historical work reminds us of how faith renewal movements, such as the Tablighi Jamaat in Islam and Arya Samaj in Hinduism, grew in direct competition to one another and, in a larger context of, the inclusion of religion and religious subsects in colonial censuses and use in electorates (Jones 1968: 45; Jones 1981: 89; Sikand 2003: 41). Colonial rule and legislation, in this context, not only spurred but also shaped the forms of interaction that took place between religions, and in how religious communities self-constituted and defined their boundaries (see Das 1995).

Going back to these histories and linking them to the present opens multiple possibilities for research across time and space, ranging from inquiries into parallel patterns of simultaneous boundary-making and borrowing in contemporary religious interactions in differing settings (Werbner 2018; Iqtidar 2011; Janson this volume) to how this past shapes our interlocuters’ views of the ‘west’. Such investigations not only acknowledge how colonial histories have shaped religious encounters and categories but also, as we hinted earlier, can prompt deeper reflection on how we – as anthropologists – are influenced by these pasts in how we differently approach the category of religion in differing regions, and the kinds on analyses
and comparisons we deploy in one context and not in others. We could then ask whether
global changes and processes such as late capitalism require us to alter these region-specific
models. In broader terms, making such connections falls in line with recent calls for an
anthropology that recognizes the deep history and longue durée patterns in inter-connections
between different regions and civilizations (see Scheele and Shryock 2019; Feuchtwang and
Rowlands (2019).

The anthropology of Islam and of Christianity: The making of sub-fields

The anthropology of Islam, as a distinct intellectual project, came hand in hand with a
questioning of the category of ‘religion’, particularly in relation to its Christian roots. Starting
with el-Zein’s (1977) essay Beyond ideology and theology: The search for the anthropology
of Islam, and Asad’s (1986) The idea of an anthropology of Islam, the sub-discipline posits
itself against the normative assumptions of secular-liberalism. Nowhere has this agenda been
more prominent than in the recent turn towards piety, where studies of ethical-self cultivation
have allowed anthropologists to draw out the pervasiveness of liberal-secular norms both
within their ethnographic contexts as well as in the academic study of Islam (Mahmood 2005;
Hirschkind 2006; Agrama 2011; Fernando 2014). With regards to the latter, earlier academic
work on Islam, which made connections between resurgence of religious practice and wider
socio-political transformations (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Kepel 1985; Roy 1992) in the
Muslim world, has been criticized for its instrumentalised outlook in which religion is
reduced to identity politics (Deeb 2009; Maqsood 2017). In discussing this, Agrama (2011)
argues that it takes the absence of religion from the modern public sphere as normative, and
then tries to explain why this has not been the case in the Muslim world.
While the piety turn has made a key intervention by highlighting the problems of liberal-secular normativity in anthropology, it has – and rightly so – been criticized for over-privileging disciplinary practices (Osella and Osella 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Osella and Soares 2009), a critique that featured in a heated exchange (Fadil and Fernando 2015a, 2015b; Schielke 2015; Deeb 2015). In that discussion and elsewhere, Schielke (2009, 2012) and Deeb (2006; Deeb and Harb 2013) direct attention towards the ambivalences and fragmentation that often mark attempts at pious self-cultivation. Furthering this critique, we argue that, in its (over-)emphasis on ethical self-cultivation, the piety literature has inadvertently presented a singular Islamic tradition as the only way of being Muslim (see also Maqsood 2017). For example, in their counter-response, Fadil and Fernando (2015b) identify emotions and affects, such as, ambivalence and scepticism, as examples of humanist subjectivities.

Many others would argue, as Shahab Ahmad has done in his posthumous book *What is Islam?* (2015), that doubt, contradiction, and ambivalence are in fact central to many Muslim traditions, artistic expression, and intellectual and literary thought. By delineating such aspects of everyday life as belonging to the ‘humanist tradition’, the authors, whether they intend to or not, marginalize these aspects of Muslim traditions and privilege only the disciplinary and legalistic dimensions. Moreover, as Maqsood points out, such an approach – with its refusal to take account of connections with broader socio-political transformations – tends to ‘echo orientalist imaginings of Islamic tradition as unchanging and timeless’ (2017: 12; see also Osella and Soares this volume).

If the anthropology of Islam has challenged the normative understandings through which Muslim practices are evaluated, the anthropology of Christianity as a ‘self-conscious
comparative project’ (Robbins 2003: 191) has unravelled traces of itself in ‘secular’
categories of analysis. Similar to the anthropology of Islam, much of this work has
concentrated on questioning the category of religion. In one of the first edited volumes on
the topic, Fenella Cannell (2006) warned against assuming particular definitions, or making
assumptions about, Christianity (cf. Frankiel 2003), while other work explored the ways in
which Christianity has shaped anthropology as a discipline (Cannell 2005). Inspired by
Weber, anthropologists have argued that the development of modernity has been intrinsically
intertwined with Christianity (e.g. Keane 2007), and that the model of time accompanying
modernity is inherited from Christian theology (Cannell 2005). Thus, while the anthropology
of Islam has criticised the category of religion for not accounting for its difference from other
religions (Asad 1986), the anthropology of Christianity has problematized it for borrowing
too much from a ‘Christianity focused on the ascetic’ (Cannell 2005: 338) and generalizing it
to all forms of the tradition.

Despite the similarity in their intellectual concern with religion, there has nonetheless been
little discussion between the two sub-disciplines. Coming of age at a time when the
anthropology of Islam was firmly established as a sub-field, the anthropology of Christianity
has largely focused on developing shared questions and engaging with the same themes
(Robbins 2003). The sub-field has given rise to its own rich and expansive comparative
project based on ethnographic research spanning Africa (e.g. Meyer 1999; Comaroff and
Comaroff 1991, 1997; Engelke 2007; Haynes 2017), Asia and Melanesia (e.g. Mosse 2012;
Cannell 1999; Keane 2006; Scott 2005; Robbins 2004), and Latin America (e.g. O’Neill
2010; Vilaça 2016), as well as Europe and the United States (e.g. Coleman 2000; Engelke
2013; Strhan 2015; Harding 2000; Elisha 2011; Bialecki 2017). In many of these contexts,
Christianity arrived through missionary activities, and anthropological work has
understandably focused on conversion, rupture, and discontinuity, which continue to resonate as topics of interest (e.g. Brahinsky 2013; Daswani 2015; Vilaça 2014).

Admittedly, discussions in the anthropology of Christianity have been more ‘open’ than those in Islam; for instance, there have been voices, which have questioned the need to isolate and study major traditions, instead of proceeding on the basis of problems (Hann 2007: 406), and others that have highlighted the importance of the history of encounters between monotheistic traditions and believers’ awareness of other religions (Frankiel 2003: 288-289). More recently, in reflecting on the current state of the anthropology of Christianity, which he sees as having reached ‘middle-age’, Joel Robbins (2014) highlights emergent areas in the sub-field, including interest in those who are ambivalent or tenuously committed Christians (as opposed to strongly self-identified ones, as has been the norm) and to Christianity’s boundaries and, thus, to what can be counted as ‘Christian’. However, the dominant trend has not been to compare across religions, to explore religious coexistence or, for that matter, to introduce new categories of analysis (borrowed from other sub-disciplines) in the study of Christianity.  

In this way, Schielke’s (2010) criticism of the anthropology of Islam can be extended to the anthropology of Christianity: both sub-fields have become excessively preoccupied with defining their fields of study and focusing on the most committed of believers. In doing so, they theoretically reinforce the boundary-marking between Christianity and Islam in which believers themselves engage. This has in turn reinforced a separation between Islam and Christianity and stalled comparative work.
... and the un-bounding of these sub-fields

With respect to both the anthropology of Islam and of Christianity, this Special Issue is certainly not calling for their demise. We value the work that has been done in both fields and, in particular, in allowing anthropology to confront its past. Rather, it is to suggest another phase in their respective evolutions, one which encourages their mutual engagement. Given the colonial genealogy and sedimented assumptions of ‘religion’, the dismantling of ‘religion’ as an area of study can be viewed as part of the larger scholarly agenda to ‘provincialize’ Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) and its categories of analysis. And, in many ways, the development of the anthropology of Islam represents this shift, offering a method of inquiry that does not burden itself with questions and concerns, which stem from European/Christian assumptions about belief, practice and ritual (Asad 1986; Mahmood 2001; Henkel 2005; Fadil 2013). However, the lack of dialogue engendered by this disciplinary shift has had consequences that run counter to this larger agenda of ‘de-centring’ Europe and of exorcising ghosts of the colonial past in anthropological study.

The overarching presence of these (sub-)disciplinary frameworks has meant that contemporary ethnographic work on religion has itself become ‘provincialized’, in that it remains limited to ‘frontal’ and ‘lateral’ comparisons within a specific religion or tradition (Candea 2016). The full comparative potential that the discipline of anthropology has to offer remains unexplored. Here, our use of ‘comparison’ refers to the placing side by side of ethnographic realities of multi-religious encounters in different contexts that are rarely positioned in conversation with each other, due to the ‘provincialisation’ of certain debates. The hope is that this endeavour may enable the cross-fertilization of concepts across different contexts but also across sub-disciplinary strands. We stress the merits of comparison by
drawing out and questioning what are, often, standard ways of approaching the study of religion in particular areas. For instance, a comparison between ethnographic work in Africa and in South Asia can foster debate on what is considered the ‘norm’ in each context, and why. Why does anthropology take religious plurality in Africa as given – Africa has always been plural – and self-explanatory? In contrast, why is the starting point of religious inquiry in South Asia usually a specific sect, movement or group and cross-overs need to be qualified and explained? Such questions, engendered through comparative work, can invite discussion on whether these frames are related to earlier colonial interests and understandings of the region and whether new/ borrowed frames and concepts can work, on their own or in tandem, to illuminate other aspects of religious and social life.

Our intention, here, is not to return to earlier instrumentalist accounts, which reduce religion to identity politics, nor is it to suggest that there is a single thing called Islam or Christianity. Rather, we want to acknowledge, more explicitly, the open quality (Khan 2012) of religious discourses. Religious ideologies and ideas – like other forms of knowledge – do not fully determine subjectivities (Liberatore 2017). They are also ‘discursively produced’ (Asad 1986), and often through transnational discourse (Deeb 2019:13), in conversation with local competing political ideologies (Iqtidar 2012; Hefner 2000), and class hierarchies (Maqsood 2017), as well as wider social and economic changes (Soares 2006; Osella and Osella 2009; 2012; Meyer 1999; Marshall 2009; Cole 2010; Daswani 2015; Strhan 2015; Fesenmyer 2018, 2019). This inevitably means a ‘borrowing’ across other religions and ideologies, the flows and contours of which can only be explored through greater comparative work. In addition, this kind of comparison possesses the potential to inform anthropology about transformations beyond ‘religion’. For instance, the rise of NASFAT (Janson this volume; Osella and Soares this volume), a movement in Nigeria that straddles Islam and Christianity, tells us as much
about religious borrowing as it does about how young people cope with neoliberal precarity, risk, and uncertainty.

**Overview of contributions**

While many (religious) interlocutors invoke ‘us’ versus ‘them’ comparisons, anthropology has much to offer in unpicking how the ‘us’ often entails the blurring and mixing of various religions and ideologies. By engaging in ‘lateral’ comparisons of multi-religious encounters within particular contexts, as well as by thinking comparatively on a global scale, we aim to generate new questions and considerations in how we study religion. Accordingly, the articles span diverse contexts, ranging from India to Guinea Bissau, and from the United Kingdom to Nigeria. While they are each based on original ethnographic research in a multi-religious context, they take different approaches to stimulating thought and dialogue beyond the anthropology of a religion (Hausner, this volume).

The first three contributions focus on practitioners of a specific religious tradition, particularly those aspiring, upwardly mobile believers who seek to reconcile their faith with other aspirations. Set against and in relation to the wider (religiously) plural urban contexts in which they live their religion, the articles explore what it means for Pentecostal Christians in London and Muslims in Kerala, India and Lagos, Nigeria to coexist with religious and non-religious others and how they do so. In her article, Leslie Fesenmyer describes how born-again Christian migrants from Kenya find in Pentecostal thought and discourse ways to strive for success and salvation in the United Kingdom, without compromising their devotion to God, in a country they believe has left the Kingdom of God. Notably, their Muslim neighbours, who they view as a threat to historically Christian Britain, offer an unlikely
model to emulate for living their religion in convivial East London. Pentecostalism thus facilitates the integration of their differing aspirations, rather than contributing to an existential sense of fragmentation. In drawing on existential anthropology, Fesenmyer proposes an approach to studying followers of a religious tradition in pluralist settings that takes into account religious and non-religious others and ideas in their midst.

Marloes Janson considers a similar problematic to Fesenmyer, albeit through a study of NASFAT (Nasrul-Lah-il Fathi Society of Nigeria), one of Nigeria’s largest contemporary religious organisations. In the precarious context of Lagos and its competitive religious landscape, NASFAT, she argues, borrows from Pentecostalism – its prayer styles, missionary techniques, media practices, and organizational strategies – to attract adherents, largely aspiring middle class young Muslims, intent on reconciling Islam with modern society. Given that belief and practice, or content and form, are dialogic, encountering different faiths is inevitable in a multi-religious setting like Lagos, thus necessitating an approach that moves away from the monism which predominates in the anthropology of religion. Through a comparative framework focused on religious practice and lived experience, Janson argues that such borrowing and mixing does not erase religious boundaries, but rather re-asserts their ongoing significance.

Turning to India and Nigeria, Filippo Osella and Benjamín Soares explore what they call Islam mondain or ‘lived’ Islam, paying attention to intra-Muslim differences as well as to how religiosity is formed and experienced through encounters with diverse Others. Their departure point is the concern that a focus on ethics in the anthropology of Islam has obscured attention to the implications of religious coexistence and to the macro-political contexts in which Muslims live. Through their focus on lived religiosity, they ‘trace the
articulation of Islamic discursive traditions within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which they are debated and gain wider plausibility’ in Kerala and Lagos. Their historically attuned approach necessitates recognition of the ways in which residual and emergent forms of religiosity are both contained within and exceed hegemonic modalities of religiosity, generating new religious practices, relations, and configurations. Together, their article and those of Fesenmyer and Janson illuminate the value of adopting a wider lens, both empirically and theoretically, than the anthropology of a religion encourages.

The next two contributions identify common ground in multi-religious settings through a focus on shared socio-religious practices – namely, marriage in Yorubaland and prayer in Guinea Bissau – and the social values which they simultaneously express and affirm. In doing so, the articles reveal the religious premise of conviviality. In her article, Insa Nolte outlines the centrality of marriage not only to individual social status in the small towns and villages of Yorubaland, but also to the constitution of religious communities such that marrying across religious boundaries is preferable to remaining single. She explores ethnographically the contradiction between recognising that interfaith marriage contributes to social wellbeing, while nonetheless being something that people wish to avoid. Such marriages, she argues, paradoxically both confirm and undermine the assumption of stable boundaries – or incompatibility – between Muslims and Christians. Meanwhile, Ramon Sarró and Marina Temudo offer an ethnographic account of Kyangyang, a prophetic movement among the Balanta, which emerged in the mid-1980s in rural Guinea Bissau where ‘prayer’ is both a practice and an idiom central to social and religious life. Otherwise known as people who do not pray, the Balanta engage in mimetic religious practices that are part of a larger transformational process. Despite criticism from their Muslim and Christian
neighbours that it is a ‘fake religion’ due to its mimetic practices, Sarró and Temudo argue that Kyangyang offers the Balanta alternative imaginings and models for organising themselves that depart from historically rigid gerontocratic structures. In other words, by using the languages of power and community which others use, the Balanta creatively engage in mimesis as a tool to fight for recognition and as a means of participating politically.

Understanding a religious movement like Kyangyang demands attention to the wider spiritual ecology within which it emerges. Their article, along with that of Nolte, is suggestive of how to approach the study of pluralist settings, while also illustrating religion’s salience as ‘social glue’, to use Sarro and Temudo’s phrase, in such convivial contexts.

In the last article, Sondra Hausner provides an ethnographically-informed reflection on the possibilities and pitfalls of comparative projects in the anthropology of religion. Taking the distinction between religion as category and practice as central to such endeavours, she considers the dilemma to which a focus on a single tradition studied in its multiplicity around the globe gives rise – do such efforts downgrade critical inquiries regarding when something is classified as Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist in favour of asserting the category as an overarching concept? By way of illustration, she examines a ritual gathering in the London borough of Southwark where a community of counter-cultural artists and seekers engage in a complex mix of Christian-pagan-Zen-Indic-neo-Egyptian practices. While the ritual looks like a religion – bringing together, as it does, like-minded people who commune at a set time and place – practitioners are disinterested in being classified as part of any ‘world religion’, just as in the case of Sarró and Temudo’s Kyangyang adepts. In this way, Hausner encourages us to re-visit the difference between the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of a religion. Has the former become the field where examples of religious creativity that defy categorisation into one religious tradition or another are considered? In
other words, has it become the space for the religiously unclassifiable? If so, what are the implications for theorising about religion generally?

‘Boundary work’ (Kirsch 2018) emerges as a key theme across the different articles. Recent work on ‘grassroots ecumenism’ (Werbner 2018) has shown how the ecumenical is always in a dialectic with the anti-ecumenical; efforts for unity are fragile as they reveal internal boundaries (e.g. in terms of class or cultural background) or rely on erecting boundaries with external others. Similarly, many of the articles in this Special Issue show how forms of borrowing or mixing do not necessarily dissolve boundaries but simultaneously undermine and re-assert them. Our call to explore contexts of coexistence and to ‘cross boundaries’ – both disciplinary and ethnographic – are not intended to overcome or erase these boundaries. Rather, it is an attempt to pay greater attention to existing boundaries, the work that they do, and how they are made and unmade. We are cautious here to not reduce our interest in coexistence and the crossing of boundaries to liberal celebrations of ‘inter-religious pluralism’ (Walton and Mahadev 2019). In many ways, our intent is the exact opposite: it is to evaluate and consider whether such interplays of simultaneous borrowing and boundary-making, intimacy and animosity, sharing and exclusion are not a symbol of conflict (ongoing or imminent), as often perceived in liberal discourse, but rather forms of conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2015; Nowicka and Vertovec 2013) that offer alternate models of cohabitation.

Collating this Special Issue has reminded us of the importance of picking up and drawing on ideas and concepts that might not necessarily be found in the religious traditions and the bodies of literature with which we work, and to ‘test’ them in different field sites. This sort of comparative work forces us beyond sub-disciplinary strands to explore connections between
ethnographic realities and probe why these might exist and what they might say about the lives we share with others.

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1 We are also mindful of parallel tendencies to erase everyday crossovers and negotiation of differences within religions. For instance, studies of reformist traditions or of Sufi movements within the anthropology of Islam often do not differentiate between the aims and worldviews of the religious movement, and the everyday practices and changing opinions of its followers (Maqsood under review, 2017; Osella and Soares 2009; Simpson 2008).

2 Although scholars have shown how Christian values, norms and sensibilities have shaped European secularism (e.g. Mahmood 2016; Asad 2003; Taylor 2007)

3 Much of the recent work on inter-religious interactions seems to be concentrated on west Africa (see endnote 7). Although there was a focus on such interactions in South Asia in the early 2000s, much of it led by Veena Das (2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), it has since declined. Notable exclusions to this include work on sufi shrines and inter-religious interactions (Bigelow 2010; Boivin and Delage 2016), but there remains interest in everyday borrowing, competition and change.

4 Anthropological work on Islam had been conducted prior to this (e.g. Geertz 1968), but it had not been articulated as part of a distinct intellectual project.

5 Dating the start of an anthropological movement is inevitably a contested exercise. With that in mind, it is important to note the ‘far from inconsequential corpus’ of research on Christian populations (Hann 2007: 394) produced prior to Joel Robbins’ assertion that there had yet to be an anthropology of Christianity ‘for itself’ (Robbins 2003: 191; for earlier examples, see Glazier 1980; James and Johnson 1988; Barker 1990; Hefner 1993).

6 Recent notable exceptions to the first two points include Julie Cassaniti and Tanya Luhrmann’s (2014) comparison of Thai Theravada Buddhism and charismatic evangelical Christians; and Andreas Bandak’s (2014) exploration of Christians living alongside their majority Muslim neighbours in Damascus.

7 Important efforts in this direction include Das (2010a, 2010b), Peel (2016), Soares (2006), Nolte, Ogen, and Jones (2017).

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