The Sufi next door: A wonderful historical irony

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Many excellent scholars study Islam. Many other scholars explore the changing face of global Christianity. Rarely do those experts look at the two worlds—Muslim and Christian—side by side, which is a pity: when we do, we see some remarkable parallels and connections that shed light on both.

The early 20th century is a critical period in the modern history of Christianity, especially the years around World War I and the great epidemics that followed that conflict. In Africa, that was the era in which prophets and evangelists took the faith wholeheartedly into their own hands, translating it into local cultures and worship styles and creating churches thoroughly rooted in African soil. In doing so, they began the mass conversion of the continent.

Although hundreds of activists were involved, a few heroic names stand out, such as William Wadé Harris in Liberia and Simon Kimbangu in the Congo. At the time, colonial authorities deeply distrusted the new churches. Chiefly they feared sedition. They were also wary of any syncretistic mixing of Christianity with animist beliefs. Kimbangu spent 30 years in a Belgian colonial prison; French authorities kicked Harris out of the Ivory Coast. But their churches and their offshoots flourished and have spread across Europe as well as Africa. The central story in African history during the 20th century was the conversion of half the continent's population away from traditional animist religions to Christianity (40 percent) and Islam (10 percent).

Although the Christian conversion story has been told frequently, less noticed are its very close parallels in the world of Islam. Among Muslims too, at much the same time, colonized African communities took that faith into their own hands, packaged it in familiar forms and made it immensely popular. And this controversial new synthesis of the faith is also making deep inroads in the Euro-American world.

The best-known Muslim equivalent of the Christian prophets was Senegal's saintly Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba (1853-1927). At the end of the 19th century he founded a

pious Sufi order called the *Muridiyya* or Mourides, rooted in mystical devotion to God. Cheikh Bamba taught a practical message of hard work, charity and pacifism, based on the principle, “Pray as if you will die tomorrow, and work as if you will live forever.” His movement drew heavily on African roots, with its cultivation of local saints and shrines. Like African Chris tians, the Mourides stand or fall on their promise of healing in mind and body.

French colonial authorities viewed Bamba about as sympathetically as the Belgians regarded Kimbangu. Bamba spent long years in exile or under house arrest. But his movement too was vindicated by history. The Mouride Way today claims several million members—about the size of the Kimbanguist church—and like the Kimbanguists, Mourides are spread around the globe.

Mourides and their order are particularly strong in southern Europe and in Amer ican cities. Pictures and mementos of Bamba can easily be found in markets across West Africa, but also in Rome, Paris, Madrid and New York. Whether or not Europeans appreciate it, this Sufi presence is splendid news for their countries. Apart from their ethic of piety and hard work, Mourides are firm allies in the struggle against fanatical Islamists, who loathe the tolerance and easy interaction with other faiths that characterize Bamba’s followers.

While the story of the Mourides is impressive in its own right, it also helps us understand the roots of modern African Christianity and the reasons for its astonishing success. For better of worse, the presence of empire played a critical role by disrupting traditional societies and political orders and by forcing social and geographic mobility. These sudden changes, concentrated in the generation or so after 1880, opened the door to radical new worldviews. New ideas appealed especially to the young and flexible-minded, and to those who had been marginalized in traditional societies.

Yet the ideologies that proved most successful were those that took familiar and beloved aspects of the older culture, with its profoundly religious bent, and showed how to integrate them with a language of universalism. People could now become Christians or Muslims without forfeiting their Africanness. Societies in rapid flux were ready to hear the voices of charismatic evangelists; as the phrase has it, leadership is a function of followership. Happily, those leaders were usually men and women of vision and integrity. They built enduring institutions. While empires faded, the churches—and the pious Muslim orders—survived and grew. And in a wonderful historical irony, those faiths in turn began their own peaceful invasion of what were

once the imperial motherlands.