The importance of religion in any attempt to understand African life in all its social, economic, and political aspects cannot be overemphasized. John S. Mbiti’s (1969:1) observation that Africans are “notoriously religious,” consciously or unconsciously, is still true of a large majority of people, urban or rural, educated or less educated, male or female, rich or poor. Even those who claim to be atheist, agnostic, or antireligion, of whom there are a growing number, often have no option but to participate in extended family activities, some of which require the invocation of supernatural powers. Religion permeates all aspects of African traditional societies. It is a way of life in which the whole community is involved, and as such it is identical with life itself. Even antireligious persons still have to be involved in the lives of their religious communities because, in terms of African thought, life can be meaningful only in community, not in isolation. Indeed, as aptly captured in Laura S. Grillo, Adriaan van Klinken, and Hassan J. Ndlovu’s book, Religions in Contemporary Africa: An Introduction, which was published fifty years after Mbiti’s 1969 volume, “Religion is so much a part and parcel of African life that we even dare to say that one cannot understand African politics, media, popular culture and so on without engaging with religious thought and practice (2019:5).

The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the major religious trends in Africa. We do so by placing the “religious” within the broader context of societal, political, and international forces at play. We by necessity must draw on a variety of disciplines, such as international studies, political science, religious studies, and theology, to accomplish this goal. We begin in section one by setting out the numbers of African believers associated with various religious faiths and their geographical distribution.
throughout the African continent. These numbers demonstrate that Africans adhere to an array of religious faiths that are representative of the globe’s major religions. The majority of the chapter is devoted to exploring the three principal religious traditions that enjoy the largest number of believers in Africa: (1) African indigenous religious beliefs and practices that together can be referred to as African traditional religions; (2) Christianity, including its expressions in African indigenous Christian movements; and (3) Islam, most notably Islamic reform movements. In each of these cases, we concentrate on the basic, common elements of each broad religious tradition and point out some of the significant differences as we go along. A final section offers general conclusions.

A comment is in order regarding the theological sources for understanding the three principal faiths of the African continent. The study of Christian and Islamic traditions poses no insurmountable difficulties with regard to our sources of information. Both have their sacred books, namely, the Old Testament and the New Testament for Christianity and the Quran for Islam (also written as Qur’an or Koran). The founders of these two traditions, their primary sources, and their geographical origins remain the same for all adherents of these faiths regardless of the different interpretations. African traditional religions have no sacred books, their beginnings cannot be pinpointed, and each of the many traditions is typically practiced by one African group with no reference whatsoever to the religion practiced by other groups. Each African group exists as a complete social, economic, religious, and political entity with no missionary designs. With the many basic, common elements, there are also some differences in religious beliefs and practices that speak against generalizations. As unrelated and independent as African groups may appear, they nonetheless share some basic religious beliefs and practices. These shared basic features suggest a common background or origin. As a result, African traditional religions are often treated as a single religious tradition, just as Christianity and Islam have many denominations or sects but continue to be treated as single entities (Martey 2009; see also Mbti 2015; Olupona and Nyang 2103).

**Adherence to Religious Faiths in Africa**

The African continent is home to an assortment of faith traditions that vary widely in terms of the numbers and geographical dispersion of believers. We are able to obtain a snapshot of what these numbers looked like as of 2015, the most recent year for which data are available through the World Christian Database (WCD) (Johnson and Zurlo 2020). Despite its title, the WCD provides a statistical breakdown by country of the number of adherents to all of the world’s major religions. In the case of Africa, these estimates are based on a total population of nearly 1.2 billion Africans (see Table 13.1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Beliefs</th>
<th>Africa Total</th>
<th>North Africa</th>
<th>East Africa</th>
<th>Southern Africa</th>
<th>Central Africa</th>
<th>West Africa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>101,360,799</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>32,351,876</td>
<td>9.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beliefs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19,847,182</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>580,248,408</td>
<td>48.65</td>
<td>9,237,752</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>186,954,291</td>
<td>55.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>496,274,163</td>
<td>41.61</td>
<td>175,409,475</td>
<td>94.33</td>
<td>114,513,223</td>
<td>33.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindus</td>
<td>3,242,348</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>7,018</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1,612,295</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baha’is</td>
<td>2,429,469</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>44,374</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>853,730</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhists</td>
<td>334,733</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>23,066</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>28,020</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese folk</td>
<td>215,970</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>16,630</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>67,241</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jains</td>
<td>109,172</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>106,960</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhs</td>
<td>84,346</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>2,245</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>64,154</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New religion</td>
<td>136,968</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>718</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>96,717</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>4,778</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>18,830</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>37,360</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>36,409</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,192,736,284</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>185,961,639</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>337,711,291</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Johnson and Zurlo (2020).
An opening point is that up until 1900, the vast majority of Africans followed African traditional religions, which are described in greater detail in section two of this chapter. More than a century later, the percentage of Africans who could be classified as “principally” adhering to a traditional African faith had decreased to 8.5 percent or 101 million Africans. Although this large number still ensures that African traditional religions remain one of the top three forms of religious expression in contemporary Africa, it nonetheless is indicative of the dramatic rise of two other religious traditions during the last century: Christianity, with over 580 million African followers (49 percent of the continental total), and Islam, with over 496 million African followers (42 percent of the continental total).

Two aspects of this trend are important. First, there is tremendous regional variation among the three dominant religions. Whereas North Africa is the region with the highest concentration of Muslims (94 percent), Southern Africa is home to the smallest percentage (only 5 percent). The remaining regions are 52 percent Muslim (West Africa), 34 percent Muslim (East Africa), and 10 percent Muslim (Central Africa). The dynamics are different for Christianity. Central Africa has the highest concentration of Christians (82 percent), followed by Southern Africa (79 percent), East Africa (55 percent), West Africa (37 percent), and North Africa (5 percent). The dynamics are different still for traditional African religions: Southern Africa has the highest concentration (12 percent), followed by West Africa (11 percent), East Africa (10 percent), Central Africa (6 percent), and North Africa (0 percent). In short, region matters.

Second, we underscore the word “principally” in our above description, in that many Africans embody a “syncretic” belief system in which adherence to a new faith such as Christianity or Islam nonetheless incorporates many aspects of their traditional African religions, such as spirits and witchcraft, in which they still believe (Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 2013; Moore and Sanders 2001). As a result, statistics must be taken with a grain of salt. African adherence to traditional African religions in the contemporary independence era is arguably much higher than indicated by statistics, which are based on what one believes to be one’s “primary” religious affiliation. This is due to the fact that many Africans embody a mix of religious beliefs that join their traditional African religious beliefs with any one of the globe’s other religious faiths. As once explained to Schraeder, one of the coauthors of this chapter, by a university-educated Senegalese citizen who self-identified as Catholic, the reality of his belief system was according to him perhaps 80 percent based on the teachings and scriptures of the Catholic church and 20 percent based on traditional African religious beliefs that were still prevalent in his life. For example, he believed in the mystical powers of his local marabout (a traditional religious leader), with whom he periodically consulted when he needed support at various points
in his life, such as taking the national exam that determined what college he potentially could attend. One is rarely truly one or the other (i.e., either a complete and total adherent to African traditional religious belief or to one of the global religious traditions).

Table 13.1 provides additional insights into the kaleidoscope of contemporary religious life in Africa. First, agnostics and atheists together comprise more than 8 million African adherents (less than three-quarters of 1 percent of the continental total). Whereas agnostics are defined by the WCD as “persons who claim no religion or claim that it is not possible to know if God, gods, or the supernatural exist,” atheists are defined as “persons who deny the existence of God, gods, or the supernatural.” Such beliefs can be found in all African countries in all African regions (Johnson and Zurlo 2020).

All of the remaining religious faiths with followers on the African continent can be classified as “minority religions.” Two of these—Hinduism and Baha’i—nonetheless exceed a million adherents each, placing these religions in the top tier of minority faiths in Africa. India is the spiritual home of the more than 1 billion Hindus in the world, including over 3.2 million in Africa, who are the followers of the core Hindu traditions of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism, as well as of various neo-Hindi sects and reform movements (e.g., see Gopalan 2014; Hiralal 2014; see also Atiemo 2017; Wuaku 2009). Hindus are principally concentrated in the former British colonies of South Africa (1,318,494), Mauritius (556,798), Tanzania (466,179), Uganda (322,524), and Kenya (236,028). This religious reality is due to the fact that the United Kingdom brought large numbers of their subjects from British colonial India to serve in a variety of capacities in their African empire. Mauritius is unique within this post-British colonial context in that it is the only African country where a religion other than Christianity or Islam (in this case, Hinduism) is the majority religion (roughly 44 percent of the population).

Baha’ism is the second largest minority faith in Africa. Founded in 1844 by Baha’u’llah in Persia (contemporary Iran), it enjoys over 2.4 million adherents in all fifty-four African countries (Lee 2011). Baha’i communities are governed by the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member body located on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, that is elected every five years by the members of national Baha’i assemblies. Followers are bound by Baha’u’llah’s book of laws, known as the Kitab-i-Aqdas. The largest concentrations of Baha’is are found in Kenya (431,312), the DRC (326,670), Zambia (297,006), South Africa (262,898), and Tanzania (229,324).

The remainder of Africa’s minority religions claim less than 350,000 adherents each. They nonetheless play important roles within their individual societies or regions. Originating in India and spreading throughout Asia, the Buddhist faith brings together at least three broad traditions of followers of the Buddha, including Mahayana (“The Great Vehicle”), Theravada
(“The School of the Elders”), and Tibetan Lamaists, or followers of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader who lives in exile in India. Buddhists number 334,733 in Africa, and are largely concentrated in South Africa (230,805, or 69 percent of the African total), followed by Libya (16,086), Tanzania (12,204), Côte d’Ivoire (11,554), Guinea (10,882), and Nigeria (9,673) (Clasquin and Krueger 1999; see also Parker 2009; Clasquin 2004). Africa is also home to 215,970 Chinese folk-religionists (followers of indigenous religions of China), 109,172 Jains (followers of the Svetambara and Digambara reform movements from Hinduism), and 84,346 Sikhs (also originating in India, and including the Akali, Khalsa, Nanapanthi, Nirman, Sowapanthi, and Udasi traditions of Sikhism). In all three cases, the vast majority of adherents not surprisingly are found in East and Southern Africa, due to the greater contacts of these regions with Asia over the centuries. One should avoid mere geographical determinism, however. The statistics also show that “new religionists,” which number 136,968, and which the WCD defines as followers of the “so-called New Religions of Asia” inclusive of “new syncretist religions combining Christianity with Eastern religions,” are principally found in West Africa (30,116 in Ghana and 18,905 in Nigeria) and Central Africa (19,310 in the DRC, 12,984 in Cameroon, and 10,703 in Gabon) as well as South Africa (19,628).

Finally, the African continent is home to 96,717 adherents to the Jewish faith who consider Israel as the historical and contemporary cradle of Judaism and the Torah as their sacred text (Chitando 2005; Friedman 2000; Hull 2009; Key 2014; Simon, Laskier, and Reguer 2003; see also Mark and da Silva Horta 2013). The majority (96 percent) of African Jews are split among six countries: South Africa (69,534), Ethiopia (15,880), Morocco (2,603), Uganda (2,007), Tunisia (1,897), and Nigeria (1,207). These numbers are striking in that they represent but a portion of what historically used to be a larger Jewish population in Africa. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ethiopia alone was home to between 200,000 and 350,000 “Beta Israel” or Ethiopian Jews who are also referred to as Falasha Jews. Many were resettled in Israel as part of a series of airlifts during the 1980s known as Operation Falasha, which took place after the advent of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and the emergence of a dictatorial African-Marxist regime under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam. North Africa in particular was historically the home of hundreds of thousands of Jews, who progressively left after the beginning of the contemporary independence era in 1951, against the backdrop of rising tensions between the contemporary State of Israel that was founded in 1948 and the predominantly Arab states of North Africa and the Middle East, most notably the Six-Day War in 1967 (Gottreich and Schroeter 2011; Simon, Laskier, and Reguer 2003). In Tunisia, for example, the Jewish population numbered more than 100,000 adherents in 1948. The vast majority emigrated to either France or Israel following Tunisia’s inde-
pendence in 1956. A small but vibrant Jewish community remains on the island of Djerba in southeastern Tunisia, which is home to the El-Ghriba synagogue, one of the few remaining, still-functioning synagogues in North Africa, and one of the oldest synagogues in the world.

The religious symbolism associated with Tunisia’s El-Ghriba synagogue demonstrates how even one of Africa’s smallest minority religious communities can become the centerpiece of African politics and international relations. Specifically, the synagogue was the site of an attack perpetrated in 2002 by the al-Qaeda terrorist group that resulted in the deaths of fourteen German tourists and three Tunisian and two French citizens. There is no doubt that anti-Semitism was an impetus behind the attack. The international shock waves created by this attack led to a dramatic decline in tourism to Tunisia, an important source of jobs and revenue for the Tunisian government and society. As such, it also captured the anti-Western impetus of the attack (i.e., a desire to stem the negative influences of Western culture by stopping tourism from members of those societies). The dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali nonetheless refused to acknowledge the terrorist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western roots of this attack, preferring instead to sweep the event and the devastation wrought on the local Jewish community under the rug. Indeed, when Schraeder, one of the coauthors of this chapter, visited the site with his family in fall 2002 while serving as a Fulbright lecturer in Tunisia, they were told by local police guarding the synagogue that what happened was a mere traffic accident; the driver of a gasoline truck had simply lost control of his vehicle, which exploded outside of the exterior wall of the synagogue. It would only be after the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 and the transition to democracy in Tunisia, that Jewish groups from the island of Djerba were able to pressure the transitional government to not only commemorate the victims of the attack but provide pledges to protect the local Jewish community. On April 11, 2012, President Moncef Marzouki met with the families of the victims of the attack and delivered a speech expressing the government’s support for and determination to protect the local Jewish community.

Although extremely small in size, Tunisia’s Jewish community reminds us that minority religions play important roles in Africa. Having noted that point, the analysis now turns to exploring in greater detail the three largest religious traditions on the African continent: African traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam.

**African Traditional Religions**

The term “African traditional religions” incorporates the indigenous religious beliefs and customs that are practiced throughout the African continent. Although African traditional religions have no sacred books or definitive
creeds, they nonetheless embody five sets of theological beliefs: (1) belief in a Supreme Being; (2) belief in spirits/divinities; (3) belief in life after death; (4) religious personnel and sacred places; and (5) witchcraft and magic practices. We explore these beliefs by drawing on examples that we have personally experienced throughout our careers in Africa. We especially draw on examples from Moyo’s life as a citizen of Zimbabwe and as a member of that country’s Shona people, which like all ethnic groups maintains a rich culture of traditional religious beliefs and practices.

**Belief in a Supreme Being**

The African perception of the universe is centered on the belief in a Supreme Being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. God, as far as the African traditionalist is concerned, is the ground of all being. Humanity is inseparably bound together with all of God’s creation since both derive their lives from God, the source of all life. This strong belief in God appears to be universal in traditional societies. The question to be asked is, How is this God perceived?
Names in African societies tell a whole story about the family—its history, relationships, hopes, and aspirations. African societies have many names for the Supreme Being. These names are expressions of the different forms in which God relates to creation. In other words, God in African traditional thought can only be known in the different relationships as expressed in God’s names. For example, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, God is Musikavanhu (creator of humankind) and Musiki/uMdali (creator), which affirms that God is the originator of all there is. But Musikavanhu goes beyond the idea of creator to the notion of the parenthood of God. Hence, God is also designated Mudzimu Mukuru (the Great Ancestor). As parent, God is also the sustainer of creation. God’s creativity is continuous and is celebrated with every new birth, and each rite of passage is an expression of gratitude to God for having sustained the individual and the community that far. These names also affirm the belief in the continuous creativity of God. Similarly, in the names Chidziva Chepo or Dzinaguru, God is perceived as the giver and the source of water. Each time it rains, God is sustaining creation in a visible way. This explains, in ceremonies relating to drought, why people appeal directly to God. So also the name Samasimba (owner of power/almighty) affirms God not only as the most powerful being but also as the source and owner of all power.

The African traditionalist does not perceive God as some Supreme Being in merely speculative terms. That which is real has to be experienced in real-life situations, directly or indirectly. God can, therefore, be real only insofar as God has been experienced in concrete life situations in different relationships with people and the rest of creation. In other words, African traditional thought cannot conceive of God in abstract terms as some being who exists as an idea mysteriously related to this world—distant, unconcerned, uninterested in what goes on here below. Consequently, Africans’ view of God arises out of concrete and practical relationships as God meets their needs. In that way, they experience God’s love and power (see Mbiti 1970; McVeigh 1974).

In terms of African thought, there can be only one Supreme Being. Interestingly enough, before the encounter with Christianity, some African societies already had some concept of the Trinity. This seems to have been the case in some African societies, as demonstrated by Emmanuel K. Twesigye in his research into his people’s traditional religions in southern and western Uganda. In an interview with an old traditionalist, Antyeri Bintukwanga, Twesigye uncovered the following information:

Before the Europeans came to Uganda and before the white Christian missionaries came to our land of Enkole or your homeland of Kigezi, we had our own religion and we knew God well. We knew God so well that the missionaries added to us little. . . . We even knew God to be some kind of externally existing triplets: Nyamuhanga being the first one and being also
the creator of everything, Kazooba Nyamuhanga being his second brother who gives light to all human beings so that they should not stumble either on the path or even in their lives. . . . Kazooba’s light penetrates the hearts of people and God sees the contents of the human hearts by Kazooba’s eternal light. . . . The third brother in the group is Rugaba Rwa Nyamuhanga, who takes what Nyamuhanga has created and gives it to the people as he wishes. . . . You see! We had it all before the missionaries came, and all they did teach us was that Nyamuhanga is God the Father, Kazooba Jesus Christ his son and not his brother as we thought, and that Rugaba as the divine giver is the Holy Spirit. (Twesigye 1987:93)

In traditional societies God is believed to be eternal, loving, and just, the creator and sustainer of the universe. God’s existence is simply taken for granted, hence the absence of arguments for or against the existence of God. Atheism is foreign to African thought. The most widely used name for God among the Shona people of Zimbabwe is Mwari, which means literally “the one who is.”

Belief in Divinities and Spirits
The Supreme Being is believed to be surrounded by a host of supernatural or spiritual powers of different types and functions. Their nature, number, and functions vary from region to region, and they may be either male or female, just as God in many African traditions is perceived as being both male and female. The numerous divinities, called orisha among the Yoruba in Nigeria or bosom among the Akan of Ghana (and sometimes referred to as “lesser divinities” in order not to confuse them with the Supreme Being), are found in most West African traditions but generally not in East and Southern African traditions. These orisha are subordinate to the Supreme Being. They are believed to be servants or messengers of Olodumare (God). God has assigned to each one of them specific areas of responsibility. For example, the divinity Orunmila is responsible for all forms of knowledge and is, therefore, associated with divination and the oracle at Ile-Ife in Nigeria. The orisha are believed either to have emanated from the Supreme Being or to be deified human beings. Some of the divinities are associated with the sky, earth, stars, moon, trees, mountains, rivers, and other natural elements (see Idowu 1962).

Perhaps more universal among African traditionalists is the belief in ancestor spirits, called vadzimu among the Shona people of Zimbabwe or amadhozi among the Zulu/Ndebele traditions. These are spirits of the deceased mothers and fathers who are recognized in a special ceremony, usually held a year after they have died. This ceremony is called umbuyiso (the bringing-home ceremony) in Zulu/Ndebele or kurova guva by the Zezuru. From that moment, the deceased person becomes an active “living dead” member of the community and is empowered to function as a guardian spirit
and to mediate with God and other ancestors on behalf of his or her descend-
dants. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, it is to these spirits that most
prayers and sacrifices are made, but often the prayers are concluded by
instructing the ancestors to take the prayers and offerings to Musikavanhu
(creator of humankind) or Nyadenga (the owner of the sky/heavens).

The significance of ancestors among Africans has led to the common
misconception that these spirits are worshiped. Traditionalists categorically
deny that they worship their ancestor spirits, but rather worship God through
them. Ancestor spirits are departed elders. African peoples in general have
a very high respect for elders. If, for example, one has grievously wronged
his or her parents, it would be utterly disrespectful and unacceptable to go
directly to those same parents and ask for forgiveness. One would have to go
through some respectable elderly person to whom one would give some
token of repentance to take to the parent. Similarly, when a young man and
his fiancée decide to get married, the prospective father-in-law will have to
be approached by the young man’s parents through a carefully chosen and
respectable mediator. In the same spirit, a person cannot approach a chief or
king directly but must have his or her case taken to the chief through a sub-
chief. Even more so, God—the transcendent, the greatest and most powerful
being, the Great Ancestor and creator of all—must be approached through
intermediaries. The ancestor spirits are believed to be closest both to their
living descendants and to the Supreme Being and are thus most qualified to
function as intermediaries.

Ancestor spirits are not the objects of worship. They are guardian spir-
its and intermediaries. They are believed to be responsible to God for all
their actions. As family elders they must be respected and if not, just like
the living elders, they can get angry and demand that they be appeased.
Quite often, the name of the Supreme Being is not mentioned in petitions.
Still, it is believed that God is the ultimate recipient of all prayer and sac-
rifices. Although not worshiped, the ancestors in some traditions are closely
associated with the Supreme Being, so much so that it becomes difficult to
determine in some of the prayers whether the address is to God or to the
ancestor. Take, for example, the following prayer of the Shilluk, who rarely
address God directly. Nyikang is the founding ancestor of the Shilluk.

There is no one above you, O God [Juok]. You became the grandfather of
Nyikang; it is you Nyikang who walk with God, you became the grandfa-
ther of man. If famine comes, is it not given by you? . . . We praise you, you
who are God. Protect us, we are in your hands, and protect us, save me. You
and Nyikang, you are the ones who created. . . . The cow for sacrifice is
here for you, and the blood will go to God and you. (Parrinder 1969:69)

As far as the Shona people of Zimbabwe are concerned, God and the
ancestors are one; an address to one is an address to the other. This means
that, even if at times one does not hear the name of God mentioned, it does not mean the people do not worship God. God and ancestors are closely associated and work very closely with each other. For example, they believe that children are a gift of Mwari (God) and the vadzimu (ancestors). So, frequently one will hear the people say kana Mwari nevadzimu vachida (“if God and the ancestors are willing”). When faced with misfortune, they will say Ko Mwari wati ndaita sei? (“What crime does God accuse me of?”), or they will say mudzimu yafuratira (“the ancestors have turned their backs”; that is, on the individual or family, hence the misfortune) (Moyo 1987).

There are different categories of ancestor spirits. There are family ancestors, with family being understood in its extended sense. These have responsibility only over the members of their families, and it is only to them (i.e., family ancestor spirits) that the members can bring their petitions, never to the ancestors of other families. Then, there are ancestors whose responsibilities extend over the larger ethnic group or people and not just over their own immediate families. These relate to the founders of the ethnic group or people and are represented by the royal house. They play an active role in matters that affect the entire community, such as drought or some epidemic. They are called Mhondoros (lion spirits) among the Shona people. Most significantly, ancestor spirits serve as intermediaries.

Belief in Life After Death
Death is believed to have come into the world as an intrusion. Human beings were originally meant to live forever through rejuvenation or some form of resurrection. So, most African peoples have myths that intend to explain the origin of death. There are, for example, some myths that depict death as having come in because some mischievous animal cut the rope or removed the ladder linking heaven, the abode of the Supreme Being, and the earth, the abode of humankind. Such a rope or ladder allowed people to ascend to and descend from heaven for rejuvenation. Other myths see death as punishment from God for human disobedience.

Despite the loss of the original state of bliss and the intervention of death, it is generally believed that there is still life beyond the grave, that life may take several forms. In some traditions, the dead may be reincarnated in the form of an animal such as a lion, a rabbit, or a snake. In that form one cannot be killed, and, if reborn as a lion, one can protect one’s descendants from the danger of other animals. Or the person may be reincarnated in one of his or her descendants. In general, people believe there is a world of the ancestors and, when one dies, one goes on a long journey to get to that world. The world of the ancestors is conceived of in terms of this world; hence, people are buried with some of their utensils and implements. That world is also thought of as overlapping with this world, and ancestors are believed to be a part of the community of the living. The terms “living dead”
or "the shades" are approximately accurate English renderings of those invisible members of the community (see Berglund 1976; Mbiti 1969).

That there is life after death is also affirmed in the belief that a dead person can return to punish those who have wronged him or her while still alive. One of the most feared spirits among the Shona of Zimbabwe is the ngozi, a vengeful spirit that will kill members of the family of the person who wronged the individual while still alive until payment or retribution has been made.

In general, people believe they are surrounded by a cloud of ancestors with whom they must share everything they have, including their joys and frustrations. Their expectation of the hereafter is thought of in terms of what people already know and have experienced. People know there is a future life because they interact with their departed ancestors through spirit mediums.

Religious Leadership and Sacred Places
There are different types of religious leaders in African traditional religions. These can be either male or female. Where the tradition has regular shrines for specific deities, there will be some resident cultic officials. At the shrine at Matongeni in Zimbabwe, for example, the priestly community is made up of both males and females, with roles clearly defined. The Yoruba of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana have regular cultic officials presiding at the shrines of their divinities. They offer sacrifices and petitions on behalf of their clients. Among most of the Bantu-speaking peoples, heads of families also carry out priestly functions on matters that relate to their families.

Another category of religious leadership, perhaps the most powerful, is that of spirit mediums. These are individual members of the family or clan through whom the spirit of an ancestor communicates with its descendants. They can be either male or female, but most are female. Among these are family spirit mediums and territorial spirit mediums that rule over an entire people or geographical region, such as Mbuya (grandmother) Nehanda in Zimbabwe. The territorial spirits wield a great deal of power and, to use the example of Zimbabwe, they played a significant political role in mobilizing people in their struggles for liberation from colonialism. The "first war of liberation" in Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) against European colonial rule was led by Mbuya Nehanda, a spirit medium who was eventually hanged by the colonial regime. During the time of the "second war of liberation" against a minority, white-ruled regime, her mediums as well as other spirit mediums worked very closely with the freedom fighters by mobilizing the people and sanctioning the war. The freedom fighters, most of whom claimed to be Marxist-Leninist, soon discovered that they could not wage a successful war without the support of the spirit mediums (Ranger 1985:175–222; Lan 1985). Thus, the mediums have political as well as religious roles to play. Through these mediums, people discern the will of the ancestors, get an explanation for the
causes of whatever calamities they may be enduring, or obtain advice on what the family or the tribe should do in order to avert similar danger. Mediums are highly respected members of the community from whom people seek advice of any nature.

The other important category of religious leaders is that of the diviner. Again, diviners may be either male or female. Communication with the spirit world is vital for African traditional religions. Through divination, people are able to communicate with their ancestral spirits and the divinities. These are consulted in the event of some misfortune, sickness, death, or calamity. They communicate with the spirit world to determine the cause of the problem and to seek possible solutions. There are different methods of divining, using, for example, palm nuts, bones, a bowl of water, wooden dice carved with animals and reptiles, cowries (seashells), or pieces of ivory. Divination would normally be conducted at some location set aside for that purpose. In Yorubaland, Ifa divination centered at Ile-Ife is the most famous. The system is very elaborate and uses palm nuts (Awulalu 1979; Bascom 1969).

Finally, since religion permeates all aspects of life, the kings and the chiefs also carry out some leadership roles. Where the whole nation is involved, it is the responsibility of the head of the community to take the necessary action to consult the national or territorial spirits. It is also their duty to ensure that all the religious functions and observances are carried out by the responsible authorities.

With regard to sacred places, reference has already been made to shrines that serve particular divinities such as those among the Yoruba of Nigeria or the Akan of Ghana. Among the Zulu people of South Africa, there is a room in each homestead with an elevated portion (umsamu) where rituals to the ancestor spirits are performed. The cattle kraal is also associated with ancestors and is, therefore, an important place for ritual action. Sacred mountains and caves are almost universal among African peoples. They are often associated with ancestors or any of the divinities. Religious officials will ascend these mountains or go into those caves only on special occasions. Such mountains are also often associated with the abode of the Supreme Being. In Zimbabwe, there are several such mountains that serve as venues for prayer and sacrifice, particularly in connection with prayers for rain in cases of severe drought.

Witchcraft and Magic
To complete the portrayal of African traditional religions, it is also necessary to look at the negative forces in these religious traditions. African traditionalists believe that God is the source of all power, which God shares with other beings. The power of the divinities and ancestors, or that derived from medicine, is primarily viewed as positive power to be
used for constructive purposes. However, that same power can also be
used for destructive purposes, in which case it becomes evil power.
Witches and sorcerers represent those elements within African societies
that use power for the purpose of destroying life. (In general, witches are
female and sorcerers are male.)

Witchcraft beliefs are widespread in contemporary Africa even among
educated Christians and Muslims, typically as a response to the insecurities
of modern life (see Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 2013; Moore and Sanders
2001). Even children are being accused and in rising numbers, according to
UNICEF (2010) in a report on West and Central Africa. It is generally
believed that witches can fly by night, can become invisible, delight in eat-
ing human flesh, and use familiar animals such as hyenas or baboons as
their means of transport. Witches are believed to be wicked and malicious
human beings whose intention is simply to kill, which they do by poisoning
or cursing their victims. Witches, sorcerers, and angry ancestor spirits are
usually identified as the major causes of misfortune or death in a family.

Magic has two aspects: to protect or to harm. Magic can be used to
protect the members of the family, as well as their homestead, cattle, and
other property, from witches and other enemies of the family or the individ-
ual. Yet magic can also be used through spells and curses to harm or to kill.
Beliefs related to magic and witchcraft clearly belong to the category of
superstition. They represent ways in which people try to explain the causes
of misfortune or social disorders. Misfortune, sickness, or death may also
be explained as an expression of one’s ancestors’ displeasure regarding the
behavior of their descendants (see Evans-Pritchard 1937).

In sum, it must be stated that African traditional religions continue to
influence the lives of many people today, including some of the highly edu-
cated as well as many of those who self-identify as African Christians and
African Muslims. It must also be pointed out that African religions are not
static. Contacts with Christian and Islamic traditions have brought about
transformations and syncretism in all three. As Paul Bohannan and Philip
Curtin (1995:124) remark, “There is an amazingly close overlap between
the basic ideas of Islam and Christianity, and of the African religions. Nei-
ther Islam nor Christianity is foreign in its essence to African religious
ideas.” The reverse is also true. Although Christianity and Islam have added
distinct elements to African religions, each has been and continues to be
adapted to and shaped by Africa’s indigenous religious heritage, as we
demonstrate in the following sections.

**Christianity in Africa**

Christianity brings together “the followers of Jesus Christ of all traditions
and confessions,” including but not limited to Anglicans, Catholics,
Protestants, and Orthodox (Johnson and Zurlo 2020). It has experienced phenomenal growth on the African continent during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It bears repeating from the previous section that 580 million Africans (or 49 percent of all Africans) are Christian, making it one of the three largest religious traditions on the African continent. Stated another way, nearly five of every ten Africans are Christians. Since so much has been written on Christianity as a broad religious tradition, it is not necessary for our purposes to deal with its specific beliefs (see Adogame, Gerloff, and Hock 2008; Oduoye 2009; Sanneh and Carpenter 2005; Sundkler and Steed 2000). We instead focus on the historical development of the religion on the African continent. Special attention is paid to those aspects that give African Christianity its own identity.

Early Christianity in North Africa and Ethiopia

Christianity in Africa dates back to Egypt in the first century. According to the ancient historian Eusebius, writing in approximately 311 CE, the Christian church in Egypt was founded by Saint Mark, author of the second gospel and a companion of Paul, a tradition still maintained by the Egyptian Coptic church. By the end of the first century, Christianity had penetrated into rural Egypt and had become the religion of the majority of the people. This continued during the rule of the Roman Empire, during which period Alexandria became one of the most important Roman cities outside of Rome. Egypt has one of the oldest Christian churches, surpassed perhaps only by Rome in terms of longevity of tradition and continuity in the same locality (King 1971:1).

The discovery of Christian and non-Christian documents at the Nag Hammadi caves in Egypt shows that quite early in the history of Christianity, Egypt had become a center for many different and even conflicting Christian groups and a center for theological reflection and debate (Robinson 1982). The city of Alexandria was the home of outstanding theologians, such as Origen, Cyprian, and Clement of Alexandria, whose writings on the different aspects of the Christian faith have influenced the church throughout the ages. The great “heretic” Arius (died 336 CE), originally from the region that is present-day Libya, provoked a controversy that rocked the church for several decades when he taught that Christ was only a human being. The controversy produced two creeds, namely, the Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds, which are used together with the Apostles’ Creed as definitive statements of the Christian faith throughout Christendom. The two creeds were formulated at the two great councils of Nicaea in 325 CE and of Alexandria in 362 CE. The Athanasian Creed was named after Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who championed the case against Arius.

The discoveries from Nag Hammadi also demonstrate that Egyptian Christians were very open-minded as they searched for an African Christian
identity. They welcomed and accommodated new ideas in their search for indigenous expressions of their Christian faith. For example, in its search for an authentic Christian life devoid of all fleshly desires and serving God through a life of self-denial, prayer, and worship, Egypt was the mother of monasticism (in which believers renounce worldly pursuits in favor of devoting themselves solely to spiritual work). The many caves and the nearby desert provided most ideal locations for such ascetic pursuits. Christianity became and remained the dominant religious tradition until Egypt was conquered by Muslim forces beginning in the seventh century, after which Islam emerged as the dominant religion. Christianity has survived, although it has been reduced to the status of a minority religion (Robinson 1982). According to the WCD, Christians number just over 9 million or 9.6 percent of the Egyptian population (Johnson and Zurlo 2020).

Christianity subsequently spread southeast to Ethiopia. The apostle Philip is reported in the Acts of the Apostles to have baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, who returned to his home country to share his newfound faith with his people. Independent evidence dates the coming of Christianity to Ethiopia to the fourth century. With the conversion of the emperor, church and state became united. The Ethiopian Orthodox church, which is one of the most thoroughly African churches in its ethos (Oduyoye 1986:30), has continued to the present and has maintained close links with the Coptic church. As of 2020, Christianity represented the dominant faith of nearly 59 million Christians or 59 percent of the Ethiopian population (Erlikh 2010; Johnson and Zurlo 2020).

Christianity also achieved a strong following as early as the second century across the remainder of North Africa during the period of Roman rule (Decret 2009). The centerpiece of this influence was the Roman province of Africa Proconsularis and its capital city of Carthage, which incorporated the western portion of present-day Libya, most of present-day Tunisia, and the eastern portion of present-day Algeria. Farther west were the Roman North African provinces of Mauritania Caesariensis and Mauritania Tingitania (present-day Algeria and Morocco), and farther east were the Roman provinces of Cyrenaica (present-day Libya) and of course Aegyptus (present-day Egypt), the latter of which already has been discussed. Roman North Africa produced influential theological thinkers and writers such as Tertullian of Carthage, who was the first person to use the word “Trinity” in his description of the Godhead, and Saint Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, whose ideas on such issues as grace, original sin, and the kingdom of God shaped both Western Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation. As in the case of Egypt, Christianity in the remainder of North Africa did not survive the Arab conquests. It currently claims only 223,165 adherents across Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia (Johnson and Zurlo 2020).
The Spread of Christianity South of the Sahara

There is no evidence of attempts by the African churches in Ethiopia, Egypt, or the remainder of Roman North Africa to spread Christianity south of the Sahara. The earliest such efforts to Christianize the rest of Africa were those of the Portuguese missionaries of the Jesuit and Dominican orders in the fifteenth century who followed Portuguese traders traveling around the coast of Africa on their way to Asia, often going into the hinterland of Africa to trade in gold and ivory. In West Africa, Roman Catholic missionaries established Christian communities in the Congo and Angola beginning in 1490, but these disintegrated after two centuries, in part because of the slave trade. Missionary work was also started in Southern Africa at Sofala (present-day Mozambique). It was from there that Father Gonzalo da Silveira led a group of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in 1560 to the people of the vast empire of Mwanamutapa in what is now Zimbabwe. On his way to the capital of the empire, he claims to have baptized 450 persons among the Tonga people. His mission, however, ended with his execution by the emperor, whom he had converted and baptized Christian. This was apparently the result of pressure from the emperor’s Arab trading partners, who feared Christian missionaries would open the door for Portuguese traders to threaten their monopoly. Subsequent Portuguese missionary efforts to the empire by both the Jesuits and the Dominicans were also unsuccessful. Their missionary efforts in East Africa suffered a similar fate.

A new phase in the evangelization of Africa was introduced by the rise of the antislavery movement in Europe and the United States in the early nineteenth century. The result was that the United Kingdom decided to send freed slaves to Sierra Leone (whose capital city was named Freetown to celebrate this reality), France sent freed slaves to Gabon (which similarly named its capital city Libreville, or Freetown in French), and the United States sent freed slaves to Liberia (the capital city of which was named Monrovia because the initiative was started under President Monroe). In each case, the freed people who had become Christians in their captivity overseas now spread Christianity within their new African communities. Famous among these was Samuel Adjai Crowther, who was missionary to his own people in Nigeria and later became the first African Anglican bishop. The evangelical movement culminated in a “missionary scramble for Africa” (akin to the later, more politically motivated scramble for Africa discussed in Chapters 4 and 6) that involved all major denominations in Europe and North America. Famous characters in this process included David Livingstone, a missionary who is nonetheless better known for his exploits as an explorer, and Robert Moffat (Livingstone’s father-in-law), who was the first to translate the Bible into Setswana (one of the national languages of Botswana). Many Africans were also involved in these missionary efforts after their conversions, crossing borders in the company of white missionaries or by themselves. As a result of the
efforts of such people, Christianity was firmly established in most of sub-Saharan Africa by the beginning of the twentieth century (Sanneh 1983).

The nineteenth-century missionary activities in Africa were a resounding success, in which almost all major Christian denominations were involved. These activities were facilitated by the support and protection that missionaries received from colonial administrators. Indeed, the Christianization of Africa went hand in hand with its colonization. The missionaries arrived in most countries before the colonialists and learned the language of the local people. They helped the colonialists negotiate and draft the agreements that cheated African chiefs out of their land and its resources. To African nationalists, missionaries appeared to have collaborated with the forces of imperialism. In what is now a famous aphorism, the role of Christian missionaries in the colonization of Africa was described by Kenyan nationalist leader (and Kenya’s first president) Jomo Kenyatta: “When the missionaries came the Africans had the land and the Christians had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them they had the land and we had the Bible” (quoted in Mazrui 1986:149–150). (See the discussions in Chapters 3 and 4 for more information on colonialism.)

Despite its association with colonialism, missionary Christianity had a significant political impact on contemporary Africa. Wherever the missionaries went, they built schools, where a large majority of the first generation

Many Christian churches, such as Our Lady of Africa, a Roman Catholic basilica in Algiers, Algeria, were built during the colonial era.
of African leaders were educated (see Mazrui 1986:285–286). These institutions helped create awareness among oppressed Africans that before God they were of equal value with their white oppressors, and this inspired many to rise up in defense of their freedom or to liberate themselves. The education that Africans received from mission schools gave them a sense of pride and value that the colonial regimes were not interested in creating. Many of the missionaries also stood up for some of the rights of Africans.

The Rise of African Independent Churches

During the Contemporary Independence Era

The contemporary independence era (1951–present) was marked by the rise of African independent churches, a broad umbrella term for African churches and denominations that separated from the European-dominated churches, assumed new and distinctly African forms that were sometimes radically different in their doctrines and general ethos from their Western parent churches, and thus served as authentic African expressions of the Christian faith. One of the earliest documented examples of these churches involved a Congolese woman named Donna Beatrice, who as early as 1700 claimed to have been possessed by the spirit of Saint Anthony. Giving up all her belongings to the poor, she proclaimed a message of the coming judgment of God. She proclaimed that Christ and his apostles were black and that they lived in São Salvador (present-day Angola). Beatrice’s proclamations served as a poignant expression of the “yearning for a Christ who would identify with the despised African” (Daneel 1987:46). The basic question Beatrice raised and that many of the new African Christian churches have been asking is, “How could the white Christ of the Portuguese images, the Christ of the exploiters—how could he ever help the suffering African, pinning for liberty?” (Daneel 1987:46). By the 1960s, there were at least 6,000 new African independent churches spread throughout most of Africa, including Islamic Africa (Barrett 1968:18–36).

The emergence of African independent churches was driven by several factors (Daneel 1987:68–101; Barrett 1982; Fashole-Luke et al. 1978; Hastings 1976). First, the African Christians did not find much of an African ethos in the missionary-founded churches. Indeed, the missionaries typically discouraged African traditional practices of faith healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, and disapproved of polygyny, ancestor veneration, witches, and traditional medicine. Africans wanted churches in which they could express their Christian faith in African symbols and images, churches where they could feel at home, so to speak. Christianity as proclaimed by the missionaries was for them not comprehensive enough to meet their spiritual needs. As a result, many people even today secretly continue to participate in African traditional rituals. There was no serious attempt on the part of the historical churches to understand African traditional spirituality and
culture. Instead, many traditional beliefs and practices were simply labeled “heathen” or “superstitious” and were thus forbidden.

Second, as far as most Africans were concerned, the missionaries and the colonialists were birds of a feather. After all, they shared a common worldview and a common racist perception of the African. The missionaries tolerated and even practiced racial discrimination to the extent of providing separate entries and sections in sanctuaries, and “by so doing [the church] preached against itself and violated human rights” (Plangger 1988:446). Such contradictions in what people heard missionaries preach and what they practiced contributed significantly to the formation of some of the independent churches. This was especially true of the refusal or slowness on the part of missionaries to relinquish church leadership to the indigenous people.

A third reason for the emergence of African independent churches was the translation of the Bible into African languages. African Christians could now read and interpret the Bible for themselves. They soon discovered, for example, that biblical paragons of faith such as Abraham and David were polygamists. They also learned that the Fifth Commandment demands that parents be honored, and that it is the only commandment that comes with a promise, namely, “that your days may be long on earth.” For African peoples the “parents” include the ancestor spirits. The translation of the Bible into African languages is thus one of the major contributions by the missionaries to the development of indigenous African Christian spirituality and to the development of African Christian theologies. In the African independent churches, the Bible plays a central role; in some churches, one service may have as many as five or six sermons, all of which are biblically based. The tendency in these churches is to be fundamentalist in interpreting the Bible.

Finally, some indigenous churches headed by women were a reaction to the male dominance found in Western Christian churches and in African society in general. For example, spirit possession cults in East Africa are dominated by women. They are considered to be the female counterpart of male veneration of lineage ancestors. Again, folk Catholicism in Zimbabwe is a largely feminine popular religion, with an emphasis on devotion to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus (Ranger 1986:42, 52, 58). Women have also been leaders in such movements as Alice Lichina in Kenya, the Nyabingi of Kenya/Uganda, and Magoi’s healing/possession movement in Mozambique (Mikell 1997:26). In Southern Africa, women play important roles as healers and diviners, often mixing indigenous beliefs and practices with Christianity. For example, they often rely on “prophecy, speaking in tongues, ecstatic dancing, and laying on of hands rather than herbs to heal” (Gort 1997:300–301).

African independent churches, and their evolution, can be divided into three broad groups (Daneel 1987:43–67; see also Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu 2019). First, there are what can be referred to as the Ethiopian-style
churches, which appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. The term "Ethiopian" captures how these churches were inspired by the fact that Ethiopia was never colonized, thereby serving as an inspiration for political, economic, and religious movements seeking an independent African voice. These were essentially protest movements that broke away from the white-dominated missionary churches that tended to align themselves with oppressive colonial regimes. They identified themselves with the aspirations of oppressed Africans and sought to give theological expression and spiritual support to the struggle for liberation. The references to Ethiopia in texts such as Psalm 68:31 were, as observed by Daneeel (1987:38), “interpreted as a sign that the oppressed Black people have a specially appointed place in God’s plan of salvation.” The Ethiopian-style churches tended to maintain the same doctrines and even hymnbooks as the church from which they broke away. They nonetheless had African religious leaders.

The second type of African independent churches is the spirit-type churches, which appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. These are often referred to as Zionist churches because the name Zion often appears in the self-designations of these movements. They are prophetic in character and place a great deal of emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, which manifests itself in speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, dreams, and visions and which helps to identify witches and cast out evil spirits. Their worship services include drums and dancing. They are more concerned with the practical benefits that religion can provide in this world than with otherworldly salvation. At the same time, they have a tendency to forbid their members from adhering to various aspects of traditional African religion, such as divination (Morrison, Mitchell, and Paden 1989:76). Zionist churches include the Adulara or “praying” churches in Nigeria and the Harris churches in Côte d’Ivoire (Ranger 1986:3). An excellent example is the Kimbanguist church in the DRC, which was started during the colonial era by Simon Kimbangu, a great healer and prophet. Since his activities were not acceptable to the missionary church, he was arrested shortly after the start of his ministry and tried for subversive activities by the Belgian colonial authorities. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment; he died in 1951. Today, the Kimbanguist church, officially known as the Eglise de Jésus Christ par le Prophète Simon Kimbangu (Church of Jesus Christ According to the Prophet Simon Kimbangu), is reported to be one of the largest African independent churches with most of its followers in the DRC and other countries in Central Africa (see Mazrui 1986:152–156).

The spirit-type churches represent a serious attempt to Africanize the Christian faith by responding concretely to the needs and aspirations of the African people. These movements take the Africans’ worldview seriously. For example, if salvation is to be real, it must include liberation from evil
spirits, sickness, and disease. For it to be meaningful and relevant, Christianity must offer protection against black magic, sorcery, and witchcraft, all of which are issues of vital concern to African societies (Kiernan 1995b:23–25). The spirit-type churches are nonetheless against participation in traditional African religious rites and substitute specifically Christian rites to fill the vacuum. The prophet who is inspired by the Holy Spirit, for example, takes the place and assumes the functions of the traditional diviners and spirit mediums. Similarly, requests for rain are made directly to God through the mediation of Christian leaders rather than through spirits mediated by traditional religious leaders.

A third form of African independent churches is the Pentecostal-charismatic churches. These appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century and were associated with Western mission churches of the Pentecostal variety, such as the Assemblies of God, coming from the United States. The essence of this type of African independent church is captured by the two words in its title. Whereas the “word ‘Pentecostal’ originates from the biblical story about Pentecost (Book of Acts), according to which the Holy Spirit was poured out over the followers of Jesus after his ascension,” the “word ‘charismatic’ has its origins in the Greek word charismata, which is used in the New Testament for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as prophecy, speaking in tongues and healing” (Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu 2019:77). The primary difference between the spirit-type and Pentecostal-charismatic churches lies in their origins: whereas the origins of the former are primarily African, those of the latter are primarily from the West, most notably the United States.

The severe economic crisis experienced by most African countries during the 1980s contributed to the rise of what religious scholars refer to as neo-Pentecostal churches, which have continued to expand and increasingly dominate the Christian religious landscape during the last fifty years (Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu 2019; see also Gifford 2004). These churches are typically based on two theological elements: (1) a “prosperity gospel” promising wealth, health, and happiness to believers; and (2) an ability to heal the physically sick and mentally ill, including deliverance from evil demons, witchcraft, and the spirit world more generally speaking (Kiernan 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2004, 2014; Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001). In both cases, the promised results are associated with the here and now (i.e., the believer’s current life on earth) rather than on a more abstract and in any case future afterlife. In terms of spreading the gospel, these churches follow the model of television evangelists in the United States who lead megachurches. As explained by Birgit Meyer (quoted in Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu 2019:79), they often include “flamboyant leaders” who “dress in the latest (African) fashion, drive nothing less than a Mercedes Benz, participate in the global Pentecostal jet set,” and broadcast their religious message through “flashy TV and radio programs.”
Gifford (1998) portrays these new churches as a response to the failure of the modernization and development agenda in Africa. With conditions of life so problematic for many Africans and opportunities for advancement in the public or private sectors often limited, religion is seen by many as the best avenue for improving their lives. Not surprisingly, the neo-Pentecostal churches appeal to many ambitious, better-educated, younger Africans in urban areas who want to get rich. It also appeals to ambitious, non-educated, younger Africans in the rural areas who see few opportunities, and like their urban counterparts, wish to become rich (Gifford 1998; Khumalo 2008:4; Simone 2010:219). Indeed, churches such as the neo-Pentecostal churches with external, often international links may have access to jobs, incomes, and other resources unavailable elsewhere. Moreover, many of these churches, especially the faith gospel churches, legitimate the accumulation of wealth as “God’s will,” thus lessening the risk of the accusation of witchcraft from envious relatives or neighbors.

 Nonetheless, without major economic and political transformation, belief in faith and personal endeavor alone as the means to riches or reliance on deliverance from witches as the cure for social problems is unlikely to work for most of Africa’s suffering people. As Terence O. Ranger (2003:117) argues, “prosperity Christianity” is more about survival than rising to the heights of entrepreneurial success. Magic is often substituted for thrift, and rewards are received for non-economic reasons. Yet among Africa’s impoverished masses, the gospel of prosperity sustains a belief that God will not allow the faithful to perish. An especially poignant example of this need for faith in the midst of human misery is found in Abdoumaliq Simone’s (2010:134) description of Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, where residents are increasingly “dedicated to religion with endless prayer services and financial obligations to the church.” In essence, the poorest of the poor in the city believe that God will “show a way even in the belly of the beast.” The entrepreneurism such faith encourages under the context in which so many Africans live is mainly “penny capitalism”—that is, informal sector activities among the young and women that prevent starvation.

 Many of the new neo-Pentecostal churches are founded by a charismatic leader who claims to have a mystical experience and is regarded as a prophet by his or her followers (Haynes 1996:174). The churches are often millenarian, that is, expecting the imminent end of the world, at which time only believers will be saved. Critical or rational thought is discouraged, and dissent from what the evangelist says is viewed as opposing God (Gifford 1998:178). Such views can give rise to extremist religious movements with tragic results, as occurred in Uganda. Early in 2000, leaders of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God killed over 900 members of their church, one of the worst cult killings in modern history. Cult leader Joseph Kibwetere, a former teacher, public official, business-
man, and devout Catholic, came under the sway of Credonia Mwerinde (allegedly “the real power”). She claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to her and told her the end of the world was coming. The motive for the mass murder is unclear, but apparently members of the cult became disillusioned and questioned the leaders’ authority (and appropriation of members’ financial assets) (see Maykuth 2000).

The Political Roles of Christian Churches
During the Contemporary Independence Era

One of the realities of the initial decades of the contemporary independence era is that Christian churches often remained silent and at worst were compliant when confronted with the growing authoritarianism of their respective governments, as single-party regimes replaced multiparty regimes and military dictators replaced their civilian counterparts in military coups d’état. For example, many independent churches in Kenya supported President Daniel arap Moi despite his record of antidemocratic and corrupt rule (Gifford 2009). In Liberia before the 1990 civil war, Pentecostal churches backed any government, however oppressive, that promoted evangelism. One of the most atrocious examples was the complicity and direct involvement of Catholic clergy and lay persons in the 1994 genocide against the
Tutsis and moderate Hutu in Rwanda. Church leaders were mostly Hutu and closely tied to the Hutu-dominated government (see Gifford 1998:51–55; Longman 1998; Ranger 2003:116).

African Christians have also been involved in violent political movements seeking the overthrow of secular African governments. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Uganda. Another group in Uganda is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) under the leadership of Joseph Kony, who considers himself a prophet. The LRA has been at war with the Ugandan government since 1986. Its goal is to replace the government with one based on Moses’s Ten Commandments. Thousands of people, especially children, have been forcibly conscripted to fight for the LRA. Thousands also have been killed and subjected to sexual violence, not only in Uganda but in the neighboring countries of the Central African Republic, DRC, and South Sudan, where the LRA is also active (Oloya 2013). Obviously, any religion in the wrong hands and under circumstances favorable to it has the potential for extremism and violence.

Africa’s wave of democratization that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 altered the church-state relationship (i.e., the role of Christian actors within Africa’s political systems). For example, Christian religious actors, like other actors within civil society, became increasingly willing to both support and promote democratic change. These ranged from individual priests and pastors who took part in protests at the local level to more senior Christian leaders who were part of a national religious hierarchy who directly confronted the leadership of an authoritarian regime. This shift is clearly demonstrated by the evolving role of the Catholic Church in DRC politics during the era of Mobutu Sese Seko’s dictatorship. In 1965, when Mobutu took power in a military coup d’état, the Catholic archbishop of Kinshasa (the country’s capital city), Joseph Malula, sent a letter pledging the support of the Catholic church. “Mr. President, the Church recognizes your authority, because authority comes from God. We will loyally apply the laws you establish. You can count on us in your work of restoring the peace toward which all so ardently aspire” (quoted in Boyle 1992:49). Twenty-seven years later in 1990, Catholic bishops in the DRC signed the first of several letters calling for political change, including presenting themselves as “honest brokers” between the Mobutu dictatorship and pro-democracy elements of civil society (Boyle 1992:62–66). “Certainly other groups and particular individuals have played a more prominent role than the bishops in formal political opposition to the Mobutu regime,” explains Patrick Boyle (1992:64). “The publication of the letters from the bishops, however, opened wider the floodgates of public opposition not only because it tapped a deep seated contempt for the Mobutu regime, a sentiment that was confirmed when Mobutu decided to set the bishops’ letter
aside, but also because the church, a traditionally conservative institution and at times closely associated with the regime, took the risk of strong public confrontation after years of perceived inaction” (see also Schraeder 2016; Schuck and Crowley-Buck 2016). This case is not unique but rather indicative of the growing role of Christian churches in Africa’s wave of democratization (Gifford 1995; Phiri 2001).

It is important to remember, however, that neither is the above trend universal (i.e., it does not affect all Christian churches equally, in all African countries) nor is it unidirectional (i.e., the trend is not automatically moving toward greater church support for democratization). In Zambia, for example, the antidemocratic and corrupt practices of the democratically elected administration of President Frederick Chiluba were frequently downplayed or overlooked because Chiluba was an outspoken, born-again Christian who put potentially critical Christian leaders in positions of influence in the government (Gifford 1998:51, 204–205, 216–217). Moreover, church leaders, like other members of civil society, are susceptible to the financial benefits and prestige that government leaders can bestow on them and their churches (Gifford 1998:87–88), and those who have benefited from political arrangements (both clergy and lay persons) use the churches to organize opposition to reform (Anderson 2006:74–79). In Eswatini, for example, King Mswati III fended off a democratization movement with the help of fundamentalist Christian leaders, who used the Bible to support monarchy as divinely ordained (Hall 2003).

Regardless of whether they support or oppose political change, and regardless of their specific Christian denomination, Christian churches are increasingly embedded in what can be referred to as the “Pentecostalization of the public sphere” (Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu 2019:85; Lindhardt 2015:20; Ranger 2008). Specifically, rather than adhering to the classic religious maxim attributed to Jesus, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” in essence underscoring the separation of church and state, the Pentecostalization of the public sphere instead captures the growing involvement of the “religious” within the political sphere. This political reality is directly connected to the rise and prominence of neo-Pentecostal churches, which coincided with the African wave of democratization. For at least three decades, “neo-Pentecostal churches appear to have abandoned the idea that the church should not be involved in ‘worldly affairs’ such as politics, and they have developed new forms of political engagement and political language, often in an explicitly religious guise,” explain Grillo, van Klinken, and Ndzovu (2019:87). “Thus, Pentecostal rhetoric is very much concerned, not just with winning individual souls, but with ‘claiming the land for Christ’ and dedicating the nation to God.’” One of the best examples of this trend was President Chiluba’s declaration upon his inauguration in 1991 that Zambia is a
“Christian nation,” followed by the inclusion in 1996 of this same statement in the Zambian Constitution. By the same token, politicians at all levels cooperate with church personnel and use the churches to increase their power and seek legitimacy (Longman 1998:68; Ranger 2003:116).

Islam in Africa
Islam, which means “submission to God,” was founded in the seventh century on the Arabian Peninsula by the Prophet Muhammad. Influenced by Judaism and Christianity, Islam established monotheism (belief in one God above all other gods) and a scripturally based religion among Arabs around the towns of Mecca and Medina. Allah (God) revealed to Muhammad how he wanted his followers to live and structure their communities. This revelation is found in the Quran and is believed to be the literal word of God. Muslims, like Jews, believe they are descendants of Abraham, and they respect the Old Testament and the Prophets. Muslims also revere the New Testament and regard Jesus as a prophet. Muhammad, however, is the last and greatest of the prophets, and the Quran is God’s supreme revelation. Unlike Judaism, both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions. As such, both Christianity and Islam have been the major contenders for the religious allegiance of Africans.

Islam has experienced phenomenal growth on the African continent during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It bears repeating from the first section of this chapter that over 496 million Africans (or 42 percent of all Africans) are Muslim, making it one of the three largest religious traditions on the African continent. Stated another way, over four of every ten Africans are Muslims. Since so much has been written about Islam as a broad religious tradition, it is not necessary for our purposes to deal with its specific beliefs. We instead focus on the historical development of the religion on the African continent. Special attention is paid to those aspects that give African Islam its own identity.

The Early Spread of Islam
Soon after the death of Muhammad in 632 CE, his followers embarked on wars of conquest, first among Arabs on the Arabian Peninsula and then among non-Arabs, most notably in North Africa. Most of Egypt was under the control of Arab Muslims by 640 CE. By then, Egypt’s rulers supported the Byzantine Orthodox church while many Egyptians were Coptic Christians who did not accept the Orthodox church’s teachings or authority. Many welcomed Arab rule as less oppressive than they had experienced under the Byzantines. The Arabs established themselves initially as a ruling and powerful minority, but Christians were treated as “protected people” (dhimmi) who were allowed to practice their faith and regulate their affairs through their own leaders. Still, Christians were second-class citizens
required to pay a special tax (*jizya*) in lieu of military service. Nonetheless, educated Christians often held prominent positions in the new Muslim state. Conversion to Islam was gradual. There was some localized persecution and pressure to convert, but most did so for other reasons, including attraction to Islamic tenets, commercial advantage, and a desire to avoid the *jizya* and second-class status. By the end of the eleventh century, Christianity in Egypt had become a minority religion (Mostyn 1988:190).

After Egypt, the Arabs moved on to Roman North Africa where they defeated the Christians, who were primarily based in the towns, and the Berbers, who had remained largely untouched by Christianity in the rural areas. J. S. Trimingham observes that

the North African Church died rather than was eliminated by Islam, since it never rooted itself in the life of the country. Although considerations such as the prestige of Islam derived from its position as the religion of the ruling minority and the special taxation imposed on Christians encouraged change, the primary reasons for their rapid conversion were the less obvious ones deriving from weaknesses within the Christian communities. Among these were Christianity’s failure to claim the Berber soul and its bitter sectarian divisions, (1962:18)

The conversion of the Berbers of North Africa was a slow process. After their initial military conquests, Arabs located in the towns. They gradually intermarried with the Berbers, who became increasingly Islamized and Arabized. Many Berbers were incorporated into Arab armies. This period of conquest of North Africa is reported by the great Arab historian Ibn Khal-dun (quoted in Trimingham 1962:18):

After the formation of the Islamic community the Arabs burst out to propagate their religion among other nations. Their armies penetrated into the Maghrīb [Maghreb—the countries of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia] and captured all its cantonments and cities. They endured a great deal in their struggles with the Berbers who, as Abu Yazid has told us, apostatized twelve times before Islam gained a firm hold over them.

The Islamization and Arabization of North Africa fostered a series of Arab/Islamic empires across North Africa. In the territory known as present-day Tunisia, control was established by local dynasties within the context of larger Arab empires, including by the Aghlabids (800–909 CE), the Fatimids (909–1148 CE), the Almohads (1159–1229 CE), and the Hafsids (1207–1574 CE). This was followed by a period of rule by the Ottoman Empire (1574–1704 CE), which was followed by a Tunisian dynasty known as the Husaynids (1704–1883 CE). All of these dynasties and empires spawned important cities and centers of higher learning, most notably the inland city of Kairouan. This city is home to the Great Mosque of Kairouan,
which was established in 670 CE, making it one of the oldest centers of worship within the Islamic world. Tunis, the capital of present-day Tunisia, is also home to the Al-Zitouna Mosque, which was built in 734 CE out of columns from the ruined city of Carthage. It hosted one of the earliest and most prestigious universities in the Islamic world.

The Spread of Islam South of the Sahara

Whereas Islam spread to North Africa in the aftermath of conquest, the initial spread of Islam south of the Sahara was primarily the result of peaceful, informal missionary efforts (Insoll 2003; Levzion and Pouwels 2000). For example, Arabized Berber merchants traded manufactured goods from Mediterranean lands in exchange for raw materials that they obtained from sub-Saharan Africa, such as gold, ivory, gum, and slaves. They followed the established trans-Saharan trade routes that connected North Africa with West and Central Africa, many of which had existed long before the rise of Islam. Wherever they went, Muslims established commercial and religious centers near the capital cities. The Nile River provided access to Nubia, Ethiopia, and Sudan. From Sudan, some of the traders went across to West Africa. The introduction of the camel also made it possible to cross the desert from North Africa and establish contacts with West and Central Africa (Lewis 1980:15–16; Voll 1982:80).

Muslim communities were established fairly early in several states in West Africa. In Ghana, for example, by 1076 CE there was an established Muslim center where several mosques almost competed with each other (King 1971:18). By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam was the religion of the rulers and elites of many large African states, such as the Songhai Empire (Voll 1982:14). Islam appealed to African elites for several reasons. One was its association with Arab-Muslim civilization and its cosmopolitanism. Islam was also compatible with or at least tolerant of African religious and cultural practices such as ancestor veneration, polygyny, circumcision, magic, and beliefs in spirits and other divinities. In fact, most African believers were barely Islamized, perhaps observing the Five Pillars of the faith—belief in one God and that Muhammad is his prophet, providing alms (zakat) to the needy, praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and making the pilgrimage (hadj) to Mecca—but often ignoring elements of sharia (Islamic) law or other Islamic practices (e.g., veiling women), which they found incompatible with local custom (Lewis 1980:33–34, 60–62; Callaway and Creevey 1994).

In East Africa, Islam was spread by Persian and Arab merchants beginning in the late seventh century. These merchants established coastal trading towns with local Africans all the way down to Southern Africa. Through intermarriage and commercial contacts, a unique Swahili language and culture developed. There was little movement of traders or Islam into
the interior until the late tenth century, however, because there were few centralized kingdoms to attract them (Lewis 1980:7) (see Chapter 3 for additional information on this period).

Islamic civilization contributed much to Africa’s own cultural development, affecting all spheres of human activity (e.g., see Hanson 2017; Robinson 2004). It emphasizes literacy and scholarship, traditions that Islam promoted in previously nonliterate African societies. Islam’s stress on the community of believers (umma) demands the subordination of regional and ethnic loyalties that often separated Africans and impeded the growth of larger political units. Sharia, as the framework for community life, along with Islamic-Arab administrative and political structures, provided models for Africa’s statebuilders and gave built-in religious legitimacy to the claims of rulers over the ruled (see Davidson 1991:28–29; Lewis 1980:37; Mazrui 1986:136–137).

By the eighteenth century in West Africa, Islamic consciousness was spreading from the upper classes to the masses. This new wave of Islamization was being carried by African Muslims through militant mass movements under the religious banner of jihad (literally “to struggle,” but often translated as “holy war”). The desire of pious Muslim leaders such as Uthman dan Fodio in northern Nigeria (early nineteenth century) was for social, moral, and political reform. The imposition of more rigorous, Islamic states on lax African believers and non-Islamic peoples was the goal. Jihad thus became a religious justification for wars of conquest and political centralization (Mazrui 1986:184–185; Voll 1982:80–81).

The new wave of Islamization was not solely the result of militant movements. Various Sufi (mystical) religious orders or brotherhoods (tariqas) dedicated to a more faithful adherence to Islam were at work. One of the earlier ones (sixteenth century) was the Qadiriyya, introduced to the great Muslim center of learning Timbuktu by an Arab sheikh (leader) (Lewis 1980:18–19). In the nineteenth century, the Tijaniyya from Fez, Morocco, gained many followers. The Qadiriyya greatly influenced Uthman dan Fodio, whose jihad movement led to the founding of the Muslim caliphate at Sokoto (Voll 1982:80–81) (see Chapter 3).

Sufi brotherhoods under the inspiration of their religious leaders (marabouts) were able to mobilize large numbers of people for political and economic as well as purely religious ends. Among these ends was resistance to European imperialism in the nineteenth century. Using the ideas of jihad and the brotherhood of all believers, Muslims were able to organize resistance on a wider scale than African political units or ethnicity would allow (Mazrui 1986:284). In Senegal, the Mourides transformed jihad into economic enterprise as marabouts organized their followers to produce peanuts on brotherhood land. (Peanuts are a source of peanut oil, which is used for a variety of purposes, most notably cooking.) Even today, the
Mourides are a major political and economic force in Senegal. They attract many followers for practical reasons but also because of their liberalism in enforcing Islamic law (Voll 1982:249–250).

In East Africa, Mahdism galvanized mass opposition to European imperialism in Sudan. The Mahdi in Islam is a messianic figure sent by God to save the believers during times of crisis. The Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed and his followers defeated the British at Khartoum in 1885, although the Mahdist forces were eventually defeated (Mazrui 1986:151–152).

European colonialism and missionary Christianity did not halt the spread of Islam in Africa. In West Africa, colonial rulers made peace with Muslim leaders by protecting their conservative rule over their people and prohibiting Christian proselytizing or mission schools in Muslim areas (Voll 1982:247). Muslims won many new converts for a variety of reasons. The racism and segregation policies of the Europeans contrasted sharply with the Muslim belief in the equality of believers. Also, in many cases, Muslim army officers under the British and the French treated Africans kindly, dealing with their grievances. They were tolerant in helping fellow Africans adjust African customary law to Islamic law (Zakaria 1988:203). Indirectly, colonialism promoted Islamic expansion through the introduction of improved communications and rapid social change (Voll 1982:245). Islam proved able to adjust and change as well as to meet new needs and conditions.
Islam During the Contemporary Independence Era

Islamic organizations and practices have undergone remarkable changes in order to cope with Western influences, including Christianity (Loimeier 2016). In some cases the process has involved accommodation and new interpretations of Islam. In other instances, Christianity and Westernization are seen as enemies of Islam and failed experiments, unable to solve Africa’s many problems. Such views have spawned a growing number of fundamentalist movements.

Initially after independence, conservative nineteenth-century organizations either died out or transformed themselves. In Sudan, the followers of the Mahdi formed a modern political party that competed in national elections. In Nigeria, also, conservative and reformist Muslims formed political parties, partly in competition with Christians in non-Muslim sections of the country. Few of these political parties, however, were explicitly Islamic. The Mourides of Senegal reorganized and assumed modern economic and political roles to maintain their influence (Voll 1982:145–250).

The spirit of jihad and forced conversion were largely replaced by a respect for religious pluralism. This was undoubtedly a result of the long history of mutual accommodation between African traditional religions and Islam in the past as well as contact with Christianity. In most sub-Saharan African states, Muslims are a minority, or at least not the only religious community, a fact that tends to reinforce Muslim support for secular states. Muslim leaders readily accepted non-Muslim leaders, such as Léopold Senghor (a Catholic), who was president of Senegal for many years. Pluralism is also promoted by the fact that family and ethnic loyalties still take precedence over religious ties for most Africans (Zakaria 1988:204–205) (see Chapter 10 for more on the centrality of the family in Africa).

For the masses of Muslim Africans, African traditional beliefs and practices have continued, although with some adaptations to conform to similar practices in Islam. In writing about the Wolof of Senegal, John S. Mbiti concludes,

In spite of the impact of Islam, there is still a much deeper layer of pagan belief and observances. . . . Men and women are loaded with amulets, round the waist, neck, arms, legs, both for protection against all sorts of possible evil, and to help them achieve certain desires. Most frequently these contain a paper on which a religious teacher has written a passage from the Koran, or a diagram from a book on Arabic mysticism, which is then enveloped in paper, glued down and covered with leather, but sometimes they enclose a piece of bone or wood, a powder, or an animal claw. (1969:245)

These are basically African elements, not Islamic, and are practiced by many African groups.
A survey of African indigenous Islamic communities in other parts of Africa also reveals the persistence of African-based practices. As is true of many Christians, ancestor veneration, the wearing of amulets to ward off misfortune and to protect cattle and homesteads, and beliefs in magic, witchcraft, and sorcery have continued. New elements include the use of charms. Also, as Mbiti (1969:249) observes, “In addition to treating human complaints,” traditional healers “perform exorcisms, sometimes using Koranic quotations as magical formulae.”

African Muslims, as well as African Christians, are seeking to redefine or modify their religion and religious identity in response to modern needs and challenges. For many Muslims, this means finding a way to incorporate more orthodox Islamic practices and beliefs into those of their pre-Islamic African religious and cultural heritage. Moreover, many African Muslims are seeking new religious responses to meet the political, economic, and social challenges they are facing. This has led a small minority of Muslims to seek a fundamentalist reaffirmation of Islam, sometimes influenced by fundamentalist movements promoted by external powers, such as Iran (Brenner 1993; Hunwick 1995; Ilesanmi 1995; Voll 1982:250, 337). However, as the Pew Forum (2010) has found, although most Muslims and Christians are deeply religious, both mostly believe that people of other religions should be free to practice their faith. Yet it is also true, as we discuss below, that Muslims find aspects of modern life in Africa to be of concern to them and see religion as a proper response.

Among those adapting to contemporary concerns, Sufi brotherhoods have been at the forefront in providing accommodation between the demands of Islam and popular aspirations, both religious and secular. One such movement is Hamallism, a branch of the Tijaniyya. Hamallism is a social and religious reform movement that stresses the full equality of all people and the liberation of women. It opposes the materialism and corruption of conservative Islamic leaders. Before the contemporary independence era, Hamallists opposed those Muslim leaders who cooperated with French colonialism. Hamallism influenced political leaders like Modibo Keita, former president of Mali, and Diori Hamani, former president of Niger (Voll 1982:254). On the other hand, anti-Sufi movements such as the Izala in Nigeria and Niger (Movement for Suppressing Innovations and Restoring the Sunna) have attracted many from the urban merchant class with their opposition to marabouts and an emphasis on individualism and putting wealth into investments (Grégoire 1993).

In Sudan, Islamic fundamentalists gained dominant influence over the government. Their efforts to impose sharia on the entire country, including the non-Muslim south, led to a secessionist struggle that ended with South Sudan’s independence in 2011 (O’Fahey 1993). The fundamentalists obliterated previous nonsectarian, modernist Islamic movements such as the
Republican Brothers, founded by Mahmoud Mohammed Taha. The Brothers sought a reform of Islam in light of modern realities, including advocating the equality of men and women. Taha was executed in 1985 for “heresy” (Al-Karsani 1993).

Elsewhere, and similar to the new Christian churches that are searching for a more African Christianity, some Muslims are promoting controversial new forms of Africanized Islam. In East and West Africa, the peaceful Ahmadiyya movement (originally from India) owes its success to its vigorous missionary efforts. The Ahmadiyya translated the Quran into Swahili and other local languages (the first to do so) since most African Muslims do not know Arabic. It is estimated that there are nearly 9.6 million Ahmadiyya believers in Africa. Members are often prominent in government and business circles and more secular. They have made significant efforts to promote the status of women. For example, women are allowed to pray in the mosque with men. The Ahmadiyya are seen as heretical by more orthodox believers (Haynes 1996:195). Much more controversial and violent was the Maitatsine movement centered in northern Nigeria. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cameroonian Mahammadu Marwa claimed to be a new prophet of Islam. Marwa was killed along with 100 other people when his followers sparked a violent confrontation with police in the city of Kano in 1980. Rioting by his followers in 1990 left 5,000 people dead. A successor to the Maitatsine movement was the Kalo Kato sect, whose members were involved in an uprising in Kano in 1980 and in Yola in 1992 in which thousands of people died (Haynes 1996:188–191). The name Kalo Kato literally means “a man says” in the local Hausa language, and is a reference to the sayings or hadiths that have been posthumously attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. According to Kalo Kato, only the Quran can serve as the authoritative guidance of God.

The Political Roles of Islam
During the Contemporary Independence Era

Muslim religious actors, like their Christian counterparts, were either compliant or silenced as their political leaders created authoritarian regimes during the early decades of the contemporary independence era. This was especially true in North Africa, where an authoritarian security apparatus known as the mukhabarat particularly suppressed Islamic groups that were perceived as threatening the secular, authoritarian political order. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the country’s leading politico-religious actor, has been persecuted and repressed by a series of military regimes led by Gamal Abdul Nasser (1954–1970), Anwar Sadat (1970–1981), Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2013–present). The Muslim Brotherhood’s only respite from repression was the brief period during which their party ruled Egypt under the presidency of Mohamed Morsy [340x631]
(2012–2013), who was nonetheless overthrown in a military coup d'état (see also Hansen and Mesøy 2009).

Critics of the role of Islamic actors within politics sometimes raise the myth of “Islamic exceptionalism,” or the idea that Islam is incompatible with democracy and, therefore, that different political rules have to be applied to predominantly Muslim countries. For example, some argue that Islamic parties will abuse their power and improperly use their election opportunity to create an Islamic authoritarian regime (i.e., they will not follow the same rules that brought them power, once they are in power). It was precisely this argument that the Algerian military used to suspend the Algerian elections of 1991. They argued that the Islamic Salvation Front, which had won more than 50 percent of the vote in the 1990 local government elections and was on the verge of winning the 1991 parliamentary elections, could not be trusted to maintain democracy if they indeed took office. The real reason, of course, was that the Algerian military did not want to yield power to an Islamist political party. The decision to suspend the electoral process ushered in a period of brutal war, which led to tens of thousands of deaths from 1991 to 2002.

The myth of Islamic exceptionalism remains a potent belief in the United States and the other northern industrialized democracies, which was reinforced by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and later attacks in Europe, such as the 2015 attack that took place in France’s national theater. This perception was captured by an exchange between one of the leading US experts on Islam, John Esposito, and an immigration officer in the United Kingdom. The immigration officer is reported to have asked Esposito, “What will you be doing in Edinburgh?” To which Esposito responded that he was going to give a keynote address on the relationship between Islam and democracy. The immigration officer smiled, stamped his passport, and then said, “Well, that is going to be a very brief speech” (quoted in Esposito and Mogahed 2007:29).

The idea of Muslim exceptionalism is belied by the fact that a majority of the globe’s Muslims live under democratically elected governments. This includes the two majority-Muslim countries with the largest Muslim populations: Indonesia (the world’s most populous Muslim country with more than 200 million Muslim citizens) and Bangladesh (with more than 135 million Muslim citizens). It is also refuted by the existence of Muslim-majority democracies in Africa, such as Senegal, which has become increasingly democratic since independence in 1960, and Tunisia, which in 2011 transitioned to democratic rule. Indeed, despite a variety of challenges associated with this transition, including terrorist attacks, guerrilla insurgencies on its borders with Algeria and Libya, and a precarious economy, Muslim-majority Tunisia has emerged as the most democratic country in the Arab world and one of the most democratic countries on the African continent.
The African wave of democratization that began in 1989, including its North African variant that emerged in 2011 in Tunisia as part of the Arab Spring, significantly affected mosque-state relations (i.e., the role of Muslim actors within Africa’s political systems). First, this period of democratization was accompanied by the rise of al-Qaeda and other internationally oriented terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), leading to mounting local and international concerns about global Islamic extremists’ gaining ground in the predominantly Muslim regions of Africa. In August 2011, for example, al-Qaeda’s North African branch—al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—released a two-part video that called for Muslims from all Arab Spring countries to join their organization as an avenue for fighting against their oppressive governments (de Montesquiou 2011). Counterterrorism experts especially note the impact of ISIS in the predominantly Muslim countries of North and East Africa, which expanded following the June 2014 announcement of a new “worldwide caliphate” with a capital in Raqqa, Syria (e.g., see Yourish, Watkins, and Giratikanon 2016). For example, the Algerian terrorist group formerly known as Jund al-Khilafah fi Ard al-Jazair transformed itself into a branch of ISIS, entitled the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Algeria Province (ISIL-AP). Such recruitment efforts had dramatic impacts, and the predominantly Muslim countries of North Africa served as one of the leading sources of foreign fighters to ISIS during the Syrian civil war, including 6,000 from Tunisia, 1,500 from Morocco, 600 each from Egypt and Libya, and 170 from Algeria (Schumacher and Schraeder 2019:696). Foreign fighters are individuals who leave their home countries to fight in a conflict on foreign soil (in this case, the Syrian civil war).

The African wave of democratization also has been accompanied by the rise of several homegrown, violent, Islamic-inspired movements that seek to overthrow secular African governments. In Somalia, for example, al-Shabaab (which means “The Youth”) since 2006 has been waging a guerrilla insurgency against the UN-backed government based in Mogadishu (the capital city) in a quest to impose a theocratic form of governance based on Islam and sharia law (Hansen 2013; see also De Waal 2004). This guerrilla insurgency and the wider Somali civil war have led to several foreign interventions, ranging from the US-led Operation Restore Hope in 1991 to the more recent (2007–present) African Union–authorized military intervention known as AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia). This guerrilla insurgency is taking place against the backdrop of Somalia’s “failed state,” which has been unable to form an effective central government since the overthrow in 1991 of a brutal dictatorship led by Mohammed Siad Barre.

Another example of a homegrown, violent, Islamic-inspired movement is Boko Haram (which means “Western education is forbidden”). Since 2009, Boko Haram has been waging a brutal guerrilla and terrorist campaign against the Nigerian government in its quest to transform Nigeria into
a theocracy governed by Islam and sharia law. It has resorted to a variety of tactics, such as the internationally reported kidnapping and enslaving of 276 schoolgirls from a secondary school in the town of Chibok in northern Nigeria in April 2014 (Comolli 2015; MacEachern 2018; Thurston 2017). It is important to remember, however, that the emergence of these and other radical Islamic movements is not indicative of violence that is somehow inherent in Islam. Rather, Islam, like Christianity and any other religion in the wrong hands and under circumstances favorable to it, has the potential for extremism and violence.

An important reality of Africa’s wave of democratization is that the majority of African Muslims, as is the case with Muslims throughout the world, prefer democratic forms of governance, albeit influenced by their religious faith. The evolving contours of what can be referred to as “Muslim democracy” were captured in a book, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (Esposito and Mogahed 2007; see also McCauley and Gyimah-Boadi 2009). The book is based on a series of Gallup Polls that were undertaken between 2001 and 2007 in thirty-five countries that are predominantly Muslim or that have substantial Muslim populations, including on the African continent. According to the results, whereas approximately 20 percent of Muslims favor the creation of secular democracies, based on the strict separation of mosque and state in which sharia plays no role within law and legislation, another 20 percent of Muslims support instead the creation of a theocratic political system, in which mosque and state are one and sharia serves as the sole source of law and legislation. In between these two extremes, the vast majority of the globe’s Muslims, or 60 percent, favor the creation of a democratic system in which sharia serves as one source of law and legislation, but *not the only source*. In short, these polling results clearly demonstrate that the vast majority of the predominantly Muslim world, including African Muslims, prefers a model of Muslim democracy that embraces religious values and that involves religion as one but not the only source of governance (e.g., see Ndzovu 2014).

Finally, the African wave of democratization has fostered the rise of religiously based, Islamist parties that seek to change peacefully the domestic and foreign policies of their countries (Villalón 2012). There are dozens of Islamist parties, ranging from more extreme Salafist parties that argue in favor of creating theocratic regimes to more moderate Islamist parties that accept the democratic rules of the game but nonetheless wish to make sharia law more prominent in their respective societies (Storm 2013). This was one of the reasons behind the introduction of sharia law by twelve northern states in Nigeria beginning in 1999. The foreign policy impacts of moderate Islamist parties have particularly attracted the attention of foreign policy specialists, in that these parties won elections, took office, and affected foreign policy in three African cases, all of which are located in North Africa:
Tunisia’s Ennahda party, which won a plurality of votes and led a coalition government known as the troika from 2011 to 2014, when it was forced to relinquish power; Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), which in 2013 captured a majority of parliamentary seats and the presidency in the country’s first democratic elections, only to be overthrown in 2014 as a result of a military coup d’état; and Morocco’s Justice and Development (PJD) party, which won a leading share of parliamentary seats in the 2011 elections and has since led Morocco’s government. “While sharing many similarities with non-Islamist parties,” explains Mecham (2019:640), “these parties brought unique ideological and identity preferences to both domestic and foreign policy.”

The foreign policy impacts of moderate Islamist parties’ taking power have included prioritizing preferential foreign policy links with other predominantly Muslim countries; pursuing foreign policy interests outside of traditional foreign policy channels due to the fact that Islamist parties often face powerful, institutionalized political rivals (e.g., the military); tending to seek indigenous, more regionally based foreign policy solutions as a result of perceived “colonial intrigues”; and having “a willingness to fight for ‘just causes’ at the expense of strategic relationships or traditional alliances” (Mecham 2019:649–656; see also Adraoui 2018). For example, the PJD minister of foreign affairs, Saad-Eddine el-Othmani, ignored domestic criticism over his priority to improve Moroccan-Algerian relations, historically fraught due to Algeria’s rejection of Morocco’s sovereignty claim over the former Western Sahara, as witnessed by being the first Moroccan minister of foreign affairs to visit Algiers in over a decade. “This may have been the result of the PJD’s pan-Islamic worldview, which emphasized commonalities between the religious interests of Moroccans and Algerians over historical differences in nationalism and between the republican and monarchical institutions of the two countries” (Mecham 2019:655). As is the case with political parties everywhere, however, a variety of domestic and international constraints have moderated the foreign policy impacts of Islamist party leaders. “As the North African experience has shown,” concludes Mecham, “Islamist parties in government find that they must inevitably walk the line between ideology and pragmatism as they try to translate the ideals that served them well in political opposition to the realities of the global stage” (2019:658).

Religions of Tolerance or Intolerance?
Although it is not possible to do justice to so broad a topic as African religions within the space of a chapter, we hope this survey has illustrated the breadth of the continent’s religious traditions and current trends. Africans, like people everywhere, embrace religions they feel speak to their experience and their need for identity and meaning—religions that promise some
kind of justice and redress of their existential problems. In Africa, a meaningful religion is one oriented toward promotion of human interests in good health, economic well-being, and human development, as well as managing social relations and easing conflict (Kiernan 1995b:25). After decades of misrule and economic and political decline from 1951 to 1989, followed by the political openings associated with the African wave of democratization (1989–present), Africans are seeking solutions to, or at least relief from, suffering, uncertainty, and disruptive socioeconomic and political changes. In this regard, although vast majorities of African Muslims and African Christians are tolerant of each other’s faiths and have positive views of each other, an unfortunate by-product of Africa’s ongoing socioeconomic and political challenges has been growing tensions and animosities, especially between the more fundamentalist elements of each religion. Muslims from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are pouring money into Africa to expand conservative Islam, which conflicts with the more tolerant Islam espoused by most African Muslims. At the same time, Christian missionaries, mostly from the United States, are pouring money and missionaries into Africa to promote conservative Christianity, which conflicts with the more tolerant Christianity followed by most African Christians (Rice 2004). Extremism can be found in both religious traditions. The question in Africa, as well as in many other areas of the world, is whether tolerant, emancipatory religions of peace, rather than religions of intolerance, repression, and violence, will be embraced as Africans seek to meet their worldly and spiritual needs.