

Heathenism, Delusion, and Ignorance: Samuel Crowther's Approach to Islam and Traditional Religion

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In 1843, Samuel Ajayi Crowther became the first African ordained for ministry in the Anglican Church, and he dedicated most of his life to bringing the gospel to his fellow West Africans. During the course of his evangelizing activity, Crowther engaged frequently with both Islam and African traditional religion. After a brief survey of Crowther's life, I compare the vocabulary with which he describes Islam and traditional religion, the analytic categories he applies to them, and the quality of his engagement with each. I argue that the differences between Crowther's engagement with traditional religion and Islam stem from his perception of the latter as a competing missionary religion and the former as being connected in important ways with the African cultural traditions he hoped to preserve and perfect.

Nigeria experienced a great deal of change in the middle of the nineteenth century. War, the collapse or restructuring of political systems, the slave trade and its gradual replacement with other forms of trade and manufacture, and growing British colonial intrusion all caused social upheaval. Into this context came Christian evangelists, many of them African converts, introducing Christianity throughout the region. One of the most prominent of these figures was Samuel Ajayi (or Adjai) Crowther, a former slave of Yoruba origin who dedicated much of his life to bringing the gospel to his fellow Africans. The successful outcome of his evangelizing endeavors was not a foregone conclusion, for throughout most of his ministry, "African traditional religion and Islam were in a position of social and political

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strength compared to Christianity.”¹ In this paper, I examine Crowther’s interreligious encounters to see how he approached Islam and traditional religion,² paying particular attention to the terms he uses to describe them and the analytical frameworks he draws upon to give them meaning. Overall, his assessment of both Islam and traditional religion is negative, especially compared with the superiority he accords Christianity, yet Crowther treats traditional religion differently from the way he treats Islam. I explore these differences and the factors that produce them, with particular attention to how the past histories of and nineteenth-century expectations about Christianity’s engagement with each religion contribute to the disparities.

Crowther’s Life and Ministry in Western Africa

Born around 1807 in the Yoruba town of Osugun, Crowther was captured and enslaved by a Muslim raiding party in 1821.³ He was sold to five or six different African masters before Portuguese traders purchased him and placed him on a slave ship to cross the Atlantic. His horror at the idea of being sold to the Portuguese was so great that he tried on several occasions to commit suicide. In 1822 his prospects changed unexpectedly when the British vessel *Myrmidon* intercepted his slave ship, liberated him and his fellow slaves, and brought them to the recently established colony of Sierra Leone. Crowther reports that in six months he learned to read the New Testament, and that he became “convinced that [he] was a sinner, and desired to obtain pardon through Jesus Christ.”⁴ On December 11, 1825, the Reverend

¹ Peter Rutherford McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa: Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s Attitude to African Traditional Religion and Islam*, Leicester Studies in Religion (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1976), 13. See also Peter Rutherford McKenzie, *Hail Orisha! A Phenomenology of a West African Religion in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 12–15.

² For the sake of simplicity, throughout this paper I use “traditional religion” as an umbrella term to cover a range of different African religious practices, including such things as Ifa divination and orisha devotion.

³ For background on Crowther’s life, see Andrew F. Walls, “The Legacy of Samuel Ajayi Crowther,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 1 (1992): 15–21; Samuel Crowther and James Frederick Schön, *Journals of the Rev. James Frederick Schön and Mr. Samuel Crowther, who, with the Sanction of Her Majesty’s Government, Accompanied the Expedition up the Niger* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1842), 371–385; and Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work*, vol. 1 (London: Church Missionary Society, 1899), 449–458.

⁴ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 384.

John Raban baptized him. Crowther continued pursuing his education, becoming one of the first students at Fourah Bay College, established in Sierra Leone in 1827.

In 1841 he participated in the first Niger Expedition, mounted with the goal of eradicating the slave trade through promoting “legitimate commerce” along the Niger River. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) sent Crowther and James Frederick Schön, a veteran European missionary, along with the expedition to explore the possibility of establishing mission stations to reach the people along the river.⁵ Malaria ravaged the expedition; nearly all of its European members became ill, and many of them died. Most considered the expedition a grand disappointment, but the CMS drew valuable lessons from even these failures. Most notably, the experience helped convince the CMS of the important role Africans could play in the evangelization of Africa. As Eugene Stock observes in his *History of the Church Missionary Society*, “although it was easy to appoint men to West Africa, it was not so easy to get them there.”⁶ Once there, everything from the climate to local languages presented additional difficulties for their ministry. The CMS realized that African agents familiar with the region had the potential to succeed where European missionaries would fail.

Impressed with Crowther’s conduct on the Niger Expedition, the CMS brought him to England for additional education, and on June 11, 1843, he was ordained for ministry in the Anglican Church. Returning to Sierra Leone later that year, he began ministering to his fellow liberated slaves. He preached his first sermon there in English, but soon he held another service in the Yoruba language. Stock notes that this was the “first Christian service ever held in Africa in the Yoruba tongue.”⁷ Crowther continued holding Yoruba services, which the congregation received enthusiastically: at the second service “at

⁵ On the anti-slavery, commercial, and evangelizing aims of the Niger Expedition and Crowther’s role in it, see Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, i–xxii; and Lamin Sanneh, “The CMS and the African Transformation: Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Opening of Nigeria,” in Kevin Ward and Brian Stanley, ed., *The Church Missionary Society and World Christianity, 1799–1999* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 173–197.

⁶ Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 157.

⁷ Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 458.

the conclusion of the blessing, the whole church rang with *Ki oh sheh*, so be it, so let it be.”⁸

In 1854 and 1857 he reprised his role on the Niger Expedition, accompanying two more exploratory voyages along the Niger River. In the course of the third Niger Expedition, he began the work of formally planting stations for the Niger Mission. Crowther and his Niger Mission became a “testing ground” for Henry Venn’s theories about the development of self-sustaining, self-governing, and self-propagating national churches through the agency of indigenous Christians.⁹ Of course, Crowther had his own ideas about the role of African agents as missionaries to Africa, and his journals and letters contain persuasive arguments in favor of his views.¹⁰ When fellow African evangelist John Taylor became pastor at Onitsha, the first station of the Niger Mission, Crowther rejoiced that Taylor would have the opportunity to work toward a rich harvest among “the people of his fatherland,” and he prayed, “May this be the beginning of a rapid overspread of Christianity in the countries on the banks of the Niger, and in the heart of Africa, through native agents!”¹¹ Later ordained bishop of the Niger region—the first African bishop in the Anglican Church—Crowther stood at the helm of a mission that until the late 1870s remained “an initiative by Africans, for Africans, among Africans.”¹²

Crowther’s ministry involved almost constant interreligious encounters. His approach toward Islam and traditional religion is evident in his published letters, journals, and treatises as well as in his unpublished work preserved in the Church Missionary Society archives.

⁸ CMS archives, CA1/O79/11, extract of journals, quarter ending March 25, 1844, 3.

⁹ John Loiello, “Bishop in Two Worlds: Samuel Ajayi Crowther (c. 1806–1891),” in Elizabeth Isichei, ed., *Varieties of Christian Experience in Nigeria* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 37. For more on Venn, see Peter Williams, “The Church Missionary Society and the Indigenous Church in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: The Defense and Destruction of the Venn Ideals,” in Dana L. Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 86–113.

¹⁰ For example, see his letter to Venn in the Preface of Samuel Crowther, *Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers, Undertaken by MacGregor Laird, Esq. in Connection with the British Government, in 1854* (London: Church Missionary House, 1855), xiii–xviii.

¹¹ Samuel Crowther and John C. Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger* (London: Church Missionary House, 1859), 36.

¹² McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 72.

In many cases, his attitudes are visible in formulaic descriptions of encounters between Crowther and one or more Muslims or practitioners of traditional religion, in which discussion ensues about the doctrines, practices, or artifacts of at least one of the religions. Usually, these stories conclude either with Crowther's interlocutors acknowledging the superiority of the Christian religion or with Crowther expressing sadness and frustration at their hardness of heart and the folly of their worship. Equally instructive, though, are Crowther's less formal observations and reactions during the course of his ministry and explorations. Ranging from offhand comments about individuals standing on the banks of the Niger as his steamboat passes by to detailed descriptions of the practices of the people he encountered, these indicate his interest in understanding other religions and help provide a more complete picture of what he thought about their role in the West African religious scene.

Nevertheless, caution is necessary in using these sources.¹³ Crowther is first and foremost a missionary, not an anthropologist or a scholar of religion, and his primary goal is to bring the light of the gospel to his fellow Africans. As such, his convictions and ideological biases lie close to the surface, inseparable from his descriptions of the religious expressions he encounters. While this does not pose as much of a problem for understanding Crowther's attitudes to other religions as it would, say, for attempting to use his accounts to describe Islamic or traditional worship in nineteenth-century Nigeria, challenges remain. In particular, determining the degree to which his writings accurately reflect his own attitudes can prove difficult. For Crowther composed his accounts aware that he had an audience: his missionary peers, his superiors in the CMS, and ultimately a wider readership of those who followed CMS activities by means of the society's publications. A desire to conform to prevailing assumptions about and attitudes toward non-Christian religions may color his attitudes and descriptions at points. With his published

¹³ For the methodological challenges of using the CMS archives to understand West African religion, see J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2000), chap. 1; McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 95; and McKenzie, *Hail Orisha!*, chap. 1 and Appendix. Adam Jones also reflects on working with materials in missionary archives in general and the CMS archives in particular in "Sources in Mission Archives," in Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame, ed., *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 39–46.

work, there is the added complication that the CMS often exercised a heavy editorial hand before publishing missionaries' accounts for general consumption.¹⁴ The Preface to Crowther and Taylor's journals from the third Niger Expedition indicates that the original documents "have received a few grammatical corrections."¹⁵ Possibly, some changes are more substantial than the editors would lead us to believe. For the purposes of this paper, though, I generally assume that Crowther's words at least closely reflect his own viewpoint. Certain nineteenth-century assumptions shape Crowther's thought and writing, but he did not always accept the assumptions and mission strategies of his European interlocutors without question or modification. Moreover, there is no marked difference between the kind of language Crowther uses to describe Islam and traditional religion in his published materials compared with the original documents in the CMS archives.

Vocabulary Describing Islam and Traditional Religion

Bearing these methodological cautions in mind, the picture that emerges from Crowther's writings is complex. At first glance, the majority of terms Crowther uses to describe Islam, traditional religion, and their adherents are negative. Some he applies solely to traditional religion. For example, he reserves "heathenism" to describe many different forms of traditional religion, but never applies "heathen" to Islam.¹⁶ Similarly, he often refers to traditional religion as "fetishism" and the objects of its worship as "fetishes." At the town of Angiama, he and his companions happened upon a "fetish-house." A priest, "expecting that we should make some presents to the gods," followed them inside. Instead they "spoke a few words on the folly of idolatrous worship."¹⁷ Regrettably, Crowther neglects to inform us of how the man responded to their remonstrations.

Sometimes Crowther uses "darkness" to describe the incidence and results of traditional religious practices. Recounting an instance

¹⁴ Jones, "Sources in Mission Archives," 43; McKenzie, *Hail Orisha!*, 560.

¹⁵ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, vi.

¹⁶ See, for example, his description of "heathenish practices" in Crowther, *Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers*, xvii. In Crowther's *Experiences with Heathens and Mohammedans in West Africa* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1892), "heathen" becomes the primary way he refers to traditional religion.

¹⁷ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 10. See also Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 309.

of human sacrifice he was unable to prevent, he interprets it as proof of Africa's need for help, "for these dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty."¹⁸ Such practices will only change if Africa is "supplied with the light of the gospel."¹⁹ Likely, European conceptions of Africa as the "dark continent" shaped these descriptions. For example, Eugene Stock characterizes Africa as a "dark" place—although less dark than it had been a century before—because of its moral desolation, the scourge of the slave trade, and the degree to which it remained obscure and unknown to European explorations.²⁰

Crowther also frames traditional religion in terms of "idolatry." In his early years, Crowther considered most of the Yoruba in Sierra Leone "gross idolaters," for while they acknowledged the "worship of the only true God" they also worshipped lesser deities, whom they believed God created for their benefit. Crowther rejects this explanation, instead denouncing the lesser deities as "devices of Satan" designed to keep the Yoruba apart from God.²¹ Similarly, when a tornado hit Abeokuta in 1847 and the devotees of Ẓango went out into the storm to appease their deity, Crowther tried to enlighten them about the important difference between worshipping the elements and the God who created them.²² Here, Crowther joined his fellow missionaries in a struggle to define divine agency and appropriate mediation between humanity and God.²³ This was a task made more complex by the fact that Christian missionaries engaged in it in competition with Islam, for Muslim *alufas* (Muslim clerics) likewise strove to present Muhammad as a more appropriate mediator than the *oriṣas* of the Yoruba. Over against both traditional religion and Islam, Christian missionaries presented Jesus as the only adequate mediator.²⁴

Another term Crowther applies especially to traditional religion is "superstition." On the first Niger Expedition, he records the actions of an old woman on the bank of the river, watching their ship pass and

¹⁸ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 51.

¹⁹ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 4.

²⁰ Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 45–46.

²¹ CMS, CA1/079/11, extracts of journals, quarter ending March 25, 1844, 3.

²² McKenzie, *Inter-Religious Encounters in West Africa*, 23.

²³ See, for example, Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 181–183.

²⁴ This competition over defining mediation provides the context for Crowther's occasional invective against Roman Catholic missionary activity in West Africa. Faced with the Muslim accusation that Christians worshipped both Jesus and Mary as gods, he feared that Catholics, with "their erroneous doctrine of Mariolatry," would simply confirm Muslims' worst suspicions (Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 30).

“bowing down to the ground, kissing her hands, and then looking up with great seriousness, as if she was asking for some protection from the gods. Whether she was performing this act of worship to the figure in the front of the ship, or to the steamer itself, was not certain: however, it sufficiently shows into what degree of superstition this people are sunk.”²⁵ Similarly, when the inhabitants of a neighboring village carry away the bell from a ruined church at Igbebe, Crowther wryly notes that “fowls were superstitiously sacrificed to it, to propitiate it.”²⁶ Occasionally, he calls Muslims superstitious as well: the Muslims he encounters in Egga have a “superstitious regard” for the Qur’an, and he removes a charm from the neck of one of his Muslim students in Sierra Leone because “such superstition was not countenanced in any Christian school.”²⁷ Again, Crowther here participates in a broader nineteenth-century tendency to characterize non-Christian religions as superstition; however, compared with other CMS missionaries Crowther uses the term sparingly. For example, Frederick Schön refers to “superstition” frequently in his journal from the first Niger Expedition, such that it becomes his primary descriptor for African religious beliefs and practices.²⁸ For Crowther, on the other hand, this term is merely one among several.

Crowther also dismisses both religions as “delusion.” He calls the ablutions of Muslims prior to prayer a “deluded act of holiness”; scandalized that men and women performed their ablutions together, he labels them “promiscuous” as well.²⁹ Reflecting on his own experiences, he recalls that as a boy an Ifa *babalawo* (diviner) had taken an interest in him, and he probably would have become one himself had he not been enslaved. He gives thanks that by “God’s grace” he was “snatched away from the practice of this delusion.”³⁰ In each case, he portrays non-Christian religious practices as distracting the believer from authentic worship of God.

Crowther applies a few choice terms especially to Islam. For example, he often associates Islam with ignorance, lamenting the

²⁵ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 285.

²⁶ CMS, CA3/04A-04B/734, journal of a visit to the Niger Mission, July–September 1866, 5.

²⁷ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 319; Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 7.

²⁸ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 1–254.

²⁹ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 228.

³⁰ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 6.

difficulty of convincing “ignorant bigoted Mohammedans” through reasoned argument, for they are “uneducated people.”³¹ According to Crowther, ignorance makes the devotion of most Muslim converts shallow and worth little: they learn to repeat only a few Arabic prayers or passages of the Qur’an by rote, and they rely on clerics to explain the meanings of these phrases and interpret Islam for them.³² Crowther notes with disapproval, though, that often the clerics are nearly as ignorant as their followers. Among the Igala Muslims, the clerics are “unlettered” and know only a “few sentences of the Koran” alongside their “imperfect knowledge of the great Prophet’s doctrines.”³³ Similarly, Crowther showed a Muslim *mallam* (religious scholar) Faris El Shidiac’s *Arabic Grammar*; the man could pronounce the Arabic words but not produce their meaning. Crowther, using the English translations, fascinated the *mallam* by giving him the meanings in the local Nupe language.³⁴

Sometimes, Crowther goes a step further and accuses Muslim clerics of deceit. He rails against the “ignorant followers of Mohamed” who engage in “deception” by convincing “the ignorant heathen” that Arabic characters are “more holy than any others in the world.”³⁵ Similarly, concerned that a Muslim interpreter had misrepresented the Niger Mission’s intentions to the people they encountered, he associates the man’s flawed character with Islam: “As he is a Mahomedan, and his character is somewhat doubtful, I was sorry that I brought him with me.”³⁶ Probably, his conviction that Muhammad himself was a “great imposter of mankind”³⁷ and “false prophet”³⁸ only encouraged this conception of Muslims as deceptive.

Categories for Understanding Islam and Traditional Religion

Moving beyond the vocabulary Crowther used to describe Islam and traditional religion to the theoretical frameworks through which

³¹ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 9.

³² Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 22, 28.

³³ Samuel Crowther, *The River Niger: A Paper Read Before the Royal Geographical Society 11 June, 1877*. Quoted in McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 69.

³⁴ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 166.

³⁵ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 56.

³⁶ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 322–323.

³⁷ CMS, CA2/031/116, journal, quarter ending March 25, 1853, 3.

³⁸ CMS, CA2/031/121, journal, quarter ending March 25, 1855, 9.

he viewed them provides a fuller picture of his approach. Despite the unflattering language he often deployed, the concepts and categories he drew on to assess Islam and traditional religion suggest that his attitudes toward them were more complex—and often less negative—than they might appear at first glance.

One prominent source for Crowther's reflections on other religions is the Bible, which provided several different lenses through which he viewed them and understood his own role in relation to them. For example, drawing on Joshua 14:12, he compares the "cities great and fenced" with the "strongholds of Mohammedanism and heathenism," and he prays that for the sake of the mission he will be able to conquer these strongholds.³⁹ Beyond this, Crowther associates few biblical passages directly with Islam. In the context of his conversations with Muslims, this makes sense, for he repeatedly struggled to impress upon Muslims that the Bible does not refer to Islam and Muhammad. Once, a group of Muslims visited him at Zogoshi, saying:

"We understand that the Anasaras [Christians] do not like Mohammed's name to appear in their book, as the names of Abraham, Moses, David, &c." I replied, that Mohammed not having been born till six hundred years after Christ, and after the close of the Anasaras' Bible . . . could not be mentioned there.⁴⁰

For Crowther, Islam's lack of biblical connections was a sign of Christianity's superior claim to truth. Similarly, he presents the greater antiquity of Christian claims as further proof of their superiority, for example pointing out that Gabriel's naming of Jesus as God's son in Luke 1:28–35 came long before Muhammad's time.⁴¹ Drawing on Muslims' respect for Gabriel, Crowther argues that they should not

³⁹ Samuel Crowther, Letter from February 26, 1883. Quoted in McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 78.

⁴⁰ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 161. See also Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 19–20.

⁴¹ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 17–18. In fact, most of the biblical passages Crowther quotes to Muslims are aimed at convincing them that Jesus is the Son of God. The second half of this particular text (pages 32–58) consists primarily of a compilation of biblical passages designed to help young evangelists prove Jesus' sonship, particularly to a Muslim audience. Crowther argues that the consensus of numerous biblical figures—including the prophets, the angels, Jesus himself (both before and after the resurrection), John the Baptist, Nathaniel, the Apostles, and Satan—indicates that Jesus is the Son of God.

doubt the testimony of God's faithful messenger as recorded in the gospels. Gabriel cannot have brought two such opposed messages—the New Testament witness that Jesus is the Son of God and the Qur'anic denial of it—so Crowther's Muslim interlocutors ought to believe the earlier testimony recorded in the Bible.

Crowther was more generous in viewing traditional religion through the lens of biblical history, even if these connections still often cast traditional religion in a rather unflattering light. In some cases, he links traditional religion with Baal worship by characterizing its priests as Ahabs and its priestesses as Jezebels who turn their husbands against Christianity.⁴² He also recommends Isaiah's "exposure of the folly of image-worship" (Isaiah 44:8–20) as a useful model for condemning idolatrous worship, and he likens practitioners of traditional religion to those in Romans 1:22–25 who "worshipped and served the creature more than the creator."⁴³ More charitably, he portrays liberated Africans playing the role of Moses speaking to his Midianite father-in-law, Hobab, approaching their countrymen with the invitation, "Come with us, for the Lord has promised good to Israel" (Numbers 10:29).⁴⁴ Crowther's use of this passage indicates that he perceived Africans as potential recipients of the blessings intended for God's people. Moreover, both this and the Isaiah passage cast the Christian evangelist as an individual sent by God to lead God's people.

Crowther included traditional religion within the ambit of salvation history more directly when he highlighted the similarities between it and ancient Hebrew religion. For example, struck by the resemblances between African and Levitical animal sacrifices, he theorizes that the African institution had descended by "imitation" from the "Levitical institution."⁴⁵ With this line of reasoning, Crowther finds himself in good company, for other missionaries, African and European alike, also speculated about the possible connections between traditional religion and the religious practices of the Israelites. For example, parallels between biblical and African rituals encouraged Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba pastor and historian, to conjecture that Yoruba customs descended from those of Israel by way of the

⁴² See McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 63, note 54.

⁴³ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 15; CMS, CA3/04A-04B/750, journal, report of Bonny Mission, May 5, 1866, 1866, 5.

⁴⁴ Crowther, *Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers*, xviii.

⁴⁵ Samuel Crowther, *A Charge Delivered on the Banks of the River Niger in West Africa* (London: Seeley, Jackson, & Halliday, 1866), 20.

Copts in Upper Egypt. Driving this tendency was a desire to make “Christianity a precedent in the Yorubas’ own history,” so that “conversion was not a break but a recovery.”⁴⁶

Even when granted a connection to Christian salvation history, traditional religion simply could not compare with Christianity or even Islam in terms of its degree of sophistication. Crowther perceived a qualitative difference between traditional religion and the two monotheistic religions rooted especially in the respective roles that scripture played in each religion. In one place, he goes so far as to expand his analysis to include a comparison with Hinduism: the people he encounters who worship traditional deities have “nothing . . . like the Vedas of the Hindoos, from which to argue for the antiquity of their mythology, and nothing like the Koran of the Mohammedans to stiffen them in arguing for the superiority of the religion of Mohammed to that of Christ, [so they] receive the translated portions of the Bible . . . with the simplicity of children.”⁴⁷ Similarly, he argues that because the “idolaters” have “nothing to support their religion, beyond that it was the custom of their forefathers,” they are more receptive to the truth of the gospel than Muslims.⁴⁸ Believing that the Qur’an is God’s revealed word, Muslims reject important Christian teachings that the Qur’an appears to deny, especially the belief in the Trinity and in Jesus as God’s Son. Crowther laments the difficulty this adds to the task of helping Muslims recognize the truth of and adhere to the teachings of the Christian faith, but he also accords Islam a greater measure of respect as an opponent than he does traditional religion. For Crowther, having a scripture in which to root religious claims made a religion more substantial and venerable. Facing Islam, the Christian evangelist needed therefore to reckon with both the contents of the Qur’an and the very fact of its existence.

Crowther also exhibited different attitudes toward Islam and traditional religion when he recognized the former’s more global scope. Arguing for the superiority of the Christian religion before the Muslim Emir of Ilorin, he considers mentioning the activity of Christian missionaries elsewhere in the Muslim world relevant to his evangelistic

⁴⁶ J. D. Y. Peel, “The Pastor and the *Babalawo*: The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland,” *Africa* 60, no. 3 (1990): 362. See also Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 184.

⁴⁷ Quoted in McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 49.

⁴⁸ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 16.

message: "I told them [the Emir and his court] that Christian missionaries are now in Stamboul (Constantinople), and in Mizra (Egypt), and Smyrna, where the truths of Christianity are being examined and inquired into by many Mussulmans, who desire to know them."⁴⁹ The implication is that if their coreligionists (in the respected Muslim heartland, no less) are eager to learn about Christianity and give careful consideration to its claims, these Muslims ought to do the same. By comparison, Crowther treated the traditional religions of Africans as more local phenomena. Taken together with the important function he accords scripture, the weight he placed on geographic spread suggests that he at least implicitly distinguished between Islam as a "world religion" and traditional religion, relegating the latter to the position of parochial "fetishism."

Ultimately, Islam's sophistication and global reach led Crowther to view Islam in a slightly more positive light than he did traditional religion. While he sharply criticizes Islam, particularly for the perceived ignorance and deceit associated with it, he claims that it is superior to traditional religion. He cites an awareness that "Mohammedanism . . . is superior to the religion of the heathens" as the reason many heathens have embraced Islam.⁵⁰ In this he reflects contemporaneous notions about Islam occupying a higher place in a hierarchy of religions than traditional religion due to its "monotheism, its literacy, and the long history of its bureaucratic and administrative capabilities."⁵¹ Since Islam was often thought to represent a more advanced stage of religious development, some believed that it could serve as a potential aid to the spread of Christianity because it prepared Africans to receive Christianity, the pinnacle of human development and religious truth. In 1858, Crowther's son, Samuel Crowther, Jr., authored a tract on Christianity, Islam, and traditional religion illustrated by a series of three sketches echoing this developmental schema. The first depicts a devotee of Şango in a rough hut surrounded by a sacrificial

⁴⁹ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 20. For a fuller analysis of Crowther's noteworthy dialogue with the Emir and its significance in the history of Christian engagement with Islam, see Andrew Walls, "Africa as the Theatre of Christian Engagement with Islam in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 29, no. 2 (May 1999): 162–164.

⁵⁰ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 171.

⁵¹ F. J. Kolapo, "Making Favorable Impressions': Bishop Crowther's C.M.S. Niger Mission in Jihadist Nupe Emirate, 1859–1879," in Chima J. Korie and G. Ugo Nwokeji, ed., *Religion, History, and Politics in Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Ogbu U. Kalu* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005), 38.

goat and the instruments of Ifa divination. The second depicts a Muslim under a tree praying in public with an audience. The final image shows Christians praying piously within the privacy of a neat church building.⁵²

Modes of Engagement with Islam and Traditional Religion

Although Crowther accorded Islam superiority over traditional religion, his much more thorough investigations of traditional religion offset this. To appreciate Crowther's attitude toward non-Christian religions fully, we must look beyond the words he used to describe them and the analytical frameworks in which he situated them and also examine where he devoted the bulk of his energy. His journals are replete with detailed information about traditional religious beliefs and practices. Sometimes this comes in the form of passing references to things that appealed to his curiosity as he went about his daily business. For instance, describing a party of guards from the town of Wappa, Crowther notes that "they had on a great number of charms and greegrees about their hair, necks, wrists, and waists, decorated with beads and many cowries."⁵³ In other cases Crowther provides extended descriptions. In his journals, he devotes several pages to a detailed survey of Yoruba funeral customs.⁵⁴ Similarly, he relates how the Nupe people "worship the *manes* of the dead, the spirits of whom are personified under a mask," and he compares the Nupe rituals with similar ones he knows among the Yoruba: "The masquerader, of the Gunuko of the Nupe, is of an enormous height, from twelve to fifteen feet, raised by means of light bamboo poles, whereas that of the Yoruba is about the ordinary height of the masquerader. These dance from village to village and receive cowries."⁵⁵ Turning to two statues belonging to the people at Jeba, he dons the hat of a scholar in earnest. Learning that the figures had been brought there long ago by a party of Yorubas who had long since intermarried with the Nupe people, he speculates that "this may account in part for the necessity of the priest of Ketsa [a spirit venerated in the vicinity of Jeba] knowing something of the Yoruba language, to qualify him for his sacred

⁵² Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 88–92.

⁵³ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 289–290.

⁵⁴ CMS, CA1/079/13, journal, extracts from quarter ending September 25, 1844, 6–12.

⁵⁵ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 215.

office.”⁵⁶ Crowther exhibits an interest not only in the religions of the peoples he encountered, but also in the historical development and interrelationship of these religious systems.

Often—but not always—he capped his observations with a judgment about the falsity or folly of the scene just described. He was not shy about unleashing caustic invective. When celebrating the Sabbath with the rest of the crew on the first Niger Expedition, he laments:

Not more than two furlongs from us are a people who know no heaven, fear no hell, and who are *strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world*. How *inexcusable art thou, O man*, who are living in a place where the Gospel of Christ is preached every Sabbath, yet who preferrest to live in darkness, in ignorance of God, of Christ, and of the state of thine own soul, to being made *wise unto salvation* by the saving knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!⁵⁷

But we should not conclude from this polemical language that Crowther did not desire to understand African traditions. As John Loiello points out, Crowther’s “belief in the perfectibility of his fellow Africans” tempers his often “intolerant” remarks.⁵⁸ This is indeed significant, given that Africans’ capacity for material, spiritual, and moral development was a matter of debate at the time.⁵⁹

Crowther’s interest in traditional religion contrasts sharply with his accounts of Islam. Rather than carefully report on the Islamic devotion he witnesses around him, he tended instead to rely upon the stereotypical ideas about Islam in vogue among his fellow Christian missionaries. For instance, Crowther describes Islam as a “poisonous doctrine” which “makes man dependent upon his own merits for salvation.”⁶⁰ Often, even these kinds of comments are absent and Crowther simply applies the label “Mohammedan” to his interlocutors

⁵⁶ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 216. See page 113 for his description of the figures at Jeba.

⁵⁷ Crowther and Schön, *Expedition up the Niger*, 277.

⁵⁸ Loiello, “Bishop in Two Worlds,” 48.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Stock’s account of the debates in England about the education of Africans (Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 336–337). Fourah Bay College was founded by those convinced that “the African was quite able, if only he had equal advantages, to hold his own with the European.”

⁶⁰ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 6.

without further elaboration, as if this alone already tells us all we could wish to know about them.

One notable exception to this trend appears toward the end of Crowther's journal from the third Niger Expedition. Here, he exhibits a great deal more interest in Islam while assessing the Nupe religious context and establishing footholds along the Upper Niger for his mission. In this setting, he recounts the celebrations at the end of the Ramadan fast, noting that he received good treatment despite the fact that he was the only Christian present.⁶¹ He catalogues the Muslim folklore he learns there; many of the stories are familiar from Muslim tradition, but often they have some distinctive African elements added to them.⁶² He also records various Muslim teachings, especially concerning punishment and reward in the afterlife. He ends his account with an appeal to the CMS Parent Committee for a moderate missionary approach in Muslim lands, one that avoids insulting Muslims and instead fosters respect and gradual acceptance of Christian ideas.⁶³

This exception aside, Crowther's approaches to traditional religion and Islam differ markedly: his descriptions of traditional religion exhibit much greater depth than his accounts of Islam. It is tempting to explain the discrepancy between Crowther's interest in traditional religion and Islam in terms of his greater exposure to, and hence greater opportunity to observe, traditional religion. But even when traveling and ministering in areas dominated by traditional religion, Islam was often close at hand as well. For instance, throughout the third Niger Expedition, he usually had at least one Muslim interpreter by his side. These men seemingly interested him primarily for their linguistic expertise, though, and his journals rarely portray him seeking them out for information about their own religion. One morning, he awakened to the sound of the Muslim call to prayer, but he did not try to observe and comment on this worship even when his interpreters joined it. Instead, he stayed in his hut with the other Christians, and they prayed together as soon as there was enough light to read.⁶⁴ Elsewhere, he expresses concern to model proper Christian worship to both Muslims and practitioners of traditional religion, and likely a

⁶¹ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 168–170.

⁶² Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 229–236.

⁶³ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 237–239.

⁶⁴ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 83.

similar motive operated here.⁶⁵ Still, this differs from his interest in almost anything pertaining to traditional religion.

More plausible explanations lie in the history of Christianity's engagement with Islam and traditional religion and Crowther's own perceptions of the role Christianity ought to play in the West African religious scene. History looms especially large for Islam in this regard. Christians approached Muslims in West Africa with knowledge gained through over a millennium of experience interacting with Islam—often in situations of competition or conflict. This meant that Christian missionaries—Crowther included—tended to import previous assumptions and rhetoric about Islam into this new situation, often in unhelpful ways. In light of this, Crowther likely assumed that he, or his intended readers, already knew enough about Islam.

Another important aspect of the dynamic between Muslims and Christians in West Africa is the fact that they arrived on the scene as religious rivals competing for converts. Crowther, reflecting on the greater success Muslims appeared to have in gaining converts, dismisses Muslims as “pernicious weeds [which] grow more rapidly than good seeds.”⁶⁶ He attributes their success to Islam's permissiveness of things like polygamy, the use of charms, and works of merit like daily prayer and ritual ablutions.⁶⁷ In this situation of competition, missionaries like Crowther had incentive to caricature their opponents, for doing so helped to explain the apparent successes of Islam in terms of perceived immoral habits or tactics and to show their readers the importance of devoting resources to evangelizing endeavors in that region.

Yet even here the picture is complex, for at times Muslims and Christians recognized each other as allies in a common cause. Once after Crowther finished preaching, two Muslims approached him; one informed him that “they [the Muslims] prayed for God's blessing upon us [the Christian missionaries] because we do so much good in this country; that they used to tell the people before we came . . . that the worship of idols was all good for nothing but the people would not hear them, but since we came, we have greatly supported

⁶⁵ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 171–172.

⁶⁶ CMS, CA2/031/103, journal, quarter ending September 25, 1848, 8.

⁶⁷ McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 85–86. See also Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 23.

them on this point.”⁶⁸ In this case, healthy skepticism is advisable, for self-congratulation may have colored Crowther’s account. Less suspect, though, are Crowther’s own affirmations of the good Islam accomplished in helping abolish idol worship and human sacrifice.⁶⁹ In important respects, Crowther departed from the often polemical, confrontational approach of his European peers ministering in Africa and Asia at the time. Well aware that his ability to preach and establish mission stations in some areas depended on the good favor of Muslim officials like the Emir of Ilorin, he sought to cultivate cordial relations with them. Especially in the latter portion of his career, rather than leading with denunciations of the Qur’an’s revelatory status or of the Prophet Muhammad’s character, Crowther sought to build his proclamation on common Christian and Muslim commitments to monotheism and shared reverence for figures like Jesus, Mary, and Gabriel. These characteristics have led Andrew Walls to see Crowther pioneering a distinctive “African Christian approach to Islam,” one firmly biblicist in character and buoyed with the confidence that the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the power of vernacular preaching could transform the hearts and lives of even the most stubborn Muslim audience.⁷⁰

On the side of traditional religion, Loiello’s observation that Crowther believed in the “perfectibility” of Africans holds another key to understanding the discrepancy between the way Crowther reports on traditional religion and Islam. A group of Šango’s devotees confronted Crowther with the argument that he should not obstruct their worship because “the gods against whom I spoke were the gods of my forefathers.”⁷¹ Crowther rejects the idea that “having

⁶⁸ CMS, CA2/031/103, journal, quarter ending September 25, 1848, 9.

⁶⁹ McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 70. Missionaries like Crowther rarely, if ever, acknowledged the full extent of the debt they owed Islam. Islam had been present in many of the areas Crowther evangelized for a century or more, and it had arrived in northern Nigeria as early as the eleventh century. Muslims introduced concepts—and the vocabulary to express them—like heaven, hell, peace, and mercy to the inhabitants of the region, paving the way for the preaching and translation projects of Christian missionaries (Peel, *Religious Encounter*, 175, 188, 195–197). On the other hand, encounters with Islam also prepared adherents of traditional religion to answer the charges made against them by members of monotheistic religions. For example, Peel argues that Ifa evolved as a reconciling cult that succeeded in “recasting the orisha system to meet some of the more trenchant Muslim criticisms of it” (*Religious Encounter*, 121; see also “Pastor and the *Babalawo*”).

⁷⁰ Walls, “Africa as the Theatre of Christian Engagement with Islam,” 163.

⁷¹ Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 11.

received the same from their forefathers” is an acceptable reason for persevering in idolatrous worship, but neither does he encourage a wholesale rejection of tradition.⁷² For Crowther maintains that Christianity’s role is to perfect rather than destroy local traditions. Speaking of both Islam and traditional religion, Crowther declares that “their false doctrines have to be exposed, their errors corrected, and they . . . led and directed to Him who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’”⁷³ In an even more direct statement, he asserts that “Christianity does not undertake to destroy national assimilation; where there are any degrading and superstitious defects it corrects them; where they are connected with politics, such corrections should be introduced with due caution.”⁷⁴ Even explicitly religious symbols and practices have value. Crowther argues that rather than prejudicing themselves against “native usages,” missionaries should carefully observe African religious terminology and rituals, for they can fruitfully draw on these to express the Christian message. He maintains that African “religious terms and ceremonies should be carefully observed, [for] the wrong use made of such terms does not depreciate their real value, but render[s] them more valid when we adopt them in expressing scriptural terms in their right senses . . . though they have been misapplied for want of better knowledge.”⁷⁵ Similarly, as bishop he encouraged those who worked under him to be “faithful in reproving ungodliness and sin, but with mingled *feelings* of sympathy, a *desire* to *correct* and *save*.”⁷⁶ He was convinced that missionaries must express the new faith with sensitivity to the traditions of the Africans around them and moreover that Christianity comes to abolish only a select group of those traditions: those in conflict with the gospel. Crowther did not advocate eradicating everything associated with traditional religion; rather, he wanted to purify it and use some of its symbols and practices to present Christianity to his African audience.

In Crowther’s opinions about the relationship between Christianity and African tradition, we can see the outlines of a nascent concept of culture emerging. He wanted to safeguard “national assimilation”

⁷² Crowther, *Experiences with Heathens*, 10.

⁷³ Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger*, 236.

⁷⁴ CMS, CA3/04/322, Charge Delivered at Lokoja at the Confluence, September 13, 1869, 12.

⁷⁵ Charge Delivered at Lokoja at the Confluence, 13.

⁷⁶ Samuel Crowther, Sermon Preached at the Ordination Held in St. George’s Cathedral Church, November 12, 1882. Quoted in Loiello, “Bishop in Two Worlds,” 46.

and he especially cautioned against Christianity too hastily “correcting” traditions pertaining to the political life of the people. He implied that there exists a sphere of life central to the identity of the people to whom he ministered that was not identical with the religious sphere legitimately occupied by Christianity. This distinction is evident in a letter to Venn arguing in favor of using liberated Africans and their children from Sierra Leone to evangelize the Africans living along the Niger. Despite their changes in religious status and level of education, he still perceived them as having a commonality with their “heathen countrymen” that would enable them to minister to those back in their “fatherland” more effectively than Europeans or Africans from other regions could.⁷⁷ Similarly, in 1868 when converts at mission stations near Onitsha faced persecution from adherents of traditional religion, Onitsha’s leaders instructed Crowther to order the converts to participate in traditional social customs and religious rites alongside attending Christian worship services. In response, Crowther conceded the importance of Christians participating in most social customs and avoiding unnecessary disruption of the fabric of social life, but he refused to encourage Christians to engage in idolatrous worship.⁷⁸ Effectively, he asserted that Christians remain members of their community after conversion, and that as such they should continue to participate in the community’s social life. Meanwhile, he identified a distinct set of religious rites in which believers could not participate without compromising the Christian gospel.

Conclusions

Crowther’s responses to traditional religion and Islam vary subtly according to his situation and the audience he addressed. On the whole, despite the predominantly negative vocabulary Crowther applied to both traditional religion and Islam, he did not portray either as entirely lacking merit. He occasionally included traditional religion within Christian salvation history as an offshoot of Israelite religion, and he exhibited a great deal of curiosity about all aspects of its belief and practice. His approach reflects a commitment to preserving the cultural heritage of the people to whom he ministered. While he carefully excluded Islam, on the other hand, from biblical history, he

⁷⁷ Crowther, *Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers*, xvii.

⁷⁸ McKenzie, *Inter-religious Encounters in West Africa*, 54–55.

portrayed it in some ways as a religion superior to traditional religion. Due to factors in the history of Christianity's engagement with Islam as well as the practical reality of Islam as a rival missionary religion in West Africa, he often dealt with Islam at a shallow level, with little regard for the specific practices or profession of the Muslims he encountered.

Examining Crowther's engagement with Islam and traditional religion is instructive in the context of the global church today. First, Crowther provides a model for doing inculturation, particularly through his concern to balance fidelity to the gospel with openness to the symbols and practices meaningful in particular contexts. As he matured as a pastor, he developed a cautious respect for African customs, and he advocated for a moderate, gradual evangelistic approach toward both Islam and traditional religion. He practiced careful discernment—rooted in both his engagement with the Christian tradition and his experience ministering in West Africa—concerning the relationship that elements associated with non-Christian religions might have with authentic Christian belief and practice. Second, Crowther's life illuminates the dynamics of interreligious dialogue. Although contemporary theological discourse often conceptualizes interreligious dialogue and Christian proclamation as different or even contrasting activities, Crowther's example reveals the way that the two have often overlapped in Christian missionary practice. In Crowther's work, dialogue and proclamation were deeply interwoven with each other, such that it is impossible to speak of Crowther's interreligious dialogue apart from his efforts to proclaim the gospel. Moreover, Crowther models strategies for balancing interreligious dialogue with vibrant proclamation in a situation of comparative (albeit, in his case, steadily diminishing) political weakness vis-à-vis Islam and traditional religion. Contemporary Christians who live in regions where Christianity is socially or politically marginal—the situation of numerous Christians in parts of Africa and Asia, for instance—could benefit from attending to his successes and failures as he navigated the tensions arising from his bold proclamation and his cautious, sometimes pragmatic, accommodation to local religious and cultural traditions.

Prophecy, Polemics, and Spiritual Exegesis: Interpretive Warrants for Ruptures in American Anglicanism

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Spiritual exegesis of Hebrew Bible texts fuels the divide between two ecclesial instantiations of Anglicanism in the United States. This exegesis, engaged in strikingly similar manners by both organizations, remains bereft of its traditional controls that, if followed, would allow it to more productively shape ecclesial life. A look at four of these controls sets the stage for a detailed analysis of representative texts, which demonstrates how leaders in both organizations fail to properly hold their interpretive strategies accountable to the larger Christian narrative. In conclusion, brief consideration is given to how adherence to these controls could reshape the conflicts at hand by the exegesis of a Hebrew Bible text of liturgical significance to Anglicanism.

From the very beginning of their movement, Christians have assimilated Hebrew scripture through the practice of spiritual exegesis.¹ As John Barton and others note, however, the diversity of spiritual exegesis's interpretive grids can render texts particularly vulnerable to use as ammunition for ecclesial polemics.² So Stephen Fowl also

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¹ For a discussion of how early on in Christianity this approach occurs, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 128–160, as well as John Barton's *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Hans Boersma's introduction to the *Modern Theology* issue devoted to spiritual exegesis, "Heaven on Earth? The Future of Spiritual Interpretation," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (October 2012): 587–596, especially 587–580.

² See Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 107–8, 123–131; see also Barton, *Oracles of God*, 95, 177–178.