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ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEW

Latter-Day Saint Theology of a Material, Embodied Deity *vis-à-vis* Evolutionary Conceptions of Embodiment, Agency, and Matter

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Abstract

Do Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have anything to contribute to theological conversations about the nature of God? The article explores this question through the lens of Latter-day Saint conceptions of matter and agential embodiment that may be useful in generalizing material theologies and provide a resource for other material-based views of deity. The argument will examine the question by first exploring the nature of agency articulated from three perspectives: 1) Process thinking in the life sciences; 2) materialist feminism; and 3) evolutionary biology. The article then suggests that the materialism of Mormonism, while in the first stages of theological engagement, is likely to provide possible dialogues with other religious traditions, looking at mattered and embodied conceptions of deity, including trinitarian ones.

Keywords: Mormonism, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, evolution, agency, feminism, embodiment

Introduction

In this essay I examine whether a material conception of deity has anything to contribute to contemporary debates about imminent, relational, and creative conceptions of humans' place in the universe. In particular, I want to explore whether such views have anything to contribute to theological conversations

about the nature of God *vis-à-vis* current scientific viewpoints. Why science? To rephrase Tertullian's question, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem'? we might echo, 'What has the Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator at CERN or DNA to do with theology'? Sources of God's revelation to humans usually include scripture, specific authoritative figures, and tradition. I would like to include, controversially, that nature itself might be a source of insight about deity – not in the sense of Paley's natural theology, in which the goodness of God can be read off nature's particulars in light of complexity or beauty, but rather in exploring the question whether fundamentals about material relationships, processes, and embodiment might be worth paying attention to on a theological level. This requires a hermeneutics of science in conversation with theology. I acknowledge upfront its problematic challenges. The efforts to allow the conversation between science and religion to be mutually respectful and productively engaged has provoked a number of responses on how to interpret the two ways of knowing in ways that acknowledge the strengths and insights of both.

I will explore Mormonism (more formally known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) as an example of material theology to open the conversation between science and theology because of its metaphysical commitment to materialist conceptions of embodiment, soul, and God. Usually, God is considered the creator of both the laws of the universe and the universe itself, and as such the interface between science and theology places science as the study of what God has chosen to create (recognizing the question of whether he could have chosen a different creation has deep, well-debated roots). Counterintuitively, in Latter-day Saint theology, there are laws and material and souls that are not dependent on God as first cause. God is a contingent being whose existence is conditioned on certain aspects and even norms that instantiate God's existence. For example, the *Book of Mormon* explicitly makes a claim that there are conditions that God must abide by to remain worship worthy. In explaining the role of justice in God's redemption of humanity, a prophet named Alma explains:

> Therefore, according to justice, the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea, this preparatory state; for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice. Now the work of justice could not be destroyed; if

so, *God would cease to be God* (Book of Mormon 2000: Alma 42:13; emphasis added).

This theology differs from the perspective of many standard creedal Christian views. Its onto-commitments arise as part of Mormonism's materialism and deserve some reflection and consideration in light of scientific claims. Moreover, it might have implications and resources that other materialist conceptions of the divine might find useful.

Mormonism holds that matter's ability to form relationships with other instances and configurations of matter are fundamental to ontological commitments of which both humans and God partake. The relational abilities of matter, and whatever laws instantiate them, form the fundamental structure of a self-existent universe, which in some ways might seem to have more in common with forms of atheism in terms of the foundational aspects of the universe being present prior to God, than found in traditional theistic views. Despite its materialism, Mormonism is committed to an embodied God who is worship worthy, creative, passionately loving, immanent, and one who can be moved by and attentive to individual petitions through prayer. Moreover, this joint creaturely and providential tie to the same ontological universe as seen in nature and studied by science, takes on interesting significance for understanding aspects of theological concerns, especially in relation to what it means to be creaturely embodied in a relationship with an embodied God.

This essay engages in a thought experiment exploring theologies of materiality and embodiment along these lines with attention to Mormon articulations of deity as a model for, or illustration of theological possibilities. My aim is not to put materialist and nonmaterialist theologies into conversation *per se*. Such a conversation has been carried on for centuries and, while acknowledging it, I intend to primarily focus on how Latter-day Saint theology engages with current scientific thought and considers what it offers as a materialist theology *vis-à-vis* other possible materialist theologies. The essay is structured as follows: First, I examine the development of aspects of Mormon theology with a focus on Mormon material theologies. Second, I look at Mormonism in conversation with science and theology in three specific areas:

1. The theology of bodies.
2. Material conceptions of agency in biology and Mormonism.
3. Natural processes and insights that bear on the nature of the Godhead in Latter-day Saint thought.

Steven L. Peck

For each of these topics, I will untangle what work material philosophies might offer and how Mormonism situates itself, or potentially situates itself in relation to ideas of a material theology. Third, I will suggest how these theological perspectives relate to ideas of creation, becoming, and religious life.

Mormon Material Theologies

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have a long history of speculative or systematic theology (for a few counterexamples, see McMurrin 1959; Ostler 2001), partially because the church is of recent origin, having been established in 1830 and because the church has focused largely on praxis rather than on theological development. Some thoughtful church thinkers have argued that there is no adequate enunciation of Mormon theology *per se* and that practice and worship are more important than doctrinal commitments. Nonetheless, there recently has been a flurry of thinking about Mormon speculative theology (Welch 2017; Petrey 2011). For example, the Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship is releasing a set of theological introductions to the *Book of Mormon,* modeled on the Oxford Very Short Introduction series.

However, from the first generation of people in the Mormon movement, the church's doctrinal resources have been committed to a material conception of deity. I will briefly examine this commitment.

Matter in Mormonism

Matter plays a key role in Mormon theology and informs Mormonism's entire cosmology, including its conception of a material heaven with embodied individuals sealed together in eternal relationships (Stapley 2018:11). The roots and history of thinking about matter in Mormon theology have a long history of exploration (Brooke 1996; Givens 2014; McMurrin 1959; Park & Watkins 2010; Peters 1993; Webb 2011; Miller 2016). The Doctrine and Covenants (hereafter D&C) is largely a collection of revelations delivered by Joseph Smith from 1828 to 1844 and considered to be one of the foundational Mormon scriptures. In one of these revelations, Smith receives the following, 'There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; we cannot see it;

but when our bodies are purified, we shall see that it is all matter' (D&C 2000 131:7-8). The embodied nature of God is articulated as follows: 'The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us' (D&C 2000 130:22). Note that in the former scripture above, the spirit is said to be composed of a more re-fined type of matter. The groundwork for Smith's materialist leanings has resonances with the work and writings of John Milton, especially *Paradise lost* (Kerrigan, Rumrich, & Fallon 2007). John Rogers has done careful work on the influence of Milton's language on Smith and on two of his contempo-raries who framed much of the early thinking on Mormon materialism, broth-ers and theologians Orson and Parley Pratt, whose work we will look at in detail below (Rogers 2017). Rogers notes the similarity of word choice and phrasing in the above-cited scripture and in the following from *Paradise lost* (Kerrigan *et al*. 2007:467-476)

> But more refin'd, more spirituous, and pure
> As nearer to him plac't or nearer tending.

Later, in the Nauvoo period, named after the city the Latter-day Saints built in Illinois, Smith developed a complex theology that centered on an embod-ied materialistic God in a Trinity. Terryl Givens gives a fairly complete and nuanced view of thinking about matter in the formative years of the church and draws out three points (Givens 2014).

First, in these early years, there were numerous unresolved discus-sions among leaders of the church about whether panpsychic attributes obtain in matter (Givens 2014:16).

Second, a different form of dualism developed that combined every-day matter and this novel form of refined, preexistent spirit matter. Together, these two types of matter defined the eternal soul: 'And the spirit and the body are the soul of man' (D&C 2000 88:15). This conception of the soul differs from classical forms of Christianity in which humans are dual crea-tures composed (if that is the right word) of a separate mind (soul), as *res cogitans*, and a physical body, as *res extensa*. Givens writes that early think-ers in Mormonism tried to

find a physiological explanation for the interaction of spirit and body. At the same time, merging the two into a single theory would mitigate – if not solve altogether – the longstanding Cartesian mind-body problem (how can body and spirit interact if they occupy different planes of reality?). Smith had essentially collapsed the dualism that created the problem, when he defined spirit as highly refined matter (Givens 2014:126).

Mormons do not make claims about the physical nature or properties of this refined matter, or even that it is the kind of baryonic matter[1] which physicists demonstrate to make up the physical universe. They also do not make any claims about physical properties of matter, as they only maintain that it exists and constitutes the human spirit and, by implication, the Holy Spirit.

Third, in Givens' articulation, God is composed of matter, likely of both types. However, there is no claim that this matter is the same kind of matter that we find accessible to our own senses and scientific instruments. In addition to the material nature of the universe, the role that laws play in the universe has been of special concern. To explore this, we will now turn to the nature of embodiment in Mormon theology.

Embodied Deity(ies)

At the church's founding, an explicitly male anthropometric deity of the same heavenly species as mankind was envisioned. One of Smith's most theologically influential discourses was given in 1844 at the funeral of a follower named King Follett. This sermon laid out conceptions of both deification and divine embodiment. From the early apostle, Wilford Woodruff's transcription of Smith's sermon, we read:

> I will show the world is wrong by showing what God is. I am going to inquire after God so that you may know God, that persecution may cease concerning me, I go back to the beginning to show what kind of a being God was, I will tell you and hear it O Earth! God who sits in yonder heavens is a man like yourselves. That God, if you were to

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[1] Cosmologists and astronomers broadly refer to the matter of the universe as *baryonic matter*, such that it includes both baryons and leptons.

see him today that holds the worlds you would see him like a man in form, like yourselves (Discourse 1844:134).

Further theological development continued after his death. Two of Smith's followers, and arguably some of early Mormonism's most important theologians, were the Pratt brothers mentioned above. Apostle Parley Pratt continued to develop ideas about materialism and embodiment (Park 2010, 2012; Givens & Grow 2011). In his 1846 work *Materialism*, he says in poetic form:

> God the father is material.
> Jesus Christ is material.
> Angels are material.
> Spirits are material.
> Men are material.
> The universe is material.
> Space is full of materiality.
> Nothing exists which is not material
> (Park & Watkins 2010:124).

Later in the same text in which he denigrates immaterial notions of deity, he adds:

> What is God? He is material, organized intelligence, possessing both body and parts. He is in the form of man, and is in fact of the same species; and is a moddle [model], or standard of perfection to which man is destined to attain; he being the great father, and head of the whole family. He can go, come, converse, reason, eat, drink, love, hate, rejoice, possess and enjoy. He can also traverse space with all the ease and intelligence necessary, for moving from planet to planet, and from system to system (Park & Watkins 2010:123).

Panpsychism in Mormon Thought[2]

Orson Pratt tried to ground ideas of Mormon materialism in contemporaneous ideas about panpsychism. Panpsychism, the idea that matter might have innate capacity for some sort of phenomenal experience, was not uncommon.

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[2]   This section is largely a reproduction of Peck (2021).

Philosopher Leibniz's monadology is an example – the idea that the world was composed of windowless monads, perceptual atoms that had written in their inner image the entire universe. Others include philosophers Margaret Cavendish, Baruch Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant. By the late 19th century, panpsychism was being discussed broadly in philosophical and scientific circles with grounding from the German Romantics influencing American pragmatist thinkers such as Charles Peirce and William James, and British process philosophers, such as Alfred Whitehead and Bertrand Russell.

The clearest, and perhaps first, articulation of panpsychism in Mormon thought came through the writings of Orson Pratt. His influences appear to be the abovementioned 19th-century thinkers (Brooke 1996:275). He is explicit in his book, *The seer,* that 'intelligence' is a fundamental aspect of the universe's constituents. After explicating on the intelligence of 'man', he explores the origin of conscious awareness:

> Whence originated these capacities? When we speak of capacities we mean the original elementary capacities of the mind…if analyzed, will be found in all instances to be the result of the combination of simple, elementary, original capacities. The question is, whence originated these elementary qualities of the mind? We answer they are eternal. The capacities of all spiritual substance are eternal as the substance to which they belong. There is no substance in the universe which feels and thinks now, but what has eternally possessed that capacity (Pratt 1853:103).

Pratt sees these fundamental units of consciousness as being combined by God to form a spirit 'infant' of which the individual parts work together to grow eventually into what we are today. He continues by writing,

> Each individual particle must consent, in the first place, to be organized with other similar particles, and after the union has taken place, they must learn, by experience, the necessity of being agreed in all their thoughts, affections, desires, feelings, and acts, that the union may be preserved from all contrary or contending forces, and that harmony may pervade every department of the organized system (Pratt 1853:103).

He goes further, thus coming into conflict with Brigham Young over several matters of theology, stating not only that this is how God formed his spirit children, but likewise how God came into existence. In a sermon recorded by Woodruff, Pratt explains how eternal particles of atoms, existing for all eternity, 'joined their interest together, exchanged ideas [and eventually, joined by other particles,] formed a body through a long process (Bergera 2002:90). Thus embodied, they gained power and influence over other intelligences and became the race of Gods.

Despite Young's condemnation of Pratt's theology, his ideas spread among the early Saints, as members of the church called themselves. Perhaps one of the most scientifically informed expressions of this view was found in Brigham Roberts' *The truth, the way, the life* (Roberts, Larson, & McMurrin 1995). Unpublished in his lifetime, the book opens with a grand sweep through the best science of his day in an attempt to frame a complete expression of the gospel's power and scope. After exploring aspects of truth, knowledge, and contemporaneous conceptions of space and time (including references to Einstein), he argues that modern physics supports the notion of agential atoms:

> All the new knowledge, however, respecting the atom and all that comes of it including resolving it into electrons, leaves us with the fact that it has within it something which 'acts', and something which is 'acted upon'; a seemingly necessary positive and negative substance in action and reaction out of which things proceed, an atom, an aggregation of atoms, a world; or a universe of worlds…may they not be the ultimate factors, spirit and matter, acting and reacting upon each other by which the universe is up-builded [sic.] and sustained (Roberts *et al*. 1995:86).

Spirit matter then has the potential to act under the direction of deity.

Roberts argues in ways reminiscent of Orson Pratt's that particles come together to create something greater than their individual instantiations. He argues that such particle-intelligences which are bound together in unity of purpose, manifest as the oneness of the universe. He does not explicitly state that atoms are conscious, but his hints make it clear that he regards them as agential, and the basis, if not the essence of intelligence.

Since Roberts' time, one of the more interesting modern explorations of sentient elements comes from process theology as originally articulated by Whitehead. There has been a significant interest in using Whitehead and his followers, to explore aspects of Mormon theology (Baker 2008; Grandy 2015; McLachlan 2005; Nolan 1989; Tickemyer 1984; Wotherspoon 2015). Whitehead considered the universe as fundamentally made up of experiential units called 'actual occasions' that God persuades to join him in bringing about particular aims. These agents are free, individual, able to join in relational interactions, and endowed with an innate capacity to make choices. Andrew Miles specifically uses Whitehead's thought to show how a process theology, joined with the thinking of Pratt and Roberts, can be used to derive a coherent Mormon theology, especially when viewed from how life emerges into the world (Miles 2008). Isabelle Stengers points out how several thinkers creating the emergent biology in the 20th century call for a new kind of engagement: 'As Whitehead had foreseen, each of them testifies, each in his [sic.] own way to living beings implying and calling for a new conception of the order of nature' (Stengers 2011:178).

Views of Deity Based upon Materialism

God as developed in Smith's theology is very much an advanced being in which the fatherhood of God is quite literal, and humans are his embodied spirit children. While these views still undergird the beliefs of much of the mainstream membership of Latter-day Saints, more nuanced views are being developed by current Latter-day Saint scholars. For example, theologian and continental philosopher, Jim Faulconer notes possible differences between God's embodiment and our own, questioning what is meant in Latter-day Saint thought by 'divine embodiment' (Faulconer 2005:1-14):

> The bodies of flesh and bone with which I am familiar do not shine, have blood, cannot hover, can be wounded and die, must move through contiguous points of time-space – in short, they are not at all like the bodies of the Father and the Son. So what does it mean to say that the Father and the Son have bodies? In fact, does it mean anything at all?

One of the principal purposes of God's creation according to Mormon doctrinal perspectives is to provide bodies for God's children – humans – who, ac-

cording to Mormon doctrine, are *sine qua non* of the universe's creation. Latter-day Saints believe that before coming to earth, humans lived with God as preexistent spirits. Standard Mormon teachings include that we freely chose earth life in part to receive a body like we observed God to have. Therefore, embodiment was not just an attribute of God, but one of the main purposes for God's creating the universe to give his spirit children the chance to also be clothed in flesh, to be deified after the final resurrection made possible by God's Son's first resurrection. So, the divine embodiment of God and his children is part of God's plan. This is written in the Mormon book of scripture, *The Pearl of Great Price*, 'For behold, this is my work and my glory – to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man' (Pearl of Great Price 2000: Moses 1:39). Embodiment is regarded as fundamental to Mormon theology. Other Mormon thinkers have taken up exploring how differences in bodies might create different experiences for humans. For example, gendered bodies, queer bodies, and disabled bodies may play a role in the conceptions of divinity and post-mortality (Petrey 2011).

Mormonism also has a deeply held doctrine of a Mother in heaven, and recently there has been carefully considered research on the Mormon theology of the divine feminine (Essay, Gospel Topics 2015; cf. Brooks, Steenblik, & Wheelwright 2016; Hudson 2015; Jorgensen 2001). Academic treatments of the feminine divine in Mormonism have long been argued in the writings of Margaret Toscano and are appearing in the work of Fiona Givens' theological and devotional work, laying the foundation for serious discussions of the theology of a Mother in heaven (Toscano 2004; Givens 2020). Taylor Petrey reviews and critiques much of the discourse and problematics of the discourse around the idea of a Mother in heaven (Petrey 2016). In addition to academic treatments, theology about the Mother in heaven has long been associated with women's voices within the church. Space was made early in the church, especially through the poetic writings of disciple Eliza Snow (Barney 2008; Preston 1993; Heeren, Lindsey, & Mason 1984; Paulsen & Pulido 2011). The place of the Mother in heaven is being articulated especially through women's voices in prose and poetry, just as it was in the foundational events of Mormonism through Snow. In addition, there are active media sites, like websites, blogs, and other media accounts devoted to the idea of a Mother in heaven (Peck, Bach, & Shurtz 2019). Of particular interest is the work of Ashley Hoiland (2016), Kathryn Sonntag (2019), and Rachel Steenblik (Steenblik & Hoiland 2017, 2019), and an edit-

ed collection of poetry about the heavenly Mother called *Dove's song* (Chadwick, Patterson, & Pulido 2018).

The God envisioned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is embodied in matter and spirit; is agential; and can sense, influence, and be influenced by the conditions in the material universe. In addition to the three entities comprising the Trinity, Mother in heaven is thought equal in power and glory to God the Father. These heavenly parents are held to be loving gods engaged in the work of redemption for humans. Their work is not for our species alone, but for the earth itself (also thought to have a divine spirit) and for its ecology and all its living organisms. Latter-day Saint eco-critic and novelist, George Handley argues that understanding the depth of effort in creation, plays a vital role in acting with care towards that creation: 'The Creation made human existence possible, but only after an almost incomprehensibly slow and complex accretion of diverse life on this planet' (Handley 2020:xv).

The material nature of the universe generates a strong grounding in Latter-day Saint thought for an interest and commitment to science. Peck reviews the history of science in relation to Mormon theology and points out that early leaders like Smith and Young held that science was an integral part of Mormonism (Peck 2019b). Indeed, one early text, called the *Lectures of faith* ascribed to and supported by Smith, reduced theology to a science (Reynolds 1991:285-294): 'What is theology?...Answer – It is that revealed science which treats of the being and attributes of God'.

This fascination with science continued with several Mormon leaders and other academically minded authors, touting the relation between science and theology (Reynolds 1991). Prior to being ordained a Mormon apostle, James Talmage wrote several books on science, supporting its relation to faith, including *First book of nature* (Talmage 1889), which explores an in-depth contemporaneous understanding of biology. In 1924, fellow Mormon, Frederick Pack wrote *Science and belief in God*, which included the idea that religious views should be updated by science (Pack 1924:270).

Tension between religion and science later developed in Latter-day Saint thought with some leaders and thinkers embracing the rise of religious fundamentalism, thus entrenching Mormonism in a decades-long disenchantment with science and academic thought, especially in the areas of evolutionary biology and higher biblical criticism. A richer account of this can be found in an article of Peck, as well as the sources cited therein (Peck 2019b).

Not until later in the 20th century did anti-science views start to abate in Latter-day Saint discourses, although it is still visible today.

In the next section, I will expand on these theological ideas and put these theological views of the embodiment of deity and humans in conversation with current conceptions of science, especially evolutionary biology. In line with Whitehead's view that science matters in theology (which informs many of his ideas on panentheism), I will explore the ways in which science and theology speak to one another in productive means. I will then explore how Mormon theology provides incentives for looking more closely at the relation between science and theology, using resources that rely on the material aspects of deity.

Mormonism and the Current Manifest Image of Science about Matter and Embodiment

What is Matter?
Understanding matter as articulated by science warrants some attention if we are to understand the landscape for its use in Mormon theology. Since the time of Parmenides up to contemporary understandings of modern physics, there has been no satisfying single answer to the question, 'What is matter'? While we know more about the subatomic world and its constituents than ever before, there is still no agreed-upon perspective on the nature of matter. Cottrell safely (and humorously) begins his introduction to a book on matter, 'Matter is the stuff from which you and all the things in the world around are made' (Cottrell 2019:1). So, perhaps a better question than what matter is, is, 'What does matter do'?

A short list of matter's attributes may include the following characteristics: Matter has mass that affects the space-time structure around it; it vibrates at certain frequencies; it has a formal relation with energy (i.e., $E=mc^2$); it creates fields of force that influence other forms of matter, even through the void of space with which it is surrounded; it can be found in multiple phases (gas, liquid, solid, and plasma); it forms atoms through strong and weak nuclear forces and through weaker electromagnetic and gravitational forces that allow these atoms to forge relations with other atoms to form higher-order structures, such as molecules, suns, and black holes; at a

subatomic scale, it behaves in ways that defy deterministic classifications, and it acts in very different ways at classically viewable scales than it does at subatomic levels; and it forms quanta that exhibit properties of waves or particles, which can become entangled in ways that allow the entanglement partner to be influenced at distances that defy the concept of locality, challenging the work of both Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton. Instantiations at certain temperatures and conditions can smear particles across probability spaces in ways that defy the Aristotelian notions of particularity.

Questions about how matter relates to creation and deity are some of the central concerns of Mormonism which offer provoking speculation, as noted above, and are perhaps best viewed with Whitehead's assertion, 'The worship of God is not a rule of safety – it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable. The death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure' (Whitehead 2011:192).

Mormonism and Matter

What then are Mormons claiming when they say that God is made of matter? The most basic commitment is to something that allows relations to form between and among physical substances. This aspect of theological concern should not be underestimated because it forms the foundation underlying many of the reasons for considering the importance of materialism and embodiment. Matter forms fields, such as electromagnetic and gravitational fields, that allow matter to influence, touch, be entwined with, react to, push, or pull other forms of matter. Within Latter-day Saint theology there is no commitment to the ultimate material nature that physicists try to explore, but there is a claim that something grounds physicality and is amenable to forces that embrace notions of God's and our material abilities to form relationships in our mutual embodiment.

Another aspect of matter, strangely unique at the macrolevel is its ability to form life, a configuration of molecules that differs from any other class of object. Life uses information, energy, and constraints to navigate through complex environments, has teleological aims and parts, is able to grow in complexity and generate novelty in form and function and, most importantly, forms autonomous agents. Of particular interest is the ability of matter to form organic bodies that can grow, reproduce, and change. At the heart of the Mormon interest in theologies of matter is the idea of bodies, especially the formation of bodies, including divine, human, and non-human.

Earthly bodies form the bases of life, and its role in Mormon theology claims that it is paramount for understanding God's purposes and nature. To see that, we turn to the question, 'What can bodies do'? What does the science of biology say about its purpose? We turn to that question from a scientific perspective and explore how it feeds into Mormon ideas of embodiment.

What Can Bodies Do? What Are Bodies for? Mormon Theology of Bodies

Gilles Deleuze paraphrases Spinoza's saying, 'We do not even know what a body can do', when he asks, 'What does Spinoza mean when he invites us to take the body as a model? It is a matter of showing that the body surpasses the knowledge that we have of it, *and that thought likewise surpasses the consciousness that we have of it*' (Deleuze 1988:18; emphasis added). Unpacking what a body does and is, as its implications theologically benefit from a look at what science thinks it is and does, with an eye to how bodies develop, are formed, and have evolved.

First, biology and the philosophy of biology conceive of biological individuals as short-lived, temporal processes. This view contrasts with common sense conceptions of bodies as objects, as interacting configurations, or as assemblages of material parts. It is also a move away from a Cartesian conception of living bodies as machines. However useful the Cartesian metaphor may have been for the advancement of science in the past, it misses too much (as Deleuze notes in the above quote), especially in light of recent findings about how organisms develop and emerge from genetic precursors. Embryonic development has been found to be more complex and emergent than the story of DNA coding for proteins that simply assemble as organisms. This change in perspective also necessitates a move away from reductionism and determinism and a return to the organism *qua* organism – an emergent, vibrant entity in constant exchange with matter and energy in ways that differ from those in any other configuration of matter found in nonorganic assemblages. These metabolically active processes are structures that maintain themselves far away from thermodynamic equilibrium, that is, they use energy in ways that allow them to repair themselves and maintain stability, and most important for considering their agential aspects, they are intrinsically purposive. Agency is a key aspect of the existence of all human beings and even God in Mormon theology, opening the question, 'In what ways are living bodies composed of matter important to understanding agency? What are the different ways bodies can be viewed'?

Steven L. Peck

Feminist Perspectives on Bodies

Some of the most remarkable work in thinking about material bodies is coming from a group of feminists working to bring bodies – human, nonhuman, and even cyborg bodies – back into conversations about existential values. These thinkers bring insights into feminism itself but also offer provocations and questions about why science, religion, and structures of discourse and power have so often ignored material bodies. Their work provides a compelling springboard to understand what is at stake in agency as an emergent biological process and how agency informs general questions about embodiment that may be relevant to theology, especially in liberation and womanist theologies of trauma. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Material feminisms* Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue that the materiality of women's bodies is the locus of many of the experiences of women (Alaimo & Hekman 2008:3).

Karen Barad has also developed a framework called agential realism for understanding embodiment on the basis of the work of Niels Bohr. Barad (2008:128) states, 'What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies – "human" and "nonhuman" – and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked'.

These thinkers recognize that life is embodied in matter and that *how* life is embodied has ramifications for understanding and contextualizing that life. By trying to untangle the complexities of what it means to be a living thing through an understanding of mattered, biological organisms, much can be gained over and above purely discursive methods of elaboration on these ideas. Material feminism is interested in matter 'becoming' the vibrant, active, evolving, environmentally conditioned, ecologically active, emerging thing as it is instantiated in life and possibly in other agential manifestations, such as artificial intelligence or digital life. Agential life is recognized as pulling together the possibilities of purpose and teleology in the universe, in terms of both the constituent parts of life and the organism's agency. The parts of bodies are easily described as functional – a heart is for pumping blood, an eye is for seeing – and thus have an explicit teleology. Moreover, agents themselves have aims and desires. With the appearance of life on earth, for the first time in the history of the universe, matter acquired genuine teleology, as Elizabeth Grosz argues in her discussions of the evolution of life on earth (Grosz 2008:23-51).

In addition, womanist theology has emphasized how embodiment has to be conceptualized as an active theological principal if we are to understand how trauma, power relations, and liberation theologies are to be conceived as part of God's interaction with, in particular, women's bodies (Isherwood & Stuart 1998).

Latter-day Saint theologian, Deidre Green has argued in her work on Jacob within the *Book of Mormon* that understanding embodiment provides a source of knowledge unavailable in other ways:

> The inestimable value of each human being attested by the death of Christ includes the body and the eternal relationship between an individual and Christ that is formed through their shared embodied experiences. Also valuable is the knowledge attained through the body that cannot be gained in any other way…Jacob is at pains to communicate that intelligence is located within the body and that a resurrection is required to retain that intelligence post mortally. In other words, neither minds nor spirits are the sole location of knowledge; there is knowledge about how to be in the world that is received through the body and necessarily remains in the body. This teaching implies that some truths can never be extrapolated from our embodied experience into rational thought; rather, this knowledge is forever only available through the body (Green 2020:26-27).

She further argues that this is true of humans and of Christ whose mortal life taught him things about existence that was only available, and only remains available, through the physical body.

This work articulated by the feminist theory about the importance and relevance of looking at the embodied nature of being, may be theologically relevant because its arguments overlap with the idea that being embodied is what defines existence in the way that it offers challenges and brings joy in existence. Mormonism accommodates the possibility that embodiment reflects a divine attribute and condition of God's existence and asks: What if we are embodied in matter because it is part of the *imago Dei*? It is a thought experiment that Mormonism seems to take seriously because it is imbedded in many of the aspects of Latter-day Saint conceptions of divine life and interaction with God – especially in their notions about agency.

Steven L. Peck

Material Conceptions of Agency in Biology

To understand embodied agency with an eye on Mormon theology, I begin by outlining how life becomes capable of forming teleological and purposeful actions – and perhaps how natural values entered the universe. Early 20th-century philosopher, Henri Bergson argues that evolution is creative (Bergson 2007). Bergson points out that three things must be explained if we are to understand life as it exists on the only planet we have closely observed. These have once again become relevant in the modern biological synthesis of embryotic development, ecology, and evolution (often referred to as Evo-Devo-Eco): 1) The purposeful nature of individual organisms and their parts; 2) the integrative, holistic, nonlinear emergent dynamics seen in evolutionary processes; and 3) how genuine novelty emerges in the universe (Peck 2019a:541-557).

Bergson has realized that this drive towards greater complexity, autonomy, and freedom of action itself was implicated in the evolution of a greater organismal telos, desire, and freedom. He has also pointed to insights still being grappled with in evolutionary biology. His work includes ideas of emergence, the generation of novelty, and the recognition that organisms have purposes, desires, and aims. Most importantly, it portrays the universe as open, nondeterministic, and filled with possibilities that have never existed as realities and may never exist as such, and in ways that subvert reductionist tendencies in science, especially when it comes to the surprising form that matter takes in instantiating life. A philosopher of science, Denis Walsh says of life on earth,

> Moreover, these forms and activities exhibit a feature unique in the natural world; organisms are exquisitely suited to their conditions of existence. They are highly complex stable, adaptive, purposive systems. In the pursuit of their goals organisms possess a prodigious array of capacities. They are self-reproducing, self-building entities. They manufacture the very materials out of which they are constructed. These structures, these activities, this diversity, set organisms apart in the natural world. Organisms are natural entities to be sure, but they are no run-of-the-mill material things (Walsh 2015:1).

These three aspects of life that Bergson mentions above, first appeared in the geologic epoch known as the Archean (2.5 to 4 billion years ago), when indi-

viduality first evolved. Individuality precedes agency and is a prerequisite for its development. The idea of an individual in biology focuses on attributes found only within life. These attributes include not just a confederation of objects but also processes that have a telos not found in abiotic concepts of the individual. Life on earth went through a series of transitions from replicating chemical elements to being characterized by confederations of organelles and subunits that eventually became integrated and worked together to create biological entities. Leo Buss points out that these transitions in evolutionary history were conditioned on a back and forth between different levels of selection being found between different cellular organisms joining forces and specializing roles and functions in surviving (Buss 1987:171). The development of organs and the integration as of the whole organism as an individual unit became the signature development of multicellular organisms.

With the emergence of multicellular individuals, the stage is set for agency – matter in the universe develops purposes geared to survival and navigating complexity. Agency is also a key theological concept for understanding God's action in the world. That the created universe has the capacity for agency to emerge, therefore, should not come as a surprise if, according to Latter-day Saint theology, it reflects this attribute of God.

Agential Action in Biology

Part of this move toward agency in living things is explored in recent work on what constitutes autonomy. Autonomy emerges under certain constraints and positive feedback loops in energy exchange. These processes are articulated in detail by Alvaro Moreno and Matteo Mossio in *Biological autonomy* (Moreno & Mossio 2015). Life constrains and uses energy to maintain its functional coherence and continuance. It accomplishes this task through metabolic pathways that create constraint closure, a closed loop that allows processes to continue, thus allowing the organism to obtain and channel energy and materials from its environment to support its survival and maintenance. This process creates an 'emergent regime of causation' that allows us to view these constraint cycles as a 'grounding of teleology, normativity, and functionality' and creates an autonomous 'causal regime' (Moreno & Mossio 2015:197-198). While these events do not require multicellularity, when achieved, it creates a higher-level autonomy, a foundation necessary but not sufficient for agency. This level of autonomy creates the basal conditions for

goal-oriented behavior, that is, aspects of the environment take on values of concern for the organism.

Daniel Nicholson adds several observations about individual organisms that distinguish them from other processes found in the universe (Nicholson 2018). First, organisms because they are dissipative structures far away from a thermodynamic equilibrium, must maintain themselves in a steady state by acquiring and using energy. This condition requires constant activity. To accomplish this activity, organisms are always engaged in a metabolic process. Second, such organisms require constant self-maintenance and repair to maintain their bodily forms. Third, they have a cross-generational identity, indicating that an organism's offspring resembles its parents (with suitable variation due to sexual reproduction, mutation, and genetic drift).

Nicholson points out that organisms and machines differ because organisms 'are *intrinsically purposive* (in the sense that their activities and internal operations are ultimately directed towards the maintenance of their own organization), whereas machines are *extrinsically purposive* (given that their workings are geared toward fulfilling the functional endos of external agents)' (Nicholson 2018:141).

Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde have identified three necessary conditions for something to be considered an agent: 1) The entity must define its own individuality, as described above; 2) it must 'be the active source of activity in its environment (interactional asymmetry)' (i.e., it is not directed by outside forces); and 3) 'it must regulate this activity in relation to certain norms (normativity)' (Barandiaran *et al*. 2009:367-386). These conditions are general enough to recognize even a filamentous single-cell bacterium swimming toward the light, the place where its evolution has conditioned it to look for food, as an agent. If one adjusts the requirement of individuality in the given three necessary conditions of Barandiaran *et al*. to match the distinction that Nicholson makes about individuals in the previous section, a more complete understanding of theological agency presents itself. Could this understanding of God's attention in creating a universe to be a place in which agency emerges into the world, be a stamp of the *imago Dei* on humans?

Agency in Mormon Theology

In Mormon theology, agency plays a key role. Alma, from the *Book of Mormon*, gives this aspect of divine action context:

> Wherefore, he gave commandments unto men, they having first transgressed the first commandments as to things which were temporal, and becoming as gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good (Book of Mormon 2000: Alma 12:31).

Here Alma connects the idea of agency with a key attribute that defines human agency – what it means to be created in God's image. In this Mormon scripture, agency is seen as an aspect of human 'becoming' that draws a person closer to being more like God. In Mormon parlance, the plurality of Gods expressed here could be considered as the three members of the Trinity and the divine feminine personage, Mother in heaven. The biological insistence that agency is rooted in individuality is reminiscent of the way Mormon theology insists that the Trinity is composed of radically individual personages who are united in purpose, desire, and intent, but separate entities, nevertheless. Therefore, because they are composed of matter, they are considered entities: They have boundaries; they are wholes composed of teleological parts (not simple) that are unique to their being, and they act with separate agency and will, although their wills coincide completely.

Agency is regarded as fundamental to the purposes of God. In the Mormon scripture known as the *Pearl of Great Price*, revelations given to Smith and attributed to divine influence replace missing pieces of the book of Genesis from the Hebrew Bible. A notion of human agency, as a preexistent attribute of 'intelligences', and which is shared with God, is used to assess these beings' potential to become like God. In Mormon theology it is thought that God is making decisions here and allowing the agency of humans to be 'proved' in the sense of an experiment on their actions.

Biological conceptions of agency locate agency as bodily action. It is distanced from some sort of algorithmic 'choice' model, resembling a computer located in brains to a bodily concept that draws on the organism's evolutionary history, its ecological context, and its genetic relations, thus acknowledging that the organism has aims, purposes, and teleological goals that buy into Aristotle's notion of teleology, 'that for which it was made'. As is seen in the Mormon scripture cited above, this feature is deep in Latter-day Saint theology.

Steven L. Peck

Natural Processes and Insights that Bear on the Nature of Deity in Latter-day Saint Thought

What the biological evolution of agency in the universe seems to suggest is an intrinsic, emergent feature of the grounding conditions of matter. If one embraces, like Mormonism does, an 'enmattered' deity, then these features of the universe may reflect that deity's embodiment as well, especially with the view that humans are created in the image and likeness of God.

There are also reasons to think that the biological paradigm of agents as a whole-body process may be useful in exploring questions about agential free will. Biological accounts have focused on concepts such as purposeful action in organisms, aims, and the navigation of the rich reality in which biological organisms find itself. For example, consciousness, in all its strange complexity, may be life's solution to navigating these multiplicities.

In thinking about agency, that Mormonism's conception of spirit/soul as both composed of matter, partakes of a strange dualism because of the Latter-day Saint commitments to a preexistent soul/spirit before earth's creation. Because there are few formal articulations of the nature of this preexistent spirit creation and subsequent embodiment, however, it may yet be articulated in ways that are less dualistic. The Mormon philosopher, Adam Miller speculates that the preexistent spirit is less an entity than a process: 'Spirit is itself manifest as a complex network of interlocked by semi-autonomous processes of thought and feeling. In particular, spirit is manifest in those patterns of desire that combine judgement and feeling in particular orientations toward the world' (Miller 2016:42-43).

Mormon Material Theological Perspectives: Creation, Becoming, and Life

Mormonism holds that deity is a material agent. The heavenly Parents, as well as Christ and the Holy Ghost can be described as meeting the requirements of deity both individually and together. The Godhead meets the necessary conditions for an agent as defined by Barandiaran *et al*. (2009:367-386): 1) The Godhead defines its own individuality separately and as an entity; 2) it is an active source of activity in its environment (which in this case is, in part, also the source of that environment); and 3) it regulates its activity in relation

to certain norms (God has purposes)[3]. These notions of agency seem necessary considerations if Mormons and other Christians claim that God is an agent materially embodied. This leads to an important thesis noted by theologian Meredith Minister:

> A material trinity that is dynamic is located in space and time. To locate the trinity within space and time suggests that God acts in the world without appealing to an underlying mind, will, or organizing principle. By refusing to appeal to an undergirding mind or will in order to explain the activity of God in the world, a material trinitarian theology locates agency, change, and process within physicality itself, as opposed to some foundational mind or will. To affirm that the trinitarian persons act in the world is to (radically) claim that they are material because agency is inseparable from materiality. Because a material trinity is located within the physical world, theologians must continue to do theology in light of science (Minister 2014:140).

Mormonism has likewise abandoned Platonic and Neoplatonic conceptions of deity (albeit reluctantly, as classic trinitarian concepts of God syncretically appear in several Latter-day Saint writings, including those by some of its leaders). Moreover, Mormon theology claims God has a body, has teleological aims, and is composed of teleological parts. Mormonism takes the metaphor of human creation in God's image more earnestly than other Christian conceptions, in terms of both form and composition. In line perhaps with historian of ancient Christianity Christoph Markschies' monumental study of God's body in Abrahamic traditions, he shows that a corporeal, anthropomorphic God has been the view from ancient times to elements of the present (Markschies 2019:319):

> The notion of a human body of God is perhaps the most potent form by means of which the antique imagination of a divine body survived the strident religious and philosophical criticism of the divine image and moreover, perhaps the most radical manner in which the original-

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[3] There is a not a single term that captures all the members of the Trinity and Mother in heaven. Therefore, in what follows, when I refer to the Godhead or God, I include all of the above.

> ly Jewish idea that humanity was fashioned in the likeness of god contained to be entertained: The divine body is exactly the human body – and *vise versa*.

He goes on to point out that '[t]he concept of God's corporeality in Mormonism represents a key theological theme' (Markschies 2019:322). Markschies then quotes Catholic theologian, Stephen Webb's assertion that dialogue with Mormons is necessary, and Webb's question of what would have happened if the 'anthropomorphites' of Late Antiquity have triumphed in the struggle [to promote a corporeal God]' (Markschies 2019:322).

Questions about first cause have been abandoned in Latter-day Saint theology for a more relational view of God's action in the universe. The relational structure of the universe resonates with current understandings of science as one of an evolving relation among temporal assemblages of matter in process. From this perspective, God is a product and perhaps an emergent actor in the universe. As Webb suggests, 'What would happen if we thought of matter as the stuff that makes relationships possible, including our relationship to God? What would happen if we thought that matter and spirit are just different names for the same thing, depending on how you look at it'? (Webb 2013:8).

As a result, Mormon forms of embodiment imagine a God who is interested in relationships and is changed by it, in forms consistent with current scientific conceptions of the material universe. Latter-day Saint theology still embraces, despite its anthropometrism, the conception of a caring Godhead embedded, as we are, in temporal processes and is not viewed as omniscient or omnipotent but as one who performs agential actions of love – one act in particular being creating the universe in which we live.

The notion of a material feminine deity in Mormon does work in providing relationships for all genders to find an opportunity to relate with a non-male deity. Alley Moder explores how trauma victims have trouble relating to traditionally conceived male deities, including conceptions of Christ and God as Father. An explicit non-male deity does work in helping to heal relationships caused by male actions that have caused trauma (Moder 2020).

This Mormon conception affords an ecological view of the Godhead, in which relationships among all the inhabitants of earth – plants, animals, and the myriad kinds of creaturely life, as well as human life – are of concern. This ties science to theology because God also has relationships with

material structures of many scales, such as societies, institutions, and networks as such. A God of materiality and embodiment, then, has relationships with all of the material constituents of God's creation, not becoming one with it, as may be seen in a Spinozian theology, but also not utterly transcendent as is found in more Plotinian structured theologies. God becomes embedded relationally in the ecology of the material universe as an agent who can influence all the other agents. This role is seen most clearly in Mormon Christology, where the agential aspect of Christ is always conditioned on love, and love is the basis for all action on the part of the Godhead. A material conception of deity who is part of the unfolding of the universe, makes matters of ecology especially important because the ecologies and creatures that have emerged from processes requiring deep time are not necessarily formal instantiations of creation, but novel emergences in which God takes surprise and delight. This makes the sciences of ecology, conservation, and climate change relevant to aspects of creation like stewardship and placing scientific activities in the purview of theological considerations that take seriously the time it takes for God's ongoing creation (Handley 2001; Peck 2011; Brown 2011; Handley 2011).

In addition, other aspects of science tie directly to Latter-day Saint theological perspectives. As Minister claims above, if God is composed of some fundamental material and embodied, it implies that all actions take place in time and in space. This idea contrasts with the concept of the block universe as articulated by both Augustine and Einstein. In their view of cosmology, space-time is completely given, so that the past and future are fixed at creation and only the perspectival stance of an agent embedded at a particular location in space and time produces an illusion of time passing as a flow. In Einstein's block universe, the equations describing the state of the universe can be run forward or backward; all that follows in either direction is determined by the current state of the situation. Pierre-Simon Laplace claimed that given the position and momentum of everything in the universe, he could predict the future or the past with perfect fidelity. This claim comports with the Augustinian view of an omniscient God who sees all events that unfold from beginning to end.

Recent work in both physics (cf. Smolin 2013, 2019) and as argued above, biology, suggests that the universe is subject to historical forces in which the future is not determined but rather unfolds in what Stuart Kaufmann has coined as the 'adjacent possible' (Kauffman, Logan, Este, Goebel,

Hobill, & Shmulevich 2008: 27-45). In this view, the creative nature of the universe is manifest in this multiplicity and novelty, and genuine novelty emerges through the forces of evolution. Keith Ansell-Pearson, in articulating Bergson's view of this temporal evolutionary process, states,

> The time of life is absolute in the sense that the dimensions of past, present and future are not simply relative to a particular form or life or living creature. It suggests rather that the *evolution of life* is a unique, irreversible process. This 'life' is one in which the whole history of the universe participates, and the same events could only recur 'in artificially isolated systems'. The cosmos is not given but becomes and the universe does not simply 'have' a history, *it is its history*. The temporality of time conceived as the process of life in its unique, irreversible becoming cannot be existentially relative to life since 'it is the form of the process of life itself' (Ansell-Pearson 2002:69; emphasis added).

The idea that the Godhead is historically embedded, offers a sense that God acts historically and is changed and conditioned by and engaged in history. For example, the historical event of the incarnation is historical for both the Divine and those created as children and creatures.

One aspect of a material deity that may be unique to Mormonism is the evolutionary idea of familial and phylogenic relationships that continue after death and entwine God's material nature with human material nature: The Mormon notion of creating eternal communities and connecting individuals through sealing ordinances to establish an eternal working relationship with God to ensure greater love in the universe and to further divine purposes and aims (for a complete description of this idea, cf. Stapley 2018).

Latter-day Saint thought still seems to be struggling with how to incorporate their insights into God's material, time-embedded nature and into their own emerging theology, which rests only on a revealed ontology rather than being derived from scientific work on material bodies. Radically, Mormon materialism places the origin of the universe before God, but God becomes a part of the universe's processes (with 'universe' here conceived as a cosmos more expansive than in whatever space in which the big bang took place). That God partakes of life makes God a part of divine ecology, placing

God as a steward of life's processes and making humans partners rather than mere creations.

During this formative period, while Mormonism is in the first stages of theological engagement with its materialism, there are possible dialogues with other religious traditions, looking at mattered and embodied conceptions of deity, including trinitarian ones that may open productive resonances among differing theological interests and engender productive discussions about differing theological possibilities.

Challenges for Mormon Materialism

There are yet several challenges to Mormon material theologies in conversation with science and other materialist views. Three specific challenges come to mind. First, it demands that matter must precede God. Early Neoplatonic and Christian thought includes the idea of *first cause*. Material conceptions of deity, especially embodied conceptions of the Trinity, call for an organismal and even biological conception of God. There is much work to do in order to make this conception theologically coherent, if that is even possible. This work may include ideas that consider God to be an emergent feature of the universe, framed by preexistent relational aspects among the universe's fundamental constituents. Webb, a Catholic theologian, however, suggests that there may be less to worry about for Mormons than first appears:

> If God is the master of matter, then no matter how God has come to be God, God's ability to form the cosmos out of preexisting matter is a sign of God's freedom from material constraints. After all, according to Mormon metaphysics, God is who he is precisely because he has exercised his freedom in the most maximally powerful and creative manner. God has come to understand the eternal law so well (indeed, coming to understand it is what makes him God) that he is not, whatever path he has taken to the status that we know him to have, bound by it. It would seem, then, that God is both free from and subjected to the same law (Webb 2013:200).

The notion of God coming into being from preexistent material has a long history, from Jacob Böhme to Friedrich von Schelling and other modern thinkers (Böhme & Waterfield 2001; McGrath 2013). Perhaps relevant is Catherine Keller's tehomic theology, especially in light of her consideration

of the divine feminine emerging from chaos, which is rich with possibilities for the emergence of deities from mattered priors (Keller 2003). Keller's rich exploration of chaos, emergence, and self-organization may provide fertile ground for theologies of matter like that of Mormonism. However, attention to this aspect of Mormon thought needs greater nuance.

Second, gender and sexuality are being completely rethought in Mormon theology. Gendered bodies and the implication of nonbinary genders are also important in the scientific aspects of biology. In addition, as scholar of religion at Kalamazoo College, Taylor Petrey has pointed out that Mormon theology has rich resources for imagining a nonbinary conception of postmortal bodies (Petrey 2011:315–341). That biology, which is informing Mormonism on this issue, has not been detailed to any great degree with most gender studies in Mormonism nestled snuggly within the humanities and social science. This is not a complaint, but rather a call for further engagement. In an excellent volume on Mormonism and gender (Petrey & Hoyt 2020), none of the nine theological essays engage with the science of biological sexuality, the evolution of such, or in the rich contribution that the biology of sexuality has informed queer studies. This presents an opportunity for more theological work that takes evolutionary biology seriously.

Third, the rich power of materialist theologies on ecology can serve as a call for a deeper engagement with God's ongoing creation. The power of theology productively engaged with science is exemplified by Whitehead's work. As mentioned above, there are deep resonances between Mormonism and Whitehead's panentheism. An important part of that is the opportunity afforded by both to explore the creative, evolutionary, and ecological novelty so prevalent and beautifully expressed in the universe and its creative expression. Stengers explains an idea that Whitehead often expressed, that both science and theology are important to framing concepts of creativity – that both are valuable modes of expression. She argues that recognizing both ways of knowing, helps to express a deeper level of engagement for each (Stengers 2011:256). Whitehead argues that if Providence is defined as the author of a predefined totality that mechanically cycles through all possible combinations, then there is something suspect about calling God 'creative'. Stenger adds, 'Yet if God is a creature of creativity, he must exemplify, more than anything else, the reason why Whitehead confers the status of ultimate upon creativity: he is what will spell out and illustrate all novelty *qua* irreducible' (Stengers 2011:473). This is an idea deeply embedded in Mormon theology.

The ecological and biological novelty we find in the world is not created merely to be discovered or to provide evidence for divine action but is also a part of God's nature and being in which we participate. Through science, art, and other expressions of divine nature, we mold and frame matter into novel creations in a like manner to God.

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Covid-19 and its Impact on Religiosity: Reflections on Religious Life and Practice in Uganda

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Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease of 2019 (Covid-19) has been a trending academic research topic since 2020. Globally, numerous treatises on the relation between religion and Covid-19 exist with scholars inclined on religious explanatory models of the disease and its impact on religious practices. This has been counterfactual for Uganda, with immense scholarly attention devoted to analyzing the impact of the pandemic on socio-economic variables. Uganda, being a highly religious nation, provides an ideal case study as classical theoretical postulations stand firm on a positive sustained correlation between religiosity and natural disasters. Using the postmodernist innovative qualitative approach and unconventional 'remote' research methods of data collection due to the bitingly restrictive Covid-19 measures, the study established that this virus variably impacted religiosity. Those hitherto religious became stauncher and more stalwart. The former religiously unenthusiastically forsook religious routines. The pandemic containment measures revolutionized the long-standing religious practices and traditions, which necessitated the adoption of and adapting to fresh forms of religious expression.

Introduction

This article analyses the impact of Covid-19 on the religious life and practice of Ugandans. Uganda, a multi-religious nation, has 99.8percent of the citizens

subscribing to one of the tripartite religious heritages of Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous beliefs (UBOS 2016; Isiko 2019:102). Catholicism dominates with 40 percent, followed by Anglicans, Muslims, Pentecostal Christians, and other religious groups comprising 32, 14, 11, and four percent respectively (UBOS 2016). Perspectives from the four dominant religious groups informed this survey. Before the virus' emergence, Uganda boasted with over 86 percent of its citizens devoted to religion. 82 percent of Ugandans, the second highest in the whole world, attended religious services weekly, hence rating seventh of 105 countries being surveyed. 67 percent of Ugandans observed daily prayers (Hackett, Kramer, & Fahmy 2018:14).

Besides the quantitative measure of Uganda's religiosity, there are tangible qualitative indicators too. Uganda's religious spaces, particularly churches and mosques gather more than political and socio-economic conferences. Clerics are more respected than politicians (Alava & Ssentongo 2016:678). Preaching is commonplace on the streets. In spite of Uganda lacking a state religion, its national motto, 'For God and my country', alludes to the country's exceptional relationship with the spiritual (Isiko 2019:103). Sunday is a designated holiday for the worship of the 'Christian God'. Out of the 16 designated annual national public holidays, nine are religious based. The public expression of religious beliefs is mostly verbally and through art. Official national celebrations of political nature are preceded by clergy-led prayers. The greeting of *Assalam aleikum* (*peace be upon you*) and exaltation of Jesus is almost obligatory among Muslims and Christians respectively. By legislation, Ugandans are required to take an official 'oath', holding either the Bible or Quran up high (ULII 2000). Physical articles of religious faiths like rosaries, the cross, the Bible, and Quran are displayed in public offices, living rooms, and vehicles.

However, the emergence of Covid-19 necessitated a shift in the routine with immense implications on religious behavior. The containment measures of the virus entailed the prohibition of congregational prayers and subsequent shutdowns of places of worship, travel bans, and curfews, which impacted on the expression of religious faith (Newport 2020). This change is an affirmation of a sociological theory which postulates a correlation between religiosity and natural disasters. The theory contends that people in areas frequently razed by natural calamities, practice religion more (Bentzen 2013:30; 2020:2 of 12; Sibley & Bulbulia 2012:2-3 of 10). Indeed, with specific reference to pandemics, people with top-class religious convictions are favorably

placed to have their religiousness being bettered by a pandemic than the less staunch (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021: 9 of 19). The Covid-19 pandemic in Uganda therefore provides an opportunity for scholars of religion to analyze and verify claims of the nexus of natural disasters and religiosity.

Uganda in the Context of Covid-19

Covid-19 is a viral infection caused by a 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2). The virus spreads from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid droplets when they cough, sneeze, sing, speak, or breathe, or when the victim is in contact with contaminated surfaces before touching their open facial parts. The spread rate is sky-rocketed by a pro-longed stay in crowded settings (WHO 2020b). Covid-19 allegedly started in the Chinese town of Wuhan in December 2019 (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir, & Siddique 2020:92; Guo, Cao, Hong, Tan, Chen, Jin, & Yan 2020:2 of 10; Zu, Jiang, Xu, Chen, Ni, Lu, & Zhang 2020:E15; Isiko 2020a:77). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic after cases were reported in 114 countries (WHO 2020a). In the case of Uganda, the President addressed the nation on March 18, 2020 with a host of preventive measures (Museveni 2020a:4-17 of 19). It included the indefinite suspension of all religious gatherings, recommending home and online prayers, regular hand washing, embracing scientific weddings and bur-ials, the imposition of a 7:00 pm curfew, and caution against shaking hands.

In all the measures, the covet objective was to decongest risk hotspots from the spread of the virus. Iran, for example, had forbidden pil-grims to visit the Islamic shrine in Qom. In Malaysia, the Tablighi gathering at a Muslim mosque in Kuala Lumpur was also forbidden. Similar Tablighi gatherings were stopped in Pakistan and India. In South Korea, a Christian congregation at the Shincheonji church was prohibited to gather, while Saudi Arabia swiftly called off the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina (Quadri 2020:220; Wildman, Bulbulia, Sosis, & Schjoedt 2020:115). In Uganda, the announcement of Covid-19 preventive measures preceded consultations with various religious leaders (Isiko 2020a:78).

In his maiden address on Covid-19, the President of Uganda referred to God three times, admonishing citizens to heed to God-given human intel-lect to act against the virus, observing God's mercy upon Uganda, and calling

upon citizens to pray for God's intervention against the virus (Museveni 2020a:7 of 19). This provides insurmountable evidence about Uganda's resolve to tackle the pandemic, based on its religious stances. However, not much has been written on the impact of this pandemic on Uganda's rich religious heritage, life, and practice. Enormous scholarly attention came from the natural sciences, with a sociological analysis and studies on the impact of the pandemic upon socio-economic variables taking center stage. The limited scholarly work on religion in Uganda has been on religious explanatory models for Covid-19 and the relevance of religiousness to fight against the pandemic (Isiko 2020a; Echoru, Kasozi, Michael, Ssempijja, Emmanuel, Mujinya, Ajambo, Matama, Monima, John, Aruwa, Kegoye, Okeniran, Adeoye, Archibong, Viola, Henry, Onongha, & Welburn 2020). On the contrary, this article does not glorify religion as a springboard for combating Covid-19 in a society with deep religious roots. Rather, the pandemic is presented as a modulating factor of religious life and practice in Uganda.

Literature Review

Globally, there has been keen scholarly interest in tracing the footprints of Covid-19 on religiosity. A study in the United States revealed that the pandemic has improved the religious faith of the American people (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021:6 of 19). In Belgium and Indonesia, Covid-19 related lockdowns gravely altered religious practices and routines with numerous believers yearning for substitute possibilities and modalities aimed at religious continuity (Huygens 2021:1 of 10; Syahrul, Hamdika, & Sholahuddin 2020:273). In Poland, Colombia, and the Philippines, religious practices intensified (Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:7 of 15; Boguszewski, Makowska, Bozewicz, & Podkowinska 2020:8 of 14; Del Castillo, Del Castillo, & Corpuz 2021:2297; Meza 2020:224-228). In Greece and other dominant Orthodox Christian countries in Eastern Europe, the pandemic also impacted on social manifestations of religiosity, taking a toll on the spiritual life of believers (Papazoglou, Moysidis, Tsagkaris, Dorosh, Karagiannidis, & Mazin 2021:1 of 13). Other scholars have analyzed the technological innovations that religious organizations embraced amidst strict combative measures of social distancing (Pillay 2020:268; Ge, Sainz, Gore, & Epps 2021:10 of 16; Parish 2020:2 of 13).

In Africa, more attention has been given to the impact of Covid-19 upon socio-economic variables like mental and reproductive health, education, disability, and gender-based violence than religious practice. Nonetheless, there is some scholarly literature on the impact of the pandemic on religiosities from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya (Sibanda, Muyambo, & Chitando 2022; Udok, Eton, & Akpanika 2020; Osei-Tutu, Affram, Mensah-Sarbah, Dzokoto, & Adams 2021; Omopo 2021; Chukwuma 2021; Sambu, Kweingoti, Cherotich, & Salimin 2021:9 of 18). An internet search for any scholarly work on the impact of the pandemic on religious practices in Uganda was futile, with the exception of studies in which religion was used as a variable of analysis of the people's understanding of Covid-19 (Isiko 2020a; Echoru *et al*. 2020). It is therefore a novel task to establish and analyze how much change the pandemic could have brought to a country with unquestionably high levels of religiosity like Uganda.

In spite of the numerous studies on religiosity, there is no consensus on the precise definition of this concept (Bergan & McConatha 2001:24; Holdcroft 2006:89; Paraschiva & Nicoleta 2011:354). The tolerable opinion though is that religiosity is a multi-dimensional concept (Cornwall, Albrecht, Cunningham, & Pitcher 1986:226). This is rooted in the variant comprehension of religion, based on the diversity of theories of religion (Pearce, Hayward, & Pearlman 2017:3). There are, however, three conventional denominators of religiosity: Religious beliefs and identity; religious activities; and personal religious practice, also known as 'devotionalism' (Mathur 2012:85; Pearce *et al*. 2017:4-5). The last aspect involves one's individual religious behavior, thus requiring a level of personal dedication. These dimensions of religiosity are not so distinct (Bjarnason 2007:350; Cornwall *et al*. 1986:227).

Marcus (n.d.) argues that whereas beliefs may reveal a person's or group's understanding about the ultimate nature of deities or the universe, behavior involves acting in a certain way as an individual or in a group. Whereas in sociological terms, religious identity has a lot to do with membership to a religious denomination, the concept of belonging carries a stronger affective dimension than mere self-identification with a religious tradition (Oostveen 2019:2 of 10). Covid-19 dictates research concerning 'stay-home', self-isolation, the imposition of curfews, and the total shutdown of places of worship which have incapacitated religiosity studies along the conventional tenets of membership and religious attendance. This has necessitated the creativity of researchers to uncover and study elements beyond membership

and attendance, depicting people's religiosity during those unique circumstances. Religious clerics, involved in the study assessed the alteration in religiosity of the faithful and self, based on their own parameters which offer a sense of belonging (Campbell & Coles 1973:153).

The challenge with previous studies on religiosity though, is their preoccupation with quantitative analyses (Cornwall *et al*. 1986:233-241; Bentzen 2020:7-9 of 12; 2013:10-30 of 40; Bergan & McConatha 2001:28-29). All dimensions of religiosity have been a subject of quantitative measurement on a scale which renders most studies on the personal and affective relationship with the spiritual defective (Koenig, Al Zaben, Khalifa, & Shohaib 2014:533). This is because devotionalism or individual feelings of one's religiosity are better understood by observing and analyzing religious behavior and emotions rather than statistical measurements (Głaz 2021:577). Yet still, quantitative studies on religiosity have been associated with research results which are not entirely consistent because of null findings and even negative associations. This is due to variations in subjects and contextual characteristics (Zwingmann, Klein, & Büssing 2011:346). This article is therefore a purely qualitative presentation and analysis of religious clerics' views and the author's personal experiences of the effect of Covid-19 upon religious lives, beliefs and belonging, practices and devotion.

Methodology

In this article, the author abandons a positivist epistemological approach and embraces a postmodernism approach. The author was dependent on clerics' personal perspectives of religiosity and his own, rather than pre-determined dimensions and standardized tools of religiosity. Postmodernism has proved to be the ideal approach to anchor the study because it values the subjective and multiple opinions rather than predetermined rules for action. It assigns value to multiple meanings rather than being the single, authoritative voice of the expert researcher. Using his vantage point as an academic of religious-theological studies at a higher institution of learning and a critical participating observer of Christian religious practices, the author makes critical analyses of the shift in the religious behavior of Ugandans amidst the pandemic.

To enhance the credibility and validity of research findings, the author held 'interactive interviews' with eight religious clerics, choosing two

from each of the four significant religious groups, who owing to their training and professional practice would be able to discern religious behavior. The robust engagement was facilitated by the fact that the author and religious clerics were acquaintances, hence innovative and flexible alternative interview formats were used (cf. Baker, Marti, Braunstein, Whitehead, & Yukich 2020:366). These included WhatsApp, Facebook, ordinary phone interviews, and short messaging (SMS) applications to have 'chat interviews'. The author found this to be the best approach because the pandemic made it difficult to use 'traditional' vital methods and tools of studying religion (Dowson 2020:42). Interviewees' names are withheld due to anonymity but are identified as 'Religious Cleric' followed by their religious denomination.

Findings and Discussion

The study revealed that Covid-19 and the associated containment measures had both a positive and negative impact on the religiosity of Ugandans. Religiously staunch Ugandans prior to the outbreak of the pandemic got more devoted albeit with constraints to practice it fully. Those with loose commitments prior to the pandemic abandoned their religious practices. Evidence and an analysis of the above is presented under the following four thematic areas: Religious belonging; religious practices and events; devotionalism; and innovations for religious life and practice. It will be discussed below.

Religious Belonging

This is a sense of religious desire beyond membership to a religious tradition. Religious belonging presented here is similar to what Bimbo Omopo appropriates as religious conviviality in his analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on religious practices in Nigeria (Omopo 2021:7). The notion of religious belonging, just like conviviality relates to aspects of social interaction and cohesion, producing a form of shared life, a strong sense of togetherness, and mutual aid among members of the same religious community, despite other socio-economic differences (Omopo 2021:7). The precise question to be answered here is, How did the pandemic and its restrictions affect the religious belonging of Ugandans? For the first two years of the subsistence of the pandemic, the country was in total lockdown for a combined number of 10

months. During the total lockdown, there was a total shutdown of places of worship and a complete ban on congregational worship. In addition, there was a continued restriction of overnight prayers (Museveni 2020b; 2021a).

The closure of places of worship negated people's association with religion. Both the church (the building itself) and mosque are representations of God's presence at least in a nominal sense. Because congregational worship on Sundays and Fridays epitomizes the Christian and Islamic identity, the shutdown antagonized a strong belief in the obligation to attend Sunday and Friday meetings for Christians and Muslims respectively (Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:5-6 of 15). Their closure made the religiously staunch appear no different from the non-religious who desert worship places. Traditional public prayer days ordinarily identify the kind of religion that a Ugandan belongs to. The complete ban on congregational prayers curtailed this kind of religious entitlement.

During the relaxation of Covid-19 measures, the government encouraged Christians and Muslims to hold scientific prayers, either involving the physical attendance of congregants less than 200 members or to go entirely virtual (Museveni 2021c:6 of 12). The guidelines further restricted the vulnerable from attending congregational worship, hence denying them the opportunity to express their faith together with other members. The closure of Sunday schools and *Madrasa* for Christians and Muslims respectively denied children the opportunity to be nurtured into their religious traditions (Religious Cleric 11, Pentecostal Church, WhatsApp chat Interview, Kampala).

The pandemic disorganized the 'cell ministry' and 'fellowship groups' common with Urban Anglican and neo-Pentecostal churches in Uganda. 'Cell ministry' involves Christians within close proximity, holding informal prayer meetings at regular intervals in each member's home. 'Fellowship groups' are small Christian groups usually based on the unique social, economic, ethnic, and religious standing of members. 'Fellowships' and 'cell groups' fill the void when members are unable to congregate in church buildings. These groups help to preserve religious identity and fellowship with each other (Kwon, Ebaugh, & Hagan 1997:248). Contrary to the Nigerian experience as articulated by Omopo (2021:16-17), in Uganda the ban on all forms of religious gatherings and the personal dread to contract the virus incapacitated the functioning of the fellowship groups and cell ministry. Whereas some fellowships and cell groups met in secrecy, the Covid-19 infection of one member kept other members away from subsequent meetings.

Fellowship and Cell members who contracted the disease were stigmatized. Only worship at household level remained functional. Ordinary churchgoers became terrified of their previously revered religious clerics. This affected some conventional and revered Christian traditions, for example hugging and kissing the Bishop's ring (Religious Cleric 11, Pentecostal Church, WhatsApp chat Interview, Kampala).

The pandemic and its collateral restrictions disorganized the sustained Christian and Muslim identities through mandatory prayer reforms which undermined the performed theology (Stenschke 2018:158). Prayer in the context of group interaction ritually embodies and dramatizes the understandings of the community (Fuist 2015:533). A Muslim cleric emphasized the significance of collective prayer to religious identity in the following words:

> The gathering of Muslims for prayer and other such religious practices clearly identifies them as people of one faith. Muslims are expected to pray five times a day in a congregational style along with the mandatory Friday *Jumah* prayers. The strict observance of prayer demonstrates the level of commitment to one's faith which lures non-Muslims to convert. Hence, Covid-19 has constrained the spread of Islam (Religious Cleric 1, Islamic faith, Phone Interview, Kampala).

In order to redefine and reassert themselves as distinct religious communities, religious clerics initiated a religious campaign in July 2020 dubbed 'I can't breathe', to protest the continued closure of places of worship (Kalema 2020). Some religious clerics sought for a court redress in order to manifest their faith (Kigongo & Wesaka 2021). Interviewees reported that they were nostalgic about a sense of belonging and religious intimacy.

Religious Practices and Events

Religious practices are hereby defined as activities and rituals that are engaged in a routine as expression of beliefs and faith. On one hand, religious practices of Muslims are enshrined in the five pillars of Islam as well as the derivation from the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Christians are bound by their sacramental life instituted by Jesus Christ. The sacramental

life of the (Catholic) church includes a member's fulfilment of the baptism, confirmation, penance, praying for the sick, Holy Eucharist, holy matrimony, and ordination (Norman & Reiss 2020:3). Religious events are commemorations of the major spiritual milestones of a religious denomination. Religious practices have a direct impact on personal devotion, while religious events demonstrate the religiousness of members as a social category.

According to religious clerics, the non-fulfilment of the sacramental life for Christians and pillars of Islam for Muslims affected the level of religious commitment (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview; Religious Cleric 2, Islamic faith, Interview). To the Christians, sacraments are viewed as transformative. Therefore, to be deprived of it, no matter the reasons, is deeply disruptive (Norman & Reiss 2020:11). In the Ugandan setting, churches were deprived of the opportunity to baptize new converts, a public ritual whether by sprinkling or immersion in water. This means that for a combined 10 months during the first two years of the subsistence of the pandemic, no church admitted new members.

Prayers for the sick and the dead, as well as the celebration of religious marriages were grossly affected. Prayers for the sick and the dead are mandatory practices among Uganda's religious elite and followers. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, the anointing of the sick is one of the seven sacraments that are guarded jealously. In Protestant churches, there are prescribed liturgical prayers for the ailing and the deceased. In Islam, there are prescribed practices for burying the dead, all conducted in a congregational format. Unfortunately, the ban on congregating paused these practices. Covid-19 standard operating procedures (SOPs) restricted burials to core relatives. With the actual disposal of Covid-19 fatalities, the Muslim burial was restricted to health personnel with approved personal protective equipment (PPEs). According to clerics, they were proscribed from blessing the dead body and praying for the grieving relatives (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). Religious clerics who were previously central in the burial rite, stood quite distant from the Covid-19 cadaver at the funeral.

The grieving relatives remained unsure of the spiritual fate of their deceased relatives. Muslim burial rites dictate fellow Muslims to be in charge of the process to ensure the utmost observance of all rituals for the deceased to be granted peace in *Jannah*. However, during the lockdowns, health personnel substituted Muslim clerics. The restrictions on the number of mourners denied the living Muslims their spiritual rewards (Religious Cleric 3, Is-

lamic faith, Interview, Kampala). The urge to uphold burial rites as per Islamic traditions gave birth to a pioneer Muslim Funeral Services Firm at Uganda Muslim Supreme Council-Kibuli in November 2020 to observe both the government directives and the Muslim burial practices (Kamurungi 2021).

Relatedly, the sacrament of praying for the sick and souls of the deceased in Christian circles were endangered by the contagiousness of the virus. In this sacrament, there are three practices involved: The confession of one's sins to the priest (Macaraan 2021:e531) which was made difficult due to the freezing of both private and public transport; the anointing of the sick with oil smeared on the forehead, palms, and feet of the sick by the priest; and offering the sacrament of Holy Communion to the sick. However, the tradition of sharing wine and bread right from the hand of the clergy was thought a possible medium for Covid-19 transmission. Catholic Priests declared that they hesitated to anoint the suspected sick especially in the villages. A Priest said: 'Someone asked me to go and pray for a very sick person within my parish a stone's throw away, but I declined due to my uncertainty about the patient's Covid-19 status. I dreaded risking the parishioners' health (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

Among other reforms by the Catholic Church in Uganda, the customary use of confession boxes was banned, dictating the practice to take place outdoor or in a well-ventilated indoor space as long as the sacramental seal was safely guarded. There was to be a two-meter distance between the priest and the penitent facing in same direction. However, the church ruled out confession by telephone and internet based technology (The Independent 2021). The effectiveness of these sacraments and practices is thought to require the effective mediation of the clergy, for which they were constrained. This led to diminishing faith levels, rendering clerics irrelevant.

In addition to the non-observance of religious burial rites, the pandemic affected the celebration of religious marriages in Uganda. Whereas weddings were initially suspended for 32 days from March 20, 2020, the suspension was later lifted, but still with a restricted number of attendees (Museveni 2021b:19 of 23), contrary to the multitudes which partly characterize pomp during non-pandemic days. Specifically, Muslim clerics indicated that in Islam, the marriage ceremony, also called *Nikah* is expected to be massively witnessed (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala). The celebratory style of religious marriages in Uganda during the pandemic birthed the concept of 'scientific marriages' (Museveni 2020a:10 of 19). In Uganda's

context, a 'scientific marriage' refers to a minimally attended marriage event where the standard operating procedures for Covid-19 are observed. These restrictions on weddings discern the spiritual from the nominal followers of faiths. During the restrictions, the staunch wedded albeit these restrictions. On the other hand, the less committed postponed their weddings, anticipating many attendees in the post-Covid-19 era.

The requirement for 'social distancing' to ensure a physical distance of at least two meters from each other meant that the clergy had to preside over the marriage while unprecedentedly distance themselves from the couple. This brought a feeling of spiritual deficiency among the wedded couple (Religious Cleric 5, Church of Uganda, Interview; Religious Cleric 10, Pentecostal Church, Interview, Kampala). Such restrictions resulted into fewer marriages being celebrated than before the pandemic. At the Busoga Anglican Diocese Cathedral – Bugembe, the number of monthly weddings dwindled from about 10 to only one or two in a month (Religious Cleric 5, Church of Uganda, Interview).

The case was not any different in the Roman Catholic Church in Uganda that hardly wedded people during the lockdown periods (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese). Clerics believed that the restrictions on weddings kept people in fornication and cohabitation – two sinful acts that reduce one's spirituality and favor before God (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview; Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala). Fewer wedded persons not only meant a smaller number of individuals who qualified to stand as godparents for those to receive baptism and confirmation, but also lessened the number of people to partake in the Holy Communion, as the wedding confers that right upon a person. The Covid-19 restrictions on weddings boosted civil marriages instead (Muhumuza & Mutsaka 2021). This was attributed to the need to circumvent the ordeals that Ugandans bear when preparing religious marriages. This category of Ugandans found in these restrictions a scapegoat to avoid societal and religious pressures that punctuate religious weddings (Muhumuza & Mutsaka 2021).

Other religious practices and events that were foregone due to Covid-19 include the ordination of clergy, religious pilgrimages, the canonization of religious clerics, and the commemoration of annual religious days, being at the core of the beliefs of specific religious groups. Several Anglican and Roman Catholic dioceses were not able to ordain deserving priests and Bishops.

Specifically, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Jinja never held any ordination since the nationwide lockdown of March 2020. The Episcopal Consecration of Rt. Rev. Raphael P'Mony Wokorach, M.C.C.J. Bishop elect of Nebbi Diocese, scheduled for June 26, 2021, was postponed due to the pandemic (Kipkura 2021). In Kampala Archdiocese, candidates for Holy Orders lingered on for more than a year to get ordained only after special permission from the government (The Independent 2021). The Anglican diocese of Kampala ordained twelve priests and canonized others only after nine months of the subsisting pandemic (Kasozi 2020). The Anglican Diocese of Busoga twice postponed the canonization of several clergy and lay people due to the pandemic. The failure to have the canonization events and ordination of priests, negated the supposed spirituality gains within the church (Religious Cleric 6, Church of Uganda, Interview). Without priests, the church's sacramental life was constrained, for which the clergy are the main celebrants, hence reducing the church in Uganda to that of lay believers (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

The government's imposition of the curfew from 7:00 pm. in the evening to 5:30 am. in the morning affected traditional religious practices during the Muslims' fasting month. They neither held *Tarawiih* prayers nor had the customary *iftar* meals at the mosques taken place as was previously the norm. *Iftar* meals were made possible through provisions of individual philanthropists or contributions from Muslims who attended prayers in a specific mosque. Through *iftar*, Muslims enjoyed unity and companionship, ultimately enlisting a sense of contentment among believers. During the first wave of the pandemic, the ban on congregational prayers as well as the imposition of night curfews made it practically impossible for Muslims to hold *Tarawiih* prayers in 2020. Muslims found it difficult to accomplish the 20 accustomed *rakahs* during *Tarawiih* prayers. In many cases, it was difficult for any group to complete the reading of the whole Quran during the pandemic fasting seasons (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). To the less committed Muslims, the challenges posed by the virus during the fasting month brought a sigh of relief from the incessant *iftar* and *Tarawiih* demands, while the devoted felt cheated and spiritually incomplete.

Ugandan Muslims had two unusual *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations during the subsistence of the pandemic. The first one was in May 2020 when Uganda was in a total lockdown. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC) leadership advised Muslims to conduct *Eid al-Fitr* prayers from their homes.

Eid al-Fitr prayers, however, were televised at the national Muslim headquarters at Old Kampala, attended by less than 10 people. This nature of *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations denied Muslims an opportunity to pray in the prescribed format as per tradition, with less *rakahs*, no sermon (*kutbah*), as well as a failure to contribute to charity (*zakat*) – a mandatory requirement after attending *Eid al-Fitr* prayers (The Independent 2020b). To enable the Muslims to accomplish their *zakat* obligations during the lockdown, the UMSC leadership introduced the practice of sending monetary charity through the mobile money system. Muslim clerics, however, noted that this was evaded by Muslims who had been less committed to charity during pre-pandemic times, as the pandemic was a convenient scapegoat to forfeit this religious obligation. Although by the second *Eid al-Fitr* in May 2021, congregational worship was permitted for up to 200 congregants, several Muslims were financially incapacitated by the lockdown, rendering them powerless in funding both the *iftar* and *Eid al-Fitr* celebrations (The Independent 2020a).

Contrary to the pre-pandemic call for a massive turn up for Christmas prayers, religious clerics endorsed Christmas prayers on televisions and online platforms. Christian religious clerics invented more church services on Christmas to enable more devotees to attend Christmas prayers. The observations about Easter during the pandemic were not any different. The central issue about Easter is the commemoration of the 'way of the cross' under the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC). This is usually celebrated on Good Friday. While the 'way of the cross' was not observed by the UJCC in 2020 in the customary manner, Christian churches encouraged their members to observe the event around their homes. Family members were encouraged to walk in procession around their compounds, though several Christians skipped this event because their homes were not conducive enough (Kisekka, Ssekweyama, Ocungi, & Luwaga 2020). The impact of the restrictions frustrated Muslim as well as Christian devotees due to the presumed missing of spiritual rewards emanating from the abscondment of religious days and events. However, to the nominally religious, the limitations of Covid-19 were a blessing in disguise. It aided them in eschewing 'burdensome' religious sacrifices.

Another noteworthy Christian and Islamic religious practice is making pilgrimages to holy sites. Ugandan Muslims fancy the holy cities of Mecca and Medina while Christians visit the Uganda Martyrs site at Namugongo. The pandemic made it impossible even for the financially-able Muslims to

make pilgrimages. Saudi Arabia, the host of the Islamic holy sites downsized pilgrims to fully vaccinated Saudi Arabian residents (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi). The church called off the pompous annual celebrations of the Uganda Martyrs at the shrines of the Namugongo Roman Catholic and Anglican Church of Uganda, scheduled for June 3 – a designated public holiday. The Namugongo Martyrs shrines had been a crowd magnet for the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church calendars before the pandemic, attracting up to three million pilgrims worldwide in commemoration of 45 young Christian converts – 23 Anglicans and 22 Catholics – who were martyred between 1885 and 1887 on the orders of the then reigning monarch of the Buganda Kingdom, Kabaka Mwanga, in a test of divided loyalty between the king and faith (Ofungi 2021).

In 2021, a representative number of only 200 pilgrims, most of whom were religious clerics and government officials participated in the annual celebrations at the Uganda Martyrs Catholic shrine of Namugongo (Oluka 2021). This was the first ever virtual Uganda martyrs celebrations (Lukwago 2021; Oluka 2021). To some Christians, however, this was spiritually inadequate because they were uncertain of a response to their prayers and a realistic connection with the martyrs (Daily Monitor 2021). Celebrating the Uganda martyrs which involves walking, usually offered Christians an ideal atmosphere to reflect, pray, and rebuild their Christian lives (Daily Monitor 2021). For the Pentecostal Christians, the annual end of the year Christian Passover festivals were restricted for the two years of 2020 and 2021. The annual end of the year Passover festival in Namboole, organized by Apostle Dr. Joseph Sserwada under the auspices of the Victory Church Ministries used to bring together more than 100,000 Pentecostal Christians. This festival had portrayed some level of Pentecostal Christian identity in the country. The Nelson Mandela National Sports Stadium in Namboole which used to host the festival on December 31 of each year had been turned into an isolation and auxiliary treatment center for Covid-19 victims. Pastor Robert Kayanja's 77 days of glory (77 DOGS) and Pastor Jackson Ssenyonga's five P's (praise, power, prayer, prosperity, and permanent miracles) were also called off (Isiko 2020b:631). The pandemic therefore not only negatively affected Uganda's religious tourism but also denied Ugandans a religious identity.

Devotionalism

It was established that Covid-19 had a great impact on the devotional life of some people. The less devoted before the pandemic further weakened their religiosity. The staunch in pre-pandemic times became more devoted. It was further established that devotionalism increased at personal and family levels but declined at community level. The pandemic brought some people closer to religion and God because the former's contagious nature and lack of cure by then heightened the fear of death, hence urging people to reflect more on their relationship with God. According to religious clerics, Covid-19 turned some Ugandans into religious fanatics who shunned sin. In support of this finding, an Anglican clergy noted, 'Some drunkards no longer drink due to the closure of bars and all recreation centers, thus reflecting on their spiritual lives. There is a Christian who abandoned alcoholism after suffering severely from Covid-19' (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview).

The pandemic provided an eschatological attitude, providing a new historical threshold that reminded believers about the coming to an end of the world and the promise of salvation (Mirela 2021:463). It led to more involvement and participation of lay people in religious rites that were considered a preserve for the clergy. With the guidance of religious clerics, homes became central to holding liturgical services and *Swallah*, attended by family members. The Anglican Church in Busoga designed a liturgical order of services for homes. This helped them to hold weekly family Sunday services. The family members shared liturgical roles, ensuring a resemblance of a fully-fledged congregational Sunday service. The roles of worship leader, text reader, preacher, and collection of offertories would be shared appropriately depending on the family size (Religious Cleric 12, Anglican Church, Interview). One parent stated, 'I have been equipping my male children with Islamic knowledge to act as Imams and lead in prayers at home. We shifted congregational prayers from the mosque to homes, though with limited numbers' (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala).

The previous cleric revealed that the closure of places of worship led to intensive prayer and religious instruction of their children at family level, especially of the already staunch parents. Some parents with limited religious knowledge used lay religious leaders within their communities to instruct the children. The lockdown therefore led to more intense catechism and prayers than in the pre-pandemic era. This enhanced the religious commitments of

families as well as family unity. It is also in sync with the old religious adage, 'a family that prays together, sticks together'. One respondent asserted that one of the indicators of a family's religiosity in Uganda is belonging to the same religion and praying as a family (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). One respondent narrated, 'Much devotion has been noticeable during the pandemic. I have witnessed worthwhile concentration among the downsized Catholic funeral and burial congregation. Whereas it is difficult to measure the amount of devotion, attentiveness and paralinguistic cues of the attendees signal increased devotion and commitment to their faith' (Religious Cleric 9, Catholic Church, Interview).

The observation by the above cleric indicates that a mere attendance of prayer may fall short in measuring religiosity. Effective attendance requires listening to the religious message. The shutting down of places of worship tested the generosity of religious people through willful giving, tithing, and payment of *zakat*. Whereas it is a tradition for both Muslims and Christians to make financial contributions, *zakat*, and offertory respectively, this was inhibited. Religiously motivated financial generosity showcased devotion. Pentecostal churches intensified the issuing out of mobile money numbers on which the tithe would be disbursed. Other churches provided bank account numbers to Christians to deposit their offertory. In some less sophisticated cases, the clergy encouraged their followers to keep tithes and offertories until the places of worship would opened again. Muslims were encouraged to get in touch with their Imams to pass on their *zakat* to the needy. In cases where such alternative and aggressive strategies to mobilize funds were made, the results were positive. A respondent averred, 'The religious commitment of the Catholics in my parish has been tested and strengthened through financial contributions to the priests during the lockdown. Catholics have contributed both financially and through tangible food items' (Religious Cleric 8, Catholic Church, Interview, Jinja Diocese).

In Uganda, financial contribution is a measure of one's devotion to their faith. However, the continued contribution was for the earlier devoted. The closure of places of worship was a scapegoat for the less committed to evade making financial contributions to their religious institutions (Religious Cleric 12, Anglican Church, Interview). All in all, the closure of places of worship promoted nominalism and a devaluation of religious attendance. Religious nominalism weakened people's faith further. Before the pandemic, the less committed only hanged in there due to constant religious instruction dur-

ing congregational worship. One priest acknowledged a reduced church attendance after the first lockdown (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). This was partly because of the alternative ways of worshiping ushered in by the circumstances of the pandemic (Religious Cleric 4, Islamic faith, Interview, Masindi; Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). The finding is consonant with the study done by Bergan and McConatha (2001:24) which identifies physical limitations among this group as a hindrance to the expression of their religiousness. Mainstream churches, especially the Anglican church of Uganda and the Roman Catholic Church were the main losers in this technological shift, yet the Pentecostal churches were thriving.

Innovations for Religious Life and Practice

In order to maintain a semblance of pre-pandemic religious life, a lot of innovations were adopted. The major objective was to keep in touch with the followers despite the ban on religious gatherings. The most prominent mechanism was digital literacy. Digital literacy involves the use of digital technologies to convey, search, consume, and participate in religious activities. The search for religion was shifted from places of worship to the internet and other media. In all, there were three categories of digital media technologies that were used: The internet based platforms, radio and television, as well as ordinary cell phones. Internet based media included, among others Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube. Small Christian communities evolved themselves into social media groups through which religious clerics would preach. There were also official religious institutions and social media platforms. Institutionalized churches like the Anglican Church of Uganda and Roman Catholic Churches in the urbanized areas used Zoom and Google meet platforms to conduct church services. The rural churches and mosques, however, remained untouched by the technological innovations. Religious clerics revealed an increased use of digital media technologies for religious activities during the pandemic as evidenced by this interviewee: 'Digital literacy has promoted devotion among Catholics in my diocese. The phone calls (inquiring about digital church service programs during the pandemic) grossly outweigh those before the pandemic. There has been attendance to virtual assemblies' (Religious Cleric 9, Catholic Church, Interview).

An interviewed Muslim cleric's insight was close to that quoted above. He argued, 'We are trying to use online platforms, but numerous Muslims lack smartphones. I receive many phone calls from people inquiring how to go about their faith. People use radios to listen to *Kutbah*. This has aided learning during this lockdown' (Religious Cleric 3, Islamic faith, Interview, Kampala).

The use of media technologies, however, faced challenges especially inaccessibility to gadgets. Despite Covid-19 having an impact on the evolution of online religious services, different religious followers reacted differently to these innovations. This promoted personal prayer and less dependence on the religious clerics for spiritual guidance, though numerous phone calls from Christians to clerics calling for prayers for specific challenges remained noticeable (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). These experienced what Del Castillo *et al*. (2021:2297) describe as spiritual dryness – a failure to experience interpersonal closeness with the spiritual. The different home routines interfered with the effective participation and attendance to online religious programs.

The effectiveness of digital literacy as the 'new normal' for the revitalization of religiosity among Ugandans amidst the pandemic therefore remains debatable. The said challenges might have simply promoted nominalism. The innovative strategies were not wholly embraced especially by the elderly and women, who were mostly challenged with adapting to new technologies, let alone inaccessibility to digital devices. Technology favored the youths more. An Anglican priest of the Church of Uganda argued that online church meetings were not effective in having previously committed Christians to attend church services and meetings. Out of the approximately 3,000 members who attend worship services at St. Francis Chapel of Makerere University, about 300 attended the special online church teaching services for two weeks during the lockdown. The case was not so different for Bugolobi Church of Uganda (Religious Cleric 13, Anglican Church, Interview). This dismal attendance was attributed to limited internet data and connectivity, limited know-how of ICT use, dwindled concentration, and extortionate ICT infrastructure, as well as a mere hesitation to adapt to the new normal (Religious Cleric 7, Catholic Church, Interview). It should, however, be noted that digital media technologies can only enhance people's religiosity, but not replace traditional forms of expressing one's faith and devotion to religion.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study aimed at establishing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the religious life and practice of Ugandans. It was established that the pandemic uniquely impacted people's religiosity. It revealed that those deeply committed to religion before the pandemic became more devoted during the pandemic. Conversely, congregants not well grounded in their faith before the pandemic, were negatively impacted. This finding is similar to that of the Colombian experience where the intensity of religiosity during the pandemic was dependent on one's pre-pandemic religious participation. In other words, pre-pandemic religious behavior was a determinant of the change in religious actions during the pandemic (Meza 2020:230). However, this finding challenges long-time theoretical and philosophical orientations which postulate a universally monolithic impact of pandemics, drawing people closer to religion (Bentzen 2013:3 of 40).

Previous studies have always held that natural disasters and pandemics draw people nearer to religion and God (Sibley & Bulbulia 2012:4-7 of 10; Bentzen 2013:3 of 40). However, such conclusions have been based on the experiences of disasters which have never involved shutting religion and places of worship from the depressed. Covid-19 instead dissuaded people from religious activities, especially of a congregational nature. In this very case, religious gatherings were identified as a hotspot for the spread of the virus, hence a ban on public congregational worship (Quadri 2020:219; Wildman *et al*. 2020:115). In India, the pandemic never affected religious activities because prayers are conducted in homes by the majority of these people (Fatima, Oyetunji, Mishra, Sinha, Olorunsogbon, Akande, & Kar 2022:6 of 7). In Europe and the United States, the lockdown heightened religious observance due to effective social welfare systems which economically sustained people despite the lockdown of the economies (Sahgal & Connaughton 2021:8 of 19; Sulkowski & Ignatowski 2020:10 of 15; Boguszewski *et al*. 2020:8 of 14; Del Castillo *et al*. 2021:2300). This availed time for personal religious reflection and observance, contrary to Uganda, with no known state welfare interventions. The less devoted Ugandans substituted religion time with survival hunting.

Contrary to precursory studies that religion yields a social connection among those grappling with natural disasters, this study revealed that Covid-19 and its containment measures curtailed people's association for fright of

infection among religious clerics and their followers. This rebuffed the religious intimacy which has overly been theorized to exist among religious people during times of natural disasters. Rather than drawing people to religious conversions as theorized by scholars regarding pandemics and disasters, Covid-19 measures made it unfeasible for people to get converted and confess their new faith. The ban on religious gatherings made Ugandans to lose a sense of belonging and religious identity. Indeed, the pandemic and its associated measures birthed disembodied religious communities especially in the urban areas, similar to other African countries like Nigeria (Omopo 2021:8-9).

Religious clerics who play a pivotal role in comforting and encouraging followers, retreated to themselves, creating a religious vacuum. Rather than acting as avenues for refugees and solace, places of worship were constructed as dens of Covid-19, worthy shunning. These revelations are indistinguishable from Europe where the visibility of religious leaders diminished in the wake of the pandemic (Dowson 2020:46), creating a stark divide between the religious individual and their religious community (Parish 2020:12 of 13). In the Arab world too, believers felt abandoned by their religious leaders (Piwko 2021:13 of 18). However, findings from Kenya are contradictory. The pandemic had no significant effect on both religious affiliation and participation in religious activities, albeit with a ban on religious gatherings (Sambu *et al*. 2021:9 of 18). The Kenyan experience was attributed to the reduced costs on media and online coverage of religious activities during the pandemic which aided the access of the majority. The pandemic therefore became a personal test of religious resilience. It discerned the nominal from the committed religious people. Indeed, as advanced by Pillay (2020:272), Covid-19 'flattened the curve' on hierarchical religious structures. It then encouraged a rethinking on mediation of religious clerics in religious practice.

The pandemic contributed to the evolution of religious practices and events. Older forms of worship took on newer forms of religious expression. Indeed, as argued by Pillay (2020:273), the pandemic provided a window for reimagining a new theology which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, roles, and rites, but being God's transforming presence in the world. One such evolution was the intensive mediatization of religious life and practice. It was not imaginable before the pandemic that the Holy Communion for Christians could ever be celebrated over television. Relatedly, the holding of *Jumah* prayers, a traditionally congregational prayer by the Imam, alone in

the mosque as the rest of the Muslims followed on television, became a new revolution which the Islamic faith may have to contend with henceforth. Indeed, as advanced by Dowson (2020:42) and Parish (2020:2 of 13), such a religious revolution on the core beliefs and practices of religious faiths requires reflection to modify the embodied presence of religion in society. The thinking that God is responsive to those who physically gather in his Name in worship places was demystified by the religious innovations during the pandemic. It redefined the church as a group of Christians who belonged to the same online church, church WhatsApp, or Facebook group which challenged the orthodox religious teachings of Islam and Christianity which prioritize congregational prayer (Syahrul *et al*. 2020:273).

However, digital media technological innovations cannot replace or effectively enable religious followers to fully savor religious practices as some require mediation by the clergy, for example, baptism, weddings, and the Holy Communion. Indeed, online religious worship activities limited diverse religious activities during the pandemic (Meza 2020:230). Nonetheless, the challenges of a shift to online religious services seem to have been universal (Dowson 2020:42). Although technology was thought to have enabled a continued religious display, it was perceived as a double-edged sword, serving as both a motivator and barrier to religious practice (Ge *et al*. 2020:12 of 16). Whereas a big section of religious followers in Uganda was cut off by this shift, findings from Europe and the United States suggested otherwise, with the number of the faithful who embraced online Easter Mass tripling (Parish 2020:7-8 of 13). This illustrates the non-universal impact of Covid-19 on religious life and practice. The swift adoption of technology and social media by religions for worship during the pandemic provide an opportunity for religious organizations and scholars to reflect deeply on the intersection between religion, technology, and digitalization in developing countries.

One of the limitations of the study is that these findings cannot be generalized to all religious groups in Uganda because of differences in forms of religious expression. For example, believers of African indigenous religions and Hinduism in Uganda may not have found the pandemic constraining to their expression of faith because most of the time they do not require institutionalized places of worship which could be shut down. Second, evidence used in this article was reliant on opinions of religious clerics, but not ordinary religious members who could have provided first-hand personal experiences. The unconventional 'remote' research methods of data collection

like WhatsApp and ordinary phone interviews excluded some knowledgeable religious leaders.

All in all, the religious experiences of Ugandan people during the pandemic contribute to the debate about the obsession with quantifying religiosity over qualitative studies. It has for example, been demonstrated that religious practitioners have their own description of religiosity contrary to the quantitative indices put up by researchers. Indeed, religiosity depends on the population under study as well as the methodological and analytical approaches used by different researchers.

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Agency and the Critical Study of Religion

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Abstract

The critical study of religion is enchanted by modern problematics, and this limits the feasibility of the project. Both secularity and modernity have been deconstructed in recent decades, but the primacy of the modern and secular agentic human remains largely unchallenged. Tracing this trend back in European history shows that a definitive collapsing of agency was necessary for the development of modern political and social structures. Modern prescriptions on agency limit the study of religion – a domain which is largely constituted by narratives involving non-human agents. A remedy for the impasse may be found in looking to a nonmodern conceptual apparatus for new avenues in theory-making and applying these concepts to the critical study of religion in the 21st century.

Keywords: Modernity, religious studies, nonmodern, agency, critical theory of religion, secular, posthuman

Introduction

The critical study of religion is enchanted by modern problematics. The ongoing debate around the term 'religion' is indicative of this conceptual gyre, and evidenced in the interchanges between Bruce Lincoln and Tim Fitzgerald, published in the journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (1996 to 2007). In a series of articles that serve as a conversation between these two scholars, the nature and study of religion is thoroughly contested, along with the value of the term itself.

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Lincoln's Theses

Lincoln sets the stage for this discussion in his 1996 article entitled, *Theses on method* (Lincoln 1996), and later admits that this publication was 'a deliberate provocation that invited critical response' (Lincoln 2007:163). In 2005, in an article that goes by the same title, he states that 'history is the method and religion the object of study' (Lincoln 2005:8) and follows this with a discussion of how history attends to critical and temporal domains, while religion attends to the eternal and transcendent. Within this dualist framework, he notes that the critical study of religion is 'a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself' (Lincoln 2005:8). Based on this logic, he laments the 'the guilty conscience of western imperialism' (Lincoln 2005:9) that he believes is implicated in permitting 'those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood' (Lincoln 2005:9). He condemns this method of studying religion as 'cultural relativism' that should not be 'confused with scholarship' (Lincoln 2005:10). Lincoln's succinct and rather perfunctory thesis embodies an early critical religion discourse, which is firmly committed to a modern, secular, and humanist approach to the study of religion. Claiming hegemonic privileges for the 'objective' position of the historian, he disregards the meat and bones of the religious domain entirely, comprised of the lived experiences of religious people. The unproblematized dualism in his conceptual framework renders his contribution to the debate around religion rather dated, and possibly only useful as a departure for critique.

Fitzgerald's Response

Fitzgerald supplies this critique in an article entitled *Bruce Lincoln's 'Theses on method': Antitheses* (Fitzgerald 2006). Identifying as a critical scholar himself, Fitzgerald laments Lincoln's 'facility to create an appearance of critical discourse analysis' (Fitzgerald 2006:392) while presenting a list of theses that are 'hardly intelligible as a serious academic proposition about method' (Fitzgerald 2006:413). He argues that the essentializing stance that Lincoln declares, in which both the religious and the secular historic are reified, serves to confirm 'a network of categorical assumptions around which the world can remain polarized' (Fitzgerald 2006:392). Instead, Fitzgerald suggests that these polarized categories should be understood as 'rhetorical and

ideological' distinctions within a wider dynamic of power relations (Fitzgerald 2006:397).

Fitzgerald (2006:401) goes on to note that both religion and the secular are ideological constructs with 'no essential meaning'. In his earlier book, *The ideology of religious studies* (Fitzgerald 1999), he clarifies that his critical study of religion involves a radical deconstruction of the term and an abandonment of the academic project to understand religion as anything other than socio-political. In a publication entitled, *A critique of 'religion' as a cross-cultural category* (Fitzgerald 1997), he puts forward an argument for a critical study of religion in which religion 'dissolves or ought to dissolve without remainder into ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values and symbolic systems' (Fitzgerald 1997:93). Following this deconstructive reasoning, he suggests that critical religion scholars, in taking a non-theological position regarding religion, 'are fundamentally talking about culture' (Fitzgerald 1997:93). In Fitzgerald's *Antithesis*, Lincoln stands accused of 'merely recycling a series of empty dichotomies' through the essentialization of both religion and history (Fitzgerald 2006:403), thereby allowing religion to remain an unchallenged domain within academic discourse, despite being underwritten by Christian theological assumptions[1].

Lincoln's Reply

Lincoln responds to Fitzgerald's critique with a 2007 article entitled, *Concessions, confessions, clarifications, ripostes: By way of response to Tim Fitzgerald* (Lincoln 2007). In it he decries the 'plodding, misinformed and misguided' criticisms voiced in Fitzgerald's *Antithesis* (Lincoln 2007:163). Against the accusation of reifying religion as a universal category, he argues that his use of the term appears in a context in which he remains 'cognizant of the fact that language is neither the world, nor its reflection, but an imperfect instrument' (Lincoln 2007:164). He also argues that he remains committed to *redefining* these 'key terms' in the field – a project which he determines has critical value. Lincoln suggests that his use of the term 'religion' is

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[1]   Fitzgerald's commitment to atheism is an ideological stance that he takes as necessary within what he calls the 'non-theological academic humanistic enquiry' into religion (Fitzgerald 1997:97).

therefore not 'an act of imperialist aggression, but neither is it intellectually sufficient' (Lincoln 2007:168). In this, both scholars briefly agree. However, as Lincoln defines the critical project, the object of religion remains, despite its mutable and contested form. This is the biggest criticism he levels against his conversation partner: Fitzgerald fails to bring that-which-was-previously-designated-religious into the 'reach of critical examination' (Lincoln 2007:168). In a rather tongue-in-cheek riposte, Lincoln remarks that in Fitzgerald's hands, 'religion simply melts into air, leaving nothing to discuss, save (naughty) Scholars' misuse of a (now-naughty) word' (Lincoln 2007:168). He argues that by reducing religion to culture without remainder, what constitutes religion is no longer visible.

Critical Reflections

It is characteristic of the restless postmodern academy that many accusations of dualism are constructed, using logic that also succumbs to dualist rhetoric. As I will now demonstrate, both scholars are locked in a modern problematic, both are limited by modern horizons, and both have relevance only to modern thinkers. The limits that these scholars introduce to the study of religion impede critical thought. This impediment has political consequences. It masquerades as generative through the crackling energy of ferocious debate, but it retains the intellectual stranglehold on the academic world that was first instituted through the laborious construction of modern distinctions.

While Lincoln argues that distinguishing 'religion' as a separate object remains necessary, he defines this object within a Christian monotheistic cosmology, as Fitzgerald rightly notes. Lincoln's reliance on notions like 'eternity' and 'transcendence' (Lincoln 2005:8) point directly to modern values shaped by theological reasoning. However, Fitzgerald's insistence that the term itself be rejected by critical scholars, performs a radical amputation that relies on an unspoken atheistic relation to the world. As I hope to demonstrate, reducing the term 'religion' to the domain of cultural phenomena does not remedy the damage done through its deployment. A postmodern history of the field reveals that religion was constructed along with the modern project and whetted on the blade of European colonial expansion. As a category, it cut the ongoing becoming of the word into polarized dichotomies, circling incessantly around the Enlightenment infused notions of eternity, divinity,

and divine authority. The people of the nonmodern world were cleaved by this conceptual blade, and defined in relation to where they fell, as the successive cuts of modern thinking hardened around them. This cannot be undone by turning to the term and banishing it from the conceptual kingdom. It also cannot be undone by holding on to modern concerns regarding essential or eternal realities. Both these attempts hold the modern hegemony in place within the academy.

The academic question of *what religion is*, has dire political underpinnings. David Chidester's retelling of the Khoekhoen[2] genocide that took place in Southern Africa during the early colonial years, demonstrates this. In his book, *Savage systems* (Chidester 1996), he details the tragedy that unfolded on the Cape Peninsula at the start of the colonial era.

Historical Considerations

Leading up to the establishment of the first way station at the Cape in 1652, the literature published in Europe regarding the native inhabitants of this region asserted that they lacked religion and natural reason (Herbert 1634; Chidester 1996). Once the colony had settled on the African shoreline to some degree, new publications lauded the recently discovered 'moon worship' of the Khoekhoen people, who then apparently showed signs of natural religious intentions (Nieuhof 1654; Heek 1665; Herport 1669). This condition did not prevail, however, as the expansion of the colony prompted conflict with the local Khoekhoen tribes, and responding European sentiment began to associate 'moon dancing' with 'laziness' and the Khoekhoen's unwillingness to engage in colonial labor practices (Chidester 1996:39). The Khoekhoen were therefore represented as having no religion, and this fed into colonial policies on the borders and frontiers in Southern Africa. By early 1700, many Khoekhoen people had been co-opted into the colonial economic system as laborers, and into the colonial religious system as Christians. During this period of relative social stability, the Khoekhoen people were again reflected within an ongoing academic and theological discussion as having the ability to show natural Christian values. However, by late 1700, a final

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[2] Formally called 'Khoi', 'Hottentot', or 'Khoisan', these peoples were populating the Cape region before the Bantu expansion, and at the time that the first European settlers began making territory claims.

tragedy relegated the question of Khoekhoen religion to the archives. The Cape colony once again expanded past its ability to provide resources for its people, and this led to growing conflicts over limited grazing land for livestock. Colonial civilians formed armed militias and received hunting licenses from Cape officials to genocide the remaining Khoekhoen people, who at this stage were understood to have no religion, no reason, and therefore no humanity. By 1800, the academic interest in the Khoekhoen religion consisted of archival research, as no independent societies remained.

This chilling example from our recent past reminds the contemporary scholar that the category of religion, constructed and contested in the debate between theological and secular scholars, has been instrumental in inflicting extreme levels of violence on the peoples of the world. Critical religion responds to this charge with a morbid focus on the term 'religion' itself, and a preoccupation with whether it should be 'cancelled' or not. This appears, on the surface, to be a constructive project. In making the category account for itself, the modern gaze can turn along with a pointed finger towards the transgressor, the very term, which encompasses the whole of Christian imperial insistence within its eight letters. However, what remains invisible is the hegemony of the modern humanist position, the position that keeps its back to the nonmodern world and defends the academy against nonmodern values. This humanism is what provides the fuel for the debate of Lincoln and Fitzgerald as they try to define the project of critical religion within its confines. Lincoln's supposition that religion references eternity while history references temporality, is perhaps more theologically motivated than Fitzgerald's assumption that religion references nothing at all, but both remain firmly entrenched in the notion that the human agent is the sole focus (and limit) of the current critical project. From this perspective, they argue themselves to a standstill around the human use of a human term.

Agency and the Modern Project

What about the accounts of multiple *nonhuman* agents that characterize nonmodern, indigenous, and folk practices, whether they be called religious or not? (Pierotti & Wildcat 2000; Salmon 2000; Kessler 2019). Crucially, this question is not answerable within the humanist framework that Lincoln and Fitzgerald have adopted. Lincoln's grasp on nonhuman agency reaches its

limit at the point where he introduces an absolute, essentialized, and eternal divinity. This monotheistic conception of religion places the nonhuman God as Agent beyond the reach of human examination. In opposition to this, Fitzgerald does away with any possibility of nonhuman agency, by insisting simply that human culture is the category that will finally and sufficiently explain religious phenomena.

When responding to this modern conundrum, it is important to note that a definitive *collapsing of agency* was necessary for the development of modern political and social frameworks over the last few 100 years. Premodern Europe embraced multiple nonhuman agents in the construction of its ongoing social and political relations. Even the overarching authority of the Catholic Church, which shaped the religious narrative on the European continent for over 1,000 years, contained space for the nonhuman agency of saints, demons, and angels. With the Protestant Reformation at the end of the 16th century, the role of nonhuman agents in Europe's social and political landscape reduced dramatically. Paul Johnson, professor of history and Afro-American and African studies at the University of Michigan, notes that modernity 'is the name for the attempt to strictly separate agents from non-agents and the persons from things' (Johnson 2014:5). French philosopher, Bruno Latour characterizes modernity by 'the total separation of humans and nonhumans' (Latour 1993:37), which relies on a clear demarcation of human agency. From this position, ethnologists and others working with nonmodern collectives are obliged to 'define one entity as animal or material and another as a free agent; one as endowed with consciousness, another as mechanical, and still another as unconscious and incompetent' (Latour 1993:15). Charles Taylor, in his discussion of the exclusive humanism that shapes the modern project, writes that within the modern imaginary, 'the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans' (Taylor 2007:30). This definitive closure of agency around the human mind makes nuanced enquiries into nonmodern religious practices implausible. That said, the modern social sciences operate within a secular mandate, and perhaps because of this have long had a fascination with the category of human experience labeled as *possession*, a phenomenon which is 'most arresting for observers' (Bhavsar, Ventriglio, & Bhugra 2016:553) and therefore forms a pole against which the 'self-possessed' modern individual has been defined.

The modern, buffered formulation of the human agent emerged as Europe began its colonial invasion of the Americas, and then Africa. In a fascinating look at the Afro-Caribbean religion, Johnson discusses how the 'backdrop of slavery in the New World...provided the material conditions for and conceptually cast into relief the appearance of the rational, autonomous individual in Europe' (Johnson 2014:7). In his edited compilation, *Spirited things* (Johnson 2014), he documents a history of European encounters with the indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas, during which the problematics around spirit possession fueled the ongoing construction, through a legal and philosophical precedent, of modern human agency.

As European thinkers contended with the spirit possession phenomena encountered in their colonial contact zones, 'possessed action came to be viewed as the opposite of *individual* action – accountable, contract worthy, transparent, and properly civil' (Johnson 2014:1; emphasis added). During this time, the nonmodern spaces of Africa and the Americas became intrinsically associated with spirit possession, and as such, the people populating these regions were regarded as having 'deficient personhood or capacity to act as agents or to act as rational authors of future and present contracts' (Johnson 2014:6). According to the modern social contract, rational individuals are those who allow that agency resides only in the person, the company, and the state.

Bodies, Possession, and the Law

One of the founders of modern philosophical thought, Thomas Hobbes, links his discourse on *contract law* to the problem of spirit possession, using the idea of the spirit possessed individual as a negative identifier against which he constructs a framework for legally binding contractual agreements. Seeking a coherent response to the centuries long oversight of the Catholic Church, Hobbes' social contract relies on his emerging sense of 'Reason' as separate from ecclesiastical authority. In *Leviathan*, he writes that the 'generall, eternall, and immutable Truth' (Hobbes 1968:Ch 46) produced by 'Reason' provides a firm foundation on which to build the developing nation state. Hobbes links the problematics around legal contracts to the burgeoning discourse on spirit possession in the nonmodern world, and labors to secure a secular framework for human agency in this context. According to Johnson,

Hobbes has identified that 'the problem of contracts and of spirit possession were linked because contracts' authenticity, identity, and agreement as to mediating authority are all rendered uncertain by spirits' occupation of bodies' (Johnson 2014:33). As Johnson (2014:32) notes, 'constructing a civil society...depended on predictable and regulated rules of property ownership and exchange'. For this to be possible, human agency needed to be ascertained, contained, and prescribed.

A distinction needs to be made between philosophical-phenomenological discussions of agency, and the politico-legal notions of agency that have been written into the constitutions of modern states. Political acts of lawmaking around agentic structures *matter,* inasmuch as it has a clear and measurable material effect on the world. During the formation of nation states in Europe after the Protestant Reformation, conditions of human agency were ascertained to be directly correlated to human *rationality*, and then firmly linked to *property rights*. The *Declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen* formalized in 1905 in France, referred only to the rights of French male property owners over the age of 25 (Censer & Hunt 2001). Human agency was acknowledged in the political process inasmuch as it related to defensible claims to rights, and only within that context. As the modern secular project found its ground in the socio-political turn from ecclesiastical oversight, the individual human agent took shape within the confines of agreements made with the ruling state powers. These powers acknowledge individuals, corporate people, and the person of the state, as the only legally prescribed agential relations that matter to the ongoing becoming of the world. As such, early political notions of modern agency were not designed with the global population in view, but with a gendered, privileged, and geographically located few.

Considering the Nonmodern

The modern project focused on property rights as the foundational framework for the emergence of civilized and rational societies. In the process, the social contract laws that come out of a modernizing Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries cemented 'the opposition between those who possess property and those who could be possessed *as* property' (Johnson 2014:10; emphasis added) and 'constructed the free individual and citizen against the backdrop of emerging colonial horizons' (Johnson 2014:24). While this is not the forum

to debate property rights and the formation of modern nation states, it remains necessary to attend closely to the ongoing relation between religion and the secular state. Of importance to critical religion theorists, the phenomenon known as 'spirit possession' became a defining feature of the nonmodern world, while not referencing to 'religion' *per se*. From this it becomes evident that there are *three* domains to be considered in the critical re-evaluation of the term 'religion'. This three-body problem is comprised of secularity, religion, and *religion's shadow*, the nonmodern/folk/indigenous world that was relegated to the sidelines of religious and political discourse in Europe as the 2nd millennium progressed. The critical gaze discerns a split between religion and its shadow as secular discourse picked up pace. While this may be a functional distinction, it loses all relevance when this 'shadow of religion' is eclipsed entirely by the continuing debate on rationality that characterizes modern discourse. The nonmodern, indigenous, and folk becomings of the world never disappeared, despite the concerted efforts of both religion and the secular. By admitting this, the scholar is allowing the nonmodern to share the stage with the secular and that-which-was-previously-deemed-religious-in-European-tradition. The dichotomy explodes into intricate relations that have previously been overlooked.

Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the domain of social science as predicated on 'the idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogenous time...bereft of gods and spirits' (Chakrabarty 2000:75-76). This description of the secular academy points to the definitive limits introduced during the modernizing of Europe. From Martin Luther's initial disruption of the Catholic Church to the political and social upheaval that followed, successive generations of European scholars have claimed authority for human reason and rejected the idea of a transcendent and sovereign God as Agent. In the process of this rejection, the notion of human agency has been refined and written into the basic tenets of modern practice and policy making. Key to this process was the rejection of the agentic authority of the Abrahamic God who had featured as the foundation of authority structures in medieval Europe.

The political process of distilling the authoritative essence of the One God into a human-scale system of secular government left no space for any agencies other than the human. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ensured the continued disenfranchising of nonmodern and indigenous collectives, often comprised of people who engage both politically and socially with nonhuman and invisible agents. Cultural anthropologist, Talal Asad, who focuses on generat-

ing postcolonial discourse, reminds the critical scholar that modernity is a political project that relies on the ongoing relations of power to maintain a privileged status in world affairs. He writes that modernity is best understood as 'a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve' (Asad 2003:13). How does the project of modernity still impact the study of religion, even as religious studies engages a critical turn? The modern imperative is clear in the refusal to attend to the ongoing agential becomings of the nonmodern world, which remain conspicuously out of sight in the current discourse. Critical religion scholars are not yet able to provide a conceptual apparatus for 'the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves)' (Chakrabarty 2000:77), and as such are not allowing nonmodern subjects to be 'subjects of their own history' but relegating them to the relics of modern discourse (Chakrabarty 2000:77).

Towards a Critically Inclusive Theory of Religion

Both Lincoln and Fitzgerald overlook the complexity of nonmodern, folk, and indigenous religious practices in favor of modern problematics. Neither of them cast a critical eye on their own positions regarding human and nonhuman agency, and as such both are firmly committed to a modern humanism that can no longer claim hegemonic preference on the world stage, and particularly not in relation to questions on religion.

While both of these scholars may have justifiable *anti-clerical* motivations, this does not necessarily require a definitive *ontological* closure. Arguably, Lincoln retains an ontological opening with his insistence that the domain of religion is an essential category that refers to an eternal divine being. However, as this allows no conceptual frameworks for examining temporal and relationally bound nonhuman agencies, he remains firmly ensconced in a modern hegemonic discourse, shaped rather conspicuously by a Christian worldview. Fitzgerald follows the secular mandate with as much tenacity as possible, rejecting any possibility that nonhuman agency is a significant category in the study of religion. While he argues that religious practitioners be given the right to define their own means of analysis, he also begins from the assumption that human *culture* can account for any categories that religious people may construct. Although he does not say this directly in his response to Lincoln, with his call to reduce religion to culture, he suggests

that nonmodern, folk, and indigenous constructions of nonhuman agentic relations are just that – constructions – and need not be given a distinctive onto-epistemological status.

This is the point where Fitzgerald's commitment to an unspoken but exclusive humanism betrays his attempts to successfully theorize a critical study of religion. His dismissal of knowledge claims generated through relations with nonhuman agents, points to an ideological commitment to modern epistemology, which is hard to justify in 21st-century scholarship. Where is the humility that is needed in the critical scholar who faces the burden of accounting for past and present violence? While Fitzgerald criticizes Lincoln for his belief in his own objectivity, he makes the same error when he confidently insists that the entirety of the world's religious phenomena are best understood as 'the study of institutionalized values in different societies and the relation of those values to power and its legitimation' (Fitzgerald 1997:95). This partial turn towards a critical study of religion is important in that it wrests the conversation around religion from the grasp of Enlightenment theology, but it remains firmly imperial in the closures it maintains.

As Donna Haraway has noted almost 50 years ago, there is a 'very strong social constructionist argument for all forms of knowledge claims, most certainly and especially scientific ones' (Haraway 1988:576). Fitzgerald acknowledges the construction of terms like 'history', 'religion', and the 'secular', while simultaneously finding assurance in the domain of 'culture' as a foundational category of description. Perhaps this is an attempt to resolve the specter of relativism that the deconstructive lens engenders, one which leaves many modern thinkers in a quandary. While Fitzgerald productively deconstructs the terms that Lincoln relies on to structure his analysis, he actively defends his own terms that he has chosen. For the modern scholar who is afraid of being cast adrift in a sea of relativism, any ground on which to base certainty is enthusiastically protected. Neither of these critical scholars therefore grapple with the underlying ontological problems in their positions.

Haraway notes that the summary dismissal of all categories that come to matter as being merely *constructed* results in a relativism, is 'the perfect twin mirror of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well' (Haraway 1988:584). As per Haraway and others, acknowledging the human agentic capacity to construct the world, does not necessitate a Cartesian *disbelief* in the world. The constructed world ceases to matter

if the measures of 'eternal' and 'unchanging' are applied to its continual becoming. It also ceases to matter when gatekeepers of knowledge take it upon themselves to decide which constructs are 'real', or most 'objective', as Fitzgerald may declare.

Barring theological and modern metrics, the constructed world matters in ways that these critical scholars have a hard time reckoning with. Reducing religious constructions to cultural relations (another form of construction) only passes the buck, leaving cultural scholars with the job of accounting for phenomena that religion scholars are unable to. Both Lincoln and Fitzgerald embrace the quest to deconstruct but are left with no means to generate new positions. Without new positions for engaging the ongoing religious becomings of the world, the study of religion in the academy faces an uncertain future (Day 2010). In the 21st century, onto-epistemological turns in multiple disciplines have provided a view of an academy in which 'the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning' is constituted by a dynamic and material process of 'experimenting and theorizing' practices (Barad 2007:56). However, this task remains beyond the capacity of critical thinkers like Lincoln and Fitzgerald. The labor of active theory making in the critical study of religion remains undone, revealing a strong antitheoretical tendency that this is damaging to the field as a whole (Flood 1999:4).

Generative Positions

In a reflexive response to mistakes of early religious studies, the academic study of religion veered sharply away from explicit theory making as the 20th century progressed. Renowned scholar of religion, Ninian Smart, has presented a study that describes 'the gods and the spirits who inhabit the phenomenological environment of a given cultural group' (Smart 1973:52), while not taking a theoretical stance on the matter. His aim is 'to provide, where necessary, what may be called a structure-laden account which is not theory-laden' (Smart 1973:58). However, offering no conceptual apparatus for theorizing these nonhuman agents, Smart's contribution to the field provides no cohesive method of accounting for nonhuman agents, aside from confessional positions. That said, Smart's efforts to at least acknowledge the relevance of nonhuman agents in his account of religion drew sharp criticism from Fitzgerald, who dedicates an entire chapter in his book *The ideology of religious*

studies (Fitzgerald 1999:54-71) to discussing Smart's possible theological complicity. As evidence of this, he sites Smart's 'starting point within the theology of religions [that] has generated an essentialist, reified concept of religion and religions' (Fitzgerald 1999:55). Fitzgerald takes particular exception to the result of this reification, in which religion is examined as 'a phenomenon, a distinctive and analytically separable kind of thing in the world that can be identified and distinguished from non-religious institutions throughout the vast range of human cultures' (Fitzgerald 1999:55). In his critical study of religion, the accusation of reification rings a Cartesian death knell. Reified things are not *real* things.

However, this rather facile dismissal of reification bears closer examination. Anthropologist, Sonia Silva steps back from what she calls the 'historical context of late capitalism' in order to strip the process of reification of its colonial baggage. Instead, she enquires into reification as 'the universal human tendency to apprehend abstractions as things' and argues that reification as a natural process reflects responsiveness and involvement in the world, rather than an inert detachment (Silva 2013:83). In critically deconstructing modern reifications, the postmodern academy rejects reification itself as a continuing technology for making the world. In an ironic twist, the *reification of reification* obligates scholars to treat it as a *thing* that can and should be avoided. In response, Silva argues that 'it is not sufficient to adopt a critical stance and come to terms with the "objective" fact that our reified world is after all our own creation, and what we did ourselves we can undo' (Silva 2013:83).

What is also needed is an ongoing acceptance of our constructive natures, and the many ways that this needs to be accounted for within current discourse and theory making. Another theorist worth noting in this regard is philosopher and physicist, Karen Barad, who uses the language of 'agential cuts' through the continuing material process of becoming, to structure a *politics of mattering*. Barad engages the world as a continual and dynamic material process and discerns multiple agential relations within this ongoing flux. Agency, no longer confined to only the human, but regarded as a property of the material world itself, is enacted through agential cuts, which continually give shape to the world in a process of entangled intra-actions. Barad (2007:175) contributes to the post-Cartesian discourse with the observation that 'different agential cuts produce different phenomena'. In this regard, the construction of the world through agential relations is one that bears account-

ing for. To inform this accounting, Barad suggests a politics of mattering, where what 'comes to matter' in the construction of the world is understood to be political and in need of continual critical engagement.

Both Silva and Barad provide conceptual frameworks for understanding reification as an inherently generative process. This does not negate the danger of domains in which reified things come to gain a static and inert material significance. What it does, is to allow for an accounting to be made, an enquiry into those reified objects that come to matter in such grave ways within human collectives. Of particular significance to the critical study of religion, Silva links reification (the making of *things from non-things*) with animation (the making of *people from non-people*). Based on her work among the Luvale-speaking peoples of northwest Zambia, she argues that reification and animation are best understood as 'a simultaneity, a co-presence, a coincidence, even – momentarily – a unity' (Silva 2013:87-88). Silva's work leads her to conclude that humans regularly 'infuse' their 'products' with both 'reality and anima' (Silva 2013:87-88). She argues that, in this regard, 'reification is not an impediment to action but a condition for action' (Silva 2013:91). Based on Silva's observations, it could be argued that reification as a *positive* process provides the means by which the human body constitutes a generative site of knowledge (Haraway 1988). Bodies reify through the boundaries they enact, boundaries which are materialized in social interaction (Haraway 1988:595), while bodies generate objects of knowledge through this ongoing process.

Materializing the Invisible

Allowing for this, what do the bodies of nonmodern and indigenous people generate, when they engage nonhuman and invisible agents as part of their continuing world making? Openings in anthropological thought and practice have recently allowed for a *material* study of invisible agents in numerous different contemporary collectives. The 'ontological turn', which has led contemporary anthropology back to the indigenous world with a fair degree of philosophical humility, has made possible the empirical project of tracking the *material effects of invisible relations*. Ruy Blanes and Diana Espírito Santo edited a compilation in 2014 entitled, *The social life of spirits*, in which a wide selection of anthropologists, each working with particular nonmodern or

indigenous collectives, discuss the material outworking of people's engagement with invisible and nonhuman agents. This new-materialist account of nonmodern practice produces a wealth of data around agency, relationality, personhood, and embodiment, and invites the critical scholar of religion to attempt a theoretical framework that takes nonhuman agency into account. The nuanced data sets being produced at an ethnographic level in the 21st century cannot be sufficiently examined within the rubric of 'culture', despite Fitzgerald's concerns about the Christian theological influence on the formation of the category 'religion'. To fuss around either of these terms seems a rather modern prerogative, and altogether misses the point.

How would Lincoln characterize the Dorvod people of Mongolia, who engage with 'invisible things' (üzegdeh- güi yum) through their supposed agential presence in the material world (Delaplace 2014:54)? What about the Toba people of Argentina, who relate to 'entities, that, although not human, possess an intentionality capable of directing and exerting actions on the world and on human beings' (Tola 2014:71)? Where is the space for nonhuman religious agency in a worldview where religion is ultimately transcendent, and therefore unexaminable within its own context? Would Fitzgerald be comfortable relegating the complex and intimate relationships that Matsigenka shamans have with their spirit companions, characterized by 'closeness...similarity, trust, and co-operation' to power-driven figments of a cultural imaginary (Rosengren 2006:810)? Sociologist Munyaradzi Mawere notes that on the African continent, 'spiritual beings are very much counted among the living as important participants in shaping everything that may happen' (Mawere 2011:62), while David Gordon points to the role of spiritual agents in contemporary Central African countries, with a focus on Zambian political history. In his book, *Invisible agents*, he concludes that 'accounts of human agency [in Zambia] must include spirits' (Gordon 2012:202), and describes in detail the contemporary political context in Zambia that includes an ongoing debate 'about the relationships between the individual, the community, the state, and spirits' (Gordon 2012:199). Can Fitzgerald's reduction of religion to culture sufficiently account for the Zambian will to debate spirits as political and social agents? Are there other options apart from the modern reductions that Lincoln and Fitzgerald champion? Religion scholar, Matthew Day insists that mistaking nonhuman agents as 'ciphers' for society or culture, maintains the marginalization of specific collectives. Following the work of Bruno Latour, Day suggests that a practical method for theorizing

nonhuman agents begins with the empirical observation that nonhuman agents populate many human networks, and 'make their presence felt by sharing the labor required to gather, attach, move, motivate or bind their fellow actors together into a social aggregate' (Day 2010:278). With this shift in focus, he suggests an opening for critical theory of religion, should scholars wish to look beyond the agentic limits of the modern era. By applying a politics of mattering to the question of nonhuman agency, the question becomes, How do spirits come to matter? rather than the Cartesian question of how 'real' spirits are, and therefore how much attention they have the right to demand within academic discourses.

New-materialist anthropological thinkers are also recognizing that there is academic relevance in 'the mechanics and effects of so-called invisible or intangible domains, whether these are constituted by spirits, quarks, the law, or money value' (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014:1), and are working to 'draw out their theoretical and methodological implications' (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014:8) rather than neutralizing these agents through a blanket reduction to culture. As Blanes and Espírito Santo (2014:15) note, 'the attribution of agency to the nontangible and even nonhuman dimensions of life is more than mere philosophical speculation: it is quite natural for most people'. They examine this domain of relation through attending to the effects that nonhuman agents 'produce in space, in human bodies, and in human subjectivity' (Tola 2014:71). How does critical religion respond to the suggestion that 'folk religious practices, diverse as they are, all share a common focus on managing relationships with a complex world of nonmaterial entities' (Wirtz 2014:126)? In dismissing the term 'religion', how does the critical academic venture intend to account for nonmodern and indigenous practices involving reciprocal relations with nonhuman agents? Conversely, by retaining the term to refer to monotheistic cosmological values like eternity and transcendence, is Lincoln able to give a critical account of the intricacies of nonhuman agentic relations? There appears to be no pressing need within modern religion studies to theorize the complex multiplicity of nonhuman agents. By allowing the modern reduction of agency to the individual, the company, and the state, critical religion scholars adopt a modern mandate that perforce hinders the academic project.

Conclusion

Have scholars like Lincoln and Fitzgerald, who set the tone for the discourse at the turn of the 20th century, decided that nonmodern and indigenous collectives do not matter to the ongoing conversation? If so, they reveal a critical blind spot. Theorizing the role of nonhuman and invisible agents in current global practices offers an avenue for keeping the category 'religion' academically active, while moving definitively away from ecclesiastical theology, as per the foundational mandate of the critical project. Perhaps at this point a new term is needed. Discourse around religion could follow the folk trend towards distinguishing between spiritual practices as those involving personal relations with nonhuman agents, and religious practices as those involving collective structures that take place within shared socio-political spaces.

Whatever is finally decided, the fact remains that this is a modern problem, created by modern conceptual structures. As long as key thinkers remain locked in a battle of wills around the use of modern terms, the ongoing becoming of the nonmodern, folk, and indigenous worlds remain opaque, eclipsed by the spectacle. Critical religion faces an important choice. Stay oriented towards the past, arguing the terms by which the moderns understand religion, or move beyond this fascinating and self-referential conflict towards a generative basis for a new theory and practice. The nonmodern, folk, and indigenous worlds await.

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Interpersonal Friendship: A Prerequisite to Mystical Contemplation, according to St. Teresa of Avila

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Abstract

Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Carmelite nun known as a teacher of the mystical life, proposed interpersonal friendship as one of the prerequisites for the life of prayer. She envisaged prayer as an interpersonal relationship with the triune God and considered interpersonal friendship among the aspirants of prayer as essential. For her, prayer was the practical fruit of the sisterly relationship lived in the community. With mystical contemplation as destination, an attempt is made to bring out the nuances of Teresa's thoughts on the need for friendship for prayer, the right form of love, and the atmosphere required to nurture such love.

Keywords: Teresa of Avila, interpersonal friendship, spiritual love, prayer, love of neighbor

Introduction

St. Teresa of Avila (henceforth Teresa), a woman of 16th-century Spain, a Carmelite nun of distinctive personality and character, was born in a Catholic family of Jewish paternal background in the city of Avila, Spain, on March 28, 1515. She joined the Carmelite Order (a contemplative religious order) and had many struggles as a young religious woman. Later she became a reformer, founder, leader, writer, and a great mystic of the Catholic Church. Together with St. John of the Cross, she reformed the Carmelite Order that was on the verge of decadence. The reformed branch of the Carmelite order,

founded on the original Carmelite tradition and spirituality, was thence called the Discalced Carmelite Order.

Teresa is renowned for her holiness and ability to harmonize contemplation with action. The universal church and Catholic tradition accept her as a great teacher of mystical prayer. Her literary contributions are considered as classics, being the outstanding guides to spirituality, winning her the title of Doctor of the Church. Teresa breathed her last in Alba de Tormes, Spain, on October 4, 1582. She was canonized by Pope Gregory XV in 1622.

Love of God and the love of neighbor have always been the pillars of Christian spirituality. While love of God has been considered as its vertical dimension, the love of neighbor served as its horizontal dimension that stood the test of true spirituality. The novel thought that the love of neighbor was a prerequisite to the life of prayer, goes to the credit of Teresa. Though this perspective is biblical and has been dealt with by the early Church Fathers, a greater thrust to this dimension was given by Teresa. A mystic herself, she had learned the indispensability of interpersonal friendship for the growth of a life of prayer. Her writings reveal that she loved genuinely, humanly, and deeply, but not indiscriminately. She regarded dignified human interactions or friendship not as an obstacle in the spiritual endeavor, but as a source of mutual aid to one's heavenward journey. Dubay asserts, 'St. Teresa looked upon friendship as a source of mutual aid in our pilgrimage to the fatherland – a concept that nicely integrates our propensity toward human intimacy with our even deeper need for God' (Dubay 1989:63). Not surprisingly, Teresa wanted the 17 cloistered communities of nuns, established by her, to be very proactive spaces for communal life. She called these communities the 'colleges of Christ' which would re-live the familial and friendly communion that existed between Jesus and his apostles (Jn 15:15).

This essay is an attempt to glean the writings of Teresa to understand the meaning of interpersonal friendship from her perspective and bring out the importance of such friendship in arriving at a mystical contemplation. It would naturally be an inclusive reading of the substratum of a particular class of interpersonal relationships.

The Need for Interpersonal Friendship

Teresa's writings underline the importance of friendship and sharing in her life as an individual and as a mystic. She acknowledged, 'Of myself, I know and say that if the Lord had not revealed this truth to me and given me the means by which I could ordinarily talk with persons who practiced prayer, I, falling and rising, would have ended by throwing myself straight into hell' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:65). Companions nourish the soul, heart, mind, and body. Just as food nourishes human life, so do companions for the advancement in the life of prayer. Carl Koch, in the foreword to a book by Broughton (1996) called, *Praying with Teresa of Avila*, brings out the nuances of the friendship hidden in the term 'companion': 'The etymological root of the word companion offers an apt explanation to this indispensable need of a friend on the journey of prayer. The word companion is derived from two Latin words: *cum*, meaning "with", and *panis*, meaning "bread"'. What bread is for survival, so are companions for the life of prayer.

Dubay (1989:84) summarizes the mind of Teresa in the study of the second mansion spoken of by Teresa and spells out the advice she gives to the aspirants,

> The soul should avoid a close association with 'evil' and mediocre people and make it a point to mix with the good, that is, not only with those in the early mansions but also with those who have advanced into the mansions 'nearer to the center', where the king is.

Teresa narrated:

> Enlighten it that it may see how all its good is within this castle and that it may turn away from bad companions. It's a wonderful thing for a person to talk to those who speak about this interior castle, to draw near not only to those seen to be in these rooms where he is but to those known to have entered the ones closer to the center (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:300).

Friends are a great source of support as one walks the path of prayer. Teresa considered it a 'great evil' to be friendless amidst the dangers the world poses

for those earnestly seeking God. They need the support of each other as is stated below:

> For this reason I would counsel those who practice prayer, to seek, at least in the beginning, friendship and association with other persons having the same interest…Since friends are sought out for conversations and human attachments, even though these latter may not be good, so as to relax and better enjoy telling about vain pleasures, I don't know why it is not permitted that persons beginning truly to love and to serve God talk with some others about their joys and trials, which all who practice prayer undergo…I believe that they who discuss these joys and trials for the sake of this friendship with God will benefit themselves and those who hear them, and they will come away instructed; even without understanding how, they will have instructed their friends…Since this spiritual friendship is so extremely important for souls not yet fortified in virtue – since they have so many opponents and friends to incite them to evil – I don't know how to urge it enough…It is necessary for those who serve Him to become shields for one another that they might advance…It is a kind of humility not to trust in oneself but to believe that through those with whom one converses God will help and increase charity while it is being shared. And there are a thousand graces I would not dare speak of if I did not have powerful experience of the benefit that comes from this sharing (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:64).

Any journey is eased by the presence of a companion. Teresa could never downplay the role of a friend and an atmosphere of friendship on her journey towards the mystical union. She believed that in the early stages of prayer, God often speaks to people in and through good conversations with their friends. For her, friendship was not simply a matter of companionship but rather a ladder, a means on the way – a reciprocal theme. One ought not only to look for better companionship but also strive to become one. It is a mutual need, as is clear from the reference from *The way of perfection* (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol 2:199):

> Sisters, strive as much as you can, without offense to God, to be affable and understanding in such a way that everyone you talk to will

love your conversation and desire your manner of living and acting, and not be frightened and intimidated by virtue. This is very important for religious; the holier they are the more sociable they are with their Sisters. And even though you may feel very distressed if all your Sisters' conversations do not go as you would like them to, never turn away from them if you want to help your Sisters and be loved. This is what we must strive for earnestly, to be affable, agreeable, and pleasing to persons with whom we deal, especially our Sisters.

'If beginners with the assistance of God struggle to reach the summit of perfection, I believe they will never go to heaven alone; they will always lead many people along after them' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:114). This is what Teresa said about the advantage of having someone in the community who is honest about the goal. No one goes to heaven alone; if at all one goes to heaven, the presence of the brothers and sisters with such a one is a presumed conclusion. This is the crux of Christian spirituality. God made the human individual a social being, needing the aid of society.

Teresa was aware that the Sisters in the convent were pilgrims on their way to God. Although she was quite sure that God would sustain the souls with what she calls 'particular helps' on their way, she was equally convinced of and propagated the need of the company and the help of their neighbors. A person's sanctification is not the exclusive fruit of one's activity; it rather requires collaboration. Teresa, who knew the importance of companionship and direction in one's journey towards union with God, held spiritual friendship and spiritual direction as a high priority. She feared the harm that could come to a soul:

> A great evil it is for a soul to be alone in the midst of so many dangers. It seems to me that if I should have had someone to talk all this over with, it would have helped me, at least out of shame, not to fall again since I did not have any shame before God (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:64).

Commitment to prayer and holiness, although attractive, is hard and needs a tremendous push and a desire to keep up the momentum despite temptations to give up. Having a friend to encourage and to share the progress, goes a long way in advancing on the narrow path to the mount of the union: 'Since

this spiritual friendship is so extremely important for souls not yet fortified in virtue – since they have so many opponents and friends to incite them to evil – I don't know how to urge it enough' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:64).

Holiness is what everyone is called to. Though this is a universal call implied in the Bible and made explicit in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (LG #40), those who embark on it are hardly received with enthusiasm. The world can often look down upon them with contempt as they look odd amidst people who walk the trodden path of mediocrity. Having a friend who shares the same intent can be a great blessing as they get to shield each other from the unwanted and sometimes unwarranted attack of the evil one. Teresa advocated such companionship to ease the journey and enhance progress:

> [I]t is necessary for those who serve Him to become shields for one another that they might advance. For it is considered good to walk in the vanities and pleasures of the world, and those who don't, are unnoticed. If any begin to give themselves to God, there are so many to criticize them that they need to seek companionship to defend themselves until they are so strong that it is no longer a burden for them to suffer this criticism. And if they don't seek this companionship, they will find themselves in much difficulty (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:65).

Since prayer and union with God is not something so attractive or to be put on public display, seldom do we find enthusiastic aspirants. In her 16th-century context, there was a 'hierarchy' of holiness, while religious life was regarded as 'higher' than the life of the laity. Teresa did leave hints to guess that her intention to join the convent was not the purest. As years passed by, her motives were purified by divine interventions. Teresa, having grown in appreciation for the universal call to holiness, and having benefitted from healthy companionship during her prayer journey, could not but insist on the importance of such friends. She acknowledged that there is an innate capacity in individuals to help each other on this journey and she pled with all not to hide the talent that could profit many: 'I should very much like to advise these souls to be careful not to hide the talent since it seems God desires to choose them to bring profit to many others, especially in these times when

staunch friends of God are necessary to sustain the weak' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:104).

Types of Love

Friendship is characterized by the love that individuals have for each other: 'Today, the term "love" has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings' (DCE #2; cf. Benedict XVI 2006:par. 2). Not all kinds of love qualify as a means to mystical contemplation, according to Teresa. Given the importance of friendship and the nobility of the end, she felt the need for prudence in the choice of friends. Teresa, in *The way of perfection* (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2: 55-70), helps the nuns to evaluate friendship by qualifying the love that inspires it. She makes a distinction between three types of love, namely, sensible love, spiritual-sensible love, and spiritual love.

What is the connection between friendship and the types of love that Teresa dwelt upon quite elaborately? Love is an essential constituent of friendship. Friendship is defined and graded by the type of love people have for each other and the intensity and intimacy they have grown into. For entering into union with God, one needs to nurture the right type of love and friendship.

Sensible Love

Sensible love is a type of love that Teresa does not care to speak about at length, for it is proper to the state of marriage. Since she is writing to the nuns who have vowed their virginity to God and preserve it as a divine treasure, she qualifies sensible love as 'wrong love'. However, she was aware of the possibility of this sensual love making its ugly appearance among nuns, ruining the very purpose of contemplative communities:

> [A]nd not these other miserable earthly affections – although I don't mean evil ones, for God deliver us from them. We must never tire of condemning anything that leads to hell, for the slightest evil of hell cannot be exaggerated. We shouldn't let our mouths utter even a word about this sinful love, Sisters, nor should we think that it exists in the world. We shouldn't listen to anything said about it, whether

this be done in jest or in truth. Do not allow that this type of love be spoken of or discussed in your presence. Such love has nothing good in it, and even hearing about it can be harmful (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:66).

Spiritual-Sensible Love

Spiritual-sensible love is the love that is ordinarily present in the relationship between individuals. Teresa considered it a kind of love that one has for relatives and friends, and so very licit. This love is not totally spiritual since it stems out of the faculties that are not purified. It can create an atmosphere of friendship between souls, persuade them, offer affectionate support, reduce loneliness, and elevate love to its purer form. This kind of love always calls for a balance between the spiritual and the sensible elements.

According to her, however, this kind of love does not bring true freedom to a person. This love runs the risk of being overridden by sensuality. The spiritual-sensible friendship can naively transform itself into an inordinate affection, or an exclusive and particular friendship which is a disorder, according to Teresa. Warning against the evils of disorderly friendship, Teresa remarked:

Be aware that, without understanding how, you will find yourselves so attached that you will be unable to manage the attachment…Little by little it takes away the strength of will to be totally occupied in loving God...this excessive love found among men and women; the harm it does in the community is well known...the silly things that come from such attachment are too numerous to be counted (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:55).

Teresa ruled out the spiritual-sensual love from the kinds of love that could be practiced at Carmel. She was convinced that it has nothing in common with anyone keen on reaching the heights of perfection in mystical contemplation. D'Souza clarifies the stand of Teresa, stating,

She indicates that when one loves a person because of his natural qualities, such as physical beauty, one does not love the person but rather his qualities; and this too for his advantage. Such love is selfish

and not genuine. It is the love of concupiscence which inordinately
attaches him to that person (D'Souza 1981:37).

It is obvious that Teresa could already apply her mind so comprehensively as
regards the human affective energy and make a wise and realistic critique of
the same, anticipating well in advance the contribution of modern anthropology and psychology.

Spiritual Love

Spiritual love which finds its mention in the sixth and seventh chapters of *The
way of perfection* (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:61-70) is a highly perfect
one. She wanted her daughters to be formed by real and genuine love that is
free of any sensuality. This is a dispassionate love. She wanted her daughters
to dwell on spiritual love. Spiritual love derives its strength from the sacred
Scriptures, the sacraments, and personal prayer. It is entwined in a spiritual
relationship, not caught up in the physical or sensual relationship. These people are still very human, but their love is very deep.

The influence of possessive passions and corporal hormonal cravings
are superseded by altruistic and sacrificial love akin to that of a parent. They
rejoice in being loved and, at the same time, they can change from the human
side to the spiritual wellbeing and lift them to God in prayer. They witness
what Teresa narrated, 'All other affections wearies [sic.] these persons, for
they understand that no benefit comes from it and that it could be harmful.
But this does not make these persons ungrateful or unwilling to repay the
love of others by recommending them to God' (Locker 2004:46).

This love can creatively combine selfless love, charity, and humility.
This love desires for the beloved the same spiritual good and benefit as one
seeks to enjoy. The primary concern of one who wants to reach perfection is
the love of God. If something wrong is sensed in the way it relates to the other – anything that does not pave the way to love of God – she suggested that
the relationship be broken before it is too late. The ideal Teresa has set for her
nuns is an elevated one; it is purely spiritual:

> In this pure love, the spiritual benefit of the beloved is desired above
> all other things. If the beloved is regarded to be lacking in pure love,
> then either the lover prevails upon him for a completely detached

> love, or else the friendship will cease, for a true friend cannot be in-
> different to anything in the friend (D'Souza 1981:37).

In the sixth and seventh chapters of *The way of perfection* (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:61-70), Teresa spelled out the salient features of spiritual love. The nature of this love is such

> that you know them in such a way that they be important to you and
> impressed deep within your being. For if you have this knowledge,
> you will see that you do not lie in saying that whoever the Lord
> brings to the state of perfection has this love. The persons the Lord
> brings to this state are generous souls, majestic souls (Teresa of Avila
> 1982, Vol. 2:62).

This love frees up the will and the heart by detaching itself from all vanities and attachments. When a person has reached this state, one can respond to the will of God instantly, for it is already free and unencumbered.

Interpersonal Friendship – a Prerequisite to Mystical Contemplation

The genuine love that goes beyond one's kin is a sure sign of the true love of God. This self-sacrificing and sacred love is the way the New Testament speaks of God, and Teresa has been given this insight: 'If we desire to make a true and complete donation of ourselves to God in response to the divine self-offer in order to enter into union with the God of love, then we must liberate ourselves of the selfishness that impedes our self-donation to God' (O'Keefe 2016:58). She has articulated it in her life and taught her nuns to practice it in the cloister where the intimate contemplation of the God of love and the self-less love for others ruled supreme.

Teresa stood next to none in emphasizing and elaborating the love of neighbor as an essential aspect of spiritual life. Love of neighbor is the ulti-mate test for the state of perfection one has attained. Everything is to be set aside when one's neighbor is in need. Some may be tempted to carve a niche for themselves, to set themselves exclusively for the Lord, or specifically not to miss the favors like visons, ecstasies, and locutions. An aspirant of prayer

may be inclined to such enjoyment and may choose favors and delights, but for Teresa, the good of the needy neighbor was the priority. Love of neighbor is a vital sign of the transforming union. Anyone who forfeits the opportunity to serve the needy neighbor, jeopardizes the possibilities of attaining transforming union. Conformity of wills is the crux of spiritual maturity; the climax of this conformity of wills is reached when the person is responding to the neighbor in need. This is a remarkable teaching coming from Teresa, who had known how important the love of neighbor is for mystical contemplation. In the closing argument on this teaching in *The interior castle* (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol 2:353), she stated:

> I have said a lot on this subject elsewhere, because I see, Sisters, that if we fail in love of neighbours we are lost. May it please the Lord that this will never be so; for if you do not fail, I tell you that you shall receive from His Majesty the union that was mentioned. When you see yourselves lacking in this love, even though you have devotion and gratifying experiences that make you think you have reached this stage, and you experience some little suspension in the prayer of quiet (for to some it then appears that everything has been accomplished), believe me you have not reached union…And force your will to do the will of your Sisters in everything even though you may lose your rights; forget your own good for their sakes no matter how much resistance your nature puts up; and, when the occasion arises, strive to accept work yourself so as to relieve your neighbour of it. Don't think that it won't cost you anything or that you will find everything done for you. Look at what our Spouse's love for us cost Him; in order to free us from death, He died that most painful death of the cross.

To reach this stage of mystical union, is to become like Jesus. It is only when the bride has become or has been made fit by God's grace that she is ready for this favor. The person in the mystical marriage takes in the total and all-encompassing love of Jesus – to be oneself a vehicle of this love. Only when one yields to this love, one is transformed into him: 'Mystical marriage is to be with Jesus a total "for-Godness" which must mean being totally for others. It is those who are totally hidden and lost in God, living only with the life of

Christ who are fire on the earth" (Burrows 2006:117). Teresa would add that 'they catch fire from its fire' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:348).

The ability to love a person or others without an enslaving attachment as well as to order one's needs and priorities, judiciously is the hallmark of authentic spiritual growth. A spiritually mature person can see meaning in everything, including oneself and others in God. A genuine friend, according to the Teresian mind, experiences an intense longing that the other party may be immersed in God. Teresa advocates, on the one hand, a detachment from every created thing including one's self, and on the other hand, emphasized the need of loving everything and above all, one's neighbor in God. Personal growth or maturity comes from the realization of love as the common denominator of all humans. Love propelled by this understanding is genuine. When one loves anything in God, one loves God.

Teresa, as a reformer of the Carmelite Order, did not visualize establishing an eremitical structure. She rather established a community life with hermitical elements. Her nuns were called to be 'not merely nuns but hermits' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:87), emphasizing the need to be detached from everything and be exposed to God. She knew that to encounter God, one must be purified and mature, for which one needs others. There are no better means of undergoing the process of purification, a prerequisite to rising to higher levels of God-consciousness, than by learning to live with others. It calls for continual sacrifice and provides opportunities for seeing the evil in oneself and overcoming it. She was convinced that one cannot forgo this essential means of human and spiritual growth. Teresa stated,

> The most certain sign, in my opinion, as to whether or not we are observing these two laws is whether we observe well the love of neighbour. We cannot know whether or not we love God, although there are strong indications for recognizing that we do love Him; but we can know whether we love our neighbour" (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:351).

Thus, in the mind of Teresa, it was crystal clear that a divine-human relationship can be considered to be authentic only if the person involved enters into a selfless and genuine relationship with fellow humans.

One of the most significant reasons for which Teresa set out to reform the Carmelite Order, was the noticeable absence of interpersonal friend-

ship in the communities where she lived previously. In *The book of her life*, Teresa narrated that the Community of Incarnation was composed of 180 nuns: 'Before the first of these convents of ours was founded, I spent twenty-five years in one in which there were a hundred and eighty nuns' (Teresa of Avila 2018, Vol. 2:425). Given the vast number of members in the community, it was a herculean task, if not impossible, to have a friendly and sisterly relationship in the community, as is indicated by her intention to withdraw from a large community she lived in and to establish smaller ones. 'Key to Teresa's reform was her conviction that the Monastery of the Incarnation where she entered and had lived for some twenty years was too crowded and busy for the solitude and contemplative prayer that she had come to consider integral to Carmelite life' (Egan 2005:50).

One of the criteria by which Teresa would discern the genuine character of prayer is the quality of relationship: '[I]f we fail in love of neighbours we are lost. May it please the Lord that this will never be so; for if you do not fail, I tell you that you shall receive from His Majesty the union' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:353); 'for if we practice love of neighbour with great perfection, we will have done everything' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:351). The nature of the community relationship that she had in mind is brought out best in the three different names she assigns to her communities in her writings: 'The little school of Christ', 'The castle of Christians', and 'A cozy little dwelling corner for God'. In the next paragraphs, these communities will be cursory discussed.

El pequeno colegio de Cristo (*The little school of Christ*). Teresa envisioned Carmel as the little school of Christ, passionately dedicated and committed to God. Her idea was to have not more than 13 nuns, including the prioress, in a convent, corresponding to the number of twelve apostles with Jesus as their master: 'I should like that there be many of these friendships where there is a large community, but in this house where there are no more than thirteen – nor must there be anymore – all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:55). The idea of a smaller community was based on the lack of sisterly life in the large communities she previously lived in. She restricted the number to 13 with the intent to have a stronger interpersonal relationship among the community members. Mathew Blake refers to her communities as perfect and ideal societies when he states, 'Her communities are a perfect or ideal society: Everyone will be equal; everyone loves everyone; everyone has true inner

freedom; the sick, weak and vulnerable are respected and cared for; power is used in the right way; and all participate in God-given honour and glory' (Tyler & Howells 2017:99).

El Castillo de Cristianos (*The castle of Christians*). The term 'castle' is a constant imagery in Teresa's understanding of higher levels of spiritual life and a place of refuge from invaders or the attack of enemies. Her monasteries were, in her mind, little castles where Christians would live in unity against the enemy's attack, and in a loving relationship with God. When she founded St. Joseph's, the first reformed house, she desired to call it 'The little castle of Christians': '[M]y Sisters, that what we must ask God is that in this little castle where there are already good Christians not one of us will go over to the enemy' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:48). It is one thing to have a well-fortified structure and another to have a relationship of trust and devotion among the dwellers within. When the castle cannot offer security, the dwellers can suffer loneliness because of its disconnect with the outside world. The only cure for loneliness is to have a warm relationship within. While the castle walls repulse the invaders, the members within serve as walls to each other and offer the security of love and relationship.

Un rinconcito de Dios (*A cozy little dwelling corner for God*): '[F]or He once said to me while I was in prayer that this house was a paradise of delight for Him' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:239). The warmth of relationships among the members in the communities led her to think of them as cozy little dwelling corners. She could not imagine a close relationship in big communities. She dreaded communities where members were deprived of love and a sense of belonging. Doubtless, Teresa envisioned small communities with adequate structures that facilitated warm and cordial relationships, where everyone felt loved and helped.

Communal life was so important to Teresa that she has put it as a prerequisite for mystical contemplation. In *The way of perfection*, she dedicated four chapters to the aspects pertaining to community life, calling the attention of the Sisters to the significance of the same (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2: 53-71): 'Taking up the first practice, love of neighbor, Teresa devotes four chapters to an analysis of love' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:29).

The way of perfection is a manual of prayer, containing instructions on prayer. The nuns, having seen the caliber of prayer of their founder, requested that a book specifically on prayer be written by her for their benefit. However, in a book containing 42 chapters, Teresa did not begin to explain

prayer until chapter 22. Instead, in all the preliminary chapters she dealt with 'the things that must be done by those who intend to lead a life of prayer'. In other words, she was dealing with the prerequisites before beginning the subject of prayer. She was not too enthused to write a manual for studying how to do mental prayer without addressing the primary concerns or the atmosphere that is required for prayer. In this aspect, she was very much rooted in the basic Christian attitude to prayer life as an interpersonal rapport between God and the human person, and not merely as a good image. A lateral rapport with visible fellow human beings is an essential prerequisite as well as a confirmation of the authenticity of the vertical relationship with the invisible God. Hence, in the first place, she insisted on building up the atmosphere in which the life of prayer can be lived:

> Before I say anything about interior matters, that is, about prayer, I shall mention some things that are necessary for those who seek to follow the way of prayer; so necessary that even if these persons are not very contemplative, they can be far advanced in the service of the Lord if they possess these things. And if they do not possess them, it is impossible for them to be very contemplative. And if they think they are, they are being deceived (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:53).

By laying down the list of prerequisites, she listed love for one another as the first: 'The first of these is love for one another; the second is detachment from all created things; the third is true humility, which, even though I speak of it last, is the main practice and embraces all the others' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:54). Teresa considered that the atmosphere in which the life of prayer was to be lived, was of the greatest importance. Having spoken of the three prerequisites essential for mystical prayer, Teresa spoke of the importance of the first prerequisite – love for one another. She narrated that love for others is of prime importance to the love of prayer and life in common:

> About the first – love for one another – it is most important that we have this, for there is nothing annoying that is not suffered easily by those who love one another – a thing would have to be extremely annoying before causing any displeasure. If this commandment were observed in the world as it should be, I think such love would be very helpful for the observance of the other commandments. But, because

of either excess or defect, we never reach the point of observing this commandment perfectly (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:54).

Referring to Jesus' insistence on love of God and love of neighbor, she stated that the love of God cannot be completely ascertained whereas the love of neighbor could be ascertained with certainty. The criterion by which the love of God is judged, is the love that one bears for one's neighbor:

> The most certain sign, in my opinion, as to whether or not we are observing these two laws is whether we observe well the love of neighbour. We cannot know whether or not we love God, although there are strong indications for recognizing that we do love Him; but we can know whether we love our neighbour' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 2:351).

Friendship between human beings becomes a redemptive reality in the church. St. Elizabeth of the Trinity, dwelling on the friendship in the cloister, relates, 'The mystery of the Three has been reproduced on earth since our two hearts have found their union in Yours' (Arborelius 2020:72).

For Teresa, contemplative prayer itself is interpersonal as is seen in her definition of prayer in *The book of her life*: 'Mental prayer, in my view, is nothing but friendly intercourse, and frequent solitary converse, with Him who we know, loves us' (Teresa of Avila 1982, Vol. 1:67). Community life is both a prerequisite and an external manifestation of such a relationship with God in prayer. Eager for certainty, and with all the passion that drew her to God, Teresa loved God in her neighbor. In her great heart, love of God fashioned abysses of inscrutable depth; love of neighbor enlarged it until it embraced the whole world: 'Like the commandment bequeathed to us by our Lord, Carmel is wholly concentrated on a double and single movement of love. Double, because it is directed to God and to our brothers and sisters. Single, because the one theological virtue of charity informs the two movements, the two tempos of Carmelite Spirituality that give it its vital rhythm and are, as it were, its heartbeat and its breath' (Marie 1999:46).

Prayer brings one to the threshold of the discovery of one's identity and goal. One realizes that one is part of the other. In discovering the other, one discovers a part of oneself. When one cooperates with the other, the

whole journey is made shorter and easier. To discover God who is present in the neighbor is to draw one step closer to God.

Teresa seems to have grasped this reality and embarked on initiating a revolution of sorts by establishing human communities where love for God and selfless love among human beings were the only and absolute rule. Therefore, Teresa called her cloisters a true family, little tabernacles of Christ, colleges of Christ, bee-hives of charity, houses of God and gates of heaven, etc. She has brought the symphony and harmony which are evident in a delicate balance between activities that are God-centric and person-centric, very close to each other. For her, they were not opposite but mutually com-plementary poles. One who loves God, excels in sacrificial love for the most undeserving, and one who truly loves fellow sisters and arrives at a mature interpersonal relationship, can easily approach God and be involved with a pure conscience in contemplation. God is not worshiped by animal sacrifices, gifts, money, music, elaborate rituals, or cult; these are but gestures of our good will. A true moral life that manifests the victory of love over evil, is the worship that can be offered to God in 'spirit and truth'. It is simple and sin-cere worship of seeing and serving God in fellow human beings without any self-interest, coming to God in prayer, and expressing that love to God in the intimacy of the heart. Doing the will of God is the core of the command of love.

The discourse of communal relationships arises precisely among those who have the conviction that love will finally win, provided everyone slowly but decisively chooses to rise above the clutches of passion that divide and distance one from another, to build bridges between people without any condition. No doubt the Christian teaching of the kingdom of God speaks of the possibility of building an earthly city where peace and justice can be ex-perienced and relished.

Conclusion

What is stated above will reveal a few aspects: First, a human person in es-sentially relational and interpersonal relationships is crucial to human society, as the happiness of people hinges on healthy relationships. Second, it is cru-cial for survival. Third, everything one learns, depends on the relationships initiated with others, and lastly, the development of the interpersonal relation-

ship is a presumed conclusion. Can a group of people who have decided to advance in prayer, which is a relationship of the highest order, call for an exception to this indispensable norm of society? It would be a unanimous NO.

For Teresa, interpersonal friendship was very close to her heart. She, a reformer of the Carmelite Order with its charism of prayer and contemplation, saw it as one of the primary prerequisites to arrive at mystical contemplation.

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Interpersonal Friendship

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Mapping Post-Secular Islamic Liberation Theology[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that the post-secular turn is the new social analysis that shapes the politics of the impoverized[2] in Islamic liberation theology. In this article, I suggest that, given the essentialism and determinism characterizing much of the contemporary studies of religion and secularism, a direct articulation of a post-secular approach from an Islamic liberation theology perspective is both inevitable and necessary. Such an approach can offer new meaning for both religion and secularism by engaging with the hegemony of secularism in relation to the state and society to envision a politics of the impoverized.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology, post-secularism, Islam, Ali Shari`ati, Asghar Ali Engineer

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[2] The article uses the term 'impoverized', although at a superficial glance it is merely the British English variant of 'impoverished', which usually denotes a temporary condition of being poor, usually caused by recent circumstances. The term is spelled with a 'z' not so much because it is the American version, but the pronunciation denotes that the poor are not merely a social category, but exists as a product of an economic system that systematically produces the condition of poverty. By using 'impoverized' rather than 'the poor' or the 'impoverished', the agency of that economic system is foregrounded to highlight a process of impoverization.

Introduction

In much of the mainstream media and among several scholars, the idea of religion being a source of conflict is the default one, and the occasional religious call to peace is intrinsically regarded as something new and praiseworthy (Mitchell 2016:20). Others, equally essentialist in their reification, insist that 'real religion' is inevitably and invariably peaceful (Khan 2004:80). Both groups, however, will often argue that a bulwark against religion being weaponized for violent purposes – particularly and increasingly when it comes to Muslims – is secularism, along with the presumption that it is inherently peaceful. The idea that secularism – supposedly the sphere of reason, on its own and without its historical nemesis, religion, or the sphere of faith – can be solely responsible for 'retaining' civilization and is increasingly challenged from different angles, all mainly falling under the rubric of 'postsecularism' or 'the post-secular turn'.

This article argues that the post-secular turn can also inform the politics of the impoverized in Islamic liberation theology. The article further argues that, given the essentialism and determinism prevalent in the contemporary analysis of religion and secularism – given its birth in the bosom of the Christian Western civilization, a direct articulation of a post-secular approach – is necessary from an Islamic liberation theology perspective. A post-secular Islamic liberation theology provides new meaning for both religion and secularism by engaging with the hegemony of secularism in relation to the state and society to envision a politics of the impoverized.

Liberation theology has two core elements: 1) The preferential option for the impoverized and the marginalized, and 2) a social analysis based on historical contexts (Petrella 2005:3). Both are nodal points based on the changing historical context of the impoverized, marginalized, and oppressed (Petrella 2005:3). Along with all other expressions of liberation theology in various religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, Islamic liberation theology is not a particularly mainstream tendency among Muslims, although there has been a significant number of scholars and organizations that describe themselves in these terms. Farid Esack (1997:83) has defined it as follows:

> A theology of liberation…is one that works towards freeing religion
> from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on un-

critical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of in-justice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion. Liberation theology tries to achieve its objective through a process that is participatory and liberatory…It is formulated by, and in solidarity with, those whose socio-political liberation it seeks and whose personal liberation becomes real through their participation in this process. Furthermore, an Islamic liberation theology derives its inspiration from the Qur'an and the struggles of all the Prophets whose encounters with different forms of oppressions (*ẓulumāt*) are narrated therein. It does so by engaging the Qur'an and the examples of the Prophets in a process of shared and ongoing theological reflection for ever-increasing liberative praxis.

This article argues that the post-secular turn is a relatively new and necessarily historical context of social analysis of Islamic liberation theology. One of the main tasks of Islamic liberation theology is to inquire about the relation between Islamic liberation theology and other theories, strategies, tools of and approaches to liberation including decolonial theories, postcolonial studies, critical Muslim studies, and Islamic feminism studies to explore convergences to advance the preferential option for the marginalized. Unexplored dimensions of post-secularism are evident in the works on Islamic liberation theology, and the article wishes to foreground it. This tendency is best exemplified in the works of two of its early pioneers in the Global South and whose relevant work the article draws upon in framing the arguments, Ali Shari`ati and Asghar Ali Engineer.

Ali Shari`ati Mazinani (November 23, 1933 to June 18, 1977) was an Iranian sociologist trained in Paris, specializing in the sociology of religion. He is regarded by many as the most esteemed organic intellectual among Muslims of the 20th century (cf. Saffari 2017:27), particularly in Iran, where his ideas may have contributed little to what finally constituted the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic. Shari`ati inspired a generation of young Muslims throughout the world to be critical towards both the powerful structures of religion as well as the invasive and corrosive nature of imperialism (Waine & Kamali 2017:309).

Asghar Ali Engineer (March 10, 1939 to May 14, 2013) was a prominent Indian organic intellectual, well known for his commitment to communal harmony and peace, and the first scholar to use the term 'Islamic libera-

tion theology'. The socio-political context of his contribution to Islamic liberation theology is the debates in India about the subaltern politics which challenged dominant concepts of citizenship, community, the public sphere, and secularism. Engineer, who published copiously and whose work was widely read across the globe, deals extensively with the question of women's rights and inter-religious relationships in India[3].

   This article argues that the articulation of a critical post-secular approach from the perspective of Islamic liberation theology is important, given the need to critique the structuralist understanding of subjectivity dominant in contemporary studies of the politics of religion and secularism. Post-secularism identifies religion as a category within the dominant power of secularism which has the discursive power to define religion. For example, Charles Taylor (2007:770) argues that modern secularism emerged as a modification, not of but within the Western Christian tradition. With regards to a non-Western context, Partha Chatterjee (1992:148) holds that the dominant force of Indian secularism and discourses around it are primarily high-caste Hindu in orientation. Both these arguments take secularism as a category of a dominant religion that has maintained its power through a historical discursive process. This differs from the claim that secularism is really another type of religion or the mask of dominant religion. Both these examples show how secularism speaks from a place of power in defining and arranging religion (Nongbri 2013:4). A post-secular perspective understands religion and secularism as inseparable phenomena that cannot be referred to in isolation, as they dynamically change each other without respectively clinging to a universal essence (Nongbri 2013:5). Moreover, the rise of liberation theology around the globe from the late 1960s was significant in the overall development of what scholars call the 'return of religion', and the subsequent crisis of secularism all around the world (Staudigl & Alvis 2016:590).

   Talal Asad (2003:23-24) points out that the term 'secularism' acquired its current meaning during the mid-19th-century debates on atheism when English freethinkers developed the term to avoid the unhelpful charge of atheism. The term 'secular' was used in medieval times to signify a domain of life and meaning outside the church. Ovamir Anjum (2017:ix) elabo-

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[3]   Engineer's writings were usually very poorly edited, and I do not wish to consistently draw attention to this. Readers may assume that any errors of spelling, style, or grammar wherever he is cited, reflect the original contents.

rates on this, 'Today, this word can have one of at least two meanings: either a neutral one to describe that which is not deemed sacred or *immediately* religiously normative without connoting opposition to it, such as when we refer to scientific or technical education as secular education or secular pursuit'. However, as Joan Scott (2018:1-2) argues, immediately after the clash of civilization thesis presented by Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) and after the Cold War, the meaning of secularism signified a triumph of enlightenment over religion, this changing in meaning towards an essentially positive alternative – not to all religions, but more specifically to Islam.

Recent studies on Islam and secularism largely concur that the political doctrine of secularism and the sociological understanding of secularization were not the dominant trends in the Islamic past and present (Abbasi 2020:185). However, the epistemological divide and separation of secular and religious as a distinct form of power relations continues to carry a particular significance in various Islamic societies (Abbasi 2020:185). Sherman Jackson (2017:2) argues that the epistemological foregrounding of the secular over the religious was not part of what he calls the 'Islamic understanding of secular'. He further argues that the Shar`iah (the Islamic legal dispensation) limits the realms of both the 'religious' (*din*) as well as that of the 'secular' (*dunya*) within Islam (Jackson 2017:22-23).

The focus of this article, however, is the hegemony of secularism in defining the relation between religion and secularism when conceptualizing Islamic liberation theology. The post-secular Islamic liberation theology, this article argues, is part of an attempt to build broader political assemblages of movements of oppressed subjectivities that cut across the boundaries of religion and secularism. There are three sections in the article. The first discusses the problem of contemporary understandings of religion and secularism from a post-secular studies perspective. Here, the first section examines the epistemological foregrounding of secularism in the work of Jürgen Habermas and problematizes it to develop a critical position on both religion and secularism. The second section shows the affinity between post-secularism and Islamic liberation theology through the works of Shari`ati and Engineer to demonstrate the convergence and divergence between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism. The second section further explores theoretical strategies and attempt to show the common political praxis in which the criticism of religion and secularism emerged. In the third section, the discursive construction of a post-secular Islamic liberation theology is further concretely

expanded, using three categories: Critique, essentialism, and subjectivity. These three categories are critically developed around the problematization of secularism and religion. This, in turn, leads to an articulation of a social analysis based on a post-secular Islamic liberation theology.

Post-Secularism: The New Politics of Religion and Secularism

The term 'post-secularism' was popularized by Habermas at the beginning of the 21st century (Modood 2014:15). Habermas' position of post-secularism enabled an understanding of the role of religion in secular citizenship in the context of European crises concerning the relation between science, politics, religion, and technological development in Western societies (Habermas 2008:126). However, the Habermasian position 'defines the post-secular turn in the narrowest possible Eurocentric terms, and it universalizes a specific brand and historical manifestation of secularism' (Braidotti, Blaagaard, De Graauw, & Midden 2014:2). For Habermas, post-secularism is a reflexive understanding of both secular and religious citizens to transcend their inherent limitations in a society (Habermas 2008:126). He retains the epistemological hegemony of secularism in his notion of post-secularism. However, the political criticism of secularism was established well before Habermas, although the term 'post-secularism' was not used to represent it. One example of this is the new politics of the critique of secularism from a social movement perspective in the Indian context, which has already started in the 1980s, as is evident in the works of Engineer (1984:9). It is evident that the critiques of secularism were present in the Indian public sphere even if not explicitly named as post-secularism (Nandy 2007:107).

   Post-secularism studies on secularism and religion tend to focus on its historical, critical, and political genealogies. Prior attempts to understand it, though, took place purely at a conceptual level (McLennan 2010:5). The common thread that unites various previous attempts to study secularism is that the critique becomes an essential elevation of secularism without the confines of power rather than a critical position on secularism engaged in historical discourse and the 'common sense' of a given society, history, or

politics (Brown 2009:10)[4]. Post-secularism studies point out how secularism has evaded critical scrutiny in the contexts of exclusions and otherization of religion, especially minority religions, faiths, and political spiritualities (Scott 2018:4).

The question of positioning secularism as an ostensibly progressive, liberatory force in relation to religion, warrants unpacking because of the dominant position of its secularism in defining religion (Asad 2003:2). Asad (2003:1-2) argues that the problem of secularism as a political doctrine is not that it is Western in origin. The separation or division of religious from secular is thus not unique to Western history. The medieval empires of the Islamic world practiced this separation for its own reason (Asad 2003:1-2): 'What is distinctive about "secularism" is that it presupposes new concepts of "religion", "ethics", and "politics", and new imperatives associated with them' (Asad 2003:2). More often, those who oppose secularism on essentialist grounds miss the point that the problem of the secular as an epistemology is in its construction of what religion is, as their positions on secularism succumb to the essentialist premise of the secularism it opposes. It is here where the power of secularism as a political doctrine is located. The novelty of a post-secular position is that it does not divide secularism and religion into two watertight compartments. It also does not place one above the other (Asad 2003:22). Critical inquiry into the inevitably intertwined history of secularism and religion focuses on a social analysis based on post-secularism (Asad 2003:22).

To illustrate the contingent history of secularism and religion, one can consider several 'histories of origin' of secularism in India, considered by many as one of the more successful examples of non-Western/postcolonial secularism without Eurocentric baggage (Sayyid 2014:39)[5]. The multiple interpretations of origins make a singular definition of Indian secularism im-

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[4]   Brown (2009:10) argues that it is very difficult to have a natural relation between secularism and critique. The post-secular argument is that the relation between secularism and critique should be regarded from another perspective of critique.

[5]   Salman Sayyid (2014:39) argues that most often the valorization of Indian secularism is a political tool to confirm the validity of secularism as a universal phenomenon. This position further entrenches the idea of secularism as not inherent to the West, obscuring its epistemological location to discipline the religious 'other' – particularly and increasingly, although not exclusively – the Indian Muslim minority.

possible. Amartya Sen (2006:17-18) argues that the ethos of secularism was present in South Asia since the times of emperors such as Ashoka (304-232 BCE) and then Akbar (1556-1605 CE). He further argues that the principles of secularism that existed in the Mughal Empire – especially under the rule of Akbar – were triggered by the spirit of Indian secularism. Ashis Nandy (2007:107-111), however, differs with this nationalist historiography of secularism and argues that Indian secularism was a colonial, political invention and cultural, imperialist imposition over the plurality of cultures, traditions, spiritualities, and religions that existed in India before British colonialism. Romila Thapar (2016:18) agrees with Nandy's critique of counter-historiography of secularism as being foreign and colonial, but argues for its relevance in the context of its adoption by the Indian masses to strengthen popular sovereignty and postcolonial democracy after the British rule. Thapar (2016:19) assumes that the so-called Indian culture has had no issues with borrowing foreign ideas and experiences, and that is its ability to accept foreign ideas to form a unique blend of syncretism, which makes India unique.

The question of the relevance of talking about the 'origins' of secularism or the definition of secularism in a given context needs to be rethought from a post-secular perspective. The essence of a concept outside of political discourse cannot be completely known (Laclau 2007:545). Instead, the post-secular attempt seeks to understand the interrelation between religion and secularism and how they have dynamically changed in their discursive moments (Asad 2003:5-6). Secularism and religion need to be regarded as discourses with different meanings in different historical and political contexts, with distinctive political effects. Neither secularism nor religion can be reduced to 'left-wing' or 'right-wing', 'progressive' or 'reactionary' without signifying the particular context of the political discourse it articulates. With this understanding of post-secularism, we need to look closer at the narratives the normative secularism has constructed about religion and the world to engage its (secularism's) discursive power.

In its critique of secular power, Islamic liberation theology converges with post-secularism studies, mainly by complicating the binary of religion and secularism (McLennan 2010:4). The power of secularism becomes hegemonic in the sense that it becomes normalized by repressing its contingent and historical articulation, and presents itself as an obvious and uncompromising certainty (Scott 2018:4). One of the political implications of post-secularism studies is that it unpacks the notion of power that works as the

usually 'hidden truth' of secularism (Scott 2018:7). Post-secular studies argue that the relation between secularism and religion is primarily one of power[6]. This is the point where Islamic liberation theology and much of post-secularism strategies converge.

Between Islamic Liberation Theology and Post-Secularism

In the early 1970s, Shari`ati[7] held that a simplistic secularist position that seeks to erase the role of religion in the life of the impoverized, does not sit well with the complex genealogy of the revolutionary praxis of the impoverized in different parts of the world (Shari`ati 2006:28). Shari`ati reinterpreted the secular anti-colonial categories prevalent in the works of Franz Fanon (who died in 1961) and reconstructed them as a language of Muslim political subjectivity in the context of the Iranian revolution (Leube 2018:165)[8]. The reconstruction of the history of religion in Shari`ati's works argues that the antagonism to religion does not emerge primarily from non-believers or anti-

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[6]   Post-secular studies have attempted to classify themselves in several ways. Religion and secularism and their interdependencies are just one part of a larger question. Colonialism, capitalism, nationalism, race, and gender frameworks of critiquing secularism are well-developed areas of inquiry (Lloyd 2016:1-18). However, the secular is primarily defined in opposition to religion, and hence there is a deeper enquiry into secularism and how it defines religion. This is what distinguishes post-secular studies as a field of enquiry. The notion of religion as the worst manifestation of society as regressive and as a perversion, was established through secular epistemology.

[7]   Andrew Burgess (2006:x) argues that Shari`ati's approach to religion has more in common with Latin American liberation theology, while his approach to the historiography of religion is more particularly in line with the works produced by Enrique Dussel (cf. Burgess 2006:x).

[8]   There were three letters sent between Fanon and Shari`ati, though he published a few articles under Fanon's editorship at *al-Mujāhid*, the journal of the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (*National Liberation Front*) (Leube 2018:159). While Fanon does not endorse the role of religion in politics in the way Shari`ati does, in a letter to Shari`ati, Fanon was optimistic about the idea that Islam, or at least Shari`ati's approach to it as practiced in the Algerian anti-colonial struggle, will converge in the larger liberation of oppressed humanity, with his secular anti-colonial interpretation of liberation (Fanon 2018:668-669).

religious secularists, as many of the clerics claimed. This antagonism rather emerged from the oppressor class, which cuts across the sphere of both religion and the secular (Shari`ati 2006:32). However, this proto-post-secular view of the role religion and anti-religion play in Shari`ati's work is often dismissed by a section of Iranian secularists as another apology for the ideological power of the elite religious classes in controlling the impoverized and working-class (Shari`ati 2006:32). Morteza Hashemi (2017:213) argues that the sociology of Shari`ati was post-secular because he used the language of religion to enthuse a social movement as compared to traditional sociologists who limit themselves to theorizing social movements. Shari`ati produced a sociology which combined secular and religious idioms to build a revolutionary mass movement in the context of Iran (Hashemi 2017:213). He challenged the presumed neutrality of secularism by foregrounding the language of the religion of the oppressed to speak back to the structure of power and hegemony which prevailed in Iran (Hashemi 2017:213).

Contrary to the position of Islamic liberation theologians such as Shari`ati, some secularists had an essentialist expectation that all religions would fade away soon and the growth of capitalism and modernism would eventually replace the regressive presence of religion by inaugurating a new immanent perspective of secular life. On the contrary, as Brown (2014:109) argues, the presence of religion in the lives of impoverished people living in huge slums all over the industrialized world, is proof that the Western and modernist rendition of secularism as global future is wrong.

Currently, many of the global impoverized across the Global South find sanctuary in religion after the heightened antagonistic developments of capitalist modernism (Brown 2014:109). Historically, globalization and capitalist expansion fueled religious convictions rather than weakening them. Globalization appeared to have unwittingly produced something of its opposite (Brown 2014:110). Religion functions as a response to the market rationality of globalization (Brown 2014:110). The earlier expectation was that secularization is an inescapable fate of the expansion of capitalism around the globe. Against this secular expectation, even the so-called European liberal democratic states are removing the mask of secularism, proudly exhibiting their religious face by placing the conflict of religion and secularism to a new phase in the history of Europe (Roy 2020:6). Brown (2014:110) argues that a normative position of modern secularism does not help in analyzing the existential role of religion in the life of the impoverized who are suffering under

the new capitalist regime. Brown (2014:110) conceptualizes a new kind of secularism that goes beyond the separation of the church and politics. Secularism, Brown argues, is a power relation that defines what secularism and religion are a) in public as well as private life, b) as a politics of governmentality, and c) through the power of modern subjectivity (Brown 2014:110).

The implication here is that the emergence of post-secular studies has a close affinity with Islamic liberation theology in criticizing an essentialist understanding of both religion and secularism with special reference to the preferential option for the impoverized and their politics. This convergence happens first by enabling a new conceptualization of critique in understanding religion and secularism; second, by moving beyond essentialism in prevailing critical attempts to conceptualize religion and secularism; and third, by forming new post-secular subjectivities beyond the structuralist understanding of religion and secularism.

The Relevance of Post-Secular Islamic Liberation Theology

The intersection and interaction of post-secularism and Islamic liberation theology is not a new phenomenon. Engineer, in fact, applied a non-binary view of secularism and religion[9] from the eighties of the previous century. Although he did not offer a particularly nuanced or rigorous analysis due to his own essentialist approach, his views on religion and secularism should be appreciated for their historical and implicit formation of a type of post-secularism. Engineer's engagement with secularism and religion emerged through his praxis in the backdrop of violence between communities in postcolonial India. While he argued that both secular and religious forces play a definitive role in producing what he termed 'communal violence'[10], he placed

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[9] Engineer's *On developing theory of communal riots* (Engineer 1984:3) can be considered as a basic structure of subsequent theoretical development of his work on communalism. His praxis is such that his analysis emerges from his capacity as a social activist, his grassroots knowledge, and his scholarly studies on the subject.

[10] Engineer differentiates between religious violence and communal violence by looking at the role of religion in violence: '[O]ne must distinguish between religious violence – [located] in sectarian and doctrinaire differences – and communal violence – [located] in conflict over controlling political power and economic

them as secondary to the economic interest of the wealthy as the major force behind communal violence (Engineer 1984:10). To understand the 'real nature' of communal riots, Engineer argued for the combination of both ideological or macro factors, as well as local contextual variants or micro factors (Engineer 1984:11). The major beneficiaries of communal violence are the ruling classes in India who use religious and secular communal identities to secure their economic interests. Engineer's basic premise on communalism and communal violence remained the same throughout his writing from the 1980s to the first decades of the 21st century.

In the early 1980s, Engineer rejected the dominant secular framework that religion had a monopoly in producing communal violence, stating that '[m]any good-intentioned secularists and rationalists…often make this mistake of holding religion as the main culprit in this [communal violence] matter' (Engineer 1984:3). He argued that secular political parties also played a definitive role in producing communal violence in a postcolonial setting (Engineer 1984:3). There is a different articulation of secularism and religion in Engineer's narratives. He views secularism as an instrument to maintain peace in social life and to promote a social ethic of non-violence (Engineer 1984:3). His position is that even though violence occurs between two communities whose identities are primarily articulated in religious terms, neither religion nor secularism is essentially responsible for it. According to him, it is the betrayal of both secular and religious values by primarily the economic elites and then, built upon that, by political interest which led to the structural reasons underpinning the violence between religions in India (Engineer 1984:8). Engineer's insistence that the roots of what was always described as communal violence was inherently rooted in religio-cultural differences, but were driven by the mechanization of the economic elites, is also indicative of his awareness that poverty and its instrumentalization for social discord are the outcomes of processes engineered by the powerful.

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resources between the elites of two communities' (Engineer 1984:3). In the Indian context, the community groupings may vary according to the social organization based on caste, language, race, region, and gender. However, community formation in terms of religion, especially between Hindus and Muslims, is predominantly understood as communalism and the subsequent violence from that grouping is called 'communal violence' (Upadhyay & Robinson 2012:36).

To examine this a bit closer, we engage with Engineer's articulation of secularism and religion by examining his enunciation of communal violence. First, his rather essentialist framing of the power of secularism and religion means that he is unable to properly assess the direct role of religion and secularism in constructing communal violence in India. It also removes the power of ordinary people and their understanding of violence (Pandey 1992:40). Engineer constructs the economic interest of the elites as the primary cause of communal violence. Moreover, the essence of the secular nation and its citizen-subjects are to be saved from elitism (Pandey 1992:40). He, however, either ignores or is oblivious to the interconnected role of the power of religious subjectivities in producing a secular politics of violence (Pandey 1992:41). Engineer's limitation is, on the one hand, that he identifies religion and secularism as the visible causes of communal violence and, on the other hand, that they occupy an essentialist position outside the problem of power and subsequent violence. By displacing the question of power to another unnamed generality, power is thus ignored and perpetuated.

Engineer' praxis, however, does show that an Islamic liberation theology engagement with the question of secularism and religion emerges from the paradigm of political discourse. The problems of essentialism, the question of critique, and the politics of subjectivity demand serious consideration when one works towards a post-secular Islamic liberation theology. It is not to suggest that all differences between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism can be eliminated, leading to some sort of unified meta-discourse, or a limitless fusion of post-secular Islamic liberation theology. What is more important in Islamic liberation theology is that it permits an intersection between Islamic liberation theology and post-secularism, and not a mere 'application' of either Islamic liberation theology or post-secularism one over another.

Three major categories determine the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology: Critique, essentialism, and subjectivity. These categories rotate around the problematization of secularism and religion to develop a direct articulation of a social analysis based on a post-secular Islamic liberation theology.

Critique: Hierarchy and Freedom

A post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective espouses the right to critique both religion and secularism without reproducing the power it opposes. Such an approach rejects the binary approach to the religious and the secular as counterproductive in that it invariably ends up in the affirmation of one over the other. Given the normalization of secularism, the right to critique it is a political demand despite a commonsensical understanding that there are aspects of secularism that cannot be critiqued (Brown 2009:13). The criticism of post-secularism is distinct from internal critiques that are autobiographical in secular history, and the need to divorce the criticism of secularism from its own biography. Secularism cannot be the single objective point of critique, and instead needs to be subjected to critique. Furthermore, religion is not the burial ground of critique, but can also become a place for the articulation of critique (Ahmad 2017:16). This critique, we acknowledge, is often met with some suspicion when it is assumed that it is undertaken to enable the integration of religion and state or to politicize religion or both. Questions are raised by well-intentioned sceptics as to whether an attempt to bring religion 'back' to the forefront is dangerous or not, given that today's contexts are different. However, the problems of power are not peculiar to religion. Questions of constraining plurality and questions of violence have just as checkered a history in secularism as they do in religion (Cavanaugh 2009:226). Both have complicated histories in terms of their engagement with politics. To relegate all problems to religion and all solutions to secularism is no longer tenable – if ever it was (Cavanaugh 2009:226).

To illustrate this, we consider the glib equation of religion with violence and secularism with peace. Routinely ignored or dismissed studies have consistently shown that the supposedly secular history of Europe has been just as – if not more – violent than its so-called religious history (Milton-Edwards 2011:187). Furthermore, in relation to what is considered religious – for example, 'Islamic' empires – there is hardly a comparison with the violence of secular history. Nazism, fascism, communism, liberal democracy – the so-called secular ideologies of Europe have a history of violence incomparable to violence in so-called 'religious' polities, and especially in Islamic governance systems (Cavanaugh 2009:113). This is not to say that Muslims are naturally non-violent, or that Muslim violence is devoid of Islamic influences, but rather to affirm that one cannot essentialize the Eurocentric and

Islamophobic historical correlation between Muslims and violence or any other group for that matter. William Cavanaugh (2009:6) argues that the essentialist understanding of the violence of religion is constructed by the politics of secularism itself[11]. There is no exclusive history of violence by secularism or religion. It is in the hybridity of religion and the secular as a relation of power that Cavanaugh locates violence (Cavanaugh 2009:6). The hybridity of religion and secularism is a better way to make an understanding of violence in this world (Eagleton 2005:99). The freedom to critique secular power is a prerequisite for the politics of post-secularism from an Islamic liberation theology perspective.

Essentialism: Secular Left and Religious Right

Liberation from an Islamic liberation theology perspective is post-secular because it does not assume a non-antagonistic essence for either secularism or religion. The hegemony of secularism is protected by projecting itself as the pure source of power and by displacing the problems of secularism to religion. One of the problems requiring attention from a post-secular Islamic liberation theology is that of right-wing tendencies within religious movements. Presented in another way, does a critique of secularism assist the resurgence of religious right-wing[12] politics? This question, of course, emerges from the assumption of an inherent and essential virtue in secularism. From a post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective, the critique of religious right-wing politics that comes from the affirmation of an essentialist secular-

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[11] Cavanaugh (2009:226) also refers to the ideological function of what he calls the 'myth of religious violence' because it is 'part of the folklore of Western societies'. The hegemony of the West is behind the construction of religious violence in relation to secular violence which is based on the ideology of the nation-state: 'As such, it legitimates the direction of the citizen's ultimate loyalty to the nation-state and secures the nation-state's monopoly on legitimate violence' (Cavanaugh 2009:226).

[12] The terms 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' have a Eurocentric history. This article does not delve into the problematic of such categories because the analysis is focused on the anxiety of the secular left concerning the resurgence of religious right-wing politics. In other words, the use of the left/right binary in the context of this article is for the purpose of description and to address the problems of understanding commonsense and public reasoning.

ism, is problematic. The problem of secularism in the global context requires specific criticism on its own terms, without being reduced or displaced by the problem of the religious right-wing. By analyzing the two contexts of post-secularism debates in India and Iran – however briefly – the following section will tackle the problematic framing of an 'essential' religious right and secular left.

The Indian debate around secularism caused considerable anxiety among the secular left, as was also evident in the Iranian context in relation to the secular left's claims that Shari`ati's Islamic liberation theology was co-opted to produce a resurgence of the religious right-wing, particularly in the case of the Iranian revolution. In the Indian context, Sumeet Sarkar argues from a critical secular left position that secularism requires self-critique to enable and renew its politics of secularism and that the postcolonial Indian critique of secularism only serves to strengthen right-wing Hindu politics (Nigam 2006:155). He argues that what is required, is a 'true' commitment to secularism and democracy, especially to safeguard the rights of religious minorities in the face of a growing right-wing Hindu nationalism. Aditya Nigam (2006:170) argues otherwise by stating that the upper-caste Hindu right-wing critique of secularism needs not be intermixed with several other critiques of secularism, including critiques by anti-caste communities and other religious minorities. These critical discourses are different from those of the majoritarian Hindu right, as the socio-political position from which a critique emerges in part determines its goals and purposes.

Shari`ati faced similar criticism when he critically engaged with both religious authoritarianism and the historical determinism of the secular left, mainly for failing to understand the role of culture and religion in the life of the oppressed masses in Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:509). Shari`ati argues that while the religious elites presented the culture of the ordinary people as stagnant, the secularists rejected the role of culture and religion in the life and cosmology of the oppressed to form an organic expression of social and political protest (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). His articulation of Islamic liberation theology was a double critique of both the followers of secularism and of the religion with both subsequently attempting to reduce his influence by pushing him to opposite camps by selectively appropriating his legacy (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). The secularists' main criticism against Shari`ati was that he provided space for the later emergence of totalitarian tendencies in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). However, this reading

does not do justice to the proto-post-secular Islamic liberation theology project of Shari`ati, a careful reading of which shows that he was critical to all forms of oppression, regardless of where it emanated (Byrd 2018:124). He was deeply cognizant of how both secularism and religion can be – and indeed were – invoked in support of systems of oppression and injustice.

Shari`ati's critics also ignore that there was a significant inadequacy in the ideological analysis of the Iranian secular leftists (Behrooz 2000:xiv). Maziar Behrooz (2000:xiv) argues that 'Marxism in Iran was defeated not through ideological crisis engulfing international communism, but due to its inability to understand the internal dynamics of the 1979 revolution in Iran'. Iranian leftists wanted to cut the head of the state without really engaging with the overwhelming consensus of the Iranian state society (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:510). Thus, the Iranian secular left failed in developing a mass movement in their society by wrongly focusing on the contradictions of the state. On the other hand, the Islamic critical discourse, by following Shari`ati, engaged with mass mobilization to build a counter-hegemonic block and focused on the existing social relationships in Iran to mobilize the masses against the state. Ghamari-Tabrizi (2004:510) argues that, '[c]ontrary to the Marxist-Leninists' position, who were preoccupied with the question of state repressive coercion, Shari`ati's predicament was the question of mass consent and, in an Althusserian way, the ideological state apparatus'. This made the Islamic counter-hegemonic block more successful in resisting the Pahlavi regime than the secular left[13].

After removing themselves from the historical context of Iran and failing to understand the significance of religion in the lives of the masses in Iran, secular leftists accused those refusing to follow their revolutionary line as problematic and regressive (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2004:511). The deterministic view of society and politics reduced secular leftists in Iran to a marginal phenomenon. Shari`ati, on the other hand, became the primary inspiration behind the revolutionary moment, theorizing the problem of state-society relations in Iran by engaging with the logic of the grassroots (Bayat 1990:21). A proto-post-secular view of the role of religion and secularism in the works of Sha-

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[13] Asef Bayat (1990:30) argues that Shari`ati's powerful critique of Marxism did not provide a complete license for the ruling regime, which was established after the Iranian revolution, to do what they wanted. That regime appropriated Shari`ati's legacy as one of its tools to fight the internal dissidents (Bayat 1990:40).

ri`ati is central in his construction of a theory and praxis of Islamic liberation theology. His praxis is attuned to the grassroots of the Iranian society. That is how he became influential among the religious class, although he differed with them by combining a theory of religion with a sociology of secularism in his approach to the problem of the Iranian society and politics (Byrd 2018:123). This subversive assemblage of religious texts, secular literature, critical theories, folk stories, and urban cultural narrations in the public discourse of Shari`ati, made him popular among both religious communities and secular circles.

According to Sophia Arjana (2018:192), 'Shari`ati's Islamic ideology insisted on religious grounds that to be a good Muslim one must fight to overthrow the existing social order and condemned both secular radicals and conservative clerics within the religious establishment who might oppose his revolutionary plans'. His praxis was post-secular in orientation because he practiced a critique that questioned the role of both religion and secularism that helped to maintain hegemony as a form of hidden consensus of power among the oppressed, and domination as a form of naked violence of the ruling class.

Subjectivity: Structure and Discourse

A post-secular Islamic liberation theology maintains a critical Muslim subject-position[14] that is in constant critical engagement with the powers of secu-

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[14] The distinction between a structural position and subject position is crucial here in understanding the politics of subjectivity in Islamic liberation theology. The relationship between a structural position and the subject position are not always correspondent (Smith 2012:61). This shows the mediation of the political discourse around the determination of a structural position from various subject positions (Smith 2012:61). Individuals are free agents and choose their life according to their wish without any consideration about whether their structural positioning in society is wrong (Smith 2012:61). However, no one experiences their structural position – class, gender, race, nation, region, religion, sex, etc. – without the mediation of political discourse (Smith 2012:61). It is a discourse which determines the subject position and its relationship to the structural position. The struggles between discourses are significant in giving an interpretative framework for a certain subject position (Smith 2012:61). The question is how can Islamic liberation theology develop a discourse on effective resistance where dif-

larism and religion by considering the historical context of oppression and marginalization within both the nominally Muslim and broader non-Muslim world. A critical theory of power argues that weak power is 'visible' and hence becomes easily visible by the greater power it wants to engage (Bourdieu 2001:35). Thus, power that acquires a normalizing capacity will hide from its own criticism by multiplying its role in various social fields. Secularism maintains its 'enlightened' and moral authority by transferring its limits and problems to religion through a greater power that is invisible (Asad 2003:191). Moreover, secular power is revealed in its ability to develop an idea of a monolithic religion as unchanging, as something that remains the same irrespective of space and time and essence (Asad 2003:200). Secularism enables the production of certain peculiar critiques of religion that it essentializes without having to talk about its own normalization, otherization, and exclusions (Strensky 2010:92). Secularism has become the dominant power because of its ability to evade criticism. It perpetuates its power through the process of normalization and by multiplying its role in the social field.

The dominant secular position is that the 'Muslim' cannot be a category to organize politics due to the diversity of Muslims' structural position in the form of class, nation, caste, race, region, gender, etc. and that there is no single structural position that constitutes 'Muslim' as a political entity (Sayyid 2014:8). The impossibility of naming Islamic politics as such is because of the plurality of social and political subject positions of Muslims that emanates from multiple structural positions – Muslims as understood through secularized categories, like class, caste, race, region, nation, gender, etc., to participate in politics by reducing their Muslimness to a secondary position. This is the reason why 'Muslim', as a singular subject position, is not possible. In short, Muslim/Islam cannot be a signifier through which political and social agency can be articulated (Sayyid 2014:7). Even if Muslims are attacked specifically for 'being' Muslims, autonomous Muslim politics is not possible because the reason for the attack against Muslims is not because they are Muslims, but there are underlying structures such as class or nationalism behind the attack against Muslims.

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ferent subject positions can merge to form effective resistance based on political discourse? The task of promoting a new political discourse itself starts by analyzing the existing power relations.

However, the dominant secularist argument about terrorism essentializes terrorism and violence, reducing it to a peculiar Muslim matter motivated by Islam especially when committed by Muslim agents (Strensky 2010:146). In such an argument, there is an absence of any consideration of the internal differences and structures of power in the Muslim communities. It is in this context that critical approaches to how terrorism discourses erase differences between Muslims are relevant. On the other hand, when it comes to violence in the name of Islam by Muslims, the dominant secular position normalizes itself by avoiding all structural responsibility to secularism by blaming the religiosity of the Muslims (Strensky 2010:146). Phrased in a theological language, in contrast to the evil acts and deeds of Muslims, the normalizing power of the secular position takes responsibility for Muslim acts and deeds when it comes to the good acts and deeds of Muslims.

In summation, the argument is not that there are no constitutive splits in the formation of a Muslim subject position in relation to the various structural positions (Sayyid 2014:8). The question is that the plurality of Muslim political positions has any say in constructing differences such as class, gender, nation, etc. in the formation of Muslim subject positions (Sayyid 2014: 8). In other words, the specificity of the Muslim discursive tradition as hermeneutical framework plays a role in determining the politics of the Muslim discourse in a concrete context. A Muslim subject-position from a post-secular Islamic liberation theology perspective refers to the ensemble of the Muslim discursive tradition. Through this, a Muslim interprets and temporarily decides the structural positions within a social formation, beyond the binary of religion and secularism[15].

Conclusion

Theories of secularization constitute the dominant norms of social analysis in understanding the relation between religion and secularism (Fox 2018:10). There are varieties of positions and variants of the secularization theory. It ranges from a gradual disappearance to a decline of religion from the public sphere and human life (Fox 2018:10). Though it is not directly connected,

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[15] Another example of this is an Islamic feminist position which prefers the signifier of gender in determining the Muslim subject position, which in and of itself is not the negation of Islamic politics.

functionalist understandings of religion compliment the secularization theory. Functionalist understandings of religion stress that religion is not the prime mover of society, but it is only a tool in the hands of non-religious prime actors of the society (Fox 2018:10). It explains religion away as a secondary factor (Fox 2018:20). The social and political elites with the collaboration of religious establishments use and manipulate religion to achieve secular or non-religious goals. This was one of the main concerns of Islamic liberation theologians like Engineer. The role of religion or Islam in the work of Engineer is rather utilitarian, and for that reason the power of secularism in determining and defining the role of religion is absent. Shari`ati's position was more complex in that he struggled to differentiate between the instrumental use of religion and the independent agency of religion in facilitating human actions towards a particular end – that is liberation.

Given the essentialism and determinism prevailing in the contemporary analysis of religion and secularism, the three major strategies in the frameworks of critique, essentialism, and subjectivity determine the articulation of a post-secular approach from an Islamic liberation theology perspective. The post-secular turn is the new social analysis that shapes the politics of the impoverized in Islamic liberation theology. The aim of the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology is not only to make a pluralistic space for religion in the public sphere – as we see in the works of post-secularism by questioning the authority and domination of secularism – but to reconstitute the role of religion as an option for the impoverized in the political constitution of the society. The recent turn in post-secular studies, however, only confines itself to making religion as one model of life world in the public sphere by challenging the hegemony of secularism. The aim of the post-secular turn in Islamic liberation theology is to give a new meaning to religion as the religion of the oppressed by engaging with the dominant power of secularism in the political constitution of the society.

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Kereke Ya Sephiri: A Study of a Secret Society in Botswana and South Africa

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The keeping of the secret is something so unstable,
the temptations to betrayal are so manifold
(Berlin 1906:473).

Abstract

The difference between esotericism and exoterism is unlike the difference between circles and rectangles. It is also not the difference between the size and relevance of a specific body of knowledge in circulation. It is rather the extent of the circulation, acceptance, understanding, and meaning of a particular body of knowledge, philosophy, or worldview, over the spiritual and socio-political life of diverse categories of people in society.

The infancy of the academic study of esotericism, as well as its interdisciplinary nature, militate against the crystallization of a universally accepted definition of the term 'esotericism'. The various definitions of the term by researchers consistently relate to their research interests. In line with Faivre's concern with the forms of thought of esoteric movements (Faivre 1996), as well as the preoccupation that Versluis has with gnosis generation in esoteric movements (Versluis n.d), our study of *Kereke ya Sephiri* in Botswana and South Africa examines a) the cultural and religious contexts in which Frederick Modise, a gnostic in his own right, generated the underlying gnosis of his secret society, and b) the import of the content of this visionary mystical revelation in the spiritual and social lives of members of this secret society[1].

The study of the Setswana term, *Kereke ya Sephiri* (*church of a secret*, referring to a Christian-based secret society), is a study of African eso-

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[1] For a critique of Faivre's disregard of the value of gnosis in his characterization of Western esotericism, see Asprem (2014).

tericism in South Africa and Botswana. The principal academic interest in the study of esotericism lies in our quest to identify the fundamental tenets of the worldviews of the specific esoteric society, the eclectic nature of its philosophy, and how this philosophy relates to the orthodoxy of the day (Christianity in this instance). We do so by concentrating on the form of thinking, engendered by esoteric practices. Esoteric groups do not appear or exist within cultural voids. For this reason, by identifying the eclectic or syncretic nature of the fundamental philosophy (*gnosis*) of these groups, we trace the cultural influences involved in the emergence and consolidation of these worldviews and philosophies. This study shows that African esotericism is not always antithetic or subversive of dominant or institutionalized Christianity.

Keywords: Kereke ya Sephiri, secret society, mystical gnosis, initiation, bakgethwa, bakulwane

Introduction

The academic study of esoteric religious cults raises methodological problems[2]. These groups are best studied clandestinely. For example, Anderson's seminal study of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (IPHC) has relied on an informant who was clandestinely embedded within the organization (Anderson 1992). In researching the Mwali cult in Southern Africa, I was sometimes forced to use eavesdropping as a method of collecting classified data. Pretending to be an ordinary pilgrim to the shrine of Dula on February 13, 1993, I gained access to the shrine, where the oracle of Mwali spoke from the deep caves of the large hills of Matopo in Southwestern Zimbabwe (Nthoi 2006). When Kefilwe Modise, one of my undergraduate research students at the University of Botswana failed to obtain permission from the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) Headquarters in Moria (South Africa) to research the Church's attitude to the use of modern contraceptives, she had no alternative but to use clandestine or covet data collection strategies (Modise 2004).

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2   Lindstrom (2015:374) states: 'The study of secrets has posed obvious methodological and ethical problems for ethnographers'.

This article, which uses the biographical approach[3], is based on the memories, reminisces, and reflections on my two visits to the International Pentecostal Church (IPC) in 1978, and my observations during the many visits I have made to the Secret Churches in Botswana. Based on my participatory observation, my approach is essentially emic – an insider's perspective (Murchison 2010; Pike 1999). If you may, call these experiences, memories, and reminiscences a 'person-centered' ethnography. Although the biographical approach or life history currently lies at the periphery of anthropological thought, it is nonetheless, useful: 'It mediates, not too successfully, the tension between the intimate field experience and the essentially impersonal process of anthropological analysis and ethnographic presentation' (Crapanzano 1984:955).

My Visit to Silo

In 1978, I was a third-year student at the University of Botswana and Swaziland. A 'sister' who was my colleague in an out-of-school Christian interfaith camaraderie group (Jesus Generation Movement), invited me to visit her church, the IPHC with its headquarters in Soweto, South Africa. This was not the first time she had invited me without success. This time, I agreed.

We departed Gaborone one Saturday morning with her three siblings and her mother. I was the only stranger on the team. We travelled safely, enjoyed ourselves during the trip, and arrived at 2 pm. There was a large number of believers in the church courtyard when we arrived. There were children and elders, men and women, and people with disabilities. As there was little time before the service began, we proceeded to a large church building where the service was held. We all sat together in the church, and I was quite at ease.

The church service lasted a little over two hours. It was a normal Christian praise and worship session, with a lovely singing of Sesotho hymns and choruses, as well as the preaching of the word of God by several priests, including Modise, the founder of the IPHC – *Ntate* (*Father*) is his honorific title. Individual testimonials of healing and other experiences were shared. For example, an elderly woman testified about her abandonment of tradition-

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[3] For more information on the biographical approach in social anthropology, see Kopytoff (1986).

al healing by joining Ntate Modise's church. She showed her beating drum, a bag full of traditional herbs and a fly whisk which she used in her old quarry as a traditional healer. These artefacts were taken away for later destruction.

After the service, we had dinner early, in preparation for what I was told was going to be a night vigil. Around 7 pm, my 'sister' asked me to join other visitors to register before the evening vigil began. This is a normal procedure, I was enjoined. I obliged and joined the long and winding queue to the enrollment office. Everyone who stood in line for the recording was called *bakulwane* or *balwetsi* (*invalids*), a word that surprised and angered me[4]. When I arrived at the office at approximately 11 pm., the officer asked me to explain the purpose of my visit and to list all my illnesses and afflictions. I had none because I had just come visiting, as I had previously done so, on various occasions, at many other churches in Gaborone, Botswana. This, as well as the fact that my hosts had left me in the queue around 7 pm., and had not prepared me for this, exacerbated my anger and frustration.

Upon completion of the registration process, the officer handed me over to two gentlemen, who escorted me to the church where we had had a charming ceremony in the afternoon. They held me firm and tightly, each putting an arm under my armpit, pushing me quickly into the church. The door was shut! They knocked and it was opened just slightly. I heard singing from within. After a brief verbal and whispered exchange, I was ushered inside the building. Once again, the two men pushed me along the aisle to the high altar, where numerous priests and Ntate Modise sat. When I arrived at the altar, the presiding priest asked me which language I spoke. I told him I preferred Ikalanga, my native tongue. To my great surprise, a priest got up and talked to me in perfect Ikalanga. He asked me to publicly confess all my sins before I could be cured and *go fitisiwa* (*incorporation after an initiation*) as *mokgethwa* (*selected and anointed*) to be an authentic member of the church. I refused to do so because I had no sins to confess. He asked whether or not I had ever committed adultery. I told him that I never had. Twice he asked me to confess to committing adultery, and twice I turned him down. He then asked the congregation what was to be done with this obstinate and unrepentant sinner: 'Do we give him a final chance to confess his sins or do we

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[4]   See Anderson (1992) for more information on Modise's association of illness and poverty with sin. There is no spiritual healing without the confession and forgiveness of sins.

eject him from here?' The congregation echoed: 'Please give him another chance!' I also heard voices from the congregation imploring me to confess my sins to Ntate so that I could be healed. I confessed that I had committed adultery, for it became clear to me that it was the only sin they seemed to care about.

Thereupon, all the elders on the podium rose and Ntate Modise prayed for me and forgave my sins. The two gentlemen that had brought me into the church were standing by me. They then led me to chairs that were reserved for the newly healed and initiated members of the church on one side of the immense church building. I sat down and started looking around in search of my hosts. None was in sight. Great anger swelled within me at the thought of what I had been subjected to without knowing it. One by one, all the other *bakulwane* were brought into the church. Their sins were forgiven and they also joined the congregation. This went on until around 5 am. on Sunday.

When the process of healing and forgiving sins came to an end, Ntate Modise stepped onto the podium to preach and enthrone the new members. While reading Bible passages, he paused to ask the faithful what they were feeling. To my great surprise, they all cried out that they were burning. I felt nothing at all. Some shouted the word 'fire' several times[5]. Ntate Modise then explained that the burning feeling they all experienced was the manifestation of God's presence among his chosen people (*bakgethwa*). God is fire, and his hidden Name, only revealed to *bakgethwa*, must never be spoken out or used in vain. This is the church's number one secret. God revealed this Name to Modise, in his out-of-body conversation we shall discuss later. God only reveals himself, particularly his Name, to the righteous and the pure of heart – i.e. his chosen nation. They are the only ones that can know and understand him. This knowledge of God's hidden Name creates a strong bond between the *bakgethwa* and God[6]. The concept of the Lord's fear implies that this secret Name is only made known to insiders. This ritual, which involves the

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[5]   This is akin to Rudolf Steiner's first step in the initiation of members in a secret esoteric cult. Steiner states that before this stage, the novice's perception is concealed by a veil of ignorance: 'The falling away of this veil for the would-be initiate consists in a process designated as the process of Purification by Fire. The first trial is therefore known as the Fire-Trial' (Steiner 1947:80).

[6]   For more detail on this issue, see Podolecka and Nthoi (2021).

forgiveness of sins and the healing of every affliction by Ntate Modise, is a rite of passage. It transforms outsiders, sinners, and *bakulwane* (*invalid people*) into *bona fide* citizens of God's kingdom. *Bakgethwa* are the only inheritors of God's kingdom because healing, which in the IPC theology is equated to salvation, is only mediated by Ntate Modise.

The second secret of the church is that only those to whom the secret is revealed by Ntate Modise, must know the secret. Nobody else has the authority to reveal it to a stranger. No one outside the ecclesial circles should be privy to the proceedings of the initiation ritual. To guard against any intrusion, both into the church building while the initiation is in progress, and into the secret, a secret code or password is revealed to novices during the initiation rite. Part of this password includes a special handshake. This special handshake is a recognition sign as *mokgethwa*. These 'signs of recognition such as the password [and the special handshake] go beyond mere recognition of members – they are a means of excluding the unauthorized' (Berlin 1906:485).

The third secret concerns the attire of the *bakgethwa*. The church uniform I saw on arrival on Saturday afternoon – a white pair of trousers, a white shirt and tie that matches either maroon or a dark blue jacket for males, a maroon and white skirt, a matching top, and either a red and white *duku* (headscarf) or beret for women – is different from the attire donned during the Saturday night vigil of members only. The attire donned during the night vigil is a secret. It is only used within the church building. As such, it is not seen, known, or touched by the uninitiated. The newly initiated *bakgethwa* robing ceremony took place later, following baptism in running water. After this induction, the service drew to a conclusion.

The fourth secret of the church is a special formula of prayer which the initiated utter to call for protection in distress. This secret formula, which is revealed to the novice only after the baptismal ritual, was revealed by God to Ntate Modise at his *hierophanic* meeting. A member in distress or difficulty secretly recites the words, 'Water, blood, the burning Spirit, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the God who comes with fire'. Anderson (2000) reports that a 'repetition of these words enables a person to receive healing and protection'. This was later confirmed by Emma Mkhwanazi, a prominent former member of the IPHC (Anderson 2000)[7].

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7   See also Mkhwanazi (2021).

A short time later, my hosts came to cheerfully congratulate me on successfully passing through this initiation. They understood how I felt about the whole episode. Nevertheless, they did explain that they were inhibited by their church rules to discuss the nature and process of the rite of initiation outside the church[8]. This is a secret that is only revealed by Ntate Modise. One only learns experientially. They also stressed the need to visit Silo twice more. First, there was a need for me to participate fully in another initiatory ritual, this time as a member, instead of being a novice. This would allow me to observe everything all the way through. This would be followed later by my participation in the combined baptism and coating ceremonies. All is well that ends well!

We drove back to Gaborone. On the way, now as cohorts, we spoke openly of my weekend experiences. I was now a *mokgethwa*, who is aware of the fundamentals of the church. At the end of the following month, we returned to Silo, the seat of the IPHC, commonly called *Kereke ya ga Ntate Modise* (Church of Father Modise). This time, I did not go there as a *mokulwane* (a sick and sinning alien). I attended the regular Saturday Open House as well as the Member Night Watch. At the front door, which is always closed and is occupied by two or three men, I was able to log in with the secret code. I sat among other people who are in a liminal state (an in-between state) – recently initiated but not yet fully integrated into the group because I had not yet undergone the combined baptism and robing ceremonies. All through the night, I watched the confusion, anxiety, and frustration on the faces of all the novices. On the other hand, I was moved by the entire congregation's plea for novices who were unwilling to publicly confess their sins. No matter how many small sins a novice confessed, it was not enough until the sin of adultery was eventually stated unequivocally. The biblical scriptures read in the induction of novices in the morning were the same. It was

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8   Once more, this is a confirmation of Steiner's prescription. It is the duty of the initiated to guard the secrets of the organization. He states: '[F]or the secret of initiation can only be understood by those who have to a certain degree experienced this initiation into the higher knowledge of existence. You may live in intimate friendship with an initiate, and yet a gap severs you from his essential self, so long as you have not become an initiate yourself. You may enjoy in the fullest sense the heart, the love of an initiate, yet he will only confide his knowledge to you when you are ripe for it' (Steiner 1947:4).

the same for the exhibition of the three fundamental secrets of the church: The secret Name of God, the secret garment of the evening vigil, and the password, followed by the special handshake. All members of my graduating class gathered to measure the sizes of our gowns in preparation for the baptism and robing ceremonies. I never returned to Silo!

However, I did continue my association with family members who invited me to South Africa. I later learned that the mother of my 'sister' was the head of the IPHC in Botswana. As an associate member of this family, I attended several night vigils in Mochudi (35 km north of Gaborone) – Bontleng Community Hall in the city of Gaborone and Mogoditshane Community hall on the outskirts of the city of Gaborone. Due to the large attendance at these vigils, they are normally held in community halls. The night vigils held at satellite stations in Botswana are mainly aimed at the community of fully-fledged members who have already been set up. The induction of new members occurs solely at the headquarters in South Africa.

At the beginning of 1976, I paid a visit to my paternal aunt in Mahalapye, about 200 kilometers north of Gaborone. At that time my aunt was a fully-fledged member of St. John Apostolic Faith Church, an African-initiated church founded by Christine Nku in South Africa. My cousin and I spent countless hours at the fireside, discussing the Bible and singing chorus songs. One day, my aunt told me that during her long observation of me, she was convinced that I had a 'fire' in me. I asked her what she meant by 'fire' in me. She refused to explain herself because I would not understand her. Following my visit to Silo in 1978, I returned to my aunt's home and shared my experiences with her. Joyfully, she got up, hugged me and gave me the special secret handshake that Ntate Modise had taught me. She further explained that the fire that I heard about in Silo is the same fire that she saw in me and talked to me about two years earlier.

I later learnt that my mother (a Catholic until her death in June 2020), my younger sister (a member of the ZCC until she died in 1994), my younger brother's mother-in-law (a member of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa until she died in 1999) and many other relatives had been inducted into what is now known in Botswana as *Kereke ya Sephiri* (a church of a secret). From the above description, it is abundantly clear that *Kereke ya Sephiri* is an interdenominational secret cult that operates within the framework of the IPHC. There are unconfirmed reports that before his death, Ntate Modise advised that the IPHC disbands and that members return to their orig-

inal churches. If the life of the IPHC is effectively co-terminus with that of its founder, perhaps it never was meant to be an established church. What was it meant to be, and what is it?

Definition of Esotericism

Academic studies of esotericism or secret cults began in the Western world in the 19[9] century[9]. During those days, a cult was regarded as any movement that espoused a heretic philosophy or worldview that was subversive of the orthodoxy of the institutionalized Christian church. This is why, within this context, an esoteric group is a movement whose teachings and philosophy of life is heretical or contrary to the institutionalized Christian dogma. As a result, most of the groups that were surveyed were aligned with Gnostic, Buddhist, and humanist philosophies.

Hence, neither can esotericism exist within authentic Christianity, nor can it be Christian in orientation. This poses enormous problems for studying esotericism in non-European cultures and outside Christianity, where the phenomenon needs to be defined differently.

Of course, scholarship in this area has developed and progressed, leading to significant changes in the conceptualization of the phenomenon, both beyond Western Europe and the European missionary Christianity of the 19th century. Esotericism no longer bears the negativity that it did in its context of Western Europe or in the West African context, in which it became bound up with peripheral occultism or mysticism which, according to the early Western scholarly views, is an aberration of real religions[10].

What does esoterism mean? The term 'esoteric' denotes a secret or semi-secret spiritual knowledge (Versluis n.d.:11). If esotericism is linked to 'religious secrecy' (Asprem 2014:8), then there is a way in which both Judaism as a religion and Christianity are based on esoteric thoughts and practices. Therefore, the view of esotericism as existing outside or necessarily subversive of Christianity is unhelpful. Deuteronomy 29:29 (emphasis added)

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[9] For more detail on this trend in the study of esotericism see Crockford and Asprem (2018), Geertz (1973), and Hanegraaff, Faivre, Van den Broek, and Brach (2006).

[10] See Tiryakian (1972) for a detailed discussion of the difference between occultism and esotericism.

reads: 'The secret *things belong* unto the Lord our God: But those *things which are* revealed *belong* unto us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the words of this law'[11]. This is a juxtaposition of two types of bodies of knowledge – the one is esoteric, sacred, and confined to divinity and spiritual beings, while the other is exoteric, profane, and readily available to all. This is consistent with Urban's definition of esotericism, according to which it 'refers to what is "inner" or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of mankind in the exoteric world' (Urban 1997:1).

No matter how one defines the term, esotericism involves practices of secrecy that give rise 'to a wide variety of initiatory societies that seek to conceal their inner doctrines and rituals from the gaze of profane outsiders' (Versluis n.d.:3)[12]. Therefore, without due attention to the 'visionary gnosis', or of the 'via negative gnosis' generation and dissemination aspect of any esoteric movement, there is no esotericism (Versluis n.d.:12). Based on the importance he attaches to the dimension of gnosis, which Antoine Faivre ignores in his characterization of esotericism, Versluis defines esotericism thus: 'The word "esoteric" refers to secret or semi-secret spiritual knowledge, including both cosmological and metaphysical gnosis' (Versluis n.d.:11). Our working definition of esotericism is the actual or claimed possession of elitist or mystical power to access or mediate knowledge that ordinarily lies outside the domain and realm of uninitiated individuals. It is based on our understanding of the terms 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' in Greek. Esoteric knowledge is secret and hidden, while exoteric knowledge is publicly available.

Whereas esotericism in the Western thinking is distinct from the Judeo-Christian orthodox religion, it is not necessarily the case in Southern Africa. This is highlighted by the results of extensive scholarly research on the cult of the *sangoma* in South Africa and Botswana, which shows the appropriation and incorporation in Christianity, and the African native

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[11] This is why Blavatsky (1989:3) refers to 'the esoteric teachings of the Law of Moses'. She further elucidates that 'every ancient religious, or rather philosophical, cult consisted of esoteric or secret teaching and an exoteric (outward public) worship' (Blavatsky 1989:5).

[12] Tiryakian (1972:494) succinctly captures this point: 'But a critical aspect of esoteric knowledge is that it is a secret knowledge of the reality of things, of hidden truths, handed down, frequently orally and not all at once, to a relatively small number of persons who are typically ritually initiated by those already possessing this knowledge'.

worldview on the long-celebrated significance of African indigenous healers. This study focuses on the IPHC, a classic secret society within Christianity, popularly known as *Kereke ya Sephiri*.

International Pentecostal Holiness Church as an Esoteric Secret Society

In his study of Pentecostalism in South Africa, Anderson devotes great attention to Modise's IPHC[13]. Although he correctly noted Modise's claim to the possession of mystical powers emanating from his meetings and conversations with God, he does not consider him as an African esotericist or gnostic like Yelena Blavatsky, the theosophist (Blavatsky 1889). Although he correctly observed that this church has many rituals and secrets that are only revealed to the initiated, he falls short of calling it an esoteric secret society. What is a secret society? Having secrets in an organization does not necessarily make it a secret society because there are very few organizations that do not have secrets[14].

We define a secret society as a society that keeps 'certain of its practices or conceptions hidden from nonmembers, no matter how public or recognized they are as a group' (Podolecka & Nthoi 2021). First, there is no secret society without a secret[15] – a secret society is 'characterized by its secret' (Simmel 1906:483). These secrets pertain to its ritual practices and beliefs (particularly the nature and source of its arcane supernatural powers) that distinguish it from other religious sodalities. These are the secrets upon which secret societies promise 'special knowledge, status, or power to the chosen initiates' (Spence 2020). Second, secret societies exist within and are part of a specific socio-cultural structured community. They always arise and exist 'within an already complete society' (Berlin 1906:485). The purpose and content of their secrets (esoteric knowledge) are the basis of their detachment

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[13] See Anderson (1992, 2000, 2001).

[14] For a detailed discussion on the ubiquitous nature of secrecy in society, see Maret (2016:6 of 28).

[15] We do not subscribe to Maret's view of secrecy as a wicked social problem (Maret 2016:1 of 28). We rather use the term 'secrecy' to denote 'the intentional or unintentional concealment of information' (Simmel 1950:330).

Leslie Nthoi

from the larger community of nonmembers and holders of exoteric knowledge.

Third, a religious secret society often has 'impressive displays, and above all, claims to secret supernatural power' (Hayden 2018:1). In this regard, therefore, a religious secret society is an 'exclusive ritual organization' (Hayden 2018:1). Fourth, membership in secret societies is voluntary and somewhat restricted. No person is born into a secret society. To ensure full concealment of society's fundamental secrets, there is a demand for the total commitment from members to such societies. To this end, secret societies use threats of death or serious afflictions to befall non-complying members. Fifth, secret societies are characterized by an elaborate and transformative initiation rite. Berlin associates the initiation rite with the first secret of any secret society as follows: 'As a rule, a solemn pledge is demanded of the novice that he will hold secret everything which he is about to experience before even the first stages of acceptance into the society occur' (Berlin 1906:488).

Therefore, there are three main characteristics of a secret society other than the mere existence of secrets: a) The secrets are linked to the beliefs and initiatory rituals of the organization; b) the circulation and dissemination of these secrets are limited to initiated members, and c) knowledge of these secrets is the primary basis for the differentiation of rights, power, and privileges of the holders of this esoteric knowledge from those of the holders of exoteric knowledge (i.e. elitism based on secret knowledge possession)[16]. We expunge any notion of 'moral badness' from our usage of the term 'secret'[17].

By its very nature, esoteric knowledge flourishes under the veil of concealment to the eyes of non-initiates. The most prolific cover is exoteric culture under which it exists and functions 'unobtrusively'. Tiryakian captures this point clearly: 'More relevant is to indicate that esoteric culture is not concretely disjoint from exoteric culture, that it coexists, albeit unobtru-

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[16] Berlin (1906:485) observes that '[s]ecrecy defines the relationship between him who has the secret and him who does not have it'. This is why Tiryakian (1972:500) describes the initiation of members of a secret society as a process in 'which the adept increasingly become socialized into the esoteric culture and increasingly dissocialized from the natural attitude of the exoteric culture'. See Faivre (1996) for further detail on the pedagogical functions of initiation rites in secret societies.

[17] For the link between secret and concealment of 'moral badness', see Berlin (1906:463).

sively with the latter, or stated differently, that there are many interchanges between them' (Tiryakian 1972:501).

Based on the above criteria, we consider *Kereke ya Sephiri* to be a secret society. It is an interdenominational secret cult within the IPHC, founded by Ntate Modise in 1962. Its monthly night vigils for initiated members at the church's new headquarters in Johannesburg (Zuurbekom) in South Africa, are interdenominational. Consequently, the IPHC, extensively studied by Anderson (1992, 2001), is the public face of this cross-cultural and interdenominational cult. Unlike the American-based International Holiness Church, the major tenets of Modise's IPHC are based on his personality, particularly his healing powers. Whether perceived as the spokesperson of God (*Moemedi*), as the personified Holy Spirit (the Comforter), or as a Messiah (Anderson 2000), Modise is the undisputed repository of secret knowledge and mystical power, derived from his mediatory role, following his divine calling in 1962.

We have already observed that esoteric groups neither emerge nor exist in cultural vacuums. There is a relation between the tenets of their teachings and philosophies and the socio-political contexts of their emergence. In what socio-cultural context did the IPHC emerge? The late 1950s to the mid-1960s in Africa mark the beginning of the African renaissance. This period marked the beginning of Africa's growing unrest and resistance to European imperialism, especially in the cultural component of its life. Among other things, black Africans began to challenge 'the right of the Europeans to impose their cultural-spiritual values on their communities while at the same time attempted to abolish the spiritual and cultural rights of "the natives"' (Nabudere 2001:14). Therefore, this was the period of the reawakening of the black African cultural and political consciousness that gave impetus to the quest for religious and political self-determination and independence. As a result, it was a period of resurgence of African indigenous esoteric movements, such as African indigenous healers and the ancient African cult, who sought to limit the Christianization of African communities. Worldwide, this period marks the ramp-up of Pentecostalism. It was in this sociopolitical context that Modise had his visionary encounter with God that changed his life.

Before founding his church, Modise was a principal pastor in the ZCC, headed by Engenas Lekganyane (Anderson 1992). The ZCC is an African-initiated church, with a strong healing ministry. Very little is known about the real reasons why Modise broke away from the ZCC. Having sev-

ered his ties with the ZCC, he grounded his new church on the claimed emergence or revelation of a new founding principle that highlights its peculiarity (personal and institutional differentiation). This claimed possession of a body of secret mystical knowledge gave rise to the secrets of his church. We therefore concur with Berlin's assertion that 'secrecy intensifies such differentiation' (Berlin 1906:467).

In September 1962, Modise developed a serious illness. He presented complicated afflictions customarily associated with a divine calling, which both Western medical doctors and African indigenous healers failed to heal. His thriving funeral parlor was broken into, and costly equipment was vandalized or stolen. His children from a first marriage died mysteriously. This left him sick, bankrupt, and emotionally traumatized. During his hospitalization, he had a near-death experience, which proved to be the turning point of his spiritual life and led to the birth of the IPHC and the secret cult that operates within it.

This is a classical visionary encounter with the transcendent. Such an experience opens the door to 'direct spiritual insight, either in the hidden aspects of the cosmos or transcendence, thereby producing a "visionary gnosis"' (Versluis n.d.:3). Let us reflect a bit more on the importance of assertions and affirmations of having had visionary experiences. This is important for defining how we encounter the body of knowledge (*gnosis*) generated by these experiences. Esotericism does not exist without gnosis. The term 'gnosis' 'refers to direct spiritual insight into the nature of the cosmos and of oneself, and thus may be taken as having both a cosmological and metaphysical importance' (Versluis n.d.:12). Therefore, narratives of such experiences and encounters are narratives of gnosis generation without which there is no esotericism, for that which is esoteric, hidden, protected, and transmitted, is generated during and through these visionary revelations.

During this visionary experiment, Modise had a 'conversation' with God. God forgave him for all his sins and healed him. Subsequently, God entrusted him to lead his chosen people out of 'Egypt', the house of bondage, to 'Israel', the kingdom of God on earth. In this way, Modise became God's representative on earth (*Moemedi*). God revealed his 'true' Name to him. He gave him specific instructions on how to establish the kingdom. Finally, God revealed to Modise a set of classified information on membership in the kingdom. He was to reveal this information only to members. The account of Modise's divine calling and anointing as God's representative on earth places

him in the category of Gnostics – those who not only have mystical powers, but are first and foremost aware of God's profound secrets (esoteric acquaintance) or the divine gnosis[18]. To borrow Blavatsky's terms, Modise is, therefore, an African version of *Theodidaktos* (*god-taught*), who is said to have had divine wisdom revealed to him in dreams and visions (Blavatsky 1889). He became one of the few who are 'permitted to attain knowledge of the secret name of God which Moses learned on Mount Sinai' (Tiryakian 1972:501). This narrative is part of image construction. Having led a faction that broke away from the charismatic Lekganyane of the ZCC, he had to lay a solid base for his claim to possession of wisdom and power superior to any other. Thus, according to him, it was God himself who chose and empowered him. He alone knows God's real Name. It is only he who can forgive sins, and it is only he who knows how to pray the Lord's Prayer. It is only his church that offers true healing. In one of his articles, Anderson notes that there are 'many secrets' in the IPHC, 'that foreigners are not allowed to know [and] secrets that can only be disclosed to members [or that] only the "elected" shall know' (Anderson 1992:188). These are the secrets that were revealed to us on the day of our initiation into the kingdom.

Benefits of the Secret

What are the benefits and dividends associated with membership in an organization, especially a secret cult? In other words, What is the difference between those who hold secrets and those who are excluded from secrecy? To answer this question *vis-à-vis Kereke ya Sephiri*, we rehearse Ntate Modise's understanding of his commissioning by God as his representative.

There is no doubt that Modise believed that his divine calling went beyond the establishment of a church. Above all, he saw his major assignment as the restoration of the kingdom of God upon the earth[19] under his direction as 'King of Kings'. No wonder he always appeared in public in regal attire. He saw himself as God's tool for the realization of a new world order

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[18]   For more detail, see Modise (n.d.).

[19]   A close analysis of the reminisces of the legacies of the late founder of the IPHC by members, titled 'The Original Comforter' reveals that the current church's principles of the kingdom, which Modise espoused in his lifetime, were obtained from Munroe (2006).

on earth. His church was to become a sub-structure of the structured socio-cultural community in which it exists, but one with which it was to have an antithetical relationship. The possession or non-possession of the secret is what differentiates the esoteric from the exoteric community.

Having received a divine revelation on God's chosen day for the Sabbath, a day dedicated to the Lord, his new church worships on Saturdays. This is in contrast to his former church, the ZCC and other Pentecostal churches that worship on Sundays. However, in keeping with its Pentecostal leanings, he rejected the fundamental principles of Africa's indigenous religions – i.e. the centrality of ancestral cult and the African indigenous healer[20]. Thus, the African indigenous healer became his 'avowed enemy'. His belief in faith healing, another important trait of Pentecostalism, led to his rejection of 'the use of medicines and prophylactic substances for the healing of sickness' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:25). This is one of the distinguishing features between the IPHC and the majority of African-initiated churches of the African Christian typology in South Africa and Botswana[21]. This went against the pursuit of African religious independence which inspired African resistance to European cultural imperialism at the beginning of the African renaissance period. Following God's miraculous cure, Modise

> removed from his house all medicine conventional or unconventional. All symbols related to traditional and ancestory [sic.] worship were thrown out of the house. Idolatory [sic.] symbols in the form of holy water, holy ash and strings were thrown out of the house. What he remained with was his trust, faith, hope and belief in his new-found God and the world order and the civilization he had to implement (Anderson 1992:191).

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[20] This is a well-known position of Pentecostal churches. See, for example Brainerd and Walling (2018:114): '[A]cross its "various" streams Pentecostalism has largely remained counter-cultural in respect of preserving conventional moral positions, especially those related to sexuality and thus has taken a stand against adultery, sex before marriage, divorce (except on the grounds of adultery), and homosexuality'.

[21] A distinguishing feature between the IPHC and the other Pentecostal churches is Modise's theology of marriage. The IPHC recognizes and practices polygyny. Marriage in most Pentecostal churches is strict monogamy.

Most of his sermons attacked the veneration of ancestral spirits and the consultation of African traditional healers. He considered ancestral worship to be an abomination to God, and ancestral spirits to be 'angels of Satan'. Consequently, he sought to reduce church members' dependence on the ancestral cult and African indigenous healing. Instead, he emphasized faith healing and 'the gift of healing which operates mainly through him in the IPC' (Anderson 1992:187). As pointed out in Podolecka and Nthoi (2021), Modise associated affliction with sin. According to this principle, effective healing requires the confession and forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, since he is the only person anointed and commissioned to forgive sins, there is no effective healing outside the IPHC. What are the implications of all these on the benefits for members?

A kingdom is an institution that is founded on a social contract, whereby subjects offer obedience to a ruling authority in exchange for protection and the provision of certain services, rights, and privileges without which social life is impossible. As already mentioned above, the successful completion of the initiation and baptism rites transforms novices into *bona fide* citizens of the kingdom of God. Shared secrets provide members with a specific identity and elevated status. It is part of the processes of identity transformation and development within the church/kingdom as a reference group: 'A reference group offers individuals a basis for self-definition and self-identification, a way of affirming their personhood as *bona fide* members' (Hefner 1993:25).

As a result of their knowledge of these secrets, new members are consequently 'accorded status and allocated space within the context of the group' (Masondo 2015:92). In this way, they escape all predation risks[22] resulting from their conversion and abandonment of African indigenous protection strategies. This is the internal dimension of secrecy – i.e. the formation of a strong internal community of believers bound by the sharing of fundamental cultic secrets. In this regard, therefore, these secrets are anti-predatory strategies. Herein lies the importance of the secret prayer formula for the recital by members in distress. Once safely located in the *habitus* of their new

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[22] In its wider sense the term 'predation risk' refers to all challenges and vulnerabilities to which an individual is susceptible, when outside the corrals of the community. For more information on predation risk, see Shultz, Noe, McGraw, and Dunbar (2004).

faith community (the kingdom), they begin to enjoy the full privileges that go with such membership. Their sins are forgiven, their bodily and spiritual infirmities are healed, and they are protected and liberated from the fear of witchcraft as well as the bullying and capricious vicissitudes of ancestral spirits. Membership guarantees one's prosperity on earth. Their married life becomes very stable because no marriage is celebrated unless the Comforter approves it. On the other hand, secrecy is a productive technique for distinguishing the sub-structure from the larger structured community. This is the external dimension of secrecy, i.e. the quest for detachment from the rest, what Berlin refers to as '*building higher the wall of separation, and therein a reinforcement*' of the uniqueness and superiority of the secret society (Berlin 1906:487; original emphasis).

In most of his sermons, Modise made little use of the term 'salvation' in its spiritualist and futuristic sense. He deliberately distinguished being saved or born again, a common expression in charismatic Pentecostal environments, and being chosen or selected. In the same way, the Israelites were God's chosen people – initiated members (possessors of the fundamental secrets) are *bakgethwa* (God's chosen, favored, and privileged people). In as far as it relates to the secrets of the church, the *bakgethwa* concept establishes and grounds elitism for members, a recognized function of secrets in esoteric movements (Urban 1997). We are therefore dealing with the management and dispersion of power within this religious organization.

The doctrine of *bakgethwa* as God's chosen people and *bona fide* members of God's kingdom, provides a doctrine of escapism from the existing order, with a more refocused attention on a 'reality that transcends that of everyday life, but which is a reality that may be actualized in a historical future by reversing the present order of the world' (Tiryakian 1972:506). This is why Anderson regards the IPHC and its internal esoteric culture as messianic in orientation (Anderson 1992). The other benefit of this esoteric knowledge is the conception of fraternal solidarity, according to which all members are brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, outside this protective corral, there is a life of uncertainty (the image of Egypt as a place of bondage, sin, and suffering versus the image of Israel as the land of milk and honey). There is a constant fear of sorcery, diseases, and poverty. It is life outside the Garden of Eden where God provides for the needs and desires of every human being. The difference between 'us' and 'them' is based on whether or not you know these secrets.

Summary and Conclusion

The pursuit of a pure, true, orthodox, and dominant Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any other religious tradition, is as elusive a task as a dog's attempt to catch its tail. Neither is it fruitful nor is it a legitimate concern for a social anthropologist. There is no pure Christianity. This is as true, today, in this globalized world, as it was before, when an esoteric movement was readily defined as a peripheral movement that espouses a secret, hidden, and unscientific worldview or philosophical thought that is either heretical or subversive of mainstream Christianity.

No term is more common in the study of Western esotericism than 'eclectic'. Likewise, no terms have been used more often than the term 'syncretic' in the history of Christian thought. However, such a realization has not impacted our indefatigable search for purity and orthodoxy, in a world in which everything is negotiated. Esotericism is still defined in terms of its relation to 'dominant' or 'institutionalized' Christianity as if the paradigm of 'institutionalized' Christianity is a given.

Extending the academic study of the phenomenon of religious esotericism beyond the borders of the Western European context, allows a more profound and perhaps a fresher understanding of esotericism. On the African continent, especially in the sub-Saharan region, esotericism is understood quite differently from its representation in Western studies. First of all, the pluralistic nature of most African communities militates against reaching a consensus on what constitutes an institutionalized religion. Even within Christianity itself, there are different forms of Christianism, like missionary Christianity and African Christianity. Esoteric movements within these disparate versions of Christianity, as well as within the diverse indigenous religions of Africa, inhibit the emergence of generalized and global conclusions about the nature of African esotericism, particularly, their relationship with 'institutionalized religions'.

In line with Asprem's call for analogically based comparative studies on esotericism (Asprem 2014), we compare our exotic data on *Kereke ya Sephiri* with what we already know about Rosicrucianism, an esoteric Christian movement widely investigated in Western scholarship (Churton 2009). Based on its disenchantment with the current order, Rosicrucianism espouses the establishment of a social, political, and religious world order, akin to Munroe's God's kingdom (Munroe 2006). According to Munroe, the 'the funda-

mental message [of the Bible is] about the establishment of a kingdom rulership on this planet from the heavenly realm' (Munroe 2006:16). It is about a sovereign monarch's plan for 'governing earth from Heaven through mankind' (Munroe 2006:16). Consequently, Christ's central message to humanity lies in his teachings on God's kingdom, which differs from the present worldly dispensation (the kingdom of the earth). The kingdom principle includes the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, love for God and neighbor as the distinguishing features of the kingdom's citizens (that which sets them apart from worldly citizens), and God's demands for an unwavering obedience by the kingdom's citizens as critical for the establishment and governance of the kingdom.

The IPHC has appropriated and incorporated Munroe's principles of the kingdom in the conceptualization of its version of the kingdom principles. Known for its symbol of the cross and a rose, Rosicrucianism, like *Kereke ya Sephiri*, is committed to creating a universal fraternity or the brotherhood/sisterhood of all, based on God's love for humanity. Rosicrucianism, whose members were, in the 17th century, dominated by physicians, pledged to cure the patients without any payment. Likewise, and as noted earlier, spiritual healing of all human infirmities and affliction lies at the heart of the IPHC, whose healing is preceded by the forgiveness of sins. Both movements profess not only to be Christian, but they also claim to herald a new version of Christianity that is based on altruism. They also claim to have the secret of the interior teachings of Christianity.

Therefore, our study of *Kereke ya Sephiri*, a study of an African religious secret society within Pentecostal Christianity, reveals the success of a charismatic esoteric leader in defending Pentecostalism from the assault of African indigenous religions – i.e. the ubiquitous and influential ancestral cult, its theodicy and healing ministry – that gave birth to the emergence of African Christianity. The result of Modise's agency was the emergence of an African-initiated church with Pentecostal leanings. This proves that esotericism in Africa is at once subversive and favorable to 'institutionalized religions'. On the one hand, it is subversive of African indigenous religions and African Christianity as 'institutionalized' religions in Africa. On the other hand, it supports both orthodox and Pentecostal missionary Christianity and European cultural imperialism. Consequently, African religious esotericism operates both inside and outside 'institutionalized religions'.

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Contextualization of Christian Theological Formation in Ghana: Nature, Challenges, and Prospects

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Abstract

Like in many African countries, Christians in Ghana bought into the concept of the contextualization of Christian theological formation – decades ago. Contextualization is generally accepted as teaching essential Christian disciplines with an active engagement of the religious and cultural environment, and the introduction of non-traditional disciplines such as the African indigenous religions and Islam curriculum of the theological institutes. Through one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of students and lecturers (formators) from both public and private theological institutions in Ghana, the author concludes that the process of the contextualization of disciplines still has a long way to go. This essay argues that, though the contextualization project is bedeviled by some challenges such as strong reservations about contextualization, the need to bow to the universal denominational agenda, and the difficulty of synchronizing theological objectives with proper teaching and learning methodologies, contextualization is essential for effective evangelization and promotion of interreligious dialogue in Ghana.

Keywords: Christianity, theology, education, contextualization, indigenization, curriculum formulation

Introduction

Christianity was introduced to Ghanaians by the mission churches. These churches included the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the Methodists, the

Presbyterians, and the Evangelical Presbyterians. In their effort to further entrench Christianity in the country, these churches also established schools and seminaries for the training of local catechists and native ministers (Buah 1998:132). For example, both the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic Church established a Training College at Akropong (in 1848) and Amisano (near Elmina in 1924), respectively. Later, the Roman Catholic Church established two full-fledged major seminaries (St Victor's Seminary at Tamale and St Peter's Seminary at Cape Coast) in 1957 for the training of indigenous priests. Before then, three protestant denominations – the Methodist Church of Ghana, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church established the Trinity College (now Trinity Theological Seminary) in Kumasi in 1942, which later moved to Accra. Almost all of these institutions are still functioning (Debrunner 1967:17).

The theological formation in these institutes had two broad objectives: First, to maintain Christian orthodoxy and second, to develop a contextualized theology for the church in Africa. The theological formation at the early stages of these seminaries and theological institutions in Ghana remained traditional[1] in order to sustain orthodoxy which was confessional in nature (Allen 1960:35). It was solely modelled on the Western theological colleges. The curricula, modules, and course outlines that developed by tradition and accretion, summarized and reinforced the objective of the theological formation then: To inculcate fundamental beliefs of Christianity, specifically in students of theology (Sarbah 2014b:15).

In furtherance of this objective, core courses in theological and ecclesiastical disciplines such as Fundamental Theology, Biblical Theology, Scripture, Christology, Ecclesiology, Pneumatology, Church History, and Church Governance were offered. Other courses included Patristic Theology, Scholastic Theology, Reformation, History of Christian Missions, Sacramental Theology, Homiletics, Christian Ethics, Pastoral Studies, and Liturgical Studies. Certainly, the main objective for the introduction of these disciplines was to instill fundamental Christian beliefs in the students of theology (Mugambi 2002:22). In other words, the traditional formation, which evolved largely out of the European religious worldview, presented the Christian tradition, couched in European culture, to their trainees as 'unique, reasonable, and thus

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[1]   'Traditional' is used in this essay to refer to the disciplines which expound Christian values and teaching.

the only religious tradition worthy of belief' (Westermann 1937:94). The overemphasis on traditional theological education also means that the second objective of making the education relevant to indigenous contexts was relegated to the background. Theological institutes in Africa were also established to enable centers for scholarship in developing contextual African theology. These centers were meant to offer opportunities for Africans who have trained elsewhere to reflect further on pressing theological/ethical concerns in Africa today. They were to be well-resourced and well-staffed institutions for specialist theological contextual education (Pobee & Kudadjie 1990:4).

The past three decades or so have therefore witnessed attempts by Christian churches in Ghana to contextualize theological formation. It is significant to note that a relevant theological formation must be sensitive to the diverse human conditions which form the context of the mission. It is an attempt to take the African context seriously in the formation of church leaders. In other words, a relevant theological formation calls for contextualization. Contextualization has broadly been explained in two varied ways: 1) As indigenization in the sense of translation and inculturation, and 2) as the socio-economic transformation of society. For the purpose of this essay, contextualization is understood in the sense of the indigenization of the whole structure of theological formation. This contextualized formation of the Christian theological institutions in Ghana was grounded on the premise that evangelism is achievable and successful in context, and therefore, evangelization in Ghana should not be different. It is also based on the fact that the structure of the theological institutes has to emerge from the situational context of the practitioners. It ought not be a mere duplication of what worked in any other contexts. This may also call for a critical review of the curricula of our institutions for theological training (Bediako 1995:34).

It must be noted that we do not assume that theological formation in Africa only takes place in institutes of theology. We agree with Joseph Galgalo that the learning and teaching of theology as an academic discipline do occur at both informal and formal levels. The informal mode of transmission which has been both oral and written, is still relevant. Thus, theological formation has not always been the 'exclusive privilege of seminaries, theological institutions or universities, but is a task carried out by the faithful who share their faith experiences in whatever forum available to them' (Galgalo 1998:6). This takes place in forms of revival fellowships, women's groups, youth groups, choir practices, as well as occasional and retreat centers. This

essay focuses and discusses the efforts of theological seminaries and universities towards the contextualization project and the challenges thus encountered. It also attempts to indicate the prospects of the contextualization project in the midst of mounting challenges.

This essay, which spanned over two academic years, took place in renowned theological institutions (private and public) in Ghana. The private institutions are the Catholic and Protestant Seminaries. The Catholic seminaries include St Peter's Regional Seminary (Cape Coast), St Paul's Seminary (Sowutuom), St Victor's Seminary (Tamale), and St Gregory Seminary (Pakoso). The Protestant seminaries are the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Church (Akropong Akwapim), Trinity Theological Seminary (Legon), and St Nicholas' Seminary (Cape Coast). Public universities, particularly the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Coast were also involved in the study. Primary data were sourced from interviews organized for 71 respondents: 21 lecturers and formators, and 50 students. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later analyzed qualitatively by means of content analysis. Secondary information was obtained from bulletins and brochures, curricula, programs, and course outlines of these institutions, which were also critically studied for this work.

Nature of Contextualization

Contextualization in the sense of indigenization is an effort to re-express the Christian message with African idioms and conceptual tools (Martey 1995:65). Discussing the nature of contextualization adopted in Ghana by the theological institutes, is critical in this study. According to the Oxford dictionary, the term 'nature' could generally be described as the structure put in place by an institution or organization to generate the desired climate. 'Nature' is often referred to as structure on which the organization is based. In the context of Christian theological formation, the nature or structure refers to the organizational design of the institution (both in the arenas of curriculum development and pedagogical strategies) which is expected to generate a certain learning environment or climate. The structure of an organization produces what is referred to as the climate. The concept of 'climate' here refers to the relations in any situation as these are effectively experienced by the people in their situation. In relation to the theological formation, the theologi-

cal climate would refer to the theological structure, perception, images or theological thinking, attitude or even behavior which not only exist at the institutions, but are also inculcated in the individual student. This theological climate in the institutes of formation ought to be compatible with the general mission of the churches, serving the needs of their members. However, a study of literature on theological programs reveals that this much needed association does not always exist, rendering it possible to have an institutional climate in the theological institutions, which is significantly discontinuous and incompatible with the real objectives of the local church and so irrelevant to the particular context (Maitland 1993:29).

Consequently, the primary objective of the formulation of a new structure of theological institutes in the spirit of contextualization in Ghana was to enable the seminaries and theological institutes to focus on their calling of training ecclesiastical leaders and practitioners. It was also to make them more effective at living out their ministry in the particular context of Ghana, increasing the fulfilment and inner satisfaction of people who would share their ministry. No wonder, the structure that eventually emerged for the formation aimed at contextual, experiential, and transformational learning that was to transform theology students spiritually, intellectually, and technically for an effective, mature, and responsible ministry in church communities (Bergevin 1967:163). The contextualization of theological training represents the beginning of a new theological trend towards a search for an authentically relevant African perspective on Christian faith (Martey 1995:65). Following recent social and cultural changes in Ghana and other parts of the world, the institutional identity of the churches and of their forms of ministry have been challenged and called into question in a more fundamental way. This is the context in which the question of the viability of theological education and ministry have arisen (Raiser 1997:55).

A cursory glance at the theological programs of the Trinity Theological Seminary and the Catholic seminaries, and even the state universities reveals that the adopted, contextualized formation involved two main aspects. Just like the traditional formation, contextualized formation highlighted the importance of the traditional theological disciplines (Congar 1964:45) such as Sacred Scriptures, Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology, Spirituality, and Fundamental Theology, by offering them core statuses (St Peter's Regional Seminary Bulletin 1994:18). Non-traditional disciplines have been introduced in the programs of theological institutes in recognition of the pluralism of

their society and cultures. This involves the introduction of the study of other religions which are deemed relevant to the Ghanaian context in the curricula of the institutes such as the African Indigenous Religions, Introduction to Islam, Missiology, Comparative Religion, Oriental Religions, History, and Models of Intra and Interreligious Relations. Later additions to the non-traditional disciplines include courses which are society and culture related such as Sociology of Religions, Introduction to Cultures and Societies of Africa, and Psychology of Religions.

However, unlike traditional training, the programs of contextualized formation went a step further to demand, in the course outlines, that these major courses be taught with due engagement with the socio-religious and cultural environment of Ghana. For instance, course descriptions required lecturers to include in their courses, outlines and references from books and papers written by indigenous authors. Lecturers were also required to cite relevant examples from the environment their students are used to in their delivery of lectures. Thus, essential and traditional disciplines of Christian theology education are expected to be expatiated, particularly, at lectures in a non-traditional way. This actually means that in contextualized formation, theology is no longer a discipline that merely reflects a solely confessional understanding of a particular (Christian) religion's doctrinal, ethical, and ritual position regarding religious truth (Flood 1999:45). Theology would rather assume universal dimensions, taking cognizance of denominational and religious pluralities prevailing in Ghana. In view of this, theology is not to be expatiated to give undue pre-eminence or superiority to a particular group's articulation of religious truth (Mugambi 2002:161).

Attempts to contextualize Christian theological formation in Ghana, despite monumental progress made so far in institutions like St Peter's Regional Seminary, Trinity Theological Seminary, St Nicholas' Anglican Seminary, and Akrofi-Christaller Institute, are still bedeviled with challenges. Seminaries still have a long way to go in duly recognizing the pluralism of their society and cultures and having them deeply reflected in their curricula. Furthermore, one would have thought that the process of contextualization would be faster, following the exit of European/foreign missionaries and formators – the supposed great hurdle of 'inappropriate' human agents for contextualization, thus removed. It was a general assumption that the meaningful contextualization of Christian theological formation in Ghana could

only be achieved or effected through the instrumentality of native or indigenous missionaries or formators.

Challenges to Contextualization

Close-minded Educators and Students
One major challenge to the contextualization of theological formation in Ghana has been divided opinions on its importance. While one group consider the project as highly significant, which must be pursued with every strength, another group finds it a dangerous process which ought to be implemented with caution. There are those (practitioners, formators, theology educators, and students) who still strongly believe that the preservation of authentic tradition in which the valuable deposit of faith is embedded, should be the primary concern of Christian formation grounds (Bosch 2004:421). They include those who view every deviation from what their group declare to be orthodox faith in terms of heterodoxy, even heresy (Bosch 2004:421). For instance, a formator at the St Peter's Seminary argues that non-traditional programs such as intercultural and religious studies are not needed in the theological institutions. This position goes contrary to the contextualization project which recommends the inculcation of spiritual riches of other religions into Christian formation. In Biblical Studies, the message of the Bible would have to be disseminated in a language which addresses the needs and world view of theology students.

The Akrofi-Christaller Institute has developed and mounted a Master's degree of Theology with a Bible translation and interpretation option, designed to provide biblical experts for translation agencies, theological institutions, and churches in Africa. The program has been uniquely efficient in relating biblical and theological scholarship to the needs of the African church in the wider world. In view of this, the Bible would not be used as a standard for judging the truthfulness of other religions, especially indigenous religions, but as a source in the search for mutual understanding, enlightenment, and cooperation (Ossom-Batsa 2007:92, 93; Ekem 2005:116; Bediako 2003:34). In the same way, Pastoral Theology, in contextualized formation as adopted by the Anglican St Nicholas' Seminary and Catholic St Victor's and St Gregory Seminaries, is no longer expected to pursue a solely denomina-

tional agenda. Rather, Pastoral Theology is to be interpreted in the broader perspective of the Theology of Religions, seeking to find adequate Christian responses to the revitalization of and the challenges emanating from other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and African indigenous religions in the country. Ogbu Kalu and others have even suggested what they call a 're-writing and teaching of Church history'. They call for a truer account of the history of the African church which will focus not only on the work of the missionaries, but also highlight the local response to the gospel (Kalu 1980:56). Thus, the history of the African church must be taught from the point of view of the local dynamics which have shaped the events. African Church History, as a discipline, must be core and be given the prominence it deserves in theological formation. Even though all formators, and in particular students appear to accept in principle the contextualization of essential disciplines such as Scriptures, Pastoral Theology, and Church History, they are still skeptical of the project which to them could erode all the gains achieved in the evangelization effort. Again, this difficult but essential project calls for trained formators, open-minded students, and the availability of essential literature. Although books by African scholars themselves are now available in their numbers, it is depressing to note that many theology educators continue to consider books written by non-African scholars as the core required books for students. This is to say that when the works of African scholars are included in lecturers' required lists, they often occupy the periphery. This, obviously, could be attempts to ensure that the contextualization of theological formation by many (formators of seminaries and even students) proceed slowly, if not at all.

Thwarting Full Implementation
The problem of formators and students with such an orthodox mentality about Christian faith and formation is that they often do everything in their power to thwart the full or effective implementation of contextualization in the formation grounds. It is difficult to understand why, despite the growing influence of Islam and the negative impact of African indigenous religions on Christianity on the African continent, formators and students still cannot appreciate the need to engage these other religions. They are still either reluctant or make little effort to inculcate, for example, the Islamic religious culture in their theological deliberations, expressions, and interpretation of an African social reality (Mazrui 1985:144).

Nevertheless, the argument that students trained in a standard Western theological and biblical formation would plant and grow indigenous, contextualized churches, is not tenable. This is because many a time these theological institutions, such as St Nicholas Theological Seminary (Cape Coast), St Peter's Seminary (Pedu), St Victor's Seminary (Tamale), Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, and other sister institutions have often produced theologians, missionaries, pastors, and practitioners, some of whom have a lack of fruitful confluence on the two worldviews in which they find themselves: One is European because of its traditional formation, while the other is African because of its indigenous cultural background. Their theological formation should come out with structures to harmonize and synchronize the two worldviews for them (Sarbah 2014a:228). Otherwise, they remain religious experts and church practitioners who have not only become disoriented by the practical day-to-day living problems and challenges of their own environment but also, more importantly, adopt a misguided and false attitude towards their own co-religionists as well as adherents of other religions, many of whom are their relatives (Allen 1960:383). In other words, the graduates of a traditional formation often find themselves in a confused state, especially when they eventually realize on the pastoral field that the grassroots do not actually need their 'un-adulterated stances' and their theological education offered to them. In fact, it is just the opposite that the grassroots want.

Nevertheless, there are others who have come to believe that the contextualization project has already begun at the grassroots level, and that the theological formation cannot drag its feet any longer. In fact, any further delay, they contend, can spell a near disaster for Christianity in Ghana. The contextualization of theological formation is badly needed not only to institutionalize the unavoidable process, but also to formally guide or give a certain direction to, or even take charge of the rather complex indigenization process of Christianity which is already taking place at the grassroots. Just as innovations in industries and commerce are often driven by the research of institutes of higher learning, so any serious or meaningful contextualization of religious beliefs and rituals should begin to be led by the theological institutes.

Weak Institutional Contextualization

The failure to contextualize the theological institutions or impel them to take leadership of the contextualization project is probably a major reason why we will continue to have weak churches, whose members are not able to recon-

cile the ideals of their religious traditions and the realities or challenges of their environment, and so turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanations or follow non-biblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals of healers and prophets. This is because a non-contextualized Christianity seldom engages people at the level of their deepest needs and aspirations and so ends up with what Jesuit Jaime Bulatao in the Philippines calls a 'split-level' Christianity (Bulatao 1966:67). Thus, it is a lack of formal or institutionalized contextualization which is bad news for Christianity, since it is the reason for reversions to former 'heathen' practices by the second and third generations of Christians in Ghana. It also contributes to the worrisome situations in which some people, mostly nominal Christians, endeavor to openly live in two worlds – the Christian community and fetishism (Sarbah 2014b:8). These reversions and relapses, often attributed mainly to 'spiritual dissatisfaction', could perhaps, in part be due to the direct consequences of the traditional theological formation and its attendant missionary strategies which, by strict disciplines in orthodoxy in a rather unaccommodating and uncompromising manner, seek to change human perceptions and religious behavior in favor of Christianity.

Confessional Preference
Furthermore, with the exception of the Departments of Religion of state universities, all other theological formation centers are still confessional institutions with denominational agendas. Thus, the challenge we face in trying to move the theological formation toward a more contextualized approach in Ghana, is that the leadership of these institutions are accountable to boards of trustees whose historical theological positions (Protestant and Roman Catholic) are still central to their formation. The Trinity Theological Seminary, for instance, is governed by a governing council, consisting of 30 members from the sponsoring protestant churches (Asamoah Gyadu 2013:381; cf. 380-385). Archbishops and bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Cape Coast and Accra constitute the governing council of St Peter's Regional Seminary (St Peter's Regional Seminary Bulletin 1994:13). The council is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the seminary's formation program in line with the universal Catholic seminary formation. It convenes at least once a year and submits an annual report on the seminary to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples of the Catholic Church in Rome. Although these board of trustees often give room for formators to use their ingenuity in

the management of the institutes, one cannot rule out the fact that the main function of these trustees is to ensure that the denominational or confessional agenda is faithfully conducted. In other words, these governing bodies or trustees by the nature of their job often are more concerned with their universal identity than the critical issues of contextualization. Their lack of adequate appreciation of contextualization stems from a certain need to protect and ensure harmony in their global religious enterprises.

Furthermore, the institutions also have funding agencies, usually their mother churches that continue to have a significant level of influence on what goes on in the formation in line with their mission statements for the theological formation worldwide. Many of these bodies of trustees largely appear to be mainly interested in extending their denominations across the face of the globe, sincerely believing that it is the best way to win the world for Christ. They are also often much more concerned with preserving universal denominational unity and identity than meeting the aspirations and needs of their culturally diverse, worldwide membership. Accordingly, the Archbishop of an Anglican diocese of Botswana, Walter Makhulu, has stated to the effect that religious departments of state universities are often more geared to meet the needs of teachers of religious education than churches' pastoral theology needs (Makhulu 1990:5). This is to say that theological institutes are more suited for the training of church men and women. However, it is surprising to note that quite a significant number of church leaders (religious and lay) in Ghana opt to accept a second degree at state institutions such as the University of Ghana, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, and the University of Cape Coast, which offers them the chance to explore deeper into the contextualization project. These state institutions, unlike the confessional theological institutes, are freer from external interference from sponsors. To ensure independence and self-reliance in church planting and sustenance, many people have suggested the need to have an authentic, contextual, theological education which is the product of funding from local churches (Engel 1990:133).

Inadequate Place for Non-traditional Disciplines

Administrators and formators of various theological institutions in Ghana, repeatedly raised the issue of time constraints as a major problem for contextualization. The current time-tables of all the schools across the denominational and non-denominational spectrum are already full. Not only are there

too many traditional courses or disciplines to cover throughout the three or four years of theological formation, but there are also too many topics to be treated per semester in each discipline. Further, students often spend a great deal of time developing basic skills in languages such as Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, since they often enter these programs with limited prior knowledge of these languages. Some of these institutions such as the St Victor's Seminary, St Peter's Seminary, The Trinity Theological Seminary, and St Nicholas' Seminary already have in place language as well as church management and administrative departments.

The introduction of non-traditional disciplines to offer programs of theological institutes in recognition of the pluralism of their society and cultures, have also encountered a time-constraint challenge. The rationale for the introduction of these non-traditional disciplines is to initiate students into secular courses as well as theology and religions other than their own (Mugambi 2002:159). There are two aspects of these non-traditional courses which are deemed significant enough for the socio-religious context. The first aspect involves the introduction of the study of other religions, which is deemed relevant to the Ghanaian context in the curricula of institutes such as the African Indigenous Religions, Introduction to Islam, Missiology, Comparative Religion, Oriental Religions, and the History and Models of Intra and Interreligious Relations. Later additions to the non-traditional disciplines include courses which are society and culture related such as Sociology of Religions, Introduction to Cultures and Societies of Africa, and Psychology of Religions. As a result, eight or more disciplines are needed to be mounted in theological institutes. Some theological formation centers find these courses too many for the seminaries who are already facing the difficulty to find places for their traditional disciplines.

To ensure that these non-traditional disciplines are not introduced just for the sake of it, the course outlines demand of lecturers to critically expound and orient them towards relatively chosen themes – theological, historical, and anthropological perspectives – which are relevant to the cultural and religious context of Ghana (Pope Paul VI: 1966 – *Ecclesiae sanctae*, nos. 157-162). In this way, it is believed, the spiritual and moral values of these other religions in the country would be explored for the benefit of Christianity (Sanneh 1983:227-241). With the exception of the Trinity Theological Seminary which is fully accredited to grant its own certificates, all other seminaries are affiliated to state universities such as the University of Ghana,

University of Cape Coast, and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. The state universities offer the requisite supervision to the affiliated theological institutions in the field of program designs, inspection of educational facilities, moderation of pre-examination questions and the post-examination of answer papers. Certificates of External Diploma and Bachelor of Arts degrees are issued by the state institutions to graduates of theological institutes in acknowledgment of the need for the worldwide recognition of the validity of seminary academic records and the openness of the modern seminary to other scientific fields that are not strictly theological (St Peter's Regional Seminary Bulletin 1994-1998 1994).

Difficulty in Developing Appropriate Curricula and Course Outlines

The responsibility of creating appropriate curricula calls for research, critical social analysis, dialogue, advocacy, and action for which the theological training centers do not have adequate time and resources. The question is: Where can one fit in courses such as Interfaith Dialogue, Contemporary Theology, or Inter-contextual Theology when there is already not enough time for traditional courses? This lack of space, time, and resources presents a significant challenge to implementing a meaningful interreligious educational agenda in the contemporary theological formation/curricula for proper contextualization in a religiously pluralistic country like Ghana.

Obviously, the challenge of time constraints calls for a deliberate restructuring of the curricula and even the course outlines, not only to avoid the overlapping of disciplines, but also to ensure due focus on relevant topics for the contextualization of the course outlines. For instance, in St Peter's Regional Seminary, the following disciplines could be merged: Pastoral Theology and Missiology; Comparative Religion and Inter-religious Dialogue; and some of the traditional disciplines such as Patristic Theology and Scholastic Theology. Course outlines of formation houses could spend less time on the history of both the traditional and non-traditional disciplines to make time or room for effective contextualization.

Furthermore, the restructuring of curricula and syllabi to include non-traditional courses will not be enough, if they remain peripheral and optional/elective as some of them are in these institutes. This is because the intended purpose of mounting these non-traditional disciplines will not be achieved with only sections of students having access to the courses. Thus, the courses must also form part of the 'core' of the curricula and their perspectives must

influence the whole of teaching. Currently, Religious Departments in state universities like the University of Ghana have made the study of world religions and contextualization an integral and required part of the theological curriculum. For this reason, theological institutions affiliated to the state institutions are mandated to mount some non-traditional disciplines, particularly Comparative Religion and African Indigenous Religions as 'core courses'. However, the general student attitude to core non-traditional courses is still negative, suggesting that for the most part, they are deemed to form an ancillary part of the theological curricula, a peripheral area of study which students may interpret as not so vital for their formation. Again, in some theological schools, courses which treat the religious traditions of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or indigenous native traditions and religions are taught only in the contexts of programs of study on Missiology and Pastoral Ministry or Theology. Thus, the disciplines or courses are often not regarded as integral and essential to Christian theological study in preparation for ministry.

Synchronizing Objectives of Theological Institutions with Teaching and Learning

Another challenge to contextualizing theological training in Ghana is the difficulty in synchronizing formation objectives with actual teaching and learning. The real purpose of theological education is not merely to have the instructor or formator perform certain activities, but most importantly to bring about significant changes in the students' attitude and patterns of behavior. This actually means that the contextualization of theological education in Ghana is expected to induce in students a certain desired outcome which makes them meaningful and effective religious and theological players in their social contexts. In view of this, any statements of objectives of the curricula of theological formation should be statements of changes, expected to take place in the students (Tyler 1949:44).

   In light of the abovementioned, the development of theological curricula for contextualization must involve five essential elements in line with the objectives of the institutions. First, the curricula must identify what kind of learning is needed in contextualization. Second, it must decide on the type of training a student needs to fulfil these learning needs. Third, they must plan the training carefully, so that contextualized learning is most likely to take place. Fourth, they have to deliver the training so that contextualized learning actually does take place. In this case, the training in contextualized

theological formation will have to consistently find answers to questions such as: Who teaches what courses? What is the framework within which the various courses are taught? What opportunities are provided to encounter students who consider non-Christian religions as living faith options and to which they have given their total commitment? Fifth, there is the need for a proper evaluation of the training so that there is evidence that contextualized learning has taken place (cf. Sarbah 2010).

In the end, the only evidence for successful, effective contextualized learning in theology is the cultivation in students of an informed awareness of essentials of other religions and the capacity to relate theologically and existentially to them. Overlooking any one of these elements in the contextualization of theological formation would be a big setback. This notwithstanding, attempts to change theological education by revising its mandated objectives for effective teaching and learning have often failed in the institutes. This is probably due to the fact that touted curriculum innovations, clearly spelt out in the objectives for the theological institutes are not always executed in classrooms in an extensive or effective manner that would sustain such improvement.

Prospects of Contextualization

Effective Evangelization

The contextualization of a Christian theological formation actually promotes evangelization in Ghana today. The knowledge that theology students acquire from their study in contextualized traditional and non-traditional courses, places them in a good enough standing to eschew what could be described as a 'wholesale' condemnatory and unaccommodating traditional approach for the adoption of the *Areopagus* approach for effective evangelization. The *Areopagus* approach is a model of proclamation which introduces an audience to the gospel, using what they are already familiar with, or essential features of their environment (Barret 1974:69-77). It was first used by the apostle Paul when he visited Athens (Ac 17:22-31). At Athens, Paul saw an altar with an inscription dedicated to the 'unknown god' and when invited to speak to the Athenian elite at the Areopagus, he gave a wonderful speech. Paul intended to meet the Athenians on their ground, and even though he was greatly dis-

tressed by many idols, he did not indicate it. He did not call them 'fools' in their faces, or mention that they have 'exchanged' the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal people, birds, animals, and reptiles (Rm 1:22-23). Paul was polite; he did not say 'your worthless idols', but used a neutral expression: Objects of worship. He was neither judgmental nor self-righteous. Paul took the time to look around and get the 'feel' of the Athenian culture and religious beliefs, including the altar to the unknown god. It is also possible that Paul was familiar with the history of the Cretan poet, Epimenides which was closely linked with the altar to the unknown god, for in Romans 1:28 he quoted a verse from Epimenides' poetry and in his letter to Titus. He quoted him again and even acknowledged him as no less than a prophet (Tit 1:12-13). Paul's prior knowledge of Epimenides and his role in the lifting of the plague centuries earlier was a good 'opener' for him in his evangelistic work. He used what the people already knew and gradually led them to what they needed to know, i.e., effectively, the living God.

The Areopagus experience is all the more needed in contemporary Ghana when the traditional models of evangelization seem not to be so effective. Despite their enormous strengths, the traditional models of evangelization are loud in their weakness. In Ghana, Christian evangelizing endeavors, based largely on the traditional/institutional models, eventually 'win' Christians back, and hardly members of other religions. According to research conducted by this author in 2010, almost 97 percent of new converts in any Christian church in Ghana were already Christians (cf. Sarbah 2010:206). They were only converts from other Christian churches. Various reasons are given to explain this phenomenon. However, this author found out, among others, that the methods/approaches of evangelization, which are essentially traditional, are rendering the Christian message unappealing to members of other religious traditions and appeal only to members of the Christian tradition. The traditional model adopts a monologue by someone with a self-righteous approach which appears condemnatory and acts as a turn off to non-Christians. Christian missionaries put up an attitude of know-it-all, having all the right answers and solutions, and do all the talking to the world and members of other religions, telling them what they need to do. The theologian or Christian missionary needs to adopt a listening attitude, for which contextualized education would have prepared them. Thus, evangelization would be give and take, a real encounter, and effective communication.

Promoting Peaceful Co-existence

The contextualization of a theological formation will advance the course of interreligious dialogue in Ghana. David Owusu-Ansah and Emmanuel Akyeampong conclude that, in the case of Ghana, it was rather 'the indigenous cosmology that laid the foundation for religious ecumenism' (Owusu-Ansah & Akyeampong 2019). Theology students, with adequate knowledge of an indigenous worldview, are better placed to engage actively with other religions in the context of peaceful co-existence. The former Catholic Archbishop Sarpong of Kumasi reiterates that the minister in Africa must be able to dialogue, must be able to live in peace and collaborative encounter with all men and women in charity, irrespective of their religious affiliations (Sarpong 1990:13). The Ghanaian environment, like all sub-Saharan African countries, has always been pluralistic, both culturally and religiously. The 2010 population census indicates that 60 percent of Ghanaians are Christian, 17 percent are Muslim and 23 percent are adherents of African traditional religions and others (Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, etc.). The diversity or plurality in Ghana is not only evident at the level of religion, but is also denominational.

Given the character of the multi-faith context today, a theological formation cannot but teach Christian theology, as a dialogical theology means not only to prepare, but also to impel and encourage students to actively engage meaningfully in the exiting plurality. According to Thomas Thangaraj, Christian theological dialogue is one theology which would be shot through and shaped by interfaith dialogue, a theology which is self-consciously dialogical in content (Thangaraj 1985:39). This dialogical theology will find appropriate and fruitful answers to questions which are considered fundamental to religious plurality such as, what kind of inter-religious cooperation do Christians want their theological viewpoint to promote? Should Christian theology foster a religious harmony among religions or hinder interreligious dialogue? In other words, unlike the traditional approach which tended to develop and largely highlight Christian exclusivism and negative attitudes in theology students, the conceptualized approach would challenge the theological worldview of students for a positive and inclusive understanding of other religions.

Conclusion

The traditional approaches to a theological formation, adopted by the early missionaries had a dual effect on the missionary enterprise. On the one hand, it delayed what we would call the formal (institutional or structural) contextualization, and on the other hand usher in the informal (grassroots) contextualization with negative consequences on Christianity and evangelization in Ghana. This delay made the Christian theological institutions at best passive in the process of contextualization. It is clear, then, that the contextualization of Christianity in Ghana will take place with or without the involvement of the theological institutions. However, it behoves the theological institutions to be involved in the inevitable process to ensure appropriate and relevant contextualization to take place. Christians, therefore, have to adopt a firm stand and resist every attempt at de-contextualized theological formation and missions or even a non- or under-contextualized approach. The Christian theological institutions are to play a leading role in the process of contextualization and direct it towards an effective formation and proper evangelization.

As noted above, contextualization will deal with a theological education process which has tended to be largely discontinuous with the practice of ministry, by equipping students with appropriate tools for effective evangelization in the contemporary Ghana. It would also pay attention to questions posed by other faith traditions such as Islam and Ghanaian indigenous religions, their spiritual experiences, and moral values. The spiritual values and moral virtues inherent in these other religions and cultures were hardly given consideration in the traditional theological formation. Despite its enormous prospects, the contextualization of a theological formation in Ghana is not without challenges.

Discussions on the contextualization of a Christian theological formation in Ghana have been centering on what the theological institutes and Christian community will lose and not what it stands to gain from the enterprise all together. There is a growing suspicion that the Christian church will lose her authentic theology and its real identity, and misplace its core values as it attempts to contextualize (Bediako 1992:256-258). However, no strong and true religion on earth has lost its core values and identity in appropriate contextualization. Rather, the core values are always left intact if not grounded in the process. As it spread through the Greco-Roman world of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, Christian theology contextualized, perfected, and strength-

ened itself. Christianity never failed to take in/on board what was relevant in the old order. Thus, the Christian community has a lot to gain in a conscious contextualization of theological formation.

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Book Review

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Living between Science and Belief

We live in an interregnum between the claims of science and those of faith. With this conviction, Charles Villa-Vicencio has commenced with a book, as John De Gruchy succinctly puts it in the Introduction, which was born out of the writer's 'long and often painful personal struggle...to relate religious faith to science' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:ix). As such, *Living between science and belief* is therefore aimed at 'believers trying to deal honestly with doubt' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:ix).

Chapter 1 is Villa-Vicencio's personal take on the (modern) dilemma of living between science and religion, while Chapter 2 is a summary of the traditional debate between what he clearly accepts – *à la* Gould (2002) – as two non-overlapping magisteria. Chapters 3 to 5 is an overview of some of the core moments in the theological development of the three Abrahamic religions. Chapter 6 is about what he believes to be the best challenges that the neurosciences specifically pose to modern believers. The questions underlying the book – not surprisingly – are the following: Can the claims of science be reconciled with those of religion? *Should* the claims of science be reconciled with those of religion?

To these questions, Villa-Vicencio answers with a provisional 'Yes'. Any possibility of reconciliation will require from theologians to not only renounce any scriptural literalism and dogmatic beliefs, but also to be prepared to re-examine all religious claims in light of scientific findings. On condition that these two prerequisites are met, Villa-Vicencio argues, religion

can still play a key role in providing life with meaning and sense. Furthermore, when not captured by institutionalism, religion provides us with powerful tools for what he understands to be the essence of religion: The command to create a more just society.

Indeed, according to him, the (justified) criticism of religious institutionalism should never detract one from the fact that, through all the ages and in all three the Abrahamic religious traditions, there were always theologians who adamantly defended this command. To prove his point, Villa-Vicencio provides his reader with a synoptic overview of certain defining moments in the histories of respectively Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He concludes that, despite their monotheistic nature, the history of this family of religions testifies to an ongoing apophatic rejection of any literal claims to the truth. There were always those religious individuals, so he quotes Jonathan Sacks (2011), who remained 'open and accountable to the world' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:60).

This part of the book shows Villa-Vicencio at his best. It also shows that this well-known icon of the struggle has remained true to himself: A professor in theology, although one who regards religion as a lesser subject for study, and more a tool to be wielded in the name of societal justice. It therefore feels unfair to criticize him on his Abrahamic take on what religion is. He has authored this book after all 'in an attempt to come to terms with my own religious identity' which is that of an evangelical Christian (Villa-Vicencio 2021:8).

It feels even less fair to criticize him on his somewhat dated knowledge of the findings of the neurosciences. His stated endeavor was not to take his reader on an intellectual tour of the sciences, but to give us a glimpse on the conflict between his own convictions on the one hand, and his uncertainties on the other.

What I do find problematic, though, is Villa-Vicencio's uncritical acceptance of the somewhat tired notion that, through the ages, religion has been the main cause of conflict and wars. This conception is provably false and historically inaccurate. It is also dangerous, because it creates the illusion that wars can be made to disappear simply by eliminating religion. Research reveals, though, that only about 7% of humankind's wars had religion as a cause, accounting for barely 2% of all deaths because of war. A graph of the worst war atrocities on record shows that while the French religious wars caused the death of about three million people, World War 2 caused the death

of at least 70 million people (cf. HistoryNet 2022). Furthermore, eugenics – one of the most dehumanizing ideologies of the 20th century, leading to some of the worst atrocities in the history of humankind – had as its roots not religion, but the theory of evolutionism (Troskie 2020:682-684).

Like religion, science is a human endeavor. Like religion, it was not developed to serve 'the truth', but to further the wellbeing of humankind. Sure, science has 'taken us closer to understanding the complexities of the universe, the origins of life, and the enigmas of the human mind than we have been ever before' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:122). Like religion, though, at times it enables monstruous atrocities like eugenics or the atomic bombing of the two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The true issue is therefore not religion or science, but the 'human propensity to appropriate whatever...ideas available in order to further greed, ambition, and power' (Villa-Vicencio 2021:109). Hopefully, that is the question that Villa-Vicencio can next turn his brilliant mind to.

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