

Editorial: (De)Colonial Entanglements with Religion

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Published at a time when the world is bearing witness to the genocide of Palestinians after 75 years of Israeli occupation, the articles presented here may be read as part of an increasingly voluble conversation on the intersections of religion and coloniality. The contradictory operations of religion as both oppressive and liberatory are stark at this time; daily we witness generations of Palestinian families bombed to death in an instant, while lone survivors navigate loss by re-affirming their faith and confirming their religious convictions. We continually hear the occupation forces attempting to justify displacement, and the starvation of millions of Palestinians under occupation, as the only means to achieving their own religious goals. Contrary to colonial encounters of religion with social, economic and political subjugation articulated as a modernising enterprise in the past, the resistance to religious subjugation we are presently seeing is part of the decolonial turn which recognizes how the analytical category of religion functions simultaneously as a racial, gender and class category that aligns religion, authority and authenticity with whiteness, maleness and ideas of superiority that claim a higher degree of human-ness for some over others. Feminism and religion are easily positioned as naturally antithetical to one another when colonial discourses monopolize feminism for imperial and modernising purposes, rendering colonised communities culturally outmoded, and potentially so irrelevant as to warrant eradication. The works presented here are part of that broader conversation about religion in the hands of coloniality, how it works and un-works relationships of cruelty and care, oppression and liberation, solidarity, and enmity. The first article is Noxolo Matele's, "Leave her Alone, She is telling the Truth", which departs from the premise that Christianity in African context is not neutral,

“its arrival in the name of civilization, also dispossessed Africans of their culture and religion... taught Africans subservience to Europeans and became a way by which to deny Africans expression of their unique culture and religious practices...[and] was seen by many to legitimize colonialism or even to participate in it”

Through her analysis of a play that fictionalizes the true story of three Rwandan convent high-school girls – Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire – whose only Vatican-approved Marian apparitions in Africa garnered widespread attention, Noxolo Matete offers an African feminist reading of Christian religious experience. Her contribution is in recognizing the contradictions and nuances of the experiences of young women of faith in the postcolonial, global South. Through an African feminist reading of Katori Hall’s play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018), set in 1981 at a convent high school in Kibeho, Rwanda, “partly through fact and partly through fiction”, Matete shows how the play offers a decolonized reading of a Christian experience.

The different roles of the three girls simulate the Trinity of Christianity, and amongst them, one also emerges in the characteristic form of the subaltern “the female figure who shifts from ‘historically muted subject’ to agent”. And so, Matele’s aim is to help us ‘see’ how the play disrupts the

“neat binaries of oppressive or liberatory. Traditional Christianity - a worldview rooted in Eurocentric, racist and patriarchal ideals and which situated African women as non-human - is reimaged in Hall’s play, as it ceases to be the domain of the Church, Western empire or traditional patriarchal domination. Instead, presented in its ambiguities and complexities, Christianity as a religious structure and through the varied experiences of ‘the Trinity’, is powerfully reclaimed.”

Matete's analysis prompts us to examine how their visitations also predict what was to be the Rwandan genocide a decade later, and further how the girls also shift from being believed and blessed and become accused of lying and pretense – the brutality of the vision is too much for the ecstatic religious experience.

In the next article, Princess Sibanda positions herself as a “radical feminist whose scholarly interests are in the study of the taboo” while also embracing the Christian parts of herself. She draws on the theoretical work of pathbreaking African feminist theologian Isabel Phiri whose work shows how “Africans experienced the gospel as a tool of colonialism, classism and exclusionism”.

Her article “*Itai Amen Satani Abhoikane: Killjoy Feminism In The Church*” introduces the work of Chaplain Christabel Phiri (not to be mistaken for Isabel Phiri), a Zimbabwean preacher who “is reshaping theological discourse in Zimbabwe”, and redefining the shorthand dichotomy too frequently set up between Christianity and feminism. She positions Chaplain Phiri amongst the “killjoys, the unfearful, problematic women (who) do not fit neatly within the packages of socio-political categories and norms” and who may therefore “craft a feminism that is situated in progressive Christianity”. For Sibanda, Chaplain Phiri is already doing this; her analysis makes visible the possibilities of feminist praxis in church spaces as demonstrated through five of Chaplain Phiri's sermons, each of them a form of theological performance.

“Phiri's feminism is a lived reality, it does not begin on the pulpit and end there. Phiri is a Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services Chaplain whose life story is one punctuated by “carrying six mountains on the back”. She has experienced life as an orphan, a widow and a sex worker, suffered a mild stroke and has survived a brain tumour. Her life story is a recurring motif in her sermons as she draws on her personal story to profile her arduous life journey and how she persevered. Instead of portraying herself

as a sacrosanct entity, Phiri brings her ‘dirty linen’ or ‘sins’ onto the pulpit.”

Phiri’s use of role play, strong language, her identity with morally questionable labels, the exuberance on stage and in the audience, and her use of dancehall songs collectively facilitate Sibanda’s analysis of this nexus between killjoy feminism and African feminist theologies, which illustrates the complex liberatory potentials of feminist theology.

Drawing on the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Sibanda posits that African feminist theologies, such as those that arise from the preaching of Chaplain Phiri, “belong within the broader ambit of African liberation theologies”.

Like Matete, Sibanda also engages the contradictions between theology founded on sanctity, purity, and holiness, and the ‘choking’ encounter of Africans with Christianity. The Church as location of performance, “holds the codes of conduct which specify which kind of bodies are eligible to inhabit and worship in it.” Consequently, the church which “is constructed as a place of perennial joy and freedom unfortunately incubates violence for women too.” What Chaplain Phiri offers instead is a theology that is “popular, participatory and troublesome. I would add, it is also disobedient and decolonial.”

Sibanda and Matete both focus on women’s expressions of faith; each shows the complex ways in which feminist and Christian ways of being come together, recognising both the inherent challenges and liberatory potentials, and Miranda Pillay continues this work too.

Pillay’s article ““First Woman to...” Exceptionalism Discourse: Badge of Honour or Badgering Burden?” takes us further into the patriarchal challenge that religion presents when it ‘tries’ to include women. The ubiquitous practice of first-ism, in Pillay’s view, enables “‘the church’ to continue “patriarchal attitudes, beliefs and practices”. For “while the

presence of women in ‘previously’ male-dominated spaces calls for celebration, there’s much need for commiseration.” The badge “first woman to...” becomes a form of ‘badgering’ characterised by exceptionalism, and the valorization of women’s capabilities are employed in the service of patriarchy rather than resistance to it.

Pillay focuses on Mary-Anne Plaatjies Van Huffel’s ecclesiastical journey in the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), who amongst other ‘first’ women, was “expected to take up leadership positions in ‘previously’ male dominated spaces with little, or no effort from the institution to transform its patriarchal culture.” Thus, while first-ism is often couched in celebration, Pillay argues for an equal recognition of the travails that first-ism brings, arguing that commiseration is more in order than celebration, “to recognise the fact that women are burdened over and over again, generation after generation with the task of clearing weeds that cushion the patriarchal track of male privilege.” Exceptionalism discourse, Pillay argues, “camouflages second-generation gender bias and upholds patriarchal normativity” or as Sarojini Nadar names it “palatable patriarchy.” In response, Pillay explores the counter-cultural *virtue of unctuousness*, which “is the creative tension between resistance and endurance”. For the latter she “points to the intentionality to resist the subtle, less visible, oftentimes unintentional, and sometimes patronising forms of gender bias”. Pillay concludes with an argument for reflective solidarity “not as a social value in an abstract sense, but as an embodied ecclesial practice toward transforming the patriarchal institutional culture of ‘the church’.”

Shifting our focus from Christianity specifically, Nina Hoel explores various trends in the study of religion and feminist theory for tools and concepts that “trouble the dualisms and hierarchies of human-nature and nature-culture” and “tune-in religion storytelling (the study of religion) to the challenges of the Anthropocene.”

Inspired by what she calls ‘crochet methodology’, derived from a Crochet Coral Reef Project at the Cape Town Aquarium, Hoel writes “Crochet Methodology: Thinking Creatively about and with the Study of Religion in

the Anthropocene". Her analysis comes to rest on ideas of kinship and the 'intimacy of strangers' to explore symposis – the collective processes of "making-with each other" that might enable a different approach to the study of religion and "the stuff of religion."

Examining how knowledge-making might arise from art, and in this way move away from the anthropocentric ways of knowing, Hoel envisions an approach to religion that acknowledges our entanglements with the material and the non-human. Recognizing how religion has always had a focus on the more-than-human, Hoel asks what such critique would look like if we moved away from human exceptionalism and if "more-than-human materialities featured more centrally." Hoel's provocations are well-placed, especially where the study of religion has become anthropocentric, leaving behind narratives that center the non-human and prioritise material aspects of religion over the spiritual, the transcendent and the ethereal. Feminist ways of knowing and knowledge-making have much to offer the encounter of religion with the anthropocene, the least of which would be the generational passage of non-normative knowledges of the material or natural world.

For Hoel, "feminist imaginings of kinship" and the "collaborative and co-creative efforts of collectives to storying religion", have the potential to keep troubling the power dynamics of the contemporary Anthropocene.

Genocide, generationality, entanglements of oppression and liberation, challenges to normative religiosities in the recognition of subaltern religious subjectivities and the struggles for authentic world-making that do not deny feminist agency – these are some of the threads that frame a decolonial feminist approach to religion. The articles here offer various inroads to these discussions, recognising the transgressive positionings of gender, race, class, and the geo-politics of being human, and other than human, in registers that are both pejorative and privileged. Once we recognise decolonial practice as the practice toward freedom, we are able to identify the very direct links between the works presented here and the

(im)possibility (yet perhaps also the necessity?) of Christmas celebrations in Palestine in December 2023.