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Gender Perspectives and African Scholarship: Blind spots in the field of religion, media, and culture

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Abstract

The cases of Prophet Paseka Motsoeneng, also known as Pastor Mboro, and Prophet Lesego Daniel – two controversial religious leaders in South Africa – caught media headlines between 2016 and 2017 when the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL) released its report after an investigation into the commercialisation of religion and the abuse of people's belief systems. A survey of reporting on the matter on popular news sites (following the release of the report) show that while Daniel and Mboro's reaction to the report, and the findings of the report received widespread media coverage, their abuse of women and young girls received significantly less coverage, by both the media and Commission. Despite the complaints lodged by gender justice NGOS in June 2011 on the sexual abuse of women and girls in Mboro's congregation; it was only when the matter became an economic one – i.e. the abuse of people's belief systems in "profiting the prophets" – that the media and the state became interested. The lack of "gender interest" in the media is widely attested to in scholarship, at the intersections of religious studies, media studies, and cultural studies, which prides itself on well-established track records of interdisciplinary work. Hence, the "media turn" in the study of religion has played a crucial role in reconfiguring understandings of pertinent contemporary geo-political and social issues. Despite the identification of gender as a blind spot, in both media reporting and scholarship in the field, by leading scholars such as Mia Lovheim and Joyce Smith, further "blind spots" in the field and in the vision of those who have been at the helm of its development and advancement is evident, as I will show in this article. In identifying gender as a missing variable in the discussions, what is absent is a theorisation of this absence. When dealing with cases in Africa, it seems that an intersectional feminist approach requires at least two considerations – the first is that feminist scholars of religion and media may want to avoid the propagation of the perpetually oppressed, pious African woman being exploited at the hands of a powerful charismatic leader. The second consideration is the very real Afro-pessimism that accompanies such reporting – the spectacle of apparently backward African religious practices attracts the attention of the world, while child marriage in right-wing Christian conservative America, for example, goes under the radar. How should feminist scholars

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working at the intersections of religion, media and cultural and religious studies negotiate the sexualisation and racialisation of African bodies within parallel constructions of sexual violence and Afro-pessimism? Using the case study of CRL in South Africa, this article makes a case for theorising the study of gender, religion, and media outside of the epistemological and contextual frame of western sensibilities and motivates instead for a feminist intersectional lens to avoid the double bind of sexism and racism in the analyses offered.

Introduction

Despite the complaints lodged in June 2011 by Sonke Gender Justice and People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) with the Commission on Gender Equality and The South African Human Rights Commission, of Prophet Paseka Motsoeneng's (hereafter referred to as Pastor Mboro) sexual abuse of women, the case only gained media attention in 2017 when the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities' (CRL) completed their investigation of Mboro together with other charismatic leaders such as Prophet Lesego Daniel who made his congregants eat grass and drink petrol.[2] The report dealt almost exclusively with the economics of religious exploitation with little space and attention paid to the abusive ways in which Mboro and Daniel dealt with women.[3] The media's reporting of the abuses, too, placed far more emphasis on the economics. The focus was on the call for churches to now reveal their financial statements; for churches to be taxed; and for churches to be registered – the bodies of the women who these prophets literally trampled on lay unattended both in the media reports as well as the actual report itself.

Interestingly, even the Commission on Gender Equality, which received the first complaints from the NGOs in 2011, refused to investigate, stating that: "the CGE respects people's religious beliefs as they are protected by the Constitution, with the understanding that those people exercised their right to go to Pastor Motsoeneng's church voluntarily".[4] While the tension between the constitutional rights to freedom of

[2] Nemakonde, Vhahangwele. 2015. Pastor Mnguni makes congregation eat snakes. https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/423976/pastor-mnguni-makes-congregation-eat-snakes (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

[3] CRL Pilot Report. *The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities: Pilot Report Commercialization of Religion in South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 2016.

[4] Sonke News. 2013. Update on Sonke's Complaint against Pastor 'Mboro' in 2011. http://genderjustice.org.za/news-item/update-on-sonke-s-complaint-against-pastor-mboro-in-2011/ (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

religious belief versus the protection of those who commit sexual offenses under the guise of 'freedom of religious belief', is out of the scope of this paper. However, the absence of theorising on gender in these matters in media reports, the CRL report, and the interdisciplinary scholarship in these areas deserves some attention. Within systems of overlapping oppressions (white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity) that encourage abuse and protect sexual abusers, how does an intersectional analysis help us to consider our scholarship on gender, religion and media differently?

Through a critical review of some of the recent literature produced in the interdisciplinary spaces of religion, media and cultural studies, this paper will, firstly theorise the absence of gender as an analytical framework and pertinent area of research inquiry in the study of religion, media, and culture. Secondly, it will investigate the relevance and utility of the contested yet pervasive mediatisation of religion theory for studies of religion, gender, and media particularly from a South African perspective. Finally, through a brief content analysis of a recent instance of "religion in the media," this article will explore some of the material, discursive, and epistemological possibilities of gender and intersectional feminist analytical perspectives for understanding the ways that religion and media are entangled within the broader socio-political milieu. The paper concludes by arguing that while the interdisciplinary track record of media, religion, and cultural studies is laudable, this interdisciplinary "canon" would benefit from an intersectional turn that takes gender and socio-political contexts within Africa more seriously.

Double Blind Spots: Gender and Africa

There exists an extensive inter-disciplinary and inter-contextual corpus on religion and media (See, Morgan 2008, Engelke 2010, Meyer and Moors, De Vries 2008, Hjarvard 2012, Hirschkind 2011, Eisenlohr 2012, 2017). However, in terms of reviewing the literature pertinent to the topic of gender, religion, and media, particularly in Africa, this article is both limited and characterised by an overwhelming dearth. It is upon the basis of this constitutive absence, of gender and Africa from the "mainstream" and definitive scholarly corpus on religion and media that I have chosen to limit my discussion to brief but illustrative descriptions of gender's absence in extended edited collections that are often presented as the most expansive view of the field.

In the 2011 publication, an edited collection authoritatively entitled, Religion*, Media, and Culture: A Reader* (Gordon Lynch, Jolyon Mitchell

and Anna Strhan) included one article about the intersections of religion, gender, and media. In 2008, a publication with an equally commanding title, *Key words in Religion, Media and Culture,* edited by Professor of Religion, David Morgan, featured thirteen key terms contributed by authors working in the fields of religious studies, media studies, anthropology and sociology, education, and historical studies. In this collection, the term gender is only ever referred to in a perfunctory manner, as one of the obligatory "other" aspects of human identity, such as race, class, sexual orientation and ethnicity, that warrants mention but not focussed attention. Earlier influential works such as *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture,* which is credited with mapping out the state and future of the field, contained only one contribution that addressed gender explicitly.[5] *Practising Religion in the Age of the Media* was ostensibly a follow up and update to the former, written in response, to the spectacular rise of the internet.[6] This paradigmatic contribution to the field did not include a chapter or focus on gender. *Media, Religion, and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges* (2013) therefore arrived as a much needed response to, and assessment of, the gender blind spot.

Editor of the collection, Professor in Sociology of Religion, Mia Lövheim's involvement in the development of religion, culture, and media as a composite interdisciplinary field can be traced to the first biennial conference of what would become the International Society for Media, Religion, and Culture in 1993. Together with an established track record as a religion and media specialist she was well poised to provide both a historical and critical account of gender's neglect within the field. In perusing the field in a much more detailed manner than I am able to do in this article, Lövheim's assessment concurs with the evaluation of this paper, that although important research on media and religion inspired by gender perspectives has taken place, "gender has been a marginal issue in central publications presenting research on media, religion and culture".[7] Furthermore, in trying to make sense of gender's invisibility in this field, Lövheim suggests that, "The historical legacy of gendered rules and traditions structuring the positions of men and women within academic life plays an important part, as well as conceptions of gender

[5] Hoover, Stewart and Knut Lundby., eds. *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997).

[6] Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark., eds. *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[7] Lövheim, Mia, ed. *Media, Religion, and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*. (Routledge: New York, 2013).

and feminist studies within dominant discourses of particular scholarly disciplines."[8] Although this point can be widely attested to, it is not often well substantiated. Lövheim's explanation is a convincing exception.

According to Lövheim, the shift from technologically and institutionally deterministic studies of media, to research focussed on the consumptive and interpretive practices of audiences, as articulated most cogently by Hoover and Lundby,[9] showed some promise in terms of including gender as a serious analytical category and framework. However, within the context of this shift, gender has remained mainly an "add-on" category, a descriptor, in determining differences in media use and consumption.[10] I argue, that the culturalist turn championed by Hoover and Lundby[11] and taken up *en masse* by scholars of religion and media, for all its merits, has to a large extent succeeded in disengaging media from the specificities of its socio-political functions and environments. The move away from institutionalised religion to the "meaning making practices of everyday life" has positively yielded more nuanced definitions and explanations of what religion and media are and what they do. Through this approach, religion was freed of its institutions and dogma. Forms of art and literature that were once regarded as too "lowbrow" for academic consumption were opened as new and credible domains of scholarly investigation. However, an early bias, towards the experiences of young men in and of these "new" media (see Stuart Hall et al: 1980) meant that even within these more expansive iterations, women's experiences were side-lined, in favour of more sensational forms of media engagement often portrayed more explicitly in the behaviour of men.[12] Finally, Lövheim argues that a lack of analysis of power has been a major shortcoming in the development and advancement of the field and suggests that, "the historical legacy of gendered rules and traditions structuring the positions of men and women within academic life plays an important part, as well as conceptions of gender and feminist studies within dominant discourses of particular scholarly disciplines."[13] In light of this claim, she postulates that the collection attempts to beyond an "add

[8] Lövheim, Media, Religion, and Gender, 20.

[9] Hoover and Lundby, Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture.

[10] Lövheim, Media, Religion, and Gender, 22.

[11] Hoover and Lundby, Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture.

[12] Lövheim, Media, Religion, and Gender.

[13] Lovheim, Media, Religion, and Gender, 24.

gender" paradigm, toward an "add gender and stir" approach as an attempt to create critical discussion on the state of the field.[14]

Lövheim shows an awareness of feminism's critique of privileged perspectives and claims that "all chapters share the aim to problematize and nuance stereotypical understandings of gender, particularly "woman" and "femininity," and also "masculinity," in media texts and cultures."[15] Despite this tentative and inclusive approach the thirteen contributions in this volume all bear testimony to a glaring omission. While issues of gender and power are thoroughly theorized, and the case for the importance of gender's inclusion and centralisation in the interdisciplinary study of religion and media eruditely defended, not one article is about, from, or in conversation with the African context.

Religion, Gender, and Media in Africa

Given that many places in Africa, including South Africa, have been at the forefront of instituting projects in large-scale political reform that have led not only to media deregulation but also to new legislative features that have fundamentally altered the role of religion in public life, this oversight has resulted not only in a historical and contextual but also, an epistemological and perhaps ideological blind spot in the field of religion. These changes to the socio-political conditions in which both religion and media are situated have highlighted urgent questions about balancing fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion, freedom of expression, the right to dignity, and the very notion of equality, that apply to many contexts around the world – both established democracies and nations in transition.[16] Two cases in point are, first, the case of the CGE rejecting the complaint against Pastor Mboro's abuses of women; and second, the case of the Supreme Court of Appeal upholding the decision of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa to fire one of its openly gay clergy, Ecclesia de Lange, on the basis of protection of religious freedom.[17]

In *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, the editors argue that while the study of media in Africa is flourishing as a field of inquiry, these studies often focus more on questions about democracy and

[14] Lovheim, Media, Religion, and Gender.

[15] Lövheim, Media, Religion, and Gender.

[16] Rosalind Hackett, "Regulating Religious Freedom in Africa," Emory International Law Review, 25 (2011): 853-879.

[17] Sonke News. 2013. Update on Sonke's Complaint against Pastor 'Mboro' in 2011. http://genderjustice.org.za/news-item/update-on-sonke-s-complaint-against-pastor-mboro-in-2011/ (Accessed 28 March, 2018)

development, consequently ignoring the question of religion completely or treating religion as a peripheral issue.[18] This pattern of omission overlooks the crucial historical connections between media development and religion and particularly ignores the fact "that religious actors in Africa have long been at the forefront in taking up new media technologies in Africa."[19] Muhammed Haron's[20] discussion on the study of religion and media studies in Southern Africa implies that in a discipline that has been dominated by scholarship underpinned by theoretical frameworks from western countries; variations in understandings of what religion is; and how religion works, particularly within the socio-political milieu of Southern Africa, play a role in the continued paucity of studies from and about the region. The dominance and imposition of western definitions and theories have meant that scholars working in this area and in the region will most often need to clarify and redefine the basic concepts that frame their analysis. This article argues that while gendered perspectives have now been firmly placed on the agenda of the field by Lövheim and others, the study of religion and media remain epistemologically and contextually framed by western sensibilities or a lack of a more authentic feminist intersectional analysis of what religion and media are and how they operate. The utility of gender theories, concepts, research approaches, and methodology, particularly those emerging from the African context, for understanding the multiple and varied relationship between and among religion and media and its effect on contemporary social life, has been underestimated, to the detriment of the development of the field at large.

This article does not imply that there have been no studies from the African context that have addressed the religion, media, and gender triangulation; the issue I raise is the same as the issue raised about gender – this is not about "adding Africa and stirring" – this is about a genuine decolonial approach to religion, media and gender in Africa. Recently, scholar of Women's Studies and English Literature, Gabeba Baderoon,[21] has made a notable contribution to the field, especially with her latest book, *Regarding Muslims*. Baderoon uses religion and media as creative categories to probe the role of Muslims in South African history across a 350-year time period, spanning colonial, apartheid, and

[18] Hackett and Soares, "Introduction: New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa".

[19] Hackett and Soares, "Introduction: New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa", 1.

[20] Muhammed Haron, "Religion and the Media: Reflections on Their Position and Relationship in Southern Africa." *Global Media Journal: African Edition* 4 (1) (2010): 28-50.

[21] Gabeba Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014).

post-apartheid settings. As Tammy Wilks notes in her review of the book: "It sits comfortably as a postcolonial analysis, but also as a methodological guide for postcolonial feminist research (see page 164 in this journal). The book helps postcolonial African feminist scholars to reconfigure the conceptual and visual habits used to define and represent Muslims and Islam, both historically and contemporarily." The book serves as a welcome addition to the domination of the field by studies on Christianity, especially charismatic Pentecostal churches in the Southern African region and is evidence that research on Islam's interaction with the media is on the rise.[22] The existing studies have been inclined to include insights into the role of electronic media within religious settings as a part of broader discussions about religion in the region.[23] However, there exists, to the best of my knowledge, no extended study of religion, media, and gender from the Southern African context in particular, that addresses the ways in which gender as lived experience; theoretical framework; and analytical device, in its many complex relationships with religion and media, has been foregrounded. I argue that, given the relatively under-theorised nature of the field in the African context, critical gender perspectives in the form of methodology and theory, be explicitly prioritised as an integral component of how the field is configured and inevitably reconfigured in time to come. In the following section, I address one of the most contested yet influential theories and concepts in the study of religion and the media.

Mediatisation of religion

The mediatisation of religion theory is concerned with the changing authority of religion, in light of the mounting influence of media technology and subsequently media logic in contemporary societies. A key proponent of this theory, Stig Hjarvard suggests that, through processes of mediation – in this case understood as the process of becoming public via electronic, print or digital media – religion is subjected, at times willingly and at other times through circumstances

[22] Eickelmann, Dale and Jon Anderson. "Redefining Muslim publics" in *New media in the Muslim world: the emerging public sphere* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[23] Harri Englund, "Witchcraft and the Limits of Mass Mediation in Malawi," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2) (2007): 295-311.; Maria Frahm-Arp, "Identity Issues amongst South African Pentecostal Charismatic Christians: Between Oreos and Romany Creams," *African Philosophy and the Future of Africa* 2 (14) (2011) 129-137.; Ilana, Van Wyk, *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: A Church of Strangers*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015).

beyond its control, to the logics of the media.[24] He argues that religion, as institutions and systems of meaning making, are fundamentally altered through the process of mediatisation. The chief outcome of mediatisation according to Hjarvard is not a new kind of religion as such but rather a new social condition in which the power to define and practice religion has changed." It is self-evident that in this media-saturated age, media (both electronic and digital) can play a significant role in how religion is understood and experienced by any media consumer, regardless of their religious affiliation. Hjarvard's taxonomy of mediatised religion is helpful in making sense of the multiple ways in which religion and media intersect. Through differentiating the various genres within which religion and media can operate, it also provides a useful conceptual and material framework for approaching the densely saturated mediascape. Accordingly, Hjarvard distinguishes between "religious media, journalism on religion, and banal religion."[25] All three categories of mediatised religion are significant for understanding the complex ways in which gender is implicated in the grand narratives of mediatisation of religion. Religious media as a lens provides a spotlight on religious women's experiences with religious media, and can show how, through these interactions, they are able to gain access to formally exclusively male spaces. However, research shows how traditional forms of authority are able to re-inscribe traditional gender roles even in virtual environments.[26] The category presented by banal religion and media, focuses attention on the ways in which religion is made public through entertainment media, such as television series and films. Gender, like religion in this regard, is usually subjected to the commercial dimensions of this genre.[27]

In relation to the South African context where questions of harmful religious practices and the exploitation of women particularly at the hands of male religious leaders have dominated popular news sources, it is the category of journalism on religion that is in need of critical

[24] Stig Hjarvard, "Three forms of mediatized religion: changing the public face of religion," In *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, eds. Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lövheim (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2012): 21-44.; Stig Hjarvard, "Mediatization and the Changing Authority of Religion," *Media, Culture and Society*, 38(1) (2016): 8-17.

[25] Hjarvard, "Three forms of mediatized religion: changing the public face of religion", 28.

[26] Michele Rosenthal, "Infertility, blessings, and head coverings: mediated practices of Jewish repentance," in *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges,* ed. Mia Lövheim, (New York: Routledge, 2013):111–124.

[27] Lövheim, Mia. "Mediatization: analysing transformations of religion from a gender perspective." *Media, Culture, and Society* 38(1) (2016): 18-27.

attention. In the Nordic context, Hjarvard[28] has shown that news media has often been primarily responsible for bringing religion to the political public sphere. In the section that follows I show that in the case of the rise of unorthodox and exploitative religious practices, the media, in framing the topic for newsworthiness, have; first, played a critical role in bringing the issue to the attention of the public and state authorities; and second, framed the gender implications of these "stories" as secondary to the more sensational and entertaining aspects of the religious leaders and to the economics of the exploitation.

Commercialisation of Religion and/or the Exploitation of Women

In 2014, Pastor Lesogo Daniels was thrust into the spotlight after video images of his congregants eating grass were posted via the Facebook Page of the Rabboni Center Ministries congregation. Reportedly a "miracle man", Pastor Lesogo was unapologetic about his unorthodox healing practices and members of his congregation attest to the efficacy of his methods. According to a news source:

> One woman, 21-year-old law student Rosemary Phetha claimed she suffered from a sore throat for an entire year. Once the young woman ingested the grass, she swore it healed her malady, telling Times Live, that the preacher "turned me into a sheep and instructed me to eat grass. Yes, we eat grass and we're proud of it because it demonstrates that, with God's power, we can do anything.[29]

The young pastor is also known for his entrepreneurial skills. He sells a variety of wares from bumper stickers to oils for anointing. In 2015, Pastor Penuel, of the End of Time Disciples Ministries, reportedly Daniels's understudy, made headlines for even more unorthodox ritual practices, including, feeding his congregants snakes, getting them to strip naked before praying for them and most notably encouraging them to drink petrol with the promise that it would transform into a popular soft drink.[30] In 2016, another young, charismatic black man, Pastor Mboro, founder of the aptly named Incredible Happenings Ministries, claimed that he was captured to heaven during the Easter Sunday Service.

[28] Hjarvard, "Three forms of mediatized religion: changing the public face of religion"

[29] Manual Logan, Ruth. 2014. South African Pastor Makes Congregation Eat Grass To Be Closer To God. https://newsone.com/2832419/pastor-lesego-daniel/ (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

[30] Nemakonde, Vhahangwele. 2015. Pastor Mnguni makes congregation eat snakes. https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/423976/pastor-mnguni-makes-congregation-eat-snakes (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

Incredibly, he managed to capture a few *selfies* while in the celestial realm. The pictures were not made publicly available but were available for purchase at R5000 per picture. Unfortunately, Pastor Mboro's sacred tool, his Samsung Galaxy Smartphone was stolen from his car a week later, and the evidence of his transcendence to the heavenly realm was forever lost. According to reports:

> One of Mboro's bodyguards claims the pictures were real and he has seen it with his own eyes. "The pictures were really there, I saw them. We suspect one of the boys washing the Prophet's car took the phone. But they all denied taking it, even after we beat them.[31]

Alleged physical violence aside and despite the loss of potential income from the sale of celestial selfies, "The Millionaire Preacher" is the picture of "new money" – he wears designer suits, is impeccably groomed, and drives a car worth almost 1.5 million South African rands. More recently, Mboro has been at the centre of controversy surrounding the death of a three year old child who was brought to the pastor by her mother, for prayer. During the service the child's condition took a turn for the worse, and paramedics were called to the scene. Allegedly, they took over 90 minutes to arrive during which time Mboro continued to pray for the child. What followed is unclear, although Mboro claims that the first responders refused to enter the church and help the child, others on the scene reported that the child was already dead when the paramedics arrived. Mboro has opened a case of culpable homicide against the emergency services. The child's mother made the following statement, "I was failed by the paramedics and the SAPS. The one man that tried to help me, Prophet Mboro, was unfairly targeted by certain journalists."[32]

The Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People's Belief Systems Report

In response to the rise of reports about unorthodox religious practices, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities (hereafter referred to as the CRL) launched an investigative study into the "Commercialisation of

[31] Lee Francke, Robin. 2016. Prophet loses heave selfie phone. https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/prophet-loses-heaven-selfies-phone-2007111 (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

[32] Bornman, Jan. Mother 'broken' after taking her sick child to Pastor Mboro. https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/mother-broken-after-taking-her-sick-child-to-pastor-mboro-20180103 (Accessed 28 March, 2018).

Religion and Abuse of People's Belief Systems" in South Africa. The objectives of the survey were listed as the following:

> i) investigate and understand further issues surrounding the commercialisation of religion and traditional healing, (ii) identify the causes underlying the commercialisation of religion and traditional healing, (iii) assess the extent of commercialisation of religion and traditional healing practices and how satisfied respondents are with government regulation and oversight, (iv) understand the deep societal thinking that makes some members of our society vulnerable and gullible with respect to views expressed and actions during religious ceremonies, (iv) assess the religious framework and its relevance to deal with the prevailing religious challenges, and (v) formulate recommendations that address the status quo with respect to commercialised religion and traditional healing.[33]

It is clear from the title of the report, and the objectives, that the commission was predominantly concerned with the financial business of these new churches. The methodology of the report cements this point since, although the report was commissioned by the CRL; it was actually conducted by the Bureau of Market Research, a research unit of the college of Economic and Management Studies at the University of South Africa. While the fourth objective alludes to the commission's plan to try to understand the ways in which religious believers are implicated within this broader framework of commercialisation, what is of concern is that what can be considered the most important objectives of the study, particularly in light of the concerning practices revealed by the media has not been highlighted as its driving force.

The report claims to have consulted 905 respondents, which include, "religious leaders, congregants, heads of household, congregants and traditional healing practitioners and followers" and 37 members of non-religious/spiritualist institutions, and 6 key informants. Suffice to say, gender or even rudimentary sex differentiation are never raised or considered as critical to discussing the ways in which power – that of the spiritual, authoritarian, and overwhelming male persuasion – is negotiated within the context of these institutions. As far as is verifiable, based on the names of the 85 religious institutions that were summoned by the commission to public hearings, only a handful of institutions were represented by women. It appears as though women were conceptually

[33] CRL Prelim Report. The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities: Prelimanary Report on the hearings: Commercialization of Religion in South Africa. Pretoria, 2017.

and physically (through their lack of presence in institutional representation) excluded in the conceptualisation and the research practices of the CRL study.

Many of the media reports focussed on the sensational nature of the religious leaders. The prophets, the priests and the pastors were presented as *nouveau riche* caricatures and zealous evangelicals that any "reasonable" person would scoff at. When the media did divert its attention away from the "leading men," the followers, who were represented almost entirely by women, were overwhelming portrayed as desperately in need of financial or health-related saving. These women were presented as zealously devoted to their spiritual guru, typifying the "vulnerable" and "gullible" persons to whom the report refers in passing.

In this case study which illustrates the rise of unorthodox and exploitative religious practices, women have been failed three times. First, by the media that have trivialised their stories in pursuit of more entertaining and sensationalist narratives around "holy" men doing outrageous things; second, by the report that chose to "follow the money" and ignore the specificity of women's experiences as integral to understanding the inner logic of what drives support for these organisations and their leaders; and finally; gender and the experiences of women, both from within and without the problematised religious groups, have been ignored in the formulations of religious regulations that the CRL have proposed as "protective" mechanisms. It is tenable that driven by commercial concerns and framed by media logics of aesthetics and genre, the information that the media reports have provided on the topic have not acknowledged the complicated ways in which gender is implicated. However, it is untenable that the CRL which is constitutionally mandated to protect religious communities have failed to address the very serious ways in which women have been at the receiving end of potentially exploitative, religiously sanctioned practices and further marginalised from the state-authorised processes of deliberation that have the potential to fundamentally reconfigure their religious environments.

This brings to the fore the question underlying this discussion of gender's absence in: media reporting on religion; the CRL report; and the field of religion, culture and media studies. How should feminist scholars working at the intersections of religion, media, and cultural and religious studies negotiate the sexualisation and racialisation of African bodies within parallel constructions of sexual violence and Afro-pessimism?

Knowledge is discursively, materially, and continually produced and reproduced.

Feminist scholars have long demonstrated that knowledge is defined by its situatedness and produced through personal, social, and historical circumstances and experiences. In order to read beyond narratives of black African women as spiritual and sexual victims, I suggest an approach that is inherently post-structuralist, to focus on how gender is constructed through and in media and not merely found as reflection.[34] Therefore, in this context, we cannot be distracted with analysing the stereotypical images of weak women that have been circulated within this story, although this does indeed warrant attention. A focus on the experience of women also requires scrutiny of the possibilities and limitations of individual agency in its many variances. I suggest that through considering the mediatisation of gender as part of the process of religion's mediatisation we are better able to assess the conditions, (medialogical, societal, and religious) under which particular symbolisations of gender are produced and presented and to discern which discourses and formations of power and authorities are served and undermined in this process.

Conclusion

Although other religions were compelled to participate in the proceedings, the CRL study was essentially commissioned in direct response to the activities of a handful of young, black, Christian religious leaders. Beyond the legal ramifications of criminal activities and given the diversity of Christianity, the question of who decides what is acceptable and unacceptable Christian leadership and religious practice becomes crucial for confronting the Afro-pessimism that has characterised the media stories and the investigative framework of the CRL. This is not only an ecumenical and ecclesial question, but also more importantly a question of power and authority, especially in relation the politics of race and the power to define religion. Despite claims to religious equality in the context of South Africa; Western European Christian and post enlightenment sensibilities of what religion is, its place in society and what it ought to look like; are the very foundations upon which the constitutional right to religious freedom is enshrined and articulated. Therefore, in determining the intersections of power at play, the CRL report, and response to the cases of Mboro et al, can be read as a blatant attempt to quell any ostensibly unauthorised religious practice that might bring disrepute to Christianity.

[34] Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

The media reporting and the CRL in response to the rise of unorthodox and exploitative religious practices have not treated the charismatic black pastors at the centre of these controversies, as *bona-fide*, religious leaders. Consequently, their female constituencies have dominantly been regarded as gullible victims of fraudsters and not as sincere religious believers. Consequently their stories have been side-lined. An intersectional feminist analysis of this case study reveals that, by following the spectacle of performance and the trail of money, and by ignoring the women's experiences, both the media and CRL have undermined the religious legitimacy of these organisations, their leaders, and followers, implicitly upholding so called acceptable forms of Christianity, while at the same time failing the women who have been multifariously violated.

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