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Studying Religion in the Pluriversity: Decolonial Perspectives

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Abstracts

Taking up the concept of the pluriversity as developed by mostly South American thinkers, this essay shares some thoughts about what the study of religion/s might look like if we seriously engage with questions of decolonisation. Building on the critique of the dominant Western, Eurocentric, colonialist and racialised models of thought that have historically shaped the field, I make a constructive proposal for an approach to the study of religion/s that centres around three Ps: a commitment to Pluriversality, an acknowledgment of Partiality, and a commitment to Participatory work. I illustrate this with some specific examples from studying religion in contemporary African contexts.

Key words

Pluriversity; decolonisation; study of religions; postcoloniality; epistemologies of the South

Bio statement

Adriaan van Klinken is Associate Professor of Religion and African Studies at the University of Leeds, where he is also the director of the Centre for Religion and Public Life. He recently published *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (Penn State University Press, 2019).

Reflecting upon the question about the future of the academic study of religion/s, in this short essay I explore some of the potential and implications of recent debates about 'the pluriversity'. I first came across the term 'pluriversity' in an essay by the critical theorist and political philosopher Achille Mbembe (2016) about decolonising the university. Mbembe's essay was written in the specific context of the mass student protests that emerged at South African university campuses in 2015, initially under the hashtag #RhodesMustFall at the University of Cape Town, and later under the hashtag #FeesMustFall across the country (see Nyamnjoh 2016). I read the essay shortly after its publication, while I enjoyed a research fellowship in South Africa, on one of the campuses that had witnessed the protests, Stellenbosch. During that time, I interacted with several students closely involved in the movement and learned about their concerns about the lack of transformation in higher education, and in society more generally, more than twenty years after the end of apartheid, and I tried to engage with the fundamental questions asked by the student protesters – questions that are not only relevant to the South African context but clearly resonated with student

movements and debates in other parts of the world, including the UK (see Chantiluke, Kwoba and Nkopo 2018).

Discussing how the student protests have put the question of decolonising the university back on the agenda, Mbembe distinguishes two sides of this project: first, 'a critique of the dominant Eurocentric academic model', and second, 'an attempt at imagining what the alternative to this model could look like', and he observes that especially the latter is an area where 'a lot remains to be done' (Mbembe 2016, 36). Sharing his own thoughts about this new imagination, he takes up the concept of the pluriversity that has emerged from the work of mostly South American thinkers such as Enrique Dussel, Arturo Escobar and Walter D Mignolo, and which has recently been developed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2017, 2018). In Mbembe's account of this literature,

By pluriversity, many understand a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions. To decolonize the university is therefore to reform it with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism – a task that involves the radical refounding of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions. (Mbembe 2016, 37)

As much as accounts on the pluriversity are programmatic proposals, there are already initiatives underway in this direction, such as various attempts at indigenising the academy and the recovery of indigenous knowledge (Milesuah and Wilson 2004).

I do not have the space here to explore the concept and debates about the pluriversity in-depth, but will rather reflect upon its significance and implications for the study of religion/s. In the light of this interest, it is noteworthy that Mbembe uses the term transcendence, with its religious connotation, to conceptualise transdisciplinarity. I may be reading too much into his usage of this word here, but Mbembe himself has drawn attention, in earlier writing, to the potential within (and I would add, also between) religious traditions to transcend (in this case, ethnic) boundaries and binary distinctions 'through conversion to a set of ideas that, by virtue of spellbinding power, could be called *magico-poetical*' (Mbembe 2001, 219). Of course, religious traditions are much more than a set of ideas; yet my suggestion here is that the study of religion/s, precisely because of the boundary-crossing (may I say, queer?) nature of its subject, is uniquely equipped to address, interrogate and indeed transcend the disciplinary, methodological and epistemological rigidity that still dominates much academic inquiry.

In the study of religion/s, there is a considerable body of literature concerned with the first side of the project of decolonization distinguished by Mbembe: critiquing the dominant Western, Eurocentric, colonialist and racialised models of thought that have historically shaped the field and continue to have ongoing legacies for its key concepts (including that of "religion" itself), methodologies and theories (e.g. Chidester 1996, 2014; King 1999; Masuzawa 2005; Nye 2019). Yet the second side, of imagining alternative ways of studying religion, appears to have received less attention (although the emerging interest in the study of indigenous religions is a welcome development as it enables alternative ways of conceptualising "religion" and the study of it, see Johnson and Kraft 2017). Without any pretention of being exhaustive, let me share some thoughts about how studying religion in the pluriversity might look, organised around three Ps: pluriversity,

partiality, and participatory. I will make particular reference to my own field, the study of religion/s in Africa, writing from my position as a white European academic researching and teaching at an institution in the northern hemisphere.

Pluriversality

As implied in the term 'pluriversity', this decolonial perspective seeks to interrogate the 'self-proclaimed universality' of Western epistemologies, and to acknowledge the existence and validity of many different ways of knowing the world (Mignolo 2018). In the words of Bernd Reiter, 'the call for decolonization ... thus points to the need to move beyond the critique of colonialism and toward the active construction of the pluriverse through the systematic elaboration of different ontologies and corresponding epistemologies' (Reiter 2018, 5). This has profound implications for the study of religion/s, where the premise of universality has given rise, at least in one dominant approach, to a particular way of engaging religious phenomena, defined by Enlightenment values such as rationality, objectivity, and impartiality (Knott 2010). To a significant extent, this tradition of studying religion/s developed out of the field's self-positioning vis-à-vis theology, often on the basis of a somewhat simplistic insider-outsider binary scheme. One result of this is that religious practice and thought often is analysed, interpreted and rendered "sensible" in non-religious terms, meaning that religious epistemologies are systematically subordinated to secular, presumably universal, ways of knowing. Thus, in the social scientific study of religion/s in Africa, practices such as divination and witchcraft, prophecy and spiritual warfare are frequently interpreted, in reductionist ways, in terms of the negotiation of modernity or neoliberal capitalism. Little adequate attention is paid to how these practices present and enable particular ways of knowing and being in the world; that is, to the alternative, often enchanted epistemologies and ontologies they represent which diverge from a disenchanted, rational and secular Western "scientific" epistemology. Instead, religious epistemologies are subordinated to the 'real' dramas of material realities. Arguably, the binaries of matter-spirit and secular-sacred underlying such interpretations itself are informed by secular ways of thinking.

In response to calls for epistemic diversity, some may fear the problem of cultural relativism. Yet in Mignolo's words, 'pluriversality is not cultural relativism, but the entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential' – a differential that he identifies as 'the logic of coloniality covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity' (2018, x). For Mignolo, the pluriversity therefore requires 'a way of thinking and understanding that dwells in the interstices of the entanglement, at its borders' (2008, xi). This is how I envision the future of the study of religion/s: located in the interstices of the entanglements between different ways of knowing and being, across cultures, contexts and religious traditions, creatively exploring the divergences, tensions and potentials; critically interrogating any automatic privileging of dominant Eurocentric perspectives, and seeking to overcome the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres 2007). The point here is not whether (or not) one epistemology is better than another, but to be critically aware of the structures of power and normativity on the basis of which such an assessment could be made in the first place. Pluriversality does not preclude the possibility of critique but multiplies the possibilities of critique, as critique is not necessarily secular (see Asad, Brown, Butler and Mahmood, 2009). Any epistemology can (and in an academic space: should be) subject of critique; yet privileging hitherto marginalised or overlooked perspectives is crucial to ameliorating epistemic injustice.

One implication of this positioning of the study of religion/s is that the traditional boundaries between the study of religion/s and theology become increasingly fluid and perhaps obsolete, as it allows for a more creative and imaginative borderland thinking about the methodological divides that have haunted the field. I appreciate how methodological agnosticism was once instrumental to help the study of religion/s navigate a middle position between militantly secular and religious confessional approaches; but in our current day and age, methodological agnosticism can be insufficient as far as it is based on (the abstinence from, rather than a critique of) a particular Western, originally Christian, and often exclusivist notion of “truth”. A commitment to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) calls ‘epistemologies of the South’ requires an openness to an empathetic understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, social and political significance of religious traditions, and their contributions to what in indigenous Latin American traditions is called *el buen vivir*, and in Africa, *ubuntu*. One noteworthy example here is Laura Grillo’s magnificent study of rituals of what she calls ‘female genital power’ in Côte d’Ivoire, which offers an incisive, multi-layered reading of the embodied performances through which women enact moral authority and spiritual power as a form of social and political protest (Grillo 2018).

It is worth emphasising that for Santos, ‘epistemologies of the South’ is not primarily a geographical but a qualitative term. It refers to ‘the knowledges that emerge from social and political struggles’ against capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, and as such they are produced ‘wherever such struggles occur, in both the geographical North and the geographical South’ (Santos 2018, 1-2). Thus, although the term epistemologies of the South seemingly reinforces a simplistic North-South binary, it seeks to acknowledge that the economic, political and epistemic inequalities in our postcolonial and globalising world have emerged from geographical divides that, although they become increasingly blurred, can still be recognised. Without necessarily assuming that there is one definable epistemology to be found among social groups suffering from such inequalities, the concept of epistemologies of the South does acknowledge that historic and contemporary experiences of struggle do have a profound effect on ways of being and knowing. As the Kenyan literary writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986, 106) captures this insight, ‘Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being.’

Partiality

What follows from the recognition of pluriversality, in the words of Bernd Reiter (2018, 3), is ‘embracing partiality’, acknowledging that ‘all knowledge production is embodied and conditioned by the researcher’s situatedness’. This key insight has been emphasized in several decades of feminist, postcolonial, queer and other forms of critical scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, critiquing traditional scientific knowledge production that, in the words of Donna Haraway (1988), plays ‘the god trick’. Yet the key notion of situated knowledges appears to be adopted only slowly in the study of religion/s, possibly precisely because of the field’s historic self-identification as “neutral”, “objective”, and “disengaged” in its positioning vis-à-vis theology (a positioning that fails to acknowledge that academic theology itself has been implicated in very similar claims to scholarly objectivity, although there appears to be a stronger tradition of critiquing such claims and of engaging with questions of decolonisation in theology). Acknowledging partiality means recognising the limitations of the knowledge we produce, which thus inspires an attitude of humility. Yet

partiality is not just a limitation, it is also a productive possibility as it requires a constant self-critical reflection on our identity and positionality, including on our (often complex) non/religious histories and trajectories which, in the words of Robert Orsi (2004, 14), still 'is the great taboo of religious studies'. Especially in the ethnographic study of religion, partiality also allows for 'taking the body seriously, taking relationalities seriously' (Hoel 2019, np), which is important precisely because the body, and embodied relationships, are key instruments through which data are gathered, knowledge is being produced, and alternative epistemologies can be experienced. In my own recent book about religion and LGBT activism in Kenya (van Klinken 2019), I have sought to make partiality productive through a mode of autobiographical, auto-ethnographical and self-reflexive writing in which I account for the embodied, relational and therefore often messy nature of my research. This mode of self-writing allowed me to acknowledge both my sexual and religious selves, and reflect on their complex role in the dynamics of my research; this then also enabled me to address the key problem of "othering" that has long characterised the Western engagement with, and study of, African realities. In other words, including an explicitly self-reflexive gaze helps to interrogate orientalisising tendencies and makes transparent that the scholar is equally subject, and has stakes, in the research.

Participatory

In the pluriversity, any serious engagement with epistemologies of the South begins with the acknowledgement that such epistemologies are often born out of, and centred around, struggle against various forms of oppression, such as (neo)colonialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, and the threats posed by climate change. This struggle can be in explicitly organised forms, but also as part of everyday practices of resistance. As Santos points out, as scholars and public intellectuals, 'we must change the world while constantly reinterpreting it; as much as change itself, the reinterpretation of the world is a collective endeavour' (2018, viii). In particular as scholars of religion, we cannot remain detached observers when studying how religious institutions are drivers of systems of oppression, and how religious beliefs and practices can be used to exclude or subjugate people but can also inspire acts of resistance and liberation. I do not suggest that all scholars should become scholar-activists, and that academic research should be a form of ally-ship and advocacy (although I do welcome such work and the academic reflections thereof; e.g. see Stausberg 2014 and other contributions to the same special issue). Yet I would advocate for greater honesty and transparency about the ways in which we negotiate in our work questions of political engagement, of personal commitment to the causes, communities and subjects we study, and of implicit and explicit normative judgement.

In the study of religion/s, there is a long and dominant tradition of 'manufacturing distance' from the object of study; this methodological tradition, as Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller have recently argued (2018, xxiii-xxiv), has 'roots dating back at least to colonial contact and to the safeguarding of particular, historically authorized, comparatively validated, "white" European identity'. In other words, there is no method free of social and political identity and situatedness. Acknowledging this insight, I envision a future in which methodologies such as participatory action research will be increasingly embraced by scholars of religion, not only as a reflection of our ethical and political commitments but also because of the intellectual creativity and productivity this will

generate (much could be said about the difficulties for this kind of work in the face of an expanding institutional culture of risk assessment, research ethics procedures and other regulations, but that is for another essay). As Santos (2014, 208-209) states: 'The issue of the relation between religious and other knowledges acquires relevance when many social movements fighting today against oppression base their militancy on religious knowledge and on spirituality.' Thus, in our contemporary postcolonial world, scholars of religion are uniquely equipped to understand the role of religion, not just in 'public life' broadly conceived, but in particular, historically situated processes of struggle, resistance and liberation, and in the face of particular socio-political concern. With regard to my own academic field, Jacob Olupona has observed that

The "neutral", socially disengaged scholar who once dominated the study of African religion is increasingly seen as ineffectual in discussing a continent in crisis. African scholars today feel morally obligated to address religion as it relates to immediate and pressing human concerns, and as such, they serve as models for the entire academy. (Olupona 2014, xxiii)

Olupona seems to suggest that it is African scholars, more than their Euro-American counterparts, who exemplify this trend, as part of an emerging set of 'African traditions in the study of religion in Africa' (Adogame, Chitando and Bateye 2012, 9). The reason might well be that for the latter it is an optional choice to undertake engaged, participatory scholarship, while for the former social and political struggle is real, and is their own, as they are part of the very communities affected by structures of inequality and oppression. Yet if we believe in the notion of a shared human existence – a notion that, as Mbembe (2001, 2) points out, has 'long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness' (in spite of its basis in Western Christian thought) – there is an ethical demand on Euro-American scholars to commit themselves to undertaking engaged scholarship in solidarity with the communities in the frontline of the social and political struggles of our times. Working in partnership with colleagues based in, and/or originating from these contexts is particularly pertinent as part of a commitment to epistemologies from the South in a truly internationalised academia, and also because, in the words of Santos quoted earlier, reinterpreting and changing the world is a collective endeavour.

Conclusion

Taking up the concept of the pluriversity, in this essay I have shared some thoughts about what the study of religion/s might look like if we seriously engage with questions of decolonisation. I propose a reflexive, participatory and perhaps more political turn in the study of religion/s, questioning the taken-for-granted Western frameworks of analysis and scholarly practice, and instead radically orienting ourselves to the pluriversity of ways of knowing and being in our postcolonial, globalised, yet divided and fragmented world. This will impact the way in which we undertake research, but also how we teach the subject to undergraduate students and how we train postgraduate researchers, as the pluriversity requires the development of new methodologies and pedagogies in the study of religion/s.

Inspired by our collaboration with the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa and by the pedagogy practised there, in the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds we have recently made deliberate effort to

build a collaborative intellectual space for postgraduate students somewhat reflecting the three Ps discussed above. The highly stimulating exchanges between these junior researchers from a wide range of backgrounds, about their respective methodologies ranging from Pentecostal-participatory, to Islamic feminist to queer critical approaches; about their respective research sites in a range of global contexts and religious communities; and about their concerns with a diverse range of issues such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, ecology, diaspora, democracy and human rights, gives me a taste of how exciting, enriching and important studying religion in the pluriversity can be.

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