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Religion in African Literature: Representation, Critique and Imagination

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Abstract

The study of religion and literature is an emerging field of academic interest. Although some work has been done on religion and African literature, research in this area tends to be fragmented and dispersed over various fields and disciplines. Reviewing available scholarship in this area, this article explores what engaging with African literary writing brings to the table of the study of religion in Africa. Focusing on postcolonial and contemporary African literature, it identifies a three-fold contribution: first, the creative representation of religious traditions and dynamics; second, the critique of religious beliefs and institutions; third, the imagination of alternative religious possibilities. It illustrates these contributions by specifically focusing on issues of (neo)colonialism, gender and sexuality. Hence the article foregrounds the importance of engaging with religion for interpreting African literary texts, and the significance of literary writing for understanding religion as part of African social and cultural life.

Key-words

African literature; African religions; religion and literature; Christianity; Islam

Introduction

The study of religion and literature is an emerging field that has witnessed growing academic interest of scholars working across disciplines such as theology, religious studies, English, and literary studies (Felch, 2016; Knight, 2016; Mason, 2015). It is most firmly established in the American and European academy and concerned with literary traditions in these regions. Although some work has been conducted on African literature and its engagement with African religions (indigenous religions, Christianity and Islam), scholarship in this field is not systematically developed. This may be surprising, given Afe Adogame's (2010, p. 3) observation that 'the prose, poetry and drama genres produced by pioneering figures in African literature are overtly suffused with religious and cultural symbolism, meaning, critique, and connotation'. I would add that this does not only apply to the work of pioneers but also of many contemporary African literary writers. Given those observations, it is striking that scholarship on the subject of religion and African literature is relatively scarce, scattered and fragmented. This article begins with a review of the existing work in this area. It then

discusses three unique contributions that engaging with African literature brings to the table of the study of religion in Africa: first, a creative representation of African religious traditions and dynamics; second, an African critique of religious beliefs and institutions; third, the imagination of alternative religious possibilities in Africa.

A Dispersed Field

There is an existing body of scholarship on religion and African literature. However, this work does currently not constitute a 'field' on its own, but is in fact dispersed over various fields, such as the study of African literature, the study of religion and literature, the study of African religions, and African theology. In each of these fields the subject appears to be somewhat marginal.

In the study of African literature, religion is not a prominent category of analysis, although attention for the subject is not completely absent. For instance, two recent major handbooks in this field (Adejunmobi and Coetzee, 2019; Ojaide and Ashuntantang, 2020) each have only one chapter (out of 28 and 29 respectively) explicitly focused on religious themes, and in both cases it is specifically about Islam (Aliyu, 2020; Edwin, 2019). The *Routledge Enclyclopedia for African Literature* includes two entries, dedicated to Christianity (Gikandi, 2009) and Islam (Topan, 2009) respectively. The journal *Research in African Literatures* in 2017 had a special issue about 'Religion, Secularity, and African Writing' (Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma 2017). Mark Mathuray's (2009) *On the Sacred in African Literature* is a rare book-length study of the subject, examining writings by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ben Okri and J.M. Coetzee.

In the field of religion and literature, African literature is not a major area of interest, reflecting the field's historic Euro-American orientation. A recent major handbook only includes one chapter focusing on the theme of reconciliation in two South African novels, *The Heart of Redness* by Zakes Mda and *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee (Jager, 2020), while a recent companion includes a chapter about 'World Christianity' that discusses two African literary texts, the poem 'Jesus of the Deep Forest' by Afua Kuma, and the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (VanZanten, 2016). Two of the leading journals in this field, *Literature and Theology* and *Religion and Literature*, have published incidental articles on African literature. Again, this mostly focuses on texts from South Africa (see the special issue of *Literature and Theology*, Levey, 1999), although some articles in these journals have engaged texts from other parts of the continent such as by Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Uwem Akpan, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Bongmba, 2001; Purcell, 2013; Searle, 2007; Stobie, 2010; Vander Weele, 2015). The journal *Christianity and Literature* had a special issue dedicated to African literature (VanZanten, 2012), with articles focusing on texts by writers such as Thomas Mofolo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Dominic Mulaisho, Uwem

Akpan and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Guendouzi, 2012; Lilford, 2012; Purcell, 2012; Szolosi, 2012; Wallace, 2012).

In the study of African religions, the leading *Journal of Religion in Africa* has published hardly any work specifically dealing with literary texts. This confirms Ezra Chitando's observation that scholars in this field 'have not devoted adequate time to analyse religious themes that run through most African literature'; hence Chitando underlines the need for engaging with literary writing in order for African religious studies to become 'truly multidisciplinary' (Chitando, 2001, p. 80, 92). This call has been taken up by Afe Adogame (2010), who edited a special issue of *Studies in World Christianity* dedicated to the theme of 'Religion in African Literary Writing'. The volume includes articles about Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Benjamin Kwakye, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010; Deme, 2010; Kamau-Goro, 2010; Okyerefo, 2010).

Lastly, in the field of African theology, some scholars have engaged with literary texts, exploring for instance the critique of missionary Christianity in the work of writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (Mugambi 1992; Bongmba, 2001), Wole Soyinka (Ng'anga, 2018) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Dube, 2018), and taking this as a basis for theological reflection. Abraham Waigi Ng'ang'a has recently made a substantial contribution to the subject, with several publications based on his doctoral dissertation. He draws critical attention to the overall lack of engagement by African theologians with the works of African creative writers, which he suggests is particularly surprising because both share 'deep affinity and common ground' in their quest for African identity in the postcolony (Ng'ang'a (2016, 27). In his own work, Ng'ang'a sets up a critical and constructive conversation between literary writers, in particular Soyinka, and African theologians such as Kwame Bediako, with a view to identifying the 'sparks of truth' that can be found in 'indigenous religio-aesthetic categories' (Ng'ang'a, 2017). Doing so, he also critiques Soyinka for too easily dismissing Christianity and instead subscribing to 'secular gods'.

This article provides a mapping of the study of religion and African literature across these dispersed fields, identifying key themes, emerging trends, and critical issues for future scholarship. It underlines and reinforces the point made by Adogame (2010, p. 3-4), that scholars,

> should begin to pay more attention to how and to what extent religion is embedded within African literary cultures; ways in which African literary scholars and their works are informed and illuminated – in their ideas and preoccupations, by religious traditions, imagery, ideas, and concerns; and how they engage with and reshape traditional and non-traditional discourses and repertoires.

Defining the Scope

Most of the existing scholarship on religion and African literature appears to be concerned with Christianity. The reason for this might be that the body of writings often referred to as 'African literature' itself can historically can be seen as a product of Christian missions in at least two ways: 'First, the major writers in French, English, Portuguese, and even African languages came from a Christian background and were educated in Christian missions. … Second, Christian missions were the places in which African literature was first materially produced' (Gikandi, 2009). Having said so, it is important to acknowledge that African literary production, in oral and written forms, pre-dates the colonial period and the introduction of missionary Christianity. Not only in North, but also in West, Central and East Africa there are longstanding literary traditions in Arabic, Swahili and indigenous languages that engage with Islamic themes and values (Harrow, 1991; Shehu, 2014; Topan, 2009). As far as Christianity is concerned, the ancient and still living cultures of Egyptian Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity represent rich literary traditions independent from European influences (Molvaer, 2009). Of course, throughout the continent there are also longstanding literary traditions – mostly oral, but sometimes also of a written nature – that played, and continue to play, central roles in indigenous cultures and religions (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992).

Arguably, 'African literature' is a rather broad and loose term, and its definition is contested. To restrict the scope of this article, my focus will be on religion in postcolonial and contemporary written literature, mainly focusing on works published or translated in English, although some broader context will be provided. Among the different literary genres, the focus will mostly be on fiction, in particular novels, although some references will be made to short stories and autobiographies. My response to the question asked at the beginning of this article, what engaging with African literature brings to the table of the study of religion in Africa, centres around a threefold concern: first, with the creative representation of religious traditions and dynamics; second, with the critique of religious beliefs and institutions; third, with the imagination of alternative religious possibilities. Obviously, the boundaries between these three concerns are not neat, and particular literary texts can combine or move between these; yet distinguishing them is helpful here for analytical purposes.

Literary Representations of Religion

It is increasingly recognized by non-literary scholars such as anthropologists that literary writing, even though being creative and imaginative, may offer 'ethnographic source material' (Wiles, 2020, 282) and might even depict the world 'more compellingly, accurately, and profoundly' than social

scientists (Fassin, 2014, p. 40). In relation to the concern of this article, the point then is that African literary texts can introduce the reader to worlds of religious belief, ritual and practice, and can represent religious landscapes and the changes therein.

Indigenous religious beliefs in supernatural beings, such as gods, spirits and divinities, are reflected in epic texts by African authors, as Mariam Deme (2010) points out with reference to the classics by Djibril Tamsir Niane (*Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 1965) and Mazini Kunene (*Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic*, 1979). Such beliefs are also captured in one of the earliest classics of modern African literature, *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, by Daniel Fagunwa (1938 [1982]) which is set in a Yoruba cosmological environment, and in the much more recent epic *Kintu*, by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi (2014), which explores the theme of an ancestral curse running through generations in a Buganda context. Wole Soyinka (1976) has written an academic treatise discussing Yoruba and other West African religious traditions of myth and ritual, and its relevance for African literature. Yet his commitment to a 'secular social vision' (Soyinka, 1976, p. xii) has been critiqued by Ng'ang'a (2016, 2018) in his recent theological engagement with Soyinka's thought. A non-fiction text such as the autobiography *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me*, by the South African self-identifying 'lesbian sangoma' (a Zulu traditional healer) Nkunzi Nkabinde (2008), demonstrates the ongoing relevance of indigenous worldviews in a contemporary Christianized context, and the significance of the belief in ancestors for conceptions of personhood and embodiment. Similar themes are narrated in the autobiographical novel *Freshwater*, by Akwaeke Emezi (2018), which offers detailed narrative insight into Igbo cosmology, specifically the belief in the spirit child (*ogbanje*), and its implications for the metaphysics of identity.

Several classic texts of African literature from the 1960s are concerned with capturing the dynamics of social, cultural and religious change as a result of European exploration, colonialism, and mission in African societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Widely-known examples are Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1962) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *The River Between* (1965), which both explore the impact of conversion to missionary Christianity, and the resulting cultural conflicts, among the Igbo (South-East Nigeria) and the Gikuyu (Kenya) respectively (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010; Kamau-Goro, 2010). Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988) explores similar themes at a more personal and familial level, in the context of a Catholic mission school in Zimbabwe (Searle, 2007). Beyond the theme of missionary activity, more recent developments in the process of 'Christianising Africa' (Okyerefo, 2010) are captured in novels such as the earlier mentioned *Kintu*, with reference to the Anglican *Balokole* revival in Uganda, *We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo (2014) with reference to prophet-healing churches in Zimbabwe, and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) with reference to Pentecostal-charismatic churches in Nigeria.

These texts illustrate the point made by Gikandi (2009) that 'after independence, Christianity could no longer be represented as a force extraneous to the African experience but a crucial part of the social and cultural fabric of postcolonial society.' However, also in these more recent novels the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religious cultures remains a recurrent theme. It is often framed as one of conflict, not only during the colonial period but also in the postcolonial present, especially in the context of contemporary Pentecostal movements, as powerfully and humorously captured in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc* (2014).

The same theme also appears in literary texts about Islam, yet here this relationship tends to be cast in a more harmonious way. For instance, with reference to the work of Amadou Hampâté Bâ from Mali, Gabriel Asfar (1991b, 142) observes that the gradual advent of Islam in the region 'may be considered a fusion, and not a clash, with traditional belief and practice', which he suggests is a result of the 'strong compatibilities' between Islam and West African indigenous religions (also see Asfar, 1991a). This image of harmonious and peaceful Islamic traditions is complicated in more recent novels, such as Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015) which offers narrative insight into the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria. On the basis of an analysis of fiction by established and emergent West African writers, Shirin Edwin (2019) has demonstrated how Islam in Senegalese, Sudanese and Nigerian societies is embedded in everyday practice and through a variety of rituals interlinks individual, local, communal and global socialities. Likewise, Emad Mirmotahari (2011) argues how novels by East African writers such as Nuruddin Farah, Abdulrazak Gurnah and M.G. Vassanji, foreground the historic presence of Islam in countries such as Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, and its central albeit complex place in social life as a key factor in the shaping of identity and community. Of course, such narrative accounts of religion as part of everyday life are not restricted to novels about Islam. In fact, many African novels, without religion necessarily being a prominent theme, capture how religious practice and belief are naturally integrated in the socio-cultural environment. For instance, in Benjamin Kwakye's *The Sun by Night* (2006), the protagonist attends to a traditional healer, a Christian pastor, and a Muslim marabout when seeking healing for his son struck by disease. This illustrates not only the local cosmologies of illness and health, but also the religious pragmatism with which people operate within this worldview.

Literary Critique of Religion

As we know from postcolonial and other critical perspectives, representation – creative or otherwise – is hardly ever neutral. This also applies to the literary representation of religious cultures and landscapes. Indeed, in line with the conception of the African writer as a social, cultural and political thinker and critic (Adebanwi, 2014), writers can directly or indirectly criticize certain religious

phenomena by representing them in particular ways. As Adogame (2010, 2) puts it, 'African novels principally communicate the African milieu's experiences in its historical setting but also critique it.' In this section, I identify three particular concerns: colonialism, gender, and sexuality.

The earlier mentioned novels capturing the intricate connections between missionary Christianity and the colonial project reflect an African postcolonial critique of the Christian religion. The title of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is telling in this regard, as it critically narrates how local traditions of culture and religion are threatened as a result of the changes brought about by European colonizers and missionaries. Similarly, Ngũgĩ's *The River Between* depicts how two neighbouring Gikuyu villages become deeply separated after one of them converts to Christianity, while the other one swears to uphold the traditional way of life (Siundu and Wegesa, 2010). In a Francophone context, Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1971) presents a satirical critique of French missionary activity in Cameroon. Other novels by these and other African literary writers present similar accounts, as summarized by Gikandi (2009):

> Christianity is represented, in canonical African texts, as the cultural arm of imperial expansion and as the major agent in the alienation of Africans from their traditional cultures, the source of self-hate and mimicry, and one of the sources of the violence that separates families, communities, and nationalities. When Christianity is not represented as an agent of colonial domination and violence, it appears as the ambiguous force of civilization and Europeanization.

The latter point, about Christianity being presented as an ambiguous force, is confirmed by Chitando in his evaluation of the portrayal of missionaries in Zimbabwean literature. Here he observes that authors do indeed firmly critique 'the cultural arrogance of the missionaries, their collusion with colonialists, their strict discipline and paternalism', yet 'they also acknowledge the sensitivity of some missionaries, their charitable works, their impact on education and their inspiring of the nationalist cause' (Chitando, 2001, p. 91). As Megan Paustian has recently demonstrated in an analysis of the autobiographical memoirs by Achebe and Ngũgĩ, these writers themselves also nuance the 'anti-mission orthodoxy' that has come to dominate the study of African literature, as they acknowledge the complexity of this history and its effects by asking, 'how have missions been used to various ends – imperialist *and* anti-imperialist, coercive *and* liberative, racist *and* antiracist, radically violent *and* surprisingly humane? And ultimately how have African people worked to privilege the latter?' (Paustian, 2014, p. 4). Related to the theme of colonialism, questions of land, and the religious connotations to it, come up in several novels, including the recent *Dance of the*

Jakaranda by Peter Kimani (2018), as does of course the theme of race, and the religious institutionalization of racial hierarchy, as in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. (Given the history of apartheid, race is a prominent theme in South African literature, which is left out of the discussion here because it is a somewhat distinct field.)

In more recent years, with new, Pentecostal-Charismatic forms of Christianity having become enormously popular in Africa, some representatives of a new generation of writers has critically represented the way in which these movements continue to use colonizing tactics, for instance by framing indigenous cultures and religions as inferior and associating it with the devil (e.g. see Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.*). In the sharp words of Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, 'public space has been squashed by Pentecostal demon hunters' (quoted in van Klinken, 2019, p. 35). Other writers may be more subtle in their criticism, such as Adichie who in *Americanah* narrates how the mother of the protagonist converts from Catholicism to Pentecostalism – literally burning the crucifixes, rosaries and missals –, and subsequently changes church three times, which can be read as a narrative appraisal of religious fanaticism and consumerism. The desire for religious revival, ecstatic religious experience, and healing miracles, which is typical of Pentecostal-Charismatic culture, is also critically depicted in the short stories *Miracle* by Tope Folarin (2012) and *Many Sons* by Yaa Gyasi (2014).

As mentioned earlier, Islam tends to be presented as entertaining a more harmonious relationship to local traditions. However, Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) is rather critical of both Christianity and Islam as sources of social and cultural conflict and alienation, and for imposing foreign – respectively European and Arab – agendas. Indeed, in the novel both religions are ridiculed:

> We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not Christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and deep night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way. (Armah, 1973, quoted in Okyerefo, 2010, p. 73)

Armah imagines, instead, an African liberation from these colonizing impositions, for which he reinterprets African history and indigenous belief systems (Guendouzi, 2012; Mtshali, 2009). Writers such as Soyinka and Ngũgĩ also tend to be concerned with reimagining and reclaiming indigenous African traditions. However, not all writers follow this path, as Frederick Hale demonstrates with reference to the novel *A Curse from God*, by the Kenyan writer S.N. Ngŭbiah (1970), which levelled 'a

broadside against much of traditional Gikuyu religion and culture as atavistic and inimical to the interests of Kenyans generally after the attainment of *uhuru* [freedom]' (Hale, 2007, p. 48).

In addition to the issue of colonialism and its enduring legacies and renewed manifestations, several literary writings critically address the relationship between religion and gender, in particular critiquing patriarchal ideologies. Chitando observes that gender emerged as a critical issue in the work of third-generation Zimbabwean writers, seeking to correct colonial gender stereotypes of Africa. In his reading of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda* (1993), 'the coalescence of traditional and Christian patriarchy is attacked, with female characters asserting their right of self-determination. Womanly virtues promoted by Christianity during the colonial period such as compliance, docility and self-sacrifice are questioned' (Chitando, 2001, p. 83). Dangarembwa's work may be particularly significant here, because where *Nervous Conditions* presents its female protagonist, Tambu, as a young girl questioning both indigenous and missionary Christian gender norms, in the two sequels to this novel – *The Book of Not* (2006) and *This Mournable Body* (2020) – Tambu gradually loses her agential character. In that sense, Dangarembga's trilogy can be read as a narrative of lost promise, not only the promise of postcolonial liberation but also of women's liberation, and as illustrating the profound difficulty of what Ngũgĩ has so aptly called the decolonization of the mind. A perhaps more hopeful account is offered by Adichie in *Purble Hibiscus* (2004) which, in the words of Cheryl Stobie (2010), is concerned with 'dethroning the infallible father'. The protagonist's father is the authoritative patriarch of the family, a staunch Catholic cum Nigerian Big Man, and in the novel he can be seen as representing the patriarchy of the Church as well as of Nigerian society. Although Adichie clearly presents a narrative critique of the religiously and culturally infused patriarchal system of power in the family, the church, society and politics, she does not simply advocate a repudiation of Christianity, or of Igbo culture for that matter, but rather engages in a 'dynamic process of critique and embrace' (Wallace, 2012, p. 467). Identifying as Catholic herself, Adichie in *Purble Hibiscus* 'implicitly criticises dogmas such as the infallibility of the pope and the celibacy of the priesthood, and offers an alternative to patriarchal and religious absolutism, shame and body-hatred' (Stobie, 2010, p. 422).

In her book about Muslim women in northern Nigerian novels, by writers such as Zaynab Alkali, Abubakar Gimba, and Hauwa Ali, Shirin Edwin (2016) demonstrates how these texts do not so much explicitly critique Islamic patriarchy, but rather narratively show how the participation in Islamic ritual and prayer provides these women with a space for what she calls 'private empowerment'. Hence Edwin counters suggestions by some African feminist thinkers who have suggested that Islam is opposed to women's empowerment and that Muslim women lack agency. Although Edwin may be right that the critique of patriarchy in Islam is not a central concern in these

novels, some recent literary writings do engage in a more subtle narrative criticism. A notable example is *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim (2016). Set in northern Nigeria, the protagonist is a 55 year old widow who resists the pressures of her family and community when she engages in an affair with a young man seen as a 'thug'. Sexual liberation here takes place as the woman transgresses the religio-cultural norms of female sexuality in this Muslim Hausa community and resists the policing of her body by men (her sons and the *mallam*) and fellow women at the mosque and in the neighbourhood.

The question of sexuality, specifically same-sex relationships, is an emerging theme in African literature (Zabus, 2013). Importantly, recent novels such as *The Hairdresser of Zimbabwe* by Tendai Huchu (2010), *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta (2015), and *Speak no Evil* by Uzodinma Iweala (2018), denounce in particular the role of Pentecostal Christianity in reinforcing the frenzy of anti-gay sensitivities that have emerged across Africa in recent decades, and in reinforcing the idea that homosexuality requires healing or deliverance as if it is a disease caused by demons. The earlier-mentioned novel *Kintu*, by Makumbi, on the other hand, narratively constructs traditions of tolerance towards sexual difference in Ugandan history, which implicitly critiques the contemporary evangelical politics of homosexuality in Uganda that culminated in the passing of the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act (Nabutanyi, 2019).

The aim of the above section is not to provide a comprehensive list of all the issues that literary writers have critiqued in their creative representations of religion. However, the identified concerns with colonialism, gender and sexuality do exemplify the ways in which writers serve as social, cultural and political critics, implicitly or explicitly interrogating the workings of religious norms and power in communities and society.

Literary Religious Imaginations

Not only do literary writers critique particular configurations of religion and their socio-political manifestations and effects; as social thinkers, they also open up new possibilities of religious imagination through a creative engagement with religious belief, symbol, and narrative. Adogame (2010, 3) has suggested that what religion and literature have in common is the possibility to 'illuminate the value of imagination, representing the artistic method of interpreting life and phenomena.' Indeed, this means that the boundary between the two can be fluid, as religious traditions often adopt literary forms, while literary writers in their texts frequently engage in religious thought and imagination, not necessarily sticking within the dogmatic and moral boundaries of established religious traditions and institutions, but often creatively pushing and transgressing these boundaries and thus imagining alternative religious possibilities.

An interesting case in this regard is the earlier-mentioned firm critic of missionary Christianity, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Several scholars have explored how Ngũgĩ, both in his earlier work, written when he still identified as Christian, and in his later work, written after he had jettisoned the Christian faith, extensively uses biblical motifs and Christian imagery in his literary aesthetics. For instance, the initial title of his novel *The River Between* was *The Black Messiah*, and indeed the main protagonist is cast as a messianic figure bringing salvation to his people. Both John Anonby (2007) and Nicholas Kamau-Goro (2010) suggest that Ngũgĩ presents a case of a secular reconfiguration of the Bible and Christianity for the purpose of a postcolonial Gikuyu nationalist imagination. However, it can be questioned whether the term 'secular' is appropriate here, especially in relation to Ngũgĩ's early novels (van Klinken, 2015). It rather appears that Ngũgĩ appropriates biblical and Christian language to render the quest for Gikuyu identity and for Kenyan independence and freedom as a sacred one, cast in a language and imagery that speaks to both Gikuyu indigenous and Christian audiences. The title of Ngũgĩ's later novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1982) obviously is a clear parody of a major symbol of the Christian tradition, mobilized for the purpose of a Marxist critique of post-independence Kenyan society, with the devil serving as a representation of capitalism. As Malebogo Kgalemang comments, 'through the crucifixion it [the novel] advocates for an alternative world in which emancipation, liberation and communal spirit drives the unity and materialist needs of the people' (2017, 178). Throughout his oeuvre, Ngũgĩ creatively appropriates motifs and symbols derived from the Bible and Christian tradition for a bold reimagination of socio-political realities. He is certainly not unique in this. For instance, the writer Thomas Mofolo from Lesotho is also found to draw on biblical traditions, such as in his best-known novel *Chaka* (1925) that engages the Old Testament books of Samuel to reflect on the nature of traditional African concepts of family and kingship (Lilford, 2012). A non-fiction text such as the collection of autobiographical and spiritual essays by Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, titled *Replenishing the Earth* (2010), also extensively engages with biblical stories and motifs. Maathai creatively mobilizes these to promote ecological awareness and imagine an eco-spirituality that draws on Christian and Gikuyu indigenous traditions.

More recent novels also engage with religious imagery and symbols. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, for instance, not only offers a narrative critique of religious patriarchy. By including an epiphany of the Virgin Mary, not in a church but in a natural setting, Adichie foregrounds a feminine perspective and alludes to the possibility of reform in a male-dominated church and society. As Stobie (2010, 430) puts it, in the novel 'the feminine spiritual principle controls manifestations of nature and acts as a bridge between heaven and earth, and between artificial boundaries dividing humans. Intuitive belief, rather than doctrine endorsed by "infallible" patriarchy'. Similarly,

according to Musa Dube (2018, 232), the character of Aunty Ifeoma in the novel represents a 'decolonizing' and 'depatriarchalizing' figure in the way in which she embodies her Christian faith as a Nigerian woman. Another example is Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* which presents a female same-sex love story in a narrative that includes plenty of references to religion. As much as the church, in particular the culture of Pentecostal-Charismatic prayer, deliverance and intense bible study, is presented as a hindrance for the protagonist, Ijeoma, to come to terms with her sexuality, the novel offers a multifaceted account of religion that requires nuanced analysis. For instance, Ijeoma herself begins to question her mother's interpretation of the Bible and suggests that the creation story about Adam and Eve can be read as underlining the need for companionship in multiple forms. The first gay party she attends takes place in a covert church, called Friend of Jesus Church of God – a name that can well be seen as suggesting that Jesus is a friend of same-sex loving people. Most notably, the udala tree that is central in the title and that appears throughout the novel is highly symbolic in Igbo indigenous culture and religion, as it is associated with both innocence and fertility. In the novel, the symbolic meaning of the udala tree appears to merge with that of the biblical tree of knowledge: the tree becomes a symbol of losing innocence, gaining knowledge and maturity, and exploring new ways of being fruitful (van Klinken and Chitando, forthcoming).

These various examples illustrate how literary writers engage with religious symbols, texts and motifs as a site of creativity and imagination, and as a basis not only to critique present-day realities but also to envisage other worlds possible, socially, politically, and religiously.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt at mapping existing scholarship on religion and African literature, across various academic fields and disciplines, and across various religious traditions. Through this mapping I have systematically reviewed the relevance of engaging with African literature for the study of religion in Africa, identifying a three-fold contribution: the creative representation of religious traditions and dynamics; the critique of religious beliefs and institutions; and the imagination of alternative religious possibilities. Much of the existing work in this field focuses on the classic texts by widely-known and highly influential writers such as Achebe, Ngũgĩ, and Soyinka. Obviously, their rich oeuvre continues to be worth studying, and has much to offer to the study of religion in Africa from cultural-aesthetic and socio-political perspectives. However, this article has also foregrounded the work of a new generation of writers who, perhaps less burdened by the direct experience of colonialism, engage with religious imagery, symbol and narrative in critical, creative and innovative ways. A clearly understudied area is the representation of new religious movements, such as

Pentecostal Christianity, in contemporary African literature, such as the writings by Adichie, Bulawayo, Huchu, and Ndibe. At the same time, a novel such as Emezi's *Freshwater* illustrates the ongoing engagement with indigenous religious beliefs and cosmologies. To conclude, the vitality of the African literary scene and the vibrancy of religious cultures on the continent together promise a rich and exciting future for the study of religion and African literature. This research field holds considerable potential for innovative scholarship, foregrounding the importance of religion for engaging and interpreting African literary texts, and the significance of literary writing for understanding religion as part of African social and cultural life.

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