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Queer Agency in South Africa: Lived Religion in the Rainbow Nation

Megan Robertson and Mujahid Osman

Introduction¹

The idea for this chapter came about after a series of engagements between the two authors in which we shared our interest in studying the ways that queerness is negotiated within Christianity (for Megan) and Islam (for Mujahid), especially in the ‘Coloured’ community of Cape Town, South Africa. Mujahid’s work has explored the work of queer Muslim groups in Cape Town, specifically Masjid al-Ghuraba or the Mosque of the Marginalized or Queer, which was first founded as Al-Fitra in 1998 by the first and only openly gay imam in South Africa, Imam Muhsin Hendricks. Megan’s work focuses on a sample of queer clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (or the MCSA). Of course, there are many differences in our projects. The most obvious is that we focus on different religious traditions, namely Islam and Christianity. The religious communities we explore also differ in that, while Masjid al-Ghuraba was intentionally formed as an affirming and accepting space for all Muslims, including women and queer people, the MCSA is a normative, hetero-patriarchal Christian church adopting an ambivalent position towards queer sexuality. Yet, our projects also share a key similarity that drives the focus of this chapter, as both focus on queer religious leaders in South Africa who negotiate the borderlands between forms of belonging and structures and practices of marginalization in their religious traditions and communities. We meet each other in this chapter with a shared purpose of exploring the everyday agencies of queer religious leaders and reflecting on it within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, where both Masjid al-Ghuraba and the MCSA are located. Drawing on a lived religion approach² that foregrounds everyday practice, we explore expanded notions of queer religious agency that position it as an effect of power negotiated at various registers of self and other. Unlike most lived religion projects, however, we do not understand everyday practice as existing as oppositional to official tradition, doctrine, ritual, or organization. In fact, as we show, studying the everydayness of lived religion, as it relates to and engages with the ‘official’, helps to move concepts of queer agency beyond the binary of either acceptance or resistance. We argue that

¹ Megan Robertson’s work in this chapter was supported by the Religion and Gender focus area of the SARCHI Chair in Religion and Social Justice, National Research Foundation of South Africa under Grant Number 118854. This work has also been supported by the Polin Institute. Mujahid Osman’s work in this chapter was supported by the Laney Graduate School at Emory University.

² Nancy Ammerman, ‘Finding Religion in Everyday life,’ *Sociology of Religion* 75 no. 2 (2014): 189–207.

approaches that have taken ‘the everyday’ and ‘official religion’ as binary opposites have reinforced unquestioned assumptions that queer religious practice lies within the realm of the seemingly more flexible everyday while heteropatriarchy and other forms of oppressive power remain within the realm of unbending religious traditions and institutions. These binaries, however, are unhelpful when considering the lives of queer religious leaders whose everyday identities and experiences are entangled with/in their traditions, theologies, and institutions. Before discussing our findings in more detail, we begin by providing background to the two religious communities on which we focus.

The MCSA, at last count in 2010, is the largest Protestant denomination in South Africa, with only the broader collection of Pentecostal churches outranking it in membership. As the name suggests, the MCSA does not only exist within the borders of South Africa, but the MCSA Connexion stretches into Mozambique, Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana, and Namibia. However, because queer sexuality is criminalized in other countries in various ways, therefore confining participants in Megan’s research to South Africa, this is the national context the MCSA will be understood within. The Church has positioned itself in a seemingly non-divisive space of ambivalence in relation to the ‘same-sex debate’. Over the past two decades, this debate has animated much of the Church’s rhetoric on sex and sexuality. While the MCSA has declared that it will not reject anyone based on their sexual orientation, it has also refused to condone same-sex marriage. This is in large part because of the threat of a split in membership that a decision condoning or opposing same-sex unions may pose. Not only does this threaten to diminish the already dwindling numbers of members in the Church, but it also places the institution’s political and moral clout at risk, which it has garnered due to its legacy as a ‘prophetic church’³ that opposed apartheid – a legacy bolstered by ties to anti-apartheid activists such as Nelson Mandela and Peter Storey. Despite its ambiguous stance on same-sex marriage, however, a small number of queer clergy work and live within the boundaries of the Church. More recently, since 2020, some queer members, clergy, and allies have formed a Connexional LGBTIAQ Task Team to provide resources for LGBTIAQ ‘siblings and allies’⁴ and to think through strategies through which to transform the Church.

While the MCSA largely benefits from its privileged position in South Africa, Muslims at Masjid al-Ghuraba, like the broader Muslim community in post-apartheid South Africa, have influenced local politics and transnational Islamic discourses. Despite only constituting 3 per

³ We borrow here from the phrasing the Task Team has used in their own communications.

⁴ We borrow here from the phrasing the Task Team has used in their own communications.

cent of a population of close to 60 million people, Muslims in South Africa have played an active role in the struggle against apartheid and in trying to build a new South Africa based on the principle of human dignity for all who live within the state. After the fall of the apartheid regime, Muslims in South Africa took up civil protections in their religious practice. In 1998, a collective of gay Muslims, under the leadership of Imam Muhsin Hendricks, formed Al-Fitra (which was subsequently renamed The Inner Circle in 2006 and then Masjid al-Ghuraba in 2018) to provide support and community to people struggling to reconcile their faith and sexual identity. The community around the imam organizes several activities for ‘public education, capacity building, [and] networking’, serving as essential ‘tools for transformation, advocacy, movement building, and the provision of psycho-social services’.⁵ This approach has allowed Masjid al-Ghuraba to effect some broader inclusivity within the ‘larger Muslim ummah by holding workshops and conferences for non-LGBTQ+ religious leaders and community members to challenge their understandings of sexual diversity and Islam’.⁶ This community now runs as a functioning non-governmental organization alongside a sacred space in which the community congregates for spiritual and social comradery. Diverging from the dominant Islamic position, members of this community embrace a queering of tradition in which nourishing resources from the past are deployed in service of contemporary practices such as same-sex marriage, training, counselling, or empowerment.

Reflecting on our different case studies, we examine the various ways in which religious agency is deployed in the context of lived religion in South Africa. The data that make up these case studies consist of Megan’s ethnographic research observing and interviewing clergy and Mujahid’s engagement with an online archive as well as his experiences as a supporter and interlocutor at Masjid al-Ghuraba. While our methodologies differ in some ways, they also overlap in their engagement with the ‘lived-ness’ of human experiences. A dominant binary of religion plays out in the ‘oppositional’ distinctions between everyday religion as lived and official religion as institutionalized. Further, when looking to understand queer agency in religious spaces, there is a tendency to witness and archive agentive acts that can only be identified by their spectacular nature, divorced from the mundane.⁷ Yet scholars studying the everyday have also shown that some people’s lives may regularly include the extraordinary,

⁵ Moses Tofa, ‘The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity: An Anatomy of Attitudes, Challenges, Opportunities and Trends in the South African Context,’ *The Inner Circle*, 2014, <https://www.arcusfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-Narrative-of-Islam-and-Sexual-Diversity-An-Anatomy-of-Attitudes-Challenges-Opportunities-and-Trends-in-the-South-African-Context.pdf>, accessed 2 July 2024.

⁶ Afshan Kamrudin, ‘Bringing Queer into Muslim Spaces: Community-Based Pedagogy in Cape Town,’ *Journal Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 143–48.

⁷ Susie Scott, *Making Sense of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

especially when navigating the everyday nature of exclusion and violence. We see this in studies of everyday patriarchy,⁸ racism,⁹ ableism,¹⁰ homophobia,¹¹ and transphobia.¹² Following this trajectory, we argue that the everyday lives of leaders who navigate various intersections of power provide a varied understanding of religious agency and uncover the often obvious and normative ways in which religious traditions and institutions are co-constitutive with the so-called everydayness of lived religion. We look at the acts that constitute the everyday for queer religious leaders who navigate the daily routines, rituals, and habits that surround their religious traditions and institutions. In doing so, we position queer agency as that which traverses the binary of the exceptional and mundane, an important point from which to critique the normative and (re)imagine queer possibilities.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, we provide a political mapping of the contested legacy of queerness and religion in South Africa. In that section, we explore the ways in which post-apartheid South Africa straddles the borderlands between neoliberal inclusion and postcolonial claims of Africanness, which seem to be divorced from gender and sexual non-normativity. Second, we show the overlapping and conflicting embodiments of everyday queer religious agency. In that section, we examine our different cases to show how queer agency moves beyond a liberal ontology of resistance and complicity and into an alternative space, embracing complexity and creativity. Based on our respective case studies, we contend that queer religious agency in South Africa is negotiated in community with the Divine and in community with a group of believers. Agency, we show, is relational and can be anti-normative, disruptive, and queer. Finally, we situate our intervention within the framework of the everydayness of lived religion. Through our example of queering religion in South Africa, we examine the interconnection between agentive behaviour and inherited tradition to show how queer religious communities are drawing on the traditions of the past to orientate their everyday practice in the present and imagine an inclusive future.

⁸ Robin Nelson, 'The Sex in Your Violence: Patriarchy and Power in Anthropological World Building and Everyday Life,' *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 23 (2021): 92–102.

⁹ Rachel Griffin, 'I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance,' *Women's Studies in Communication* 35, no. 2 (2012): 138–57.

¹⁰ Damian Milton, 'Everyday Ableism and Hate Speech: A Tale of Three Encounters in One Day,' in *Disability Hate Speech: Social, Cultural and Political Contexts*, eds Mark Sherry, Terje Olsen, Janikke Solstad Vedeler, and John Eriksen, 110–15 (London: Routledge, 2019).

¹¹ Kath Browne, '(Re)making the Other, Heterosexualising Everyday Space,' *Environment and Planning* 39 (2007): 996–1014.

¹² Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for the Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

The Politics of Queerness in Postcolonial South Africa

Over the last two decades, scholarship on African forms of ‘sexual deviance’ has demonstrated how religious and cultural discourses and actors have become ‘complicit’ in the marginalization, criminalization, and death of queer people on the continent.¹³ This dominant and powerful discourse suggests that Africanness and Blackness are inextricably linked with conservative religious beliefs and traditions, sociocultural practices, and political discourses shaping anti-queer attitudes and systems of violence. As this political economy of the sacred is constructed at a discursive level, it also has material implications for queer communities (as we write, the unfolding and ever-expanding queerphobia of Uganda comes to mind). Narratives that figure the ‘uncivilized African’ as anti-queer are often premised on a binary that positions the Global North as a queer sanctuary that fully embraces all forms of queer expression. However, as contemporary evidence demonstrates, queerness in the Global North is contingent on the production of secular, liberal, and apolitical politics, aesthetics, and sensibilities.¹⁴ At the core of this process is a bias that sets up poor immigrants of colour from the Global South as inherently homophobic or as not conducive for living in secular, sexually liberated states. As Sara Farris has demonstrated, there is a complex set of factors, in many other European states, that dovetails with right-wing anti-immigration politics, anti-Muslim politics, neoliberal interests, and the instrumentalizing of sexual and gender liberties.¹⁵ What this implicitly states is that through a contribution to a neoliberal economy one can become a fully realized queer subject transcending religion, tradition, and culture. This particular anthropology is orientated around a notion of the human subject that is committed to the maintenance and support of the market. So, to be fully human, queer subjects (as emerging from the Global North) must be key actors in the exchange of capital and go beyond the limitations of religion, culture, and tradition that are presumed to shackle the modern subject to forms of superstition, irrationality, and backwardness.

This picture becomes more complex in the context of contemporary South Africa, a country that has enshrined legal protections for sexual and gender diversity in its constitution. Lauded as one of the most progressive legal frameworks in the modern world, the protections

¹³ Adriaan van Klinken, ‘Queer Love in a “Christian Nation”: Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 44 (2015): 947–64.

¹⁴ Lisa Duggan, ‘The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,’ in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson, 174–94 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). See also Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), 105–106.

¹⁵ Sara Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

secured in the law have translated into passing of the Civil Unions Bill in 2006 and various other legal protections. However, despite this legal framework, South Africa is plagued by several ‘gaps’ between the ideals of its secular constitutional democracy and the lived realities of queer people.¹⁶ This gap often exposes marginal groups to intersectional forms of precarity. At an international level, South Africa’s foreign policy is ambiguous, as it struggles to be a ‘beacon of human rights’ but also a protector of ‘traditional African culture and mores’.¹⁷ During Thabo Mbeki’s (1999–2008) reign of rational terror and Jacob Zuma’s (2009–2019) decade of kleptocracy, South Africa did not support international calls for the legal protections of LGBTIQ communities, supposedly as a gesture of grace to ‘tradition’. At a domestic level, both of these regimes were fraught, as Mbeki denied the HIV/AIDS epidemic, killing many Black South Africans, and Zuma continued to push a misogynistic regime, furthering the epidemic of gender-based violence.

Enter our latest president, Cyril Ramaphosa (2018–present), who has pushed his ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), to support the 2020 amendment of the Civil Union Act, removing a prescription of the 2006 Act that allowed marriage officers of the state to opt out of solemnizing same-sex marriages on the grounds of conscience, religion, or belief. In what seems like a triumph of protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation over the right of belief, the South African government tries to prioritize its constitutional commitments of equality over prevailing forms of homophobia that label homosexuality as ‘un-African’ and therefore a corrupting import from the West.¹⁸ At a local level, South Africa is fraught with intersectional queer-based violence. The post-apartheid state has one of the highest levels of intersectional violence, contestably called ‘corrective rapes’, for gays and lesbians.¹⁹ In addition, the country has high rates of queer teen suicide and numerous instances of public resistance to, and boycotts of, material forms of public queerness,

¹⁶ Charlene van der Walt, ‘Mind the Gap: Freedom of Religion and the “Gay Rights Clause”,’ in *Freedom of Religion at Stake: Competing Claims among Faith Traditions, States, and Persons*, eds Dion Forster, Elisabeth Gerle, and Göran Gunner, 221–38 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019).

¹⁷ Giseppe Rahkumar Guerandi, ‘South Africa’s Queer Foreign Policy: The Failed Bastion of African Human Rights,’ *The Daily Maverick*, December 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2020-12-15-south-africas-queer-foreign-policy-the-failed-bastion-of-african-human-rights/>, accessed 2 July 2024.

¹⁸ This type of hypocritical behaviour is best displayed in the ANC’s silence on the case of Uganda, where the new law calls for life imprisonment or even death for the practice of homosexual sex. See also Marc Epprecht, *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa: Rethinking Homophobia and Forging Resistance* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2013), 1–5.

¹⁹ Clare Carter, ‘The Brutality of “Corrective Rape”,’ *The New York Times*, 27 July 2013, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/26/opinion/26corrective-rape.html>, accessed 2 July 2024.

associated with the rainbow flag.²⁰ Despite this problematic record, the South African government continues to retain their political and economic neoliberalism. In the face of massive legal contradictions, domestic gender and sexual violence, challenges of service delivery, and widespread corruption, South African elites maintain that the country is part of the ‘civilized’ world or political modernity.

This rhetoric also operates to frame a conservative, religious, and traditional Africa, binarized in opposition to a liberal, queer-friendly South Africa. Simply put, Africa and Africans are framed as backward savages, while South Africa is constructed as modern and civilized (more similar to the Global North than the rest of the continent) and an ideal destination for liberal tourists from Euro-American countries. After the 1994 democratic elections, South Africa was described as a ‘rainbow nation’ by the late Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Describing the feeling of hope and optimism in a country that almost engulfed itself in a race- and class-based civil war, Tutu projected a vision of a ‘non-racial’ democratic South Africa.²¹ The rainbow attempted to capture the great diversity of South Africa and embraced difference as a sign of the beauty of human creation. Part of the construction of the rainbow nation is the inclusion and celebration of sexual freedom as a marker of political modernity. However, the rainbow image of South Africa has neglected the continued effects of pervasive racial and socioeconomic inequalities, shaped by the country’s history of Dutch and British settler-colonialism and apartheid segregation. In contemporary South Africa, whiteness, hetero- and homonormativities, neoliberal capitalism, and patriarchy continue to function to exclude women, Black, queer, and trans people from economic, cultural, and social power.²² Within this context, queer activism and agency have also become central concerns for those who seek to recognize and create ways of realizing some of the promises contained within the symbol of the rainbow.

Based on our research and experience, the notion of queer agency has often been restricted by Western liberal framings associated with rainbow flags, Pride parades, and acts

²⁰ For example, in October 2022, when a rainbow pedestrian crossing and a pink stripe indicating a ‘Pink Route’ were unveiled in the Greenpoint district of Cape Town, this was met with strong opposition led by the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), while in June 2023 a local grocery chain selling rainbow ‘pride’ items was boycotted and threatened by local conservative movements, influenced by American right-wing rhetoric and actions. See Andy Carolin and Reinhardt Fourie, ‘Woolworths Pride and Why the US War on LGBTQ Rights should matter to all of us,’ *The Daily Maverick*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-06-21-woolworths-pride-why-us-war-on-lgbtq-rights-matters-to-us/>, accessed 25 July 2023.

²¹ An inclusive nationalism on the basis of political citizenship rather than race. This was seen as an antidote to the racial toxicity produced by Dutch and British colonialism and solidified by Afrikaaner nationalism in apartheid.

²² Zethu Matebeni, ‘Southern Perspectives on Gender Relations and Sexualities: A Queer Intervention,’ *Revista de Antropologia* 60, no. 3 (2017): 26–44.

of ‘coming out’, marked by a middle-class framework of white (patriarchal) visibility. This means that Black Africans from poor backgrounds who hold religious and Indigenous beliefs and participate within these communities might be excluded from agentive (so called) queer possibilities because of a form of religious and cultural alienation produced by dominant queer cultures, emerging from the Global North. In this form, queer rights in South Africa operate in homonormative ways that ‘endorse equality founded in neoliberalism, with an emphasis on consumption and domesticity’.²³ Not only has homonormativity concealed structural violence,²⁴ but it has also limited the possibilities for queer agency, especially in relation to religion, which is seen as a marker of identity that needs to be removed from a modern queer regulatory way of being.²⁵ Most often homonormative forms of agency require a rejection of tradition and religion or, at the very least, a subversion and constitution of a spirituality divorced from those normative communities. Scholars in recent years have demonstrated that queer African people are deconstructing, subverting, and transforming heteropatriarchal theologies and religious practices.²⁶ The ways in which they are able to do so, and to what extent, have not been extensively theorized in relation to broader conceptualizations of queer agency.

In post-apartheid South Africa, we suggest *queering* as a process that accounts for the intersectional realities of context in a way that not only deconstructs but also reconstructs for a just and nurturing future, providing room for gender and sexual performances. This form of queering also disidentifies with the dominant queer paradigms associated with the images of both the Western (South African) liberal and the African conservative. In its quest to imagine a queer subject that troubles normative regimes, queering paves the way to thinking through the practice of decolonization in new ways.²⁷ In doing so, our framing of queering plays with

²³ Nyx Mclean, ‘(Re)considering the Rainbow,’ *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 24–40, 33.

²⁴ Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,’ *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

²⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 13–17.

²⁶ Adriaan van Klinken, Johanna Stiebert, Sebyala Brian, and Frederick Hudson, *Sacred Queer Stories: Ugandan LGBTQ+ Refugee Lives & the Bible* (Rochester: James Currey, 2021). Tina Magaqa and Rodwell Makombe, ‘Decolonising Queer Sexualities: A Critical Reading of the *Ogbanje* Concept in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*,’ *African Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2021): 24–39. Adriaan van Klinken, *Kenyan Christian Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019). Ezra Chitando and Tapiwa P. Mapuranga, ‘Unlikely Allies? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) Activists and Church Leaders in Africa,’ in *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, eds Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken, 171–83 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). Nadeem Mahomed, ‘Queer Muslims: Between Orthodoxy, Secularism and the Struggle for Acceptance,’ *Theology & Sexuality* 22, no. 1–2 (2016): 57–72.

²⁷ Walla Alqaisiya, ‘Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine,’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* 187, no. 3 (2018): 29–41, 36.

a regulatory regime²⁸ that draws legitimacy from the state²⁹ by exposing the links between power and the construction of the self, which is not only autonomous (as Western political modernity demands) but also communal, drawing on vernacular social ethics. Being queer in South Africa means confronting various axes of power, including religious, cultural, and racial. By understanding how agency is enacted in relation to these various forms of power relationally, we intend to open up conversations and spaces for alternative modes of being in South Africa. As key players in this dynamic, religious leaders are often at the edges of various religious traditions and everyday lived practices. As guardians of tradition, they guide their communities through theological debates and pastoral practices. In the next section of this chapter, we reflect on the agency of religious leaders playing with the edges of tradition and practice.

Negotiating Agency in Religious Communities

Through queer religious agency, we read power as attentive to the dynamism of ordinary and everyday life while also embracing the embodied experience of textualism in the construction of tradition. Concepts such as the ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ have often been used to critique so-called upper-body studies, which predominantly focus on religious institutions and leaders.³⁰ However, claiming that religion can and should only be understood by researching laypeople outside of religious organizations or to the exclusion of religious leaders overlooks the multiple ways in which even the most formalized denomination or institution is socially constructed and influenced by shared meanings, experiences, and understandings shaped by everyday embodied realities. Religious leaders illustrate the dynamic and intimate ways in which religious experiences are shaped, challenging notions that within traditions these experiences are singular and uniform.. Their everyday reveals that leaders are embedded in religious communities and traditions, yet they negotiate the multiple, creative, and fluid ways that intersect the constructed boundaries of texts and practice. This is perhaps even more evident in the lives of the queer religious leaders in our study, who occupy positions of power and status afforded to them by their religious institutions and traditions, yet who also navigate

²⁸ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 11–24.

²⁹ Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³⁰ Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Nancy Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Mary Jo Neitz, ‘Lived Religion: Signposts of Where We Have Been and Where We Can Go from Here,’ in *Religion, Spirituality and Everyday Practice*, eds Giuseppe Giordano and William H. Swatos, 45–55 (New York: Springer, 2011).

the everyday taken-for-granted ways in which that power and status are ratified by norms of gender and sexuality.³¹ By looking at the lived realities and experiences of religious leaders within religious communities through the lens of lived *relation*, we suggest that we are able to more fully explore understandings of agency within those communities and religious spaces. Furthermore, we note that religious discursivity is not entirely divorced from practice and experience. In other words, it is because of their everyday negotiations of power that the queer religious leaders (re)construct the theologies, practices, and beliefs that we discuss here.

The everydayness of religious leaders also resists implicit connotations of the everyday with marginal and precarious social classes. As Sarojini Nadar³² and Tinyiko Maluleke³³ have previously problematized, concepts of ‘ordinary’ or ‘everyday’ have come to signify readers from poor Black communities in Contextual Bible Study, as a way to ‘bring the voices of the marginalized into the academy’. Yet such approaches can operate ‘through a valorisation of the survival methods of the oppressed rather than a critique of why survival is needed in the first place’.³⁴ This echoes Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s articulation that those in positions of power need to attend to their everyday and how it differs from and intersects with those in marginalized positions, as highlighted in the Introduction to this volume. In our studies on queer religious leaders we found similarities in how participants negotiated tradition and created queer-affirming religious spaces in their everyday lives in ways that complexify understandings of queer agency beyond these binaries of formal tradition versus ordinary faith.

In the context of the MCSA, for example, while some queer Christians were disenchanted with the Church, they rarely were motivated to abandon it all together. Rather, the Christian leaders deployed theology to motivate them to maintain religious bonds with the Divine even within queered theologies of Methodism.³⁵ For example, Kagiso,³⁶ who identifies as a Black gay man, constructs the Divine as flawed as a way of explaining the imperfection of the MCSA and uses this as a platform to fight for justice. In an interview he explained:

Just because the Church has a few flaws ... and I still believe in a God that has few flaws, I don’t think God is perfect, but I still love him. I don’t love God less

³¹ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 190.

³² Sarojini Nadar, “‘Hermeneutics of Transformation?’ A Critical Exploration of the Model of Social Engagement Between Biblical Scholars and Faith Communities,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 339–51.

³³ Tinyiko Maluleke, ‘The Bible among African Christians: A Missiological Perspective,’ in *To Cast Fire upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multicultural Global Context*, ed. Teresa Okure, 87–112 (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000).

³⁴ Sarojini Nadar, ‘Beyond the “Ordinary Reader” and the “Invisible Intellectual”’: Shifting Contextual Bible Study from Liberation Discourse to Liberation Pedagogy,’ *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 2 (2009): 384–403, 398.

³⁵ By using the concept of ‘Divine’ we allow for a trans-religious discussion of a transcendental being that extends beyond institutional theology.

³⁶ The names used in reference to Megan’s study are pseudonyms that participants chose themselves.

because God is less perfect, so I can't love this Church any less just because it is less perfect. I cannot even love this Church less because it is still struggling with accepting issues around the theology of marriage Because, for me, justice and its plight or its fight might mean I'd probably die with the Church still struggling with this issue of marriage amongst homosexuals and I am not closed to that, I am not blind to it.

In Kagiso's theological reasoning, he uses Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection and holiness (around which Methodism is formed) to argue that perfection does not necessarily equal flawlessness. In fact, in Wesley's doctrine, 'mistakes and ignorances [are] part and parcel of humanity', and they do not preclude the possibility of perfection.³⁷ This is because perfection for Wesley is about a 'complete orientation to love'.³⁸ Kagiso in this instance demonstrates his own striving for perfection as he orientates himself to loving the Divine and the Church despite its ignorance and inability to make a clear decision on the issue of same-sex marriage. In some ways Kagiso also borrows from the normative logic of 'love the sinner, hate the sin', often used in anti-queer Christian discourses to condemn homosexuality rather than homosexual people. Kagiso turns this discourse on its head by arguing that the institutional church is the sinner and its rejection, or at least its struggle with same-sex marriage, is the sin. In this way he maintains his belonging to the Church and his faith in the Divine. We understand Kagiso's use of Wesleyan theology and Christian doctrine as homemaking rather than active resistance – agentive acts that embrace community with the Divine and the Church that form (and inform) so much of his everyday life.

Similarly, as religious leaders in the MCSA stretch normative understanding of the Divine, Imam Muhsin from Masjid al-Ghuraba has also embraced an expansive notion of the Divine as part of his religious anthropology. He understands queer or marginalized theology as one that upholds the diversity of creation. The idea of diversity within creation has especially been taken up by feminist and queer Muslims. Scott Kugle writes that:

The diversity of human communities is not just in appearance, but also in the subtler hues of language and shades of belief. The Qur'an says, *One of God's signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and your colors, in which there are signs for those who know* (Q 30:22).³⁹

³⁷ Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021), 40.

³⁸ Osinski, *Queering Wesley*, 40.

³⁹ Scott Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflections on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 44.

Locating his textual insight in the language deployed by the Qur'an, Kugle notes how the Arabic word for colour (*lawn*) signifies a variety of shades such as the pigmentation of skin or other types of tastes such as sexuality and orientation.⁴⁰ Imam Muhsin's queer theological approach therefore celebrates and honours this diversity: '[t]he diversity that Allah created is full of colour and difference', he explains to his congregation.⁴¹ Indeed, it is this creative paradox that escapes the broader Muslim community that seeks to homogenize the Muslim *umma* as opposed to celebrating this diversity: '[q]ueer theology expands our knowledge of Allah', Imam Mushin contends, and he grounds his understanding of the queer in a spiritual tradition of Islam that views God as constantly unfolding within creation.⁴² By orientating his approach to theology in practice, Imam Muhsin performs his solidarity and activism as a queer imam and creates, with his community, a theology of diversity.

Masjid al-Ghuraba has not divorced itself from or resisted the tradition of Islam. As a community, it operates at the margins of the broader mainstream Muslim community and has a relatively stable relationship with the mainstream community, except when queer citizens made claims to the rights guaranteed in the public space.⁴³ Noting the delicate balance between the larger (heteronormative) Muslim community and the small group of queer Muslims, the imam has been critical of the larger heteronormative nature of Muslim society. However, because of its affective and ontological attachment to the broader Muslim tradition and community, Masjid al-Ghuraba draws on the Islamic tradition to ground its activism as authentically Islamic and ethically just. One way this was translated was through the sacred space cultivated at the mosque. In this sacred space, the participation and leadership of heterosexual women and queer Muslims are encouraged. Women and queer people are encouraged to lead the ritual prayers (*salat*), deliver the sermon (*khutba*), and worship in the same space as equal believers in front of the Divine. This practice is contrary to the gender segregation of most mosques around the globe. In this space there is neither gender segregation nor gendered restriction. As one congregant said:

I came to this mosque to be able to pray in a space that is not gender segregated, to be able to stand in the front row, behind the imam, to sometimes be asked to lead the prayer, just to be in a space where women are in the front lines, are

⁴⁰ Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*, 45.

⁴¹ Muhsin Hendricks, 'Khutbah on Queer Theology,' Al-Fitra Foundation, 25 April 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DU_OYpcPmCw&t=28s, accessed 2 July 2024.

⁴² Hendricks, 'Khutbah on Queer Theology.'

⁴³ Mujahid Osman and Sa'diyya Shaikh, 'Islam, Muslims and the Politics of Queerness in Cape Town,' *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 23, no. 2 (2017): 43–67.

included as much as possible, are really actual participants, and not on the sidelines and forgotten about.⁴⁴

As this congregant notes, the space that Masjid al-Ghuraba cultivates should be recognized as a place where marginalized Muslims, from across the identity and ideological continuum, could gather to ‘participate in religious meaning-making through the performance of supplicatory prayers and expressions of pious belonging and commitment’ to the ethical and mission and political project of the community.⁴⁵ However, this vision for Islam, according to Masjid al-Ghuraba, is not limited only to queer Muslims. It is open to all those who are committed to a socially just and compassion-centred reading of Islam. Because of the mission and vision of Masjid al-Ghuraba, it supports all Muslims who do not identify with the normative androcentric and heteronormative reading of tradition; for the imam, this is a form of queer agency.⁴⁶

As Imam Muhsin opened a space for a diversity of Muslim believers attached to religious tradition, members of the MCSA also constructed queer spaces for themselves in ways that attached themselves to the Christian and Methodist community. Their reluctance to resist or completely reject these normative spaces and traditions is deeply informed by their everyday experiences of communal Christianity within the MCSA. Bradley, who identified as a white gay man, came across the MCSA as a teenager when he agreed to accompany a nervous friend to his confirmation class.⁴⁷ He expressed this religious belonging in saying:

I suppose what had caught me was that I *did* feel like I belonged ... I suppose it gave me a home, and a place that I was okay in because [in] high school ... I was different (uhm) I didn't like the things that other boys did, so high school was quite hard because my friends were all girls. I didn't really fit in in high school. I couldn't relate to the things that other guys related to and I sensed that I was different, and I sensed that I liked boys and at that stage in high school that was just like a no-no, you know. Gosh, I was even more of an outcast there but here's this church space, they like me, and I'm okay here and I have friends here ... I'm always going to be this personality but in the church it's okay to be this personality and not like sports because there's this other stuff that we're all about (uhm), it's just the being gay thing isn't going to belong anywhere.

⁴⁴ *Lut's People: The Struggle to be Gay and Muslim in South Africa*. Produced by Leila Dougan and Rebecca Davis. *Daily Maverick*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaCg4bsmWEw>, accessed 2 July 2024.

⁴⁵ Nina Hoel, ‘Sexualising the Sacred, Sacralising Sexuality: An Analysis of Public Responses to Muslim Women’s Religious Leadership in the Context of a Cape Town Mosque,’ *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 25–41.

⁴⁶ Muhsin Hendricks, ‘Khutbah on Queer Theology.’

⁴⁷ Confirmation in the Methodist Church is one process of attaining full membership in the church.

In relation to his high school, where a hegemonic masculinity associated with playing sports and being friends with other boys was celebrated, the preferential norm that Bradley found in the Church had less to do with the way he performed his gender and sexuality and more to do with the way he performed his religion. As a teenager and young adult, Bradley's ability to perform his identity well as a Christian by doing 'Christian stuff' allowed him to find a sense of community in his local Methodist congregation. This sense of community was formed through his acts of Christianity, which did not seem to demand as much of a normative gender and sex performance as his school.

Anele, who identified as a Black gay man, had a similar experience to Bradley's, in which the Church became a space where gender identity and sexual orientation mattered less than with his friendship group. In response to being asked about why he felt like he belonged in the Church as a teenager, Anele responded:

... before Wesley Guild [a youth organization in the MCSA] I was never in a space where you just sit around with people who are in the same age group as you, that you just share. Even though I would not share what was really inside me. But they would ask a question, 'How is it with yourself?', you know. And you'd just talk ...

Anele distinguishes the Church, and more specifically the Wesley Guild, as a space that provided him with the opportunity to belong outside of the heteronormative pressure he experienced in his friendship circle to speak about and interact with girls in sexual and romantic ways. Anele also speaks about the ways in which the MCSA helped him to grow as a believer. It is not only that Anele finds and makes his home in the MCSA, and more particularly in the Wesley Guild, but that the Wesley Guild also shapes and changes Anele. In this way, while Anele constructs a safe space for himself as a queer person in the Church, the normative theologies and Church communities and practices also construct and shapes Anele.

Unlike other scholars who have argued that inclusive and progressive theologies are used by queer people only in subversive ways in order to create more queer-affirming religious spaces outside of normative traditions, queer religious leaders in the Masjid al-Ghuraba and MCSA attempt to preserve and to sustain particular iterations of Islam, Christianity, Sunnism, and Methodism in South Africa. This process of preservation and reinterpretation suggests that traditions are a lot more flexible and adaptable to change. This change, as our chapter suggests, often happens at the edges of tradition, in which leaders are engaged in the everyday activities of navigating and solving legal and ethical challenges with fellow believers and practitioners. In this chapter, we contend that these leaders have then deployed iterations of tradition in order

to support a broader set of social practices that challenge hetero- and homonormativities in the city. Indeed, these religious leaders show an alternative in which their experiences are shaped by and shape queer religious practice in South Africa. Despite the regulatory norms of tradition and religious doctrine, a sense of community was significant to their theological world-making. In the next section, we focus our analysis on how a reading of power in these examples operates at various intersections dialectically playing out in the discourses and practices of queer agency in religious communities in South Africa.

Agency and Lived Religion

We understand agency as an effect of a regime of power that allows a subject to perform an act or choice. Saba Mahmood argues that the narrow Western liberal framing of agency as ‘resistance to norms’ does not accurately explain the performances of the women in the Egyptian piety movement. Rather, a more productive explanation of the agency of these practices would be to argue that their agency should be understood in a network of the Islamic discursive tradition (drawing on Talal Asad), whereby their comportment is organized by a framework of virtue ethics (drawing on Aristotle, al-Ghazali, and Foucault).⁴⁸ Through the performance of certain acts (like donning the *hijab* or performing a traditional femininity) middle-class Muslim women in Egypt can cultivate the virtue of modesty (*haya*), for example. As Mahmood uncovers the liberal anthropology of feminist theory, she explores the notion of the liberal subject ‘whose agency is conceptualized on the binary model of subordination and subversion’.⁴⁹ She therefore suggests that the agency performed by the women in the piety movement is a result of the logic and power of a discursive tradition that calls these women to mirror their comportment on a constructed ideal.⁵⁰ In the same way that Mahmood’s intervention is centred on dislodging a triumphalist vision of secular liberalism on Muslim woman, Puar highlights the ways in which queerness is understood as solely a transgression and a reassertion of liberal secular modernity.⁵¹ She writes:

queerness as transgression (which is one step ahead of resistance, which has now become a normative act) relies on a normative notion of deviance, always defined in relation to normativity, often universalizing. Thus deviance, despite its claims to freedom and individuality, is ironically cohered to and by regulatory regimes of queerness – through, not despite, any claims to transgression.⁵²

⁴⁸ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 17.

⁴⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14.

⁵⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 32

⁵¹ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 22.

⁵² Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 23.

Queerness, therefore, could only mean resistance to religion and not a living out (to borrow from Scott Kugle) of various expressions of religion and queerness.⁵³ So what happens when women or queer people respond to the call of the tradition by drawing on its wisdom in order to live out their sexual identities and dispositions in relation to human sociality?

Lived religion, with its particular focus on the everyday, enables us to adopt an alternative epistemology to suggest that the religious leaders in our research do not simply repeat and re-enact the prescribed beliefs and behaviours as taught by an abstracted institutionalized religious norm; rather, they actively shape religious theologies, traditions, and communities in the subtlety of their everyday lived realities.⁵⁴ This co-constitutive nature of religion involves accounting for the active and reflexive ways in which the religious leaders in our work shape, negotiate, and play with religious beliefs and practices as well as the contextual factors and relations of power that inhibit or enable different forms of agency. Meredith McGuire makes a similar point when arguing that agency can be found when exploring the ways people use ‘religion-prescribed practices in ways completely unforeseen by the official religion’.⁵⁵ By conceptualizing the agency that our participants enact as relational, we demonstrate the ways in which queer religious leaders ‘live out’ their religion at various levels of the individual and community and in ideological discourses. This living out further translates into a number of modes of activism (religious, communal, familial, political, and reflexive), demonstrating how queer religious leaders are reimagining their traditions in ways that dislodge androcentric and heteronormative anthropologies by foregrounding more expansive ways of being human. This is perhaps a more nuanced understanding of agency than the secular resistance and subversion that is so commonly suggested by queer scholars. By looking at how queer religious leaders negotiate their relationships with their religion and religious communities in their everyday lives, a multivocal and queer notion of agency emerges. A simplistic binary of agency does not accurately reflect the complexity of queer life and meaning-making. By exposing its undergirding liberal anthropology, we propose a more capacious way of being human. Agency is relational: it ‘elucidates how [religious activism] can be fuelled and facilitated by devotedly remaining in relationship with the very tradition one

⁵³ Scott Kugle, *Living Out Islam: Voices of Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Kathleen Talvacchia, Mark Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore, *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2014). Line Nyhagen, ‘The Lived Religion Approach in the Sociology of Religion and Its Implications for Secular Feminist Analyses of Religion,’ *Social Compass* 64, no. 4 (2017): 1–17.

⁵⁵ McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 98.

critiques, enabled by the same cultural schema that underpins structures activists both uphold and resist'.⁵⁶ The common thread in our findings is the co-constitutive nature of agency negotiated in relation to various other webs of intimacy and community.

Conclusion

Within liberal discourses, the figure of the individual reigns supreme. This figuration often constructs single individuals confronting social structures and therefore opening up a form of social transformation. We resist the temptation of this figuration and narrative expressing that it is only with entanglements of power that social change can occur. Human actions, which are deeply enmeshed in power arrangements, affect how we act, but they can also be a springboard for some form of modest change, as reflected in our case studies.⁵⁷ Through our explorations we point to the countless ways that humans exert their agency. As we move beyond an autonomous liberal self, we show the capaciousness of religion and religious becoming in relation to community with the Divine and community with believers. The religio-political action of our interlocutors in South Africa demonstrates that agency cannot be easily understood along a simplified binary of resistance to religion and an entry into Euro-American secular modernity. In our understanding, agency in this context operates at a level that evades liberal capture through an excess of sociality. The network of relations in which agency is performed is complex and diverse, suggesting that the human person and its agency is located in a network of dynamic relationality. We therefore suggest a notion of human beings as interdependent and interactants whenever they practise religious agency.⁵⁸ The agency we witness in our research is an effect of power that engages communally with religion as everyday, lived, and embodied normative traditions. As we witnessed the complex ways in which our queer interlocutors (in textual or ethnographic form) engage with the category of religion, we show how this intersectional axis of identity is intimately interlinked with other parts of being human. For our research interlocutors, religion operates at multiple registers and does not easily fit into a neoliberal homonormative subjecthood that is separate from politics, economics, sociality, or culture. By focusing on religious leaders, we also resist the idea that religious actors are only beholden to tradition and not creative in their deployment of theology. In this way, we also hoped to reject the claim of a compulsive queer secularity, a formation

⁵⁶ Tanya Zion-Waldocks, 'Politics of Devoted Resistance: Agency, Feminism, and Religion among Orthodox Agunah Activists in Israel,' *Gender & Society* 29, no. 1 (2015): 73–97, 79.

⁵⁷ Ian Burkitt, 'Relational Agency: Relational Sociology, Agency and Interaction,' *European Journal of Social Theory* 19, no. 3 (2016): 322–39, 326.

⁵⁸ Burkitt, 'Relational Agency,' 330.

based on the compulsory belief that the shedding of the shackles of religion is the most accurate way of performing a queer identity.⁵⁹ We explore the modes of agency that escape easy categorization, pointing to a horizon of queer possibility.

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⁵⁹ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 22.

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