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TRAJECTORIES OF MUTUAL ZOMBIFICATION IN THE PRAXIS OF POST- COLONIAL FAITH IN SOUTH AFRICA: A NEED FOR AFRICAN DECOLONIALITY THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT

In this theoretical article, I tap into Mbembe's (1992) concept of mutual zombification to start a debate on the need for African decoloniality theology (ADT) for a contemporary praxis of Christian faith. Observing the praxis of faith in post-colonial states among the "new" religious movements, I argue that there is a need for theologians to rethink theology in the context of religious mafiarisation, extortion, abuse, constitutional delinquency, political oppression and coloniality of God. I use decoloniality theory to articulate and suggest the need for ADT. I answer the question: What are the trajectories of mutual zombification and how will ADT involve? I submit that ADT can provide meaning to faith in post-colonial states that are devoid of coloniality, oppression, extortion, and constitutional delinquency, a Christian faith where people tap into both modernity and post-modernity, as opposed to mutual zombification that favours abusive religious leaders.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious praxis in post-colonial states has unfolded in ways that could not have been imagined. The emerging praxis has caused various trajectories, which, in turn, have caused religion (in this case, the Christian faith) to be viewed, in some quarters, as a questionable phenomenon and as a social institution whose agenda in relation to sustainable development and social justice is questioned. In this article, I highlight some of the questionable practices of religious adherents, which, I believe, are socially toxic, and which must be challenged and eliminated through all available platforms or spaces, including academia.

According to Mbembe (1992; 2002), mutual zombification refers to the impotence or powerlessness of the ruler and the ruled, each of which having robbed the other of vitality, leaving both impotent. In accordance with Mbembe's definition, I use the term to refer to a failure by religious adherents to recognise oppression, and their support of oppressive leaders. Cognisant of this tendency, Manuel Zapata Olivella (cited by Walsh 2007:226) claims that the problem of post-colonial Africa is not "the chains on our feet, but on our minds".

I use the term "religion" in this article very loosely. More specifically, it refers to "new" religious movements, to which some religious circles refer as cultic movements. These movements are characterised by an emphasis on one individual as the prophet, who is divine and who receives messages from God; general adherents are expected to rely on the prophet for direction, rather than on sacred scriptures such as the Bible.

To develop this article, I highlight various incidents of mutual zombification as practised by religious movements in South Africa. Cognisant of the powerlessness of some religious adherents, and the chains that bind their minds, I conceptualise my argument on a need for African decoloniality theology (ADT), as part of efforts to ensure that religion regains its status in society as a force supporting sustainable development. As point of departure for this problematisation, I agree with Sanni (2016:12) that the problem in Africa is that we have given unquestionable power to religious leaders; thus, the challenge is to reclaim the power and distribute it to all, in order to ensure sustainable development.

2. CREATING A NEED FOR AFRICAN DECOLONIALITY THEOLOGY

In this section, I explain why there is a need for a new theology by indicating the limitations of liberation theology.

3. INADEQUACIES OF BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

The black theology of liberation emerged in Latin America and Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, from a context characterised by political, economic, social, and existential remnants of the colonisation of the Americas (Drexler-Dreis 2017:269). It is also believed that, for the black theology of liberation in South Africa, the umbilical cord of black theology was American black theology and liberation theology (Van Aarde 2016). As it has come of age, it has become not simply a church for Africa, but a church of Africa (Boesak 1978:75). As it emerged within the liberation narrative to end apartheid, black theology contributed significantly to ending apartheid, although its role in the liberation of South African discourses has been undermined (Dube & Molise 2018). In addition, Van Aarde (2016:1) argues that the emerging post-Cold War and post-apartheid paradigm of black theology of liberation performs a unique role in reaffirming the human dignity of Africans and their black identity. Despite its role being undermined, black theology of liberation theology represents the sigh of the oppressed that enabled them to take a stance against colonial domination (Andrade 2017:620).

While black theology of liberation is arguably credited for facilitating the political consciousness that led to independence for many countries in Africa, I argue that black theology of liberation has failed to deal with the crisis of religion in post-colonial states, such as South Africa. It has failed to address the coloniality of God, the religious mafia, and the abuse and extortion of money in the name of religion or God, which has characterised contemporary practices of religious movements sometimes referred to as cults. This failure is partly because black theology of liberation situated itself in the context of political oppression with the aim of gaining independence for colonial states such as South Africa, without necessarily encroaching on other areas that need liberation such as the post-colonial praxis of faith. The failure of black theology of liberation is also premised on focusing on racism within the external dimension of the damage it caused to black people, rather than the essential core of racism as an integral part of modernity, such as coloniality (Velleem 2015) brought by men and women of God.

I am of the view that the colonial matrix survives, even post-independence, and continues to manifest itself beyond white supremacy and global North narratives. The colonial matrix, as a practice by religious leaders and others who embraced colonial tendencies, has not been adequately problematised; hence, it continues to survive. Walsh (2007:229)

notes that, “[w]hile colonialism ended with independence, coloniality is a model of power that continues”.

In light of black theology of liberation’s shortfall, there is a need for a decolonial intervention that complements liberation theology, and through which religious movements can move to eliminate political subjection, spiritual enslavement, economic oppression, and the racism of the white Christian church and its neo-colonial apartheid theology (Methula 2017:4). In decolonial thinking, black theology of liberation is important, even though the genealogy of thoughts and sensing are not the same (Mignolo, in López-Calvo 2014:178). Furthermore, decolonial thinkers build on the earlier versions of liberation movements (Medina 2017:281) to map new ways of unmasking the invisible vampires of colonialism that hibernate under the auspices of religious praxis.

In the ensuing section, I will discuss the theoretical framing of the article, namely decoloniality.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMING: DECOLONIALITY

Decoloniality is not a singular theoretical school of thought (although it is grounded in the earlier works of Enrique Dussel and Anibal Quijano), but a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem of the modern age (Cormie 2017:278; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:13). Decoloniality arises from a context in which the humanity of black people is doubted, and it emerges as one way of telling the story of the modern world from the perspective of experiences of slavery, imperialism, and colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:11-12). It is a theory that engages in a struggle against the Euro-North American global design strategy, which is visible in religion informed by binarism and hierarchisation, which keeps power imbalances and the colonial legacy intact (Sithole 2014). Furthermore, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) posits, decoloniality emphasises an agenda that involves rethinking the very constitution of the present and the construction and reconstruction of African subjectivity, as being a more important project nowadays than ever before.

To clarify, the struggle for decoloniality is against coloniality. Coloniality should not be viewed as colonialism, but, rather, as the epoch that survives colonialism (Mignolo 2000). It is a “darker side” of modernity that needs to be unmasked, because it exists as

an embedded logic that enforces control, domination, and exploitation disguised in the language of salvation, progress, modernization, and being good for everyone (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:13).

Consequently, decolonial thinkers seek to interrogate the inherent colonising character of the present state of world affairs, as well as to unmask/dismantle and decentre its colonising epistemological edifice (Dussel 1996).

In the praxis of religion in South Africa, a new coloniality has arisen, in which a few individuals act in ways that are manipulative and exploitative; yet, adherents fail to perceive anything wrong in the questionable acts of religious leaders. Hence, couching this article in decoloniality enables me to argue for a religion that allows people to participate in both modernity and post-modernity, devoid of oppression and mutual zombification. In short, decoloniality as theory is pertinent to this article, because it advocates for continuing the search for a new base by the excluded and subordinated, from which to launch themselves into a new world order that is humane and inclusive (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015:22).

In the ensuing section, I highlight various reasons for the need for ADT, using the decoloniality lens. I do so by drawing on examples from South Africa.

5. TRAJECTORIES OF MUTUAL ZOMBIFICATION

In this section, I respond to the first question of the article: What are the trajectories of the mutual zombification? The first one is the commercialisation of faith.

5.1 Extortion and commercialisation of faith

Various scholars and media houses have commented on the questionable financial practices that characterise some emerging religious movements (Commission for the Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities 2015; Dube *et al.* 2017; Epondo 2015; Goddard 2017; Larsen 2010; Klenetsky 1983). While these scholars have problematised the misuse of money and exploitation of adherents by religious movements, the trajectory of mutual zombification is still evident; adherents perceive zombification to be an act of obedience to God. This view has prompted Dube *et al.* (2017) to pose a critical question: How can we find a crack code for those oppressed by religion, so that they can see the abuse, which is sugar coated by narratives of obedience to the man of God? Other questions are: Does the prosperity gospel represent a particular expression of coloniality? Is it yet another form of economic and spiritual domination, under the guise of spiritualised economic liberation (Niemandt 2018:204)?

In responding to these questions, we have to acknowledge that coloniality is evident in every social system that does not prioritise

social justice and equality. Given the way religious practices unfold in contemporary Africa, it is true that the prosperity gospel presents a new form of coloniality, one that is underpinned by spiritual domination. Colonialism is not something of the past; it has new forms, which, I argue, are premised on the prosperity gospel and extortion. An example is the case of Ngcobo Seven Angels Ministry, of which the leaders, according to Herman (2018), have opulent lifestyles, characterised by reckless expenditure. The Ministry was commercialised to the extent that it had so many cars that they could not be counted, whereas Ministry members were left impoverished after giving their resources to the “angels” (Herman 2018; Swain 2018). Describing the Seven Angels Ministry’s appetite for money, Ngcukana and Fengu (2018) report: “They need money and are desperate. People of that church are brainwashed. They only live in their own world.”

The sad thing, in the context of the Seven Angels Ministry, is that it buttresses the mutual zombification as a challenge in a post-colonial state such as South Africa, because Ministry members see their zombification as obedience to God, and to the “seven angels”.

However, it should be noted that this feature of coloniality (extortion by and commercialisation of religion) needs to be problematised and challenged in a decolonial space, to produce a religion that can contribute effectively to sustainable development. Thus, readers should not conclude that I advocate that church members should not make donations to churches or to other religious organisations. What I say is that the giving must be done in obedience to God, and for the purpose of empowering church activities, such as helping orphans and widows, as emphasised in James 1:26. I am against the commercialisation of the gospel, where one individual benefits at the expense of the majority of the people, even though those who are suppressed seem to support the idea. Thus, I problematise this phenomenon, because post-colonial praxis of religion produces and maintains the oppression of people by a few individuals under the guise of religion.

5.2 Latent structural religious violence

Latent structural violence is a form of violence that is hidden in religious narratives and discourses. Unfortunately, such violence has received limited or no attention in the academic space, although it presents a way to forge a new order for the Christian faith to regain its space in life transformation. I describe latent structural violence as a form of knowledge present in religious circles, which promotes marginalisation, and demonises and even eliminates the other (Grosfoguel 2007). Latent structural violence is also defined as a form of preaching that intimidates

and locates the man of God as absolute authority, on whom congregants are dependent. Sithole (2014:viii) is of the view that

structural violence is the violence that is not visible and it is hidden ... It makes those who are affected by it to be incapacitated to see, name, describe and explain it as it institutionalised, naturalised and normalised in everyday existence.

Various studies (Cavanaugh 2007; Ganzevoort 2006; Hall 2001; Huber 2011; Kung 2005) have shown that, if not guided, religion can contribute to structural violence. Latent structural violence is a form of violence that does not manifest in a physical form, but is mechanistically inherent in social forces, ranging from poverty, disease, racism and mortality to oppressive religious hegemony (Farmer *et al.* 2006). However, while decoloniality scholars and believers have a need to problematise violence, the case is different for some other believers, who view this violence as God's plan and, therefore, they bear the violence as an act of obedience to God. Because some religious adherents do not perceive some preaching as violent, the spread of latent violence continues.

The leaders of the Seven Angels Ministry make the lives of its people a misery, as members are not allowed to attend school, are separated from the rest of the community, and are scared of the church leaders. Some even sell their property to support the Ministry (Fuzile 2018). In this instance, it is clear that the message preached by the Ministry creates a sense of fear and social disconnection, thus creating a mutual zombification. This phenomenon prompted former Police Minister Mbulula to declare:

The women have been brainwashed. They are just walking dead. That thing that has captured their minds is not a church, but is a satanist place of witchcraft (Dayiman & Ntshobane 2018).

Mutual zombification survives through naturalising, normalising and institutionalising injustices (Sithole 2014) under the pretext of religious obedience. Decoloniality argues that ours is an asymmetrical world order that is sustained not only by colonial matrices of power, but also by pedagogies and (religious) epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:11), thus speaking to the need for ADT to facilitate reverse osmosis of faith, so that faith can make a positive contribution to society. Among the goals of ADT stipulated by Sithole (2014) is to recover those knowledges that were displaced by (religious) epistemicides of various kinds, and ADT has the impetus to offer this solution.

5.3 Coloniality of God tendencies

While various decolonial theories have developed the original theory far and wide, this article positions itself in a unique place in decoloniality narratives. It adds an angle to decoloniality thinking by arguing that contemporary religion in Africa places a particularly strong emphasis on the need to respect the man or woman of God. Coloniality of God, the term used in this article, is the act of believing that the man of God is the only person who has access to God – the remainder of the adherents must rely on him/her to hear what God has to say. It is a firm understanding that the lives of people hang on the one person who has access to God, and, for human survival, their obedience to him/her should be absolute and unquestionable.

This does not mean that I reject the view that God speaks people; I believe He does, through his prophets, but not for the purposes of manipulation and distortion, as was the case with Jim Jones (Chidester 1991). If church leaders feel the need to convince everyone that they are the only prophets of God, then the article supports problematising this approach. This approach can also be equated to what Quijano (2008:182) calls “a mental category of modernity”, which strives to ensure coloniality, as proposed by Walsh (2002:79), “[t]hrough strategies of manipulation, co-optation, division, and control”. Once manipulation has taken centre stage, an uncontrolled appetite for power, abuse and exhortation becomes inevitable, of which the ramification is the oppressed supporting the oppressor, which Mbembe (2002) calls mutual zombification.

Paying respect to religious leaders is a trait of many religions. Its praxis in the contemporary religious and political landscape presents trajectories in some religious spaces, and dehumanises adherents, which, when it is uncovered and challenged, creates a religion that is abusive and oppressive. Thus, decoloniality, as a counter-strategy of coloniality, aims to

evoke a philosophy of liberation, which entails the rehumanisation of the dehumanised and the courage to care and to love (Mpfungu 2017:4).

6. WHAT WILL AFRICAN DECOLONIALITY THEOLOGY LOOK LIKE?

According to Maluleke (1997:6), “[f]or nearly half a century, Africans have attempted to articulate their own brands of Christian theologies consciously and deliberately”. I discuss and argue that decolonial theology, as a counter-hegemony strategy against mutual zombification, is an option

for derailing the coloniality manifested in contemporary religion. There is a need for a new object of investigation, which also requires a new kind of theologian, with a new kind of conscience and posture in relation to the current scenario (Cunha 2017:697). In this section, I agree with Sithole (2014) that there is a need to rethink and even to go beyond thinking, even to the point of exhaustion, to avoid coloniality of mind. Thus, there is a dire need to deploy other ways of seeing, and the struggle is not about legitimising “ongoing practices involving the coloni[s]ation of people, culture, and the environment” (Lander 2002:257). In addition, as noted by Kaunda (2016a), ADT is locked in a struggle to unmask the manifestation of Africa’s own self-recolonising thought system, disguised as the legitimate way of knowing, acting and knowledge production in Africa – an uncontested way of meaning-making and interpretation of reality. To do so, I focus on the following approaches.

6.1 Linking faith practices with decolonialised *ubuntu* philosophy

African decolonial theology hinges on the hybridity of theology and decolonialised *ubuntu* philosophy in the praxis of faith. The Christian faith brought along Western civilisation, which, naturally, presents ambivalence in the praxis of faith that calls for decolonial scholars to work to extricate the Christian faith and Western coloniality. Thus, to extricate the Christian faith from coloniality and its structures, which are intertwined with the global North, is a challenge facing the vast majority of African societies, including those in the religious circle. I am of the view that there is a need for a decolonial theology that is African in its orientation, structure and formation, and that meets the needs of African people’s lived realities. To achieve this, I advocate for a religion that centres the African man/woman and his/her philosophy at its centre. I am of the opinion that *ubuntu* offers an African philosophy, which, when combined with decoloniality and the Christian faith, has the impetus to produce African decolonial theology as a counter-hegemony strategy to unmask the coloniality hibernating in religious narratives.

Ubuntu, as an African philosophy, is contested in terms of its origins; nevertheless, the philosophy is generally premised on humanness as a reciprocal mechanism to enhance social solidarity. This humanness is conferred on another person through solidarity with one another and care for each other’s quality of life within the contexts of communal relationships and human dignity (Metz 2011:559). Combining Christian theology with *ubuntu* has the impetus to restore order in the praxis of the Christian. This is possible, because *ubuntu* is a powerful tool for strengthening a

community; it promotes dignity, identity, mutualism, empathy, generosity, and community commitment (Tutu 1999) that are critical for societies geared to achieve sustainable development. I argue, thus, for combining Christian theology and *ubuntu*, premised in decoloniality, because it is through the amalgamation of our deepest moral obligations that selfishness is excluded in favour of those marginalised by religion (Shutte 2001). When such an approach characterises religious movements, those zombified through religion regain mental fitness to exercise religion free of manipulation of any kind, by embracing a decolonial African theology. This type of theology represents a commitment to engage in a struggle along with marginalised peoples as subjects who have the capacity to make sense of the social situation (Drexler-Dreis 2017:286). In light of the foregoing argument, I agree with Kaunda (2016b) that any theology that does not take *ubuntu* into consideration cannot possibly help Africans escape the fetters of colonialism in its current manifestation, which, in this context, is evident through mutual zombification.

While I argue that *ubuntu* should be infused in Christian theology, I am cognisant of the limitations of *ubuntu* philosophy, such as its promotion of patriarchal tendencies. In the context of these limitations, I propose engaging decoloniality theology to neutralise the oppressive elements of *ubuntu*.

In short, decoloniality and *ubuntu* for the praxis of Christian faith is paramount at this juncture of contemporary faith, because *ubuntu* and decoloniality focus on how we can be

restored together as a community, so that we can heal together ...
because we can only be fully human when we are human together
(Gade 2012:493),

free from spiritual distortions that seek to undermine the value of Christianity through the propagation of abusive tendencies. In essence, African decolonial theology proposes a struggle for recognition and rehumanisation of oppressed people through religion. Such an approach brings hope for a Christian life devoid of coloniality, oppression and abuse of the gullibility of the other through religious narratives.

6.2 Critical and spiritual intelligence

One of the challenges in the praxis of religion in Africa is the absence of critical thinking when it comes to issues of faith and praxis. Consequently, trajectories have emerged that force Africans to reconsider the application of critical thinking to faith issues. I am of the view that mutual zombification can be eliminated when faith is merged with spiritual intelligence, by subjecting all religious narratives and practices to critical thinking and

reflection, as opposed to blindly following prophets and their acts. I believe that Africans need a theology that evokes the intelligence of faith and shines the light of reason on human experiences of meaning (Baptista 2017:2). Such an approach facilitates the denaturalisation of modern religious powers and the inclusion of non-modern systems and principles of knowledge, voices and categories of thought (Snyman 2014:1036).

Some of the praxis makes us stop and wonder if spiritual intelligence is being applied. For example, with reference to Ngcobo Seven Angels Ministry, it has been reported that pensioners in the church gave all they had (cars and money) to the church and were left penniless (Herman 2018). It is unfortunate that adherents of a religion seem to have no problem with such financial exhortation. Consequently, my argument is that there is a need for a theology that evokes intelligence in order to refute prosperity preachers who normalise, naturalise and institutionalise “queer capitalist tendencies” characterised by excessive commercialisation of the sacred, and commodification of grace, prayer and offering (Methula 2017:4); such intelligence can be achieved by embracing African decolonial theology. Engaging the ADT thinking option is not being fundamentalist; instead, it is about engaging in shifting the geography of reason with a clear locus of enunciation (Sithole 2014), and it enables the liberation of thinking and encourages delinking from religious imperialism (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2009:22).

6.3 Reintroducing religion in schools

The intelligence of faith to eradicate mutual zombification cannot be left to church leaders, who are prone to ignore decoloniality and decolonised *ubuntu*. Instead, decoloniality and *ubuntu* must cascade down to the classroom space. It is clear that church rhetoric and narratives do not suffice to help eliminate zombification. Unfortunately, the school space has not helped resolve the lived realities of people who are exploited by religion. In South African schools, religion is fast losing ground, especially as a result of the recommendation that life orientation be eliminated at the Further Education and Training level (which had a very limited religious component) (Khubeka 2018). Considering the South African curriculum in the context of abuse through religion, I am of the view that the curriculum is not succeeding in addressing adequately the needs of the people who are predominately Christian. Furthermore, the curriculum deprives learners of the ability to engage with religion from a scholarly space in order to promote, as argued by Dandala (1996), harmonic intelligence. Given the way religion is being downplayed in schools, Nkoane (2015:39) rightly notes that

hegemonic dominance in circles of knowledge construction, which is a political battle in which the discursive weapons of knowledge and power are used, and which determines what is worthwhile knowledge for inclusion and exclusion.

Bernstein (1970:47) states that the way in which

a society selects, clarifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principle of social control.

In the context of decoloniality, particularly regarding coloniality of knowledge, it is unfair to relegate one form of knowledge to another. It is clear that religion is downplayed in South Africa, and the effect of doing so is social pathology, as reflected in the activities of the Seven Angels Ministry at Ngcobo. I am of the view that all knowledge forms are important and must receive equal treatment in the curriculum. Having said this, I argue that the reintroduction of religion should be devoid of confessionalisation, and that such an approach can go a long way to emancipating the people of South Africa from zombification that is premised on the post-colonial praxis of religion. Its reintroduction will enable students and society to engage meaningfully in a scholarly space with religions discourses. Through the reintroduction, African churches and people can rethink religious praxis and discourses and seek to converse and respond to global coloniality in a scholarly manner (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015).

7. VALUE OF THIS ARTICLE

7.1 Strengths of this article

The article focused on various issues of zombification through religious narratives and made an eye-opening argument that religious narratives and praxis must be investigated and critiqued as a way to produce a world order free of religious oppression. It does so by taking a bold step towards problematising some religious movements in post-colonial states such as South Africa. It points out the trajectories such as commercialisation of religion, violence and perpetuating coloniality that result from mutual zombification. The article engages decoloniality by suggesting what can be done to reverse the pain caused by some religions, as a way to achieve sustainable development in South Africa. I propose the idea of ADT, with which theologians can engage and problematise, in order to achieve excellence through Christian theology. Lastly, the article manages to unmute often silent religious discourse that has caused more harm than good.

7.2 Limitations of the article

The article can be viewed as opposing new religious movements, while some of the issues raised, in this instance, have been present for many years. The article could be seen to suggest that new religious movements have hardly anything positive to offer. Of course, this is not the case. I believe that this article will stimulate discussion among educationists and theologians about “new” religious movements, their contributions and the challenges they face in society. Such discussions will offer a platform of opposing arguments, which this article may not have offered. A disclaimer is that, indeed, some new religions have contributed significantly to changing people’s lives and developing society in a positive sense (although this discussion was not the scope of this article) and, as such, scholars must expose these contributions to reveal the beauty of the Christian church to all, who should be free from abuse, coloniality and extortion through the Christian faith.

8. CONCLUSION

In this theoretical article, I tapped into Mbembe’s concept of mutual zombification, and problematised the practice of Christian religion characterised by abuse and an inability to think independently of abusive religious leaders. In my argument, I used decolonial theory to problematise mutual zombification. I argued for the need for an ADT premised in the Christian faith, *ubuntu* and decoloniality, as a way for post-colonial praxis of religion to be emancipatory and to contribute to sustainable development of the people of Africa. As I end the article, I argue for the need to intellectualise faith, and that the school space is a good platform for ushering in a new dawn for extricating mutual zombification from the practice of religion.

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Intelligensie van geloof

Herkurrikulering