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Religion Matters in Africa: Navigating African Christian Identity, Climate Change in Zimbabwe, and Pentecostal Religious Economies in South Africa

For the largest part of history, African scholarship on religion in Africa has mostly been overshadowed by external non-African perspectives and epistemologies. In recent years, the situation has changed, in part owing to the small but meaningful contribution of the *Journal for the Study of Religion* (*JSR*). Most notably, the change is also because of the scientifically rigorous and influential contributions from our early-career and established senior scholars who emerge from a wide range of contexts, religions, and disciplines, yet, who all share in their mutual passion for research in (and on) religion in Africa. Owing to our partnership with the *Association for the Study of Religion in Southern Africa (ASRSA)* and *UJ Press*, the journal has (since its creation) hosted a wide range of research perspectives on religion: Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Indigenous, and Non-Religious (to name but a few). This not only reflects the diversity of the scholarship in Africa, but also the unique multifocality that sustains the *JSR* as a journal in the global field of religion, while located at the southern tip of Africa.

As such, the *JSR*, being situated in Southern Africa, cannot be impartial to the issues that confront African scholarship in the digital age. Digital media and political polemicism, largely driven by contexts in the Global North, still play a major role in the way post-colonial African scholarship is perceived and understood and how its scholars are treated. In August 2026, we saw this in the untimely passing of Prof. Jason Arday (1985-2026), the youngest Black professor in the sociology of education at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. Yet, simultaneously, we also see this in the celebration of the legacy of Charlotte Maxeke (1871-1939), a South African religious leader and political activist who became the first Black woman to graduate with a B.Sc. degree from Wilberforce University in the United States in 1903. In late August 2026, she was posthumously awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Both these instances reflect histories of contention and suspicion toward African knowledge in their respective contexts. Such a situation is mostly due to outdated social and ideological projections on Africa and African intellectual contributions from the West, still plaguing contemporary academia and society's approach to scholarship in (and on) Africa.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the rise of alternative intelligence, anti-intellectualism and an overreliance on new media, as well as distrust in scholarly expertise overall remain at an all-time high. Universities have become targets (and sometimes even victims) of regressive partisan politics, rather than remaining independent hubs of critical thinking that focus on evaluating the inherent value of human identity and preserving human dignity through new knowledge. This has paved the way for deepfakes and AI chatbot biases, which have co-opted rigorous intellectual scrutiny and academic peer review with misinformation, disinformation, and targeted harassment, devoid of a shared humanity. These threats are compounded by Afrophobic and/or xenophobic political attacks against African migrants, as well as the resurgence of racism stemming from legacies of whiteness. These are ever-growing threats, amplified *via* social media consumer networks marketizing outrage at the expense of our vulnerable environment, as opposed to prioritizing the preservation of our *alma mater* (our 'nurturing mother'), Mother Nature. Collectively, these things affect the beliefs we have about ourselves, society, spirituality, and institutions of higher education.

This is why scholarship in the humanities still (and continues to) matter in Africa, occupying a notable space in the minds of those who assert, 'I am an African'. Knowledge creation becomes an act of rebellion, a way of speaking truth to power, transcending borders, facilitating community, and maintaining intellectual honesty with both ourselves and others. Academic journals (specifically in the study of religion) therefore play a crucial role in preserving the very essence of *umuntu, ngumuntu, ngabantu* ('*I am because you are because we are*'). Research journals like ours (and many others in the humanities) bear a significant responsibility in today's world, being the final bastions protecting intellectual accountability, credible knowledge generation, human ingenuity, and scientific rigor. These are pillars without which society as a whole will collapse.

In light of this, we are honored to present our most recent edition of the *JSR, featuring four articles that reflect the JSR's commitment to these pillars in Africa.* The articles contained in this edition examine how religious institutions and spiritual beliefs interact with the modern challenges of identity, climate change, institutional economies, and migration. Together, the authors highlight the multiplicitous role of faith-based frameworks as vulnerable targets of environmental crises, complementary spaces for African identity formation, powerful engines of social capital for displaced populations in Africa, as well as financially lucrative institutions for coercive control.

Starting with *Christianity and African identity: Against the incompatibility thesis*, Dr. Ignatius Nnaemeka Onwuatuegwu in the Department of Philosophy at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka in Nigeria presents a fascinating philosophical treatise on the age-old question, 'Are Christianity and African identity compatible?' In this paper, Onwuatuegwu argues that such a question, in itself, is a colonial simplification subject to historical subjectivity. As such, he suggests a possibility for reconciling two (frequently considered antithetical) philosophical identity constructs by way of a Complementary Ontology Thesis. Drawing from the works of seminal African philosophers Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Wiredu, John Mbiti, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon, and Thaddeus Metz (originally from the USA), Onwuatuegwu argues that the convergence of African identity and Christianity is not merely a structural discussion but a structurally relevant one embedded in African beingness. He thus sets out to philosophically refute the widely held 'Incompatibility Thesis', which frequently posits a fundamental, irreconcilable opposition between Christianity and African identity. He argues that this thesis is based on a colonial simplification of African ontology, represents a cultural misunderstanding of Christianity in Africa, and involves a conceptual error that conflates historical colonial subjugation under European Christian imperialism with an ontological contradiction.

Onwuatuegwu elaborates on three flawed assumptions of the Incompatibility Thesis: First, the conflation of historical transmission with philosophical essence; second, the mischaracterization of African ontology as irrational or static; and third, the false restriction of Christianity to Western cultural forms, rather than viewing it as a translatable, culturally permeable religion in Africa. Furthermore, he contradicts this by proposing a Complementary Ontology (in other words, two things can harmoniously exist at the same time), built on a rigorous philosophical-comparative and conceptual analytic method, while also relying on critical reconstruction and intercultural analysis to bolster it. Finally, Onwuatuegwu concludes with a 'Relational-Convergence Ontology' using insights from Hegel's dialectical idealism and Whitehead's process philosophy, proving that intercultural philosophical traditions are able to achieve non-reductive convergence and dialogical alignment, without them collapsing into mutual assimilation or erasing the distinctiveness of one or the other. By deconstructing

the postcolonial binary of conflict versus assimilation, Onwuatuegwu elevates African philosophy into global metaphysical debates. The paper offers a sophisticated framework for navigating African Christian identity, proving that being African and Christian are structurally and metaphysically complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

No rest for the dead: Climate change and indigenous burial practices among the Shona people in Zimbabwe by Dr. Bernard Pindukai Humbe, Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Prof. Zorodzai Dube in the Department of Religion Studies at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa is the second article. In their paper, Humbe and Dube extraordinarily utilize a cultural destruction conceptual framework that investigates how climate change physically and spiritually destabilizes the sacred burial practices and grave environments of the *Shona* people living in the Buhera district of Zimbabwe. In their paper, the authors argue that, in Shona cosmology, the grave (*imba yemufi* or 'house of the deceased') exists as a sacred, central phenomenon that links the physical world with the underworld of the ancestors (*vadzimu*), thus linking the material with the spiritual. Viewed from the perspective of not only environmental harm but also cultural deterioration, Humbe and Dube therefore propose that the effects of climate change are especially visible in the destruction of burial grounds and the rituals tied to those sacred spaces. These disrupt said rituals and diminish ancestral connections, while also destroying the sacredness of the land.

Therefore the authors conducted an exploratory qualitative inquiry that employs both an empirical and a theoretical religion phenomenological lens to access an 'experience-near perspective' among the Shona peoples. Fieldwork was conducted in the Buhera district between January 2024 and April 2025, with data collection involving in-depth interviews and participant observations (including transacted walks of affected gravesites) from 20 voluntary recruited, purposively sampled participants. The participants were all Shona people who were 18 years and older. The qualitative data were processed via thematic data analysis, and the authors established that extreme weather events (such as droughts, floods, and destructive weather phenomena such as *Cyclone Idai*) have physically ruptured, destroyed, or washed away graves. Furthermore, the drying up of swampy environments, traditionally required for the symbolic cooling rites of infant and stillbirth burials, are among the events that triggered outward migration, leaving ancestral graves neglected in depopulated rural areas. Furthermore, compounded by agricultural failure, these events have also contributed to the scarcity of small grains and the cattle required for sacred memorialization rituals (*kurova guva*).

In response, the authors document crucial indigenous adaptation strategies used in Buhera to preserve the physical and spiritual integrity of graves: Burying deceased relatives close to homesteads for closer monitoring; establishing burial societies to fund and reinforce graves with concrete slabs and linings; and prioritizing elevated, flood-resistant anthills (*churu*) as alternative burial sites. The authors powerfully shift the discussion of climate change from purely economic or infrastructural damage to a contextually specific realm of ontology, spirituality, and cultural migration. Humbe and Dube demonstrate that fundamentally ecological destruction is a form of cultural and religious dislocation, indicating how environmental precarity directly threatens ancestral bonds, ritual continuity, and communal religious identity.

The third article is *African Pentecostal Churches as mediating institutions of socio-economic integration among African migrants in Cape Town* by Dr. Anjofui Patience Anegub, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Religion at the University of Johannesburg. Anegub applies a Social Capital Theory (vertical ties to power, legal expertise, and formal state or institutional resources) to analyze how African Pentecostal Churches in Cape Town function as informal, hybrid mediating institutions for the socio-economic integration of African migrants. The article argues that African Pentecostal Churches are critical social hubs that generate two primary forms of capital, bonding social capital (creating a strong 'surrogate family' and internal safety net that offer trust, emotional security, and mutual care in the absence of biological relatives). Additionally, they provide bridging social capital by offering informal, trust-based job referrals and skills-sharing through peer networks. Anegub further notes that these Pentecostal Churches emerge as primary mechanisms through which migrants are able to access emotional support, information, employment opportunities, and livelihood resources.

However, Anegub reflectively notes that links to such social capital remains weak, highly informal, and heavily reliant on the personal connections of individual pastors to their congregations. The research employs a qualitative multiple case study design examining five distinct churches in Cape Town, selected for their high percentage of migrant congregants. Primary data were gathered between

January and March 2026 *via* semi-structured interviews with 20 gender-balanced participants (aged 20-64) originating from the DRC, Nigeria, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Uganda. This was supplemented by participant observations (six observation sessions during services, workshops, and cell group meetings) complemented by field notes. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis assisted by *AILYZE*, a qualitative data software for initial coding, which was then systematically validated and refined by the researcher. Anegub concludes that these African Pentecostal Churches serve as vital 'protective sanctuaries' and safe havens, shielding migrants from external xenophobia, labor market exclusion, and the intense psychological strain of legal vulnerabilities.

While these churches successfully mobilized reactive, immediate relief (such as food, shelter, and basic funds), Anegub notes that they suffer from severe structural limitations, lacking formalized, long-term mentorship or development programs for non-South Africans, including minimal institutional funding. Consequently, the paper also argues that these inward-looking networks facilitate immediate short-term survival and coping strategies. In the long term, they face the risk of reinforcing social boundaries and the possibility of developing patterns of dependency, while also failing to support sustained, long-term socio-economic mobility and broader integration into the host society (i.e., South Africa). Anegub thus contributes a relevant critical empirical layer to the study of Pentecostal religious economies by demonstrating that these Pentecostal Churches are not merely spaces of spiritual devotion but function as active, trust-based parallel economies that mitigate structural marginalization. The paper simultaneously exposes the dualistic nature of socio-economic capital in religious ecologies, how they act as both sites of profound resilience and localized survival, yet are constrained by state-level exclusions and their own inward-looking organizational politics.

The last article is *Reproducing whiteness: Prophets for profit, prosperity cults, and Big Religion in South Africa* by Dr. Tristán Kapp, NRF SARChI Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. This article investigates the rapid rise of 'Megacostalism' (or 'Big Religion') in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing from the work of scholarship in the field of Pentecostal Church studies, Kapp argues that white Pentecostal Charismatic and Evangelical (PCE) megachurches have notably been absent in critical scholarly analyses. The paper analyses the various types of prosperity theology (characteristic of PCE churches) as an institutional tool that maintains racial and economic hierarchies while also serving as reproductions of colonial-era whiteness. By operating as corporatized, capital-intensive 'non-places', these churches function as highly controlled, coercive religious systems or 'cults', structured around Weberian charismatic authority, Big Religion, and anti-intellectualism. The paper characterizes this as 'mafiarized' or 'deviant' religion, where belief is commercialized and spiritual objects (material religion) are commodified to financially exploit vulnerable congregants while qualifying systemic inequality as selective divine favor.

Kapp employs a multidisciplinary critical case study approach, focusing on three prominent white classical Pentecostal celebrity pastors and their ministries in South Africa: Ray McCauley (*Rhema Bible Church*), At Boshoff (*Christian Revival Church*), and Theo Wolmarans (*Christian Family Church International*). The paper applies a multi-theoretical synthesis, utilizing Benjamin Zeller's 'Big Religion', Janja Lalich's charismatic authority cult frameworks, David Chidester's 'deviant religion', George Sanders' corporatized 'non-places', John Searle's 'status function monopolies', and Christi van der Westhuizen's Critical Whiteness Theory as theoretical approaches. The empirical evidence is gathered through sources in the public domain, including data from the Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities (CRL) Rights Commission, statistics from the World Megachurches project, media sources, and South African scholarly literature. The study concludes that megachurches act as powerful commercial religious cults that successfully monopolize key status functions (money, political access, and moral legitimacy).

White celebrity pastors amass extreme personal wealth, using their political connections and media branding to shield their tax-free assets, remaining highly insulated from meaningful social or legal accountability. Furthermore, the paper argues that these organizations also actively resist and lobby against ongoing regulatory oversight attempts such as the CRL Commission's proposed *Section 22 Ad Hoc Committee* as a self-regulatory framework for the Christian sector in South Africa. The paper subsequently contributes a contemporary, critical structural analysis to the discussion on Pentecostal religious economies, while the majority of South African religious scholarship has almost exclusively (and often positivistically) focused on Black-led or African Independent Churches. Kapp examines the

racialized institutional dynamics of classical white Pentecostalism while defending the critical and epistemic relevance of cults as necessary analytical demarcation for understanding deviant religion and coercive religious institutions. In sum, the article demonstrates how religious economies can serve as neo-colonial reinforcers of inequality, leveraging prosperity gospel theologies to translate financial affluence as a result of white privilege, into divinely sanctioned contemporary economic success in a deeply unequal post-apartheid South Africa.

Collectively, these articles complement and represent ongoing concerns in the study of religion in Africa. Not only do they reflect epistemological evolution in the field, but they reveal why religion remains relevant to Africa in its entirety. Spirituality in Africa (whatever form it may take) is inalienable from identity, the environment, and migration *vis-à-vis* xenophobia/aphobia, including social and economic capital. The discourse is constantly evolving, reflecting the changing societal *Zeitgeists*. The study of religion is not something that exists in abstraction; it is not a subject that dedicates itself exclusively to the immaterial. Rather, it is the immaterial constructions that very often find themselves at the basis of who we are as humans: Whether one believes in a higher power or not, we always find ourselves in a place where we exist in relation to belief. In society, what we believe about the world around us is often influenced by our proximity to religion. Scholarship in the study of religion analyzes these proximities and translates them into knowledge. Such knowledge exposes the often underestimation of the very fabrics which make us human. In the study of religion, there are no limits, not even the sky.

As we navigate the study of religion in the digital age, we hope that you will join us in making sense of this journey: A journey from Africa, with Africa, and in Africa, including its relationship to the world, showing that religion matters to Africa, as we dialogically engage in broader critical discourses, transcending borders, where religion and the study of its multiplicity also matter.

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