

On the Intersections of Power, Critique, Discourse and Invention

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In spite of the impression of unconnected contents, there is a golden line running through this issue of *Religion & Theology* that creates a conceptual unity in the collected essays here. This issue of *Religion & Theology* revolves around issues of power, critique, discourse, and invention, and not as free-standing topics but as interweaving practices that, in concert, illuminate the processes of manufacturing religion.¹ Hence the two section topics of “On Power, Contestations, Contextualisation, and Innovation: Perspectives from Africa,” with essays on the reception and interpretation of the Council of Nicaea and its Creed in Africa (by Teddy Sakupapa), contestations around the intrusion of Christian discourses and practices in traditional cultural contexts, in this case Cameroon (by Elias Bongmba), and the construction of a new religious movement in the hybrid Christian–African traditional religion of the Ibandla lamaNazaretha (Nazareth Baptist Church) by Isaiah Shembe

1 This issue continues a conversation that started in previous issues of *Religion & Theology* (31, no. 1&2 and 31, no. 3&4 of 2024) on “Manufacturing Religion: From Christian Origins to Classical Islam,” parts 1 and 2 respectively. Taken together, these three issues not only consider theoretical issues pertaining to defining religion with special focus on a “test case,” namely Christian origins and the making of Christian tradition, but also provide materials to think with when imagining the making of religion as a discursive artifact, that is, in service of theorising religion. That some of the essays across all three issues speak from the field of theological studies gives expression to the aim of the journal, namely, to pursue a perspective beyond the insider–outsider language or religious studies–theology divides, seeing both types of conceptual languages as species of discourse production. See my articulations of this pursuit in Gerhard van den Heever, “Beyond the Insider: Outsider Perspective – The Study of Religion as a Study of Discourse Construction,” in *Religion in Motion. Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and Discourse in a Globalizing World*, ed. Julian Hensold et al. (Basel: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020), 141–164; and Gerhard A. van den Heever, “Introduction. Reflections on the Ampersand: A Manifesto of Sorts, Etc. Etc.,” *Relig. Theol.* 26, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–39, esp. 25–33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02601008>.

(by Sibusiso Masondo); and “Power, Critique, Feminism, and Invention: Critical Perspectives on Religious Discourses,” with essays on Catholic discourses on the paranormal and practices of exorcism (by Nicole Bauer), conceiving of new directions in Catholic theology of human dignity as public theology (by Christiaan Hermans), New Materialism as a philosophical framework to engage the figure of Mary, the Mother of God, to reconceptualise divinity for feminist theology (by Calvin Ullrich), and the retrojection of Romanticism and its legacy cultural values on to the processes of inventive curation of those material artifacts that (now supposedly) constitute – for us – the cultural world of the Roman Empire (by Robyn Walsh).

So, what is that golden line that connects the essays in this issue? It might be useful to invoke here, for the purpose of drawing the connections, Bruce Lincoln’s polythetic definition of religion in which, in various ratios, elements of four domains are operationally constitutive:²

1. A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status.
2. A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected.
3. A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices, and
4. An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value.

Thus, as Lincoln summarises it: “All four domains – discourse, practice, community, and institution – are necessary parts of anything that can properly be called a ‘religion.’”³ It should be noted, however, that all four domains constitute only the *terms* of the definitional conceptualisation, and thus that each domain encompasses a variety of possible positionalities/position-takings such that each domain is also a field of difference, contestation, and conflict.⁴ The essays in this issue explore in various ways and in various specific situations or contexts these fields of difference, contestations, and conflicts.

2 Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5–8.

3 Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 7.

4 “... may be locked in power struggles ... every macro-entity that gets called a ‘religion’ – Buddhism, Islam, or Christianity, for example – has countless internal varieties and subdivisions, each of which undergoes its own historic process of development and change. ... Sweeping characterizations of these macro-entities are always misleading, especially the simplistic

An unspoken assumption underlying the domain of regulatory institutions is the phenomenon of the operations of power, understood here in an adapted Foucauldian sense as the capacity to effect outcomes (which operation can range from classification, order, and institutionalisation; authorisation; persuasion; coercion; covert and overt violence). As Sakupapa shows, the Council of Nicaea, its Creed, its reception in the history of theology and in Africa particularly, are all deeply enmeshed with and coded with imperial ideology. That Constantine played a central role in the calling of the Council in order to lay to rest the theological conflicts consuming the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire as well as officiating at the Council *and* suggesting the key Nicene definition of the relation of Christ's divine sonship to God the Father (as *homoousios*), this is all well known. What is less known is that on becoming emperor, Constantine stepped unproblematically into the traditional imperial office of *pontifex maximus* (traditionally the "archbishop" and protector of the cults of Rome and traditional Roman religion) becoming thereby the "ultimate bishop" of Christianity taking care of the "harmony between his new deity and his people," effectively turning emerging Christianity into a civic religion (just like the old cults of Rome) while merging it with imperial ideology.⁵ Even as the hero of the historical narrative of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, Constantine cut an ambiguous figure: while transforming traditional ancestral cults into a henotheistic worship of a Supreme Deity (albeit cult devoid of blood sacrifices), maintaining traditional cults and temples including cults of Tyche and Rhea,⁶ appropriating pagan symbols on his coins (e.g., Helios), Constantine naturally stepped into the role of ultimate bishop or "overseer" of all the inhabitants of the empire, both Christian and pagan. If bishops took care of cultic matters, Constantine saw his sphere as the public domain (to which he was appointed by God after his victory over Maxentius), and since Christianity was now a civic religion, the emperor naturally had a role to play in settling theological disputes that threatened the unity and harmony of the empire, as maintainer of ecumenical peace.⁷ Even though the office of *pontifex maximus*

caricatures that contrast one to another ... At best, one can try to assess specific movements or tendencies within a tradition at given moments of their development, recognizing that each macro-religion encompasses many such groups and tendencies. No one of these is normative; rather, they compete with one another ...," Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 7–8.

5 Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Making of Christian Constantinople* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 26–27.

6 Tyche the deity of fortune, chance, providence and fate, the protectress of a city's fortune and prosperity; Rhea, very ancient deity of fertility and fruitfulness, and Mother of the gods.

7 See Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, chapter 1, esp. 21–29, for a full discussion and further literature on Constantine and the Christianisation of the empire.

was abolished (but only later – by Constantine's grandson Gratian, r. 367–383, who refused the office and title),⁸ the “Constantinian turn,” of which Nicaea was the manifestation and enduring symbol, set a pattern in place: henceforth, Christianity was imbricated with imperality. The regularity with which anathemas were appended to confessions of faith (or explications of creedal faith) in this period,⁹ evidences the use of classification, authorisation, coercion, and at times downright violence (i.e., the operationalisation of power) to institutionalise and regularise an authorised version of Christianity.

I belabour this point, because, if the Christianity imported into Africa on the wings of the Western imperial-colonial project is chiefly shaped – in theology and practice – by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (itself a product of empire), then a space is opened – indeed, as a desideratum – for a decolonial, African-contextual redefinition of Christology, now no longer in terms derived from Late Antique Graeco-Roman/Neoplatonic philosophies but African cultural-contextual conceptualities to give expression to how Christology, as the systematic reflection on the divinity of Christ and his relation to/in the Godhead, can be reformulated to speak in terms familiar to an African context. This is the argument presented by Teddy Sakupapa.

Issues of power as the capacity to effect outcomes inform the essays by Bongmba and Masondo. In Masondo's presentation of the Ibandla lama-Nazareth it is argued that one of the reasons for the formation of this new religious movement, this hybrid Christian–African traditional religion, was the empowerment of the AmaZulu in the wake of colonial dispossession ... the shape of the movement and its practices was an act of resistance. The case studies of Baptist action in Wimbumband in Cameroon, discussed by Bongmba,

8 But even without the title and office, successive emperors intervened in church and theological matters, exercising authority over the shaping of a Christianity very much still in its formative stages, with at one extreme end, Emperor Theodosius (r. 379–395), who used legislation and decisive action to effectively end the public practice of paganism in the Roman Empire, closing temples and sanctuaries, repurposing them for Christian use or other purposes, and prohibiting pagan religious activities, both public and private.

9 Cf. Nicene Creed (325), Egyptian synodal letter on the heresy of Arius (336), Creed of Sirmium (351), Liberius's letter *Pro deifico* to the eastern bishops (357), Epiphanius's *Ancoratus* (367), Ps. Athanasius's *Hermeneia* (ca. 370?), the letter *Per filium meum* to the bishop Paulinus of Antioch (375), the canons of the Council of Constantinople (381), the canons of the Synod of Rome (382), the Confession of Toledo (400), Armenian Confession (4th–7th cent.), see the relevant entries in Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum. Kompendium der Glaubensbekenntnisse und kirchlichen Lehrentscheidungen. Lateinisch–Deutsch*, amended and enlarged edition (Freiburg: Herder, 2001).

exemplify the use of power to forcefully Christianise the country and the region, in what Bruce Lincoln called a maximalist religious model, “the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence.”¹⁰ The conflicts arising from Baptist theological prohibitions of traditional cultural (or better: religio-cultural) practices and even destruction of traditional religious shrines are the result of the meeting and clashes between different cultural discourses with all the power plays that are part of it.¹¹ As Bongmba concludes, “These contestations arise when one religious discourse – and one predicated on conversion from previous lifestyles and cultural discourses and practices – ‘intrudes’ upon the territory of a long-existing other set of cultural discourses and practices.” It is only after a longer period of unsettling of a new religious worldview and sets of practices that traditional cultural practices can become disarticulated from traditional religion, and come to be seen as ... only culture (and it is only roughly a century since the beginnings of the Christianisation of Wimbumbland, hence the acuteness of the issue). Consider, as example from the early centuries of Christian formation, the visit of Constantius II to Rome in 357 CE, recounted by the (pagan) senator Symmachus, as an event of admiration of traditional culture:¹²

He diminished none of the privileges of the sacred virgins, he filled the priestly offices with nobles, he did not refuse the cost of the Roman ceremonies, and following the rejoicing Senate through all the streets of the eternal city, he contentedly beheld the shrines with unmoved countenance, he read the names of the gods inscribed on the pediments, he enquired about the origin of the temples, and expressed admiration for their builders. Although he himself followed another religion, he maintained its own for the empire, for everyone has his own customs, everyone his own rites. The divine Mind has distributed different guardians and different cults to different cities.

SYMMACHUS, *Third Relation* 8

10 Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 5.

11 It is not a one-way street: Bongmba also reports that there are Christians who advocate for retaining such religio-cultural practices as building blocks of cultural identity – in effect, a minimalist model of religion.

12 Robert Owen Edbrooke, “The Visit of Constantius II to Rome in 357 and Its Effect on the Pagan Roman Senatorial Aristocracy,” *Am. J. Philol.* 97, no. 1 (1976): 40–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/294112>.

Regardless of the intention of Symmachus's rhetoric, it shows the beginnings of a process whereby it was possible to present the ancient cult sites as merely monuments to venerable traditions. The contestations in Wimbundland are examples of how Christianisation occurred everywhere right through history from the beginnings of Christianity to the present day – through imposition and destruction, to be sure, but also through appropriation, reinterpretation, and contextualisation.¹³ But in spite of the “anti-heathen” rhetoric often employed in such cases (and demonisation is really a rhetoric of upping the ante), it is really a two-way street. In fact, in the much-cited essay by Birgit Meyer, “‘Make a Complete Break with the Past.’ Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal Discourse,”¹⁴ she shows that notwithstanding Pentecostal preachers' exhortations to break with traditional religious customs and practices, they often employ the very same religious technologies from traditional African religions to construct their own versions of evangelical Pentecostal Christianity, as something completely divorced from their religious past. Once the focus shifts from authorised, hegemonic discourses to lived religion, as Bongmba suggests, it is clear that the normal way of living religion is highly syncretic or hybridising. As Masondo also shows with respect to the AmaNazaretha, the Ibandla lamaNazaretha is a deliberate exercise in hybridising, which is, really, what all contextualised traditions are, traditions being adaptable discursive formations in continuous processes of reinvention. In the Ibandla lamaNazaretha we have a new religion “cobbled together” from (mainly) the Old Testament, African conceptions of God with a very low Christology, the cultural phenomenon of prophecy, in combination with adapted Christianised Zulu cultural customs, and a social organisation responding to conditions of life under a colonial regime.

If religion is also a collective noun for those traditional customs and practices, the affectively-charged habitus (the inculcated habits, ways of seeing the world and acting accordingly), and the materialisation of religious imaginaries in artifacts and cultic spaces – in other words: culture, then here, in the essays by Bongmba and Masondo, we encounter another intersection between the domains of institutionalising power operations and cultural practices.

13 A short overview of the ambiguous processes of Christianisation – this time pertaining to northern Europe – can be found in Anton Wessels, *Europe: Was It Ever Really Christian? The Interaction Between Gospel and Culture* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

14 Birgit Meyer, “‘Make a Complete Break with the Past.’ Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostal Discourse,” *J. Relig. Afr.* 28.3 (1998): 316–349, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.2307/1581573>. Bongmba also refers to this essay.

Operations of power surface as well in Bauer's essay on the discourses of the paranormal and demonic, and the institutionalisation of practices of exorcism (as officially prescribed and regulated rituals). Framing her study by the Foucauldian concept of pastoral power, she shows how a class of exorcistic ritual experts have come to be constituted and authorised in the Roman Catholic Church. The "exorcistic movement" arose in the interstices of a cultural worldview that had taken leave of a transcendent world populated by spirit beings, and one very much predicated on the interpenetration of the spirit world with the human world (supported by church doctrine according to which spirit/demonic beings and the Devil exist, and that they act in the human world). Through an extensive process of authorising as ritual experts as well as through popularising their views in publications and social media, exorcists gain enormous power over the individuals they claim to heal and in the communities in which they operate. It is not simply a throwback to a mediaeval worldview, as inputs from psychology and psychiatry are also employed, but the fact remains that it posits a world that is open to "non-obvious beings," and in that, the world that exorcists and their enthusiastic supporters inhabit, sidles up closely to that of traditional cultures, very definitely divorced from what is conventionally still called secular culture.¹⁵ The phenomenon occupies a specific positionality in the complex make-up of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church (but also across a broader range of Christian religious formations and denominations).

The two essays by Hermans and Ullrich plough the fields of discourse construction in Christian theology, albeit discourse constructions with social implications, and thus with relevance to community and in the extension of which, with reimagined practices of being religious. Hermans critiques regnant

15 Although, to be fair, let me caution, this is not simply a divide between Enlightenment/learned/scientific/developed vs. traditional/magical/unscientific/quasi-mediaeval. As the rapid growth of Charismatic, Evangelical, and Neopentecostal churches demonstrates, where such discourses are often at home, their appeal lies with audiences precisely from the middle- to upper-middle classes, and well-educated people. Bauer did not reference her previous published work on exorcism, but it is worth pointing to Gerhard Ammerer, Nicole Bauer, and Carlos Watzka, *Dämonen: Besessenheit und Exorzismus in der Geschichte Österreichs – Eine kritische Betrachtung* (Salzburg: Anton Pustet, 2024), in which they argue that possession phenomena (and then also exorcisms) often occur in contexts of heightened social anxieties in times of ambiguous cultural and political transitions. See also Gerhard van den Heever, "Exorcizing Devilsdorp: Demonization and Satanic Possession in South Africa," in *Ideas of Possession: Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Perspectives*, ed. Nicole M. Bauer and J. Andrew Doole (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), esp. 265–269, <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780197679951.003.0014>, but see also other essays in the volume.

discourses on human dignity in Catholic Social Teaching, in order to rethink what makes for a dignified human life – in short, the capabilities to achieve a fulfilled life or quality of life. But since this is not solely dependent on individual capabilities, but also through a conducive social, political, and economic environment – the domain of social and political action, this becomes part of the task of public theology, which is that theological discourse that speaks to matters of import to a broad public. Ullrich investigates how recourse is taken to the figure of Mary (in the history of theology the feminine, and Mary, taken to signify the material creation over against God as rational Creator) to devise a new materialism in which the feminine/creation is absorbed into the divine, rethinking the relation between materiality, femininity, and the divine. He proposes “rethinking materiality, not as a passive substrate but as a dynamic, form-giving force. This plastic ontology posits that matter itself is dynamically related to signification and when considered theologically, Mary, in this view, emerges as a site of generative possibility, embodying the contingency and transformative potential of divinity.” This is the substance of the new understanding of materiality as propounded in the New Materiality.

Lastly, the essay by Robyn Walsh seems to stand at a distance to the other essays. But by showing how those material artifacts she discusses – sculptures supposedly representing (as in making present) Greek and Roman antiquity, but it concerns not only these examples, these are emblematic of much of the curated remains of antiquity – are actually “cobbled fictions,” some of fairly recent origins even, assembled together to sustain a certain mythical idealisation of a pure Graeco-Roman (but mostly Greek) past. This myth of Greekness is a legacy of Romanticism as a cultural movement in which the discovery (and invention) of a heroic Greek past-as-ideal performed ideological work in the massively turbulent years of the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century to manufacture national identities in Europe, and to provide an intellectual remedy to the traumas and social disruptions of industrialisation. While Romanticism is drawn on to interpret the phenomenon of cobbled-together artworks, the Romantic era and its complex legacies were also the foundations for almost all our current scholarly fields of study, all of which coded by the values embedded in the myth of Greekness and the imperial ideals built on this myth of a once-upon-a-time greatness. The value of Walsh’s study lies in its unmasking of the fictitiousness and factitiousness of our inherited vision of the past and constructions of history (and the practice of historiography).¹⁶ That

16 See also her monograph, Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge; New

her study is also of importance for a redescriptive historiography of Graeco-Roman religions and Christian origins is more than borne out by the fact that it is now recognised that Mediterranean religions in antiquity and Christianity in its first formative centuries have been “cobbled” in the image of Western, European, cultural imaginations in the long nineteenth century.¹⁷ That this has grave significance for our understanding of Christian origins is more than illustrated by a slew of recent studies on the (mis)curation – and sometimes

York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108883573>. The genre of “invention studies” has exploded in recent years, which has led to almost complete revisionings of how to understand histories. I mention only a few: Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009); John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul*, Taubman Lectures in Jewish Studies (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Mark Currie, *The Invention of Deconstruction* (Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Stefanos Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2024); nonfictioness, “The ‘Invention’ of Folklore in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nonfictioness*, 6 June 2019, <https://nonfictioness.com/folklore/the-invention-of-folklore-in-the-nineteenth-century/>; Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, rev. and exp. (Chicago, IL/London: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Katherine Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: History and Aesthetics in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft*, Classical Presences (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

If one takes seriously Robin Walsh’s argument that the historiography of early Christianity and the development of New Testament studies as discipline were products of the nineteenth century, fundamentally influenced by Romanticism as cultural movement, then it is very useful to read any of the volumes in the Brill series, *National Cultivation of Culture*, <https://brill.com/display/serial/NCC>. The following monograph provides a great comparative work through which to reimagine the way in which the figures of Christ and the leading fathers in the first four to five centuries were used to invent Christian identity, Lauren Horn Griffin, *Fabricating Founders in Early Modern England: History, Rhetoric, and the Origins of Christianity*, MTSRSup 22 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2023).

- 17 See various essays in Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi, eds., *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik (Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van Der Leeuw [1890–1950])* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1991); Gerhard van den Heever, “Making Mysteries. From the *Untergang der Mysterien* to Imperial Mysteries—Social Discourse in Religion and the Study of Religion,” *Relig. Theol.* 12, no. 3–4 (2005): esp. 276–281, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157430106776241150>; and Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

even pastiches of pasted together material evidences – of the artifacts on the basis of which the historiography of Christianity in its early centuries is manufactured.¹⁸ Her essay raises important questions the significance of which far transcends only cultural or religious studies: Who owns history? Which history is manufactured in whose image? How is the objectness of a historical or discursive object constituted by the processes of producing and curating it? What Christian discourse is, should be rethought. That is the challenge calling us to renewed vigour in reflexive scholarship.

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- 18 On manuscripts, see Brent Nongbri, *God's Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2018). On revisionary historiographies of early Christianity, see Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108647052>; Markus Vinzent, *Resetting the Origins of Christianity: A New Theory of Sources and Beginnings* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009290470>; and most recently, Markus Vinzent, *Christ's Torah: The Making of the New Testament in the Second Century* (Abingdon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003378303>.