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Exploring the entanglement of race and religion in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This special issue is meant to begin to address the lacuna in research on the entanglements of race and religion by focusing on one specific geographical region – Africa. The reality of political communities in Africa cannot be understood properly independently of colonial racialisation. The formation of colonial political communities on the African continent was based on racial exclusion in terms of the colour line. While most research focuses on the latter, slowly more research is being done on the race-religion constellation which takes account of the impact and force of religion in the processes of racialisation, and political exclusion as religion is at the centre of the colonial and racial project. Nonetheless, much less scholarly and philosophical attention has been given to understanding and unravelling the role of religion in conceptions and practices of colonial and postcolonial political practices of racial exclusion in Africa.

KEYWORDS

Race; religion; Africa; Christianity; secularism

> The new symbolic construct was that of "race." Its essentially Christian heretical positing of the nonhomogeneity of the human species was to provide the basis for new metaphysical notions of order. (Wynter 1995, 34)

> Race of necessity is knotted from the outset of its formulation and social fashioning with religious resonance. Jews, Muslims, and black and New World Indian "heathens" represent Europe's formative nonbelonging. (Goldberg 2016, 19–20)

> Race and religion are conjoined twins … because they share a mutual genealogy, the category of religion is always already a racialised category, even when race is not explicitly under discussion. (Vial 2016, 1)

> The term "race-religion constellation" refers to the connection or co-constitution of the categories of race and "religion." Specifically, the term "race-religion constellation" is used to refer to the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term "religion." (Topolski 2018, 58)

While there is no consensus about the meaning of the terms "race" and "religion," recent interdisciplinary scholarship has brought to light their fundamental entanglements. The explorations of the histories, concepts and experiences of racism are predominantly coming from scholarship in the Americas, although this is not exhaustive. Likewise, while many scholars of religion have begun to consider how religion is related to race/racism in Europe, these relatively new academic investigations often overshadow the

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work of scholars exploring the intersection of race and religion in Africa, Asia and Australia as well as the global/colonial aspects of these entanglements. This overshadowing is problematic not only because it repeats the global patterns of coloniality with regard to academic knowledge production, but it also fails to understand the entanglements of race and religion as relational. What happens in Europe, or the Americas, is always in relation to what happens in Africa, Asia and Australia and vice-versa.

An important contribution to this new scholarly insight has come from scholars over the past decades who have deconstructed the concept of "religion" (as well as the notion of true religion and world religions) in order to make visible its particular relationship to Christianity (or Christendom) and secularism. These "religious" categories have been/are used to justify racialised structural exclusions. Among the most well researched examples are antisemitism and Islamophobia. An often-used term that demonstrates this almost presumed connection in the USA is the term "WASP," White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, which brings to the fore the link between phenotype, or skin colour, and religion.

When we turn our critical gaze to the concept of "race," which like that of religion is often assumed to be a "modern" one, we likewise see different entanglements such as: religious racism, biological racism, cultural racism and rational/natural racism. The goal of our research, which was the inspiration for this special issue, is to explore the entanglements of race and religion in different global manifestations of racialised realities. In doing so, we explicitly challenge the often-presumed binary between race and religion as separate categories of social organisation.

Our own research, which turns its gaze onto Europe as an object of study, is a reaction and supplement to the outstanding literature produced in the Americas over the past decade. With new booming fields such as Black Studies, African American Studies, Black Theology and the great scholarship being done in more established fields, race/racism are finally making their long overdue entrance into academia. This is not to say they are always welcomed, but this says more about the university itself as an ivory tower than anything about the scholars/scholarship themselves. Within critical race theory, a smaller group of scholars are focusing on the entanglements of race and religion (Davies 1988; Stoler 2002; Goldberg 2009; Wynter 2003; Jennings 2011; Barbar 2011; Stam and Shohat 2012; Nye 2019; Lentin 2020; Jansen and Meer 2020)

Sadly, for many other dynamic and intertwined parts of the globe, there is very little research – and what there is, is often not known globally. This special issue is meant to begin to address this lacuna by focusing on one specific geographical region – Africa – which is of course central to questions of both race and religion. The reality of political communities in Africa cannot be understood properly independently of colonial racialisation. As Frantz Fanon has shown, the formation of colonial political communities on the African continent was premised on a Manichaean world view, a compartmentalised conception of a political community based on racial exclusion in terms of the colour line (Fanon [1952] 2008). As such the vast amount of literature in the field of critical philosophy of race has focused on the race-colour intersection. This has slowly begun to change as more research is being done on the race-religion constellation which takes account of the impact and force of "religion" in the processes of racialisation and political exclusion as "religion" is at the centre of the colonial and racial project (Ramose 2005; Topolski 2018). Nonetheless, much less scholarly and philosophical attention has been given to understanding and unravelling the role of "religion" in conceptions and

practices of colonial and postcolonial political practices of racial exclusion in Africa. In Africa today, religion plays a central role in identity discourses and practices (Sanni 2016), therefore the need to understand the role of the race-religion intersection in the constitution of political communities as conscripts of colonialism and modes of political exclusion becomes imperative.

In Africa, religion and race take on numerous entanglements, some of which are fundamentally contradictory. On the one hand, since colonisation, Christianity has been the basic framework from which Africans have been socio-politically and theoretically constructed as inferior races of human beings to be subjugated and exploited by white Christians. On the other hand, Christianity has been a source of anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles on the African continent and abolitionist struggles across the Atlantic. Given this contradictory position of Christianity on race and racism, we propose that race and racism in Africa emerged within Christian thinking and practices but with different and dissenting positions on the justification of racism. And of course, Christian racist thinking and practices were not imposed on eternally peaceful and egalitarian African political communities. Many political communities in Africa had hierarchy, exclusion and sometimes even violence in their sociopolitical organisation. But as Aimé Césaire argues, "on the old ones – very real [forms of exclusion and violence] – they [Christians] have superimposed others – very detestable" (2000, 43). With the arrival of Christianity in fifteenth-century Africa, African local forms of exclusion and hierarchy began to be registered and indexed within Christian thinking and practices "which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity = civilisation*, *paganism = savagery*, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences" (Césaire 2000, 33, italics in original).

Before the dominance of the category of race in explaining and justifying the exploitation, domination, enslavement and dehumanisation of Africans by white Christians, the category of religion – with Christianity holding the title of true religion (Topolski 2018) – was fundamental in the construction and conception of Africans as inferior. As the category of race emerges to take discursive dominance in the construction of human differences between Africans and white Christians, the idea of race takes over what we have come to call racist thinking and practices from religion or in this case, Christianity. In her essays "The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism" (1984) and "1492: A New World View" (1995), Silvia Wynter shows that the modern secular metaphysical order that structures and justifies racist modes of constructing human differences and organising human sociopolitical intercourse is essentially western Christianity in form albeit reconfigured in secular garb. The category of race therefore emerges to take on the conceptual and political work that the category of religion in Christianity had begun to do in the fifteenth and sixteenth century as western Europe increasingly imposes its presence and domination of the planet.

One of the main modes by which Christians encountered and represented Africans operated by way of what Valentin Mudimbe has called a double representation (1988, 8–9). One way in which Christians formed representations of Africans was by reducing and neutralising differences between them and Africans and allowing a sense of sameness based on Christianity, which was simultaneously used to construct non-Christian forms of social, cultural and political existence. The other way of representing Africans was by emphasising differences between Christians and Africans on the basis of Christian norms

and creating separate categories of human identities (Mudimbe 1988, 9). The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European modes of encountering and representing Africans, therefore, were basically practised and articulated within a Christian religious worldview which assimilated differences among human beings into the Christian norm, only to construct racial human differences. Taking a painting as one of the modes of conceptualising and representing Africans by way of the double representation, Mudimbe writes:

> [The] objective [of the painting] is to assimilate exotic bodies into sixteenth-century Italian painting methodology, reduc[ing] and neutraliz[ing] all differences into the sameness signified by the *white* norm, which, let us keep in mind, is more religious history than a simple cultural tradition. In concrete language this reference meant a "biblical solution to the problem of cultural differences [which] was regarded by most men as the best that reason and faith could propose;" that is, the same origin for all human beings, followed by geographical diffusion and racial and cultural diversification. And it was believed that the Bible stipulated that the African could only be the slave of his brethren. (Mudimbe 1988, 8–9, emphasis in original)

What we wish to emphasise is Mudimbe's argument that the production of human difference, which was followed by "geographical diffusion and racial and cultural diversity," emerged within Christianity as religion. Indeed, if it is within Christian thinking and practices that racial and racist conditions emerged in Africa, the operations of race and racism should be studied and understood within their Christian foundations. This means going beyond the necessary but insufficient work of showing how the category of religion in Africa was produced within the colonial economy of manufacturing African inferiority and difference from the Christian religion. To expose the religious roots of race and racism in Africa demands that we locate Christian religion at the centre of racial colonialism.

Based on the current state of the art of literature on this topic, we have identified at least four themes in the literature on religion which we found to make the connection between race and religion. Of course, these themes are not exhaustive. We believe there may be literature that studies religion and its connections to race which we may not be aware of.

The first theme is on the connections between race and religion in critical theory of race and philosophy of race. While doing the necessary work of exposing and theorising the rise and persistence of racist thinking and practices in Africa, most of the literature on race and racism focuses on secular racist thinking and practices (Ranger 1982; Ross 1982; van den Berghe 1983; Appiah 1993; Eze 1997; Grovogui 2001; Bassil 2005; Garuba 2008; Pierre 2018).

The second theme in the literature that connects race with religion holds that Christianity was used to justify racist thinking and practices (Tiryakian 1957; Lafferty 1990). This position constructs western Christianity as essentially apart from the constitution of race and racism (Pillay 2017).

The third theme is on the role of religion in Africa. There is a significant amount of literature in Africa that connects religion to law (Nsereko 1986; Green 2009; van der Vyver and Green 2008; Kirkham 2013; Green, Gunn, and Hill 2018; Tweneboah 2021), development (Molnar 1966; Agbiji and Swart 2015; Chitando et al. 2020), politics (Haynes 1995; Ellis and Ter Haar 1998; Campbell 1999; Meyer 2004; Sanni 2016; Woermann and Sanni 2020; Willis and Mwakimako 2021; Sackey and Dexia 2021),

and conflict (Molnar 1966; Basedau and de Juan 2008; McCauley 2017; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert 2019; Abbink 2020) but with little to no attention given to the foundational connections of race and religion. Of course, there is marginal literature which questions the racial contours of the discourse of development in Africa (Pierre 2020). Connected to literature on religion, there are some scholars on religion in Africa who have underscored the connections between the study of religion in African and colonial and postcolonial governmentalities (Chidester 1996, 2014; Meyer 2004; Settler 2018). This literature opens the space for further research on the fundamental connections of race and religion beyond the scholarly field of religion.

The fourth theme is on the relationship between African secular national states and a citizenly which is perceived to be highly religious (Isabirye 2002; Leatt 2007, 2017; Abbink 2014; Engelke 2015; Mahmood 2016; Nwauche 2021). With different points of focus, this literature examines and theorises the relationships between postcolonial African nation states with the diverse religious communities to which their citizens belong. Some literature compares Christianity and Islam in relation to the secular democratic state, but sadly ends up reproducing racist tropes about Islam (Kedourie 1994). The relationship between the secular and religion has significantly very little literature in Africa as Engelke (2015) correctly argues. Besides being understudied, most literature on the relationship between the postcolonial African secular national state and a citizenly perceived to be highly religious rarely questions the entanglements of the secular with the connections between race and religion.

Based on the four themes, we have made some observations and raised some points of intervention. The first intervention proposes that a comprehensive and historically informed understanding of race and racism demands a thorough and proper account of the fundamental connections of categories of race and religion. This intervention follows from the observation that much of the scholarship on the rise of race and racism in Africa holds a secular view of the rise of race and racism. Race and racism are theorised more in terms of the secular justifications of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonial enterprises that began in the nineteenth century. This is mostly the case in critical race theory and the philosophy of race (Appiah 1993; Eze 1997; Mamdani 1996). But as we have shown earlier, the emergence of racist thinking and practices in Africa begins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Second, we have observed that we need to study the connections between race and religion in their complexities and multifaceted characteristics. This means that scholarship on race and religion needs to move beyond the view that "Christianity has sometimes been used in ethnocentrism or racism" (Lafferty 1990, 136). Proposing only an instrumental relationship between race and religion assumes that racism emerged outside western Christian thought and practices. In this way, racism is perceived as having an instrumental relationship with Christianity, and Christianity is reduced to being a tool to propagate racism. Such a position runs counter to the historical emergence of racism in Africa and falls short of uncovering and facing the contradictions in Christianity with regards to the rise and maintenance of racism and racist conditions in Africa, and across the world.

Third, the study of religion in Africa cannot be fully understood without its basic connection to race. And more specifically, conceptions and practices of religion in Africa cannot be fully understood outside the contours of Christianity's historical and present-

day racist paradigms or the definition of religion modelled on Christianity. Some important work has been done in the studies of religion where it is shown that religion played an important role in colonial governmentalities (Chidester 1996). However, like most scholarships on race in Africa, this scholarship needs to go beyond the view that religion took on a colonial function in the nineteenth century. As shown earlier, religion was central to conditions that made the racial colonialisation of Africa possible. If religion was central to the rise of racial colonialism in Africa, it can not only be understood as a colonial function. The scholarship on religion is yet to unravel how religion was central to racist conceptions and practices. Most of this literature exposes the connections between religion and colonialism but tends to overlook the connection with race and racism. Further, even when the colonised and ex-colonised subjects have taken up the responsibilities of fashioning religion, it is necessary to question how racist values, habits and attitudes in discourses and practices of religion continue to shape present day African sociopolitical conditions and formations. The racist domination of the African continent led to the adoption and contestations of Christian values and practices that sedimented racist domination of the African continent and its peoples. Even though the dissemination of Christian racist values, habits and attitudes may not have been totalising, racist values, habits and attitudes nonetheless permeated both African Christian converts and African indigenous sociopolitical and epistemic structures:

> If at the cultural and religious levels, through schools, churches, press, and audio-visual media the colonialising enterprise diffused new attitudes which were contradictory and richly complex models in terms of culture, spiritual values, and their transmission, [then] it also broke the culturally unified and religiously integrated schema of most African traditions. (Mudimbe 1988, 4)

Precisely because of the adoption of Christian racial and racist values, habits and attitudes by Africans that transformed most African indigenous sociopolitical and epistemic orders, which were later called religion and custom, it is imperative to examine the racist roots of Christianity which continue to sustain postcolonial racist conditions on the continent. This is made more urgent because religion – in its Christian, Islamic and African "traditional" forms – plays an important role in the sociopolitical and cultural geographies on the African continent. Africans have increasingly come to fashion themselves in religious terms (Haynes 1995; Ellis and Ter Haar 1998; Mbembe 2002; Isabirye 2002; Abbink 2014; Sanni 2016; Agbiji and Swart 2015). The European racial colonial divides between tribes, between Christians and Muslims, between Arabs and Blacks, all of which are anchored around an ever changing and self-sustaining western Christian whiteness, continue to figure prominently in African economic and cultural divides, civil wars and the collapse of postcolonial nation states. This further warrants examining the roots of racism in what Gerrie Snyman has called "Christianity's racialising mission" (Snyman 2008, 398).

Fourth, while necessary research is being done on the relationship between African secular nation states and a majority of religious citizens (Abbink 2014), there is a need to question and go beyond the binary between the secular and the religious which has its historical roots in Christianity and its fundamental connection to race and religion. Scholars such as Talal Asad (1993, 2003) and Gil Anidjar (2009, 2014) have pointed out

that the category of the secular is far from being neutral, rather, it is a discourse of power and otherness. The secular's "relation to power is not merely derivative but inherent and dynamic, the product of unequal and conflicting forces at work within and around it" (Anidjar 2009, 365). As African political institutions take on secular forms, how do they relate to the Christian racist structures which, in part, produced the secular as a way of ordering and organising sociopolitical life? Most postcolonial African nations have inherited secular political institutions from their racist colonial pasts (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2015; Leatt 2007, 2017; Takyi 2017), while the majority of their citizens have become increasingly religious which has contributed to political instability, wars, discrimination, poverty and destitution for most African peoples. In addition, the discourse of the secular in relation to religion in some discussions on African states has not lost its sense of neutrality. To be sure, without a critical interrogation of the history of the concept of the secular, with its basic connection to the entanglements of race and religion in Africa, the enchantment of secular neutrality is likely to persist (Nwauche 2021), but with it a racist and unequal distribution of humane conditions for human existence.

Further, secular nation states in Africa reproduce similar modes of excluding non-Christian "religions," such as Islam, from the public sphere in similar ways as the secular exclusion of groups such as Muslims in Europe and North America (Yassine 2019). Many endogenous African "religions" also face exclusion and discrimination from African secular states which are supposedly neutral (Settler 2018). Even when scholars such as Matthew Engelke (2015, 97) suggest that "we can't disentangle Africa from the West or 'Latin Christendom,'" and that we should "consider the ways in which the colonial, the modern, and the secular are related," the explicit and fundamental entanglements between race and religion in the secular are yet to be explicitly theorised in Africa. The constellation of race and religion, examined in works such as Engelke's, is present but muted in the colonial, modern, secular and Latin Christendom. To develop a better understanding of the secular in Africa, we argue that it is imperative to unmask the fundamental connections between race and religion, especially when, as Engelke correctly contests, we can't disentangle Africa from Latin Christendom. Our sense is that we cannot fully understand the impact of religion in Africa without fundamentally connecting it to race and racism and vice versa.

To start correcting this lacuna in the scholarship, we present several articles and an interview in this special issue which reflect on some of the issues we have raised in this introduction. As a collection, the articles and interview underscore the necessity of unmasking and understanding the fundamental connections between race and religion in Africa. Individually, each has a particular focus on the entanglements of race and religion, which show the complexity and multifaceted nature of the constellations of race and religion in Africa. Due to the limited number of articles included in the issue, the edition does not cover the entire African continent. In different ways, the articles discuss parts of Southern, Western and Central Africa. However, this introduction, the articles and the interview in the special issue consult scholarship on most parts of Africa.

In his article, Mano Delea discusses the connections between race and religion in the thought and praxis of Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912), one of the most influential African intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Blyden's intellectual contribution to Africa echoes in the work of influential African intellectuals, anti-colonialists and politicians such as Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) and Lèopold

Senghor (1906–2001). Locating Blyden in the Africana intellectual tradition and the intellectual and political conditions of his time, Delea shows how the connections between race and religion played a central and contradictory role in Blyden's intellectual contribution and politics. By locating religion at the centre of Blyden's theoretical and political understanding of race and identifying the contradictory roles race and religion played in Blyden's emancipatory projects, Dalea's contribution points us to the fundamental entanglements of race and religion in the African intellectual history we have received, and how it has shaped and continues to shape our emancipatory practices and imaginations.

In his contribution, Josias Tembo engages scholars such as Ramose Mogobe, Valentin Mudimbe, and Anthony J.R. Russel-Wood on race and racism on Africa to argue that race and racism in modernity emerged within western Christian thought and practices. By looking at discourses on reason, commerce and empire, Tembo shows how the three are fundamentally anchored within western Christian systems of thought and political practices at the dawn of modernity and racism. Tembo argues that we cannot separate mercantile practices from western Christian anthropological conceptions and imperial practices in the rise of modern racism, and specifically anti-black racism. The insertion of black Africans in the history of western Christianity had Christian anthropology (which evolved in relation to Jews and Muslims) alongside sociopolitical and economic practices as the main driving forces. By making this argument, Tembo compliments scholarship that mostly focuses on commerce as the springboard of modern racism.

Schalk Gerber's article takes on the torchbearer of enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), to discuss the political theology of apartheid. Engaging with the work of Carl Schmitt and Achille Mbembe, Gerber argues that Kant's conception of the "K"-figure as a racial category is firstly located in religion and articulated in the binary politics of enmity. The "K"-word was dominantly used in apartheid South Africa to dehumanise black Africans. In the first sustained contact between the Dutch colonists and the Xhosa people of South Africa in about 1702, the "K"-word – derived from the Arabic word for infidel – was used as a European designation for the Xhosa. The "K"-word still retains its racist violence today. This religious term, which means non-believer in Arabic, became central to European racist imaginations and political practices even to a scholar considered an important thinker of the secular. Gerber's contribution sheds more light on the fundamental connections between race and religion in South African political theology and how it connects to the larger European intellectual history.

The complexity of the entanglements of race and religion cannot be overstated in this issue. Contrary to Tembo's and Gerber's articles that identify religion as a driving force in the rise and maintenance of racism, in his contribution, Verlan Lewis discusses how Christianity shaped some anti-imperialist and anti-apartheid ideas and practices in South Africa. By examining the lives and ideas of two prominent figures in the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid ANC, Z.K. Mathews (a liberal) and Govan Mbeki (a Marxist), Lewis shows how Christianity shaped the ideas and practices of these two ANC anti-racist and anti-imperialist giants. Christianity pervaded not only the academic institutions they attended, but also their upbringing. For Lewis, the Christian influence in the African nationalist and anti-imperialist movement go beyond the two figures he discusses. He argues that Christian ideas, among others, provided the impetus for the formation of the ANC and African nationalist as an organisation in South Africa.

And finally, we are honoured to be able to include an interview with Professor David Theo Goldberg that explores different ways in which religion produces difference, hierarchy and subject formation. In conversation with Nyanchama Okemwa and Anya Topolski, Goldberg reflects on the entanglements between race and religion in Africa, African spirituality, and how they connect to the global histories of the constellations of race and religion. More specifically, in dialogue they explore how the connections between race and religion operates in social formation, group understanding and self-formation, social domination and discrimination. This also points to how the connections between race and religion, in some historical periods, led to the expulsion of certain racialised people from their homes and the extermination of others. The interview also takes on questions of the secular and its relationship to religion and race; the contradictions in Christianity for being both a source of racist thinking and practices on the one hand, and a ground for anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles on the other; as well as new and better ways of thinking about subject-formation to counter racist thinking and practices. In a dialogical, probing and insightful way, the interview explores the complex constellations of race and religion in Africa.

We are very pleased to be able to publish this special issue, and yet we are also acutely aware of how much more research needs to be done on this topic. This is but a first step and one that does not include the diversity of positions and intersections which any topic of political importance deserves. We hope to see more scholars and special issues investigating the race-religion constellation in Africa in the future, in relation to other parts of the globe, as well as in relation to gender, sexuality, racial capitalism and academic knowledge production among other important topics.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Anya Topolski is an associate professor in political philosophy at Radboud University. Her current research focuses on the race-religion constellations in Europe, past and present. Her areas of expertise are: racism, political philosophy, ethics, European identity and exclusion, antisemitism and Islamophobia, political theology, Jewish thought, Arendt, Levinas and the myth of Judeo-Christianity.

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