

Decolonising Religious Studies in South Africa: Reflections on the field 26 years after democracy

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Abstract

In light of the decolonial turn in scholarship, this essay maps the state of the field for Religious Studies in South Africa, 26 years after the first democratic elections. It suggests that between the genealogical critique of the discipline and the mapping of decoloniality in research and teaching, a description and assessment of the institutional presence and politics of Religious Studies and theology is necessary. This conceptual pause allows us to chart the practical possibilities and limitations for the discipline's future. By highlighting the contested Christonormativity that characterises contemporary South African public culture and illustrating the overrepresentation of theology in higher education, I argue that the flourishing of Christian privilege in higher education should be more critically considered within the decolonial project.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The limitations of the globally lauded racial reconciliation which marked the early years of the transition from apartheid to democracy are apparent when one observes the gross economic disparity, widespread poverty, rampant political corruption and the tragically femicidal character of South African society. Against this backdrop, it is not difficult to agree with philosopher Achille Mbembe's observation that South Africa has entered into an extended 'negative moment' (2015, p. 1).

The disruptions caused by the student protest movements of 2015 and 2016 mediated the strife of South African lived realities, through students, to the academy. These protest movements gained global traction. Various iterations could be found what are considered the centres of colonial power, the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe (see e.g., Bhambra et al., 2018). In South Africa, the student protest movements demanded the decolonisation of the educational system and knowledge production, the wide-scale transformation of universities

in terms of the racial and gender composition of academic staff, and other essential workers' insourcing. Echoing Mbembe (2015) explication of the unsettled, unnerving, and unstable nature of this negative moment and its implications for the future, Langa (2018) claims that 'student protests are not new but an extension of the unresolved past' (p. 6). As student protestors declared the academy's culpability in upholding systems and practices of myriad injustices: administrative, epistemological, personal and economical, they also charged universities with the responsibility to act in the interest of social justice (see Nyamnjoh, 2016; Langa, 2018).

Scholarship on the decolonisation of knowledge and education, as well as decolonial approaches to scholarship certainly predate the cluster of events, and orientations that the most recent student protest movements have revived. Decolonisation and its conceptual analogues are notoriously slippery and decolonial approaches to scholarship are numerous (see e.g., Smith, 1999; Sefa Dei & Lordan, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Within the academy the concepts of decolonisation and decoloniality have been engaged and explained in a variety of critical and creative ways by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, natural scientists, mathematicians, student activists and universities administrators. Given the systemic and sustained legacies of colonialism and coloniality, and how they are affecting the lived realities of individuals and communities it is unsurprising that issues related to decolonisation, decolonising and decoloniality have transcended the purview of the academy. One has only to engage in the most cursory of Internet searches to find that wellness practitioners, nongovernmental organisations, trade unions, educational institutions such as schools, politicians, journalists, filmmakers and other media practitioners including social media activists and influencers have responded to the decolonial call.

While there are significant overlaps between and among disciplines and contexts as to what signalled the decolonial turn or what constitutes a decolonial approach, as a scholar of religion I am particularly interested in what the calls for decolonisation and social justice in higher education mean for the study of religion/s within the specificity of this historical moment in South African public universities. According to scholar of religion Nye (2019) 'Decolonization is about changing how people think, talk, and act through a radical engagement with a plurality of voices and perspectives that have been historically marginalised and silenced' (p. 43). In agreement with Nye (2019) this paper adopts the perspective that insomuch that decolonising Religious Studies is about curriculum and research practices, disciplinary issues and institutional structure, it is about the enactment of social justice. Decoloniality as orientation towards research magnifies and prioritises the intertwined nature of the academy and society. In contexts of religious diversity, the lens highlights religion as site of intersectional inquiry. Mbembe (2016) suggests two key constituents in the process of decolonising the university. The first is the genealogical critique of the problematic Eurocentric, Western, racialised and racist orientations of the field. Scholar of religion in Africa, Van Klinken (2020) points out that in the study of religion generally, there is a record of rigorous and sustained critique of these aspects of the discipline. He argues that it is the second aspect, the process and practice of imagining an alternative to these problematic epistemological foundations that remains underresearched. Van Klinken (2020) joins a chorus of scholars raising critical and urgent questions about the contours of the decolonial project for and in the academic study of religion. Mallory Nye cautions against seeing 'decolonisation as simply an exercise in diversity but rather as a challenge to (and potentially a dismantling of) the field of study' (p. 1).

While I agree with Van Klinken, in this essay I wish to show that with reference to the South African context, there may be a crucial element missing between the genealogical critique of the discipline and the mapping of decoloniality in research and teaching. I argue that a description and assessment of the institutional presence and politics of the academic study of religion in South African universities in this later stage of democracy, within the context of the crisis of this negative moment and its warped temporality is missing from scholarly reflections on the state of the field (see e.g., Clasquin, 2005; Chitando, 2008). Certainly, I am not suggesting a reversion to the 'techno-bureaucratic fixes' that Mbembe (2016, p. 3) has cautioned us against, but rather advancing the utility that a critical overview of the material conditions under which the decolonial study of the study of religion/s is expected to operate may provide. This essay will show that without a reflection on the institutional context of the discipline, an incomplete depiction of the possibilities and limitations for the present and future of Religious Studies will continue to be circulated and accepted as authoritative.

2 | BACKGROUND

Beyond the sociopolitical demands of this negative moment, and the fervour of this most recent decolonial turn, both in the academy and in the study of religion, two factors have determined the shape of this essay. The first is historical and the second, epistemological. First, in the context of the tumult of the 1980s, a time where common implements of apartheid, namely, unrelenting police brutality, violent state surveillance and widespread censorship, were particularly heightened, David Chidester considered the meaning of the Christian normative nature of the state and its policy of Christian National Education for the presence of religious diversity and the nonconfessional, academic study of religion. In exploring the Christian conquest of public education during apartheid Chidester proposes that Religious Studies, 'involves an inherently political praxis even when it is not overtly engaged in exposing the linkages between religion and politics'. Chidester suggested that Christian National Education was a form of hegemonic state violence, and formulated Religious Studies as a political practice capable of contesting this violence through the assertion of religious pluralism and nonviolence (1987, p. 6). Against the background of Christian hegemony in politics and education Chidester suggests that Religious Studies is a nonviolent political practice, based on religious pluralism, that contests symbolic and material exclusion, subordination and erasure. Chidester's reflection on the social justice potential of Religious Studies during a time of social crisis wherein issues such as gross inequality and discrimination, both flagrant and surreptitious, dominated as grievances, resonates with the current negative moment in which South Africans find ourselves. This essay uses Chidester's appraisal of the state of Religious Studies during apartheid as an entry point for considering the current milieu within which the discipline is located.

Secondly, feminist and queer scholars have long argued for the recognition and critical consideration of the contextual, embodied and subjective features, of knowledge and knowledge production. The decolonial turn has once again brought up for scrutiny the unsustainability of methodological atheism or agnosticism, once the hallmark of Religious Studies (typically framed in opposition to theology), for socially responsive and responsible scholarship (Cantrell, 2016). It would be fair to assume that in Religious Studies, this might manifest as a confession of faith or declaration of religious affiliation. This is not the case however, especially in light of the gross oversimplification of the individuals' religious or nonreligious entanglements that such a statement would entail. Instead, I suggest that in acknowledgment of methodological agnosticism/atheism's universalising and depoliticising tendencies through a careful reflection on epistemological subjectivity, we may be better able to discern and challenge the biases and assumptions that have come to dominate the character of the academic study of religion in South Africa.

As a non-Christian South African woman of colour from a middle-class background, I spend much of my life as a racialised, gendered and politicised being. As a feminist and scholar of religion, trained at a previously white-university and as a younger woman in a field which is still largely dominated by older males, many of whom bear the dual privilege of the titles of professor and priest, I have been personally subjected to diverse iterations of violence both personally and professionally. These experiences shape my epistemological orientation towards research that is interested in upsetting take-for-granted norms and assumptions embedded in systems of unequal power and privilege. In assessing the state of Religious Studies in South Africa, my own experiences as a scholar, personally, professionally and politically have shaped the conceptualisation of this essay.

The first section of this paper briefly sketches the public and political privilege of Christianity in democratic South Africa. Thereafter, an overview of the representation of Religious Studies and theology within universities will be provided. Finally, I will demonstrate how the normative status of Christianity in society is enhanced in higher education. In conclusion, I will argue that while Christian privilege has been eroded and contested in many aspects of public life, the fact that the academy and scholarship are spaces where it is not only enhanced but allowed to flourish unchecked may undermine the epistemological and social justice efforts of the decolonial project.

3 | SOUTH AFRICA: THE 'CHRISTIAN' COUNTRY

Religion and politics have a longstanding, on-going history of intimacy. In South Africa, this relationship has transpired in interesting and surprising ways. During apartheid, religion and politics were so explicitly and deeply intertwined that it was difficult to differentiate where the one began and the other ended. This deliberate blurring of the boundaries between church and state was a key feature of the regime. In the democratic era, despite legal and political instruments such as constitutional precepts that claim secular governance and promise religious freedom, the role, function and status of religion and its correlatives-religious diversity and religious freedom are not only uncertain but also contested.

If the apartheid state has been lamented for its religiously sanctioned, racist political policies and practices, the democratic state was lionised by some for its concerted efforts to disentangle religion and politics and lamented by others for being anti-religion and anti-religious (for more, see Chidester, 2003; Tayob, 2016). Legal scholar Amien (2015) suggests that 'South Africa's willingness to respect religious freedom not only in the private sphere but also in the public sphere is as a direct result of its discriminatory-laden history under colonialism and apartheid' (p. 179). The 1996 Constitution, along with its Liberal Bill of Rights promised all-encompassing equality. Whereas the apartheid state claimed that it provided religious freedom as a constitutional right for all South Africans, in practice this freedom was titular and ridiculed by the blatant religious overtones which accompanied racist state policies and policing. With the 1996 Constitution, for the first time genuine religious freedom along with its conceptual derivatives religious equality and religious dignity were inscribed as law.

The South African constitutional adaptation of religious freedom allows for a cooperative and accommodating arrangement between religion and state, as opposed to a strict separation between the two. In the first decade of democracy many legal, political and intellectual resources were committed to unravelling the new role and position of religion in the public sphere. However, in public and political culture the notion that South Africa as a country, has a religious identity which is decidedly Christian still circulates as a social fact. The residual influence of the apartheid religious inheritance is only partly culpable, contemporary Christonormativity has been transformed and re-produced by new political and public role players.

During the 2016 election campaigns, the ruling party, the African National Congress, sought to gain the vote of the Western Cape, the only province held by the official opposition party. On the campaign trail, struggle veteran and national chairperson of the African National Congress (ANC), Gwede Mantashe addressed a Christian congregation on a Sunday morning. Speaking on behalf of the ANC, he claimed that 'According to our belief, we were anointed by God to lead the country from oppression to freedom and there are things that show us that we have that anointment....' (De Klerk, 2016, p. 1). Illustrating the political pliability of this biblical myth of origin, more than seven decades earlier, the national party used the same narrative to describe its escape from the tyranny of the British and galvanise its religiopolitical aspirations (Thompson, 1987). Gwede Mantashe is certainly not the only politician nor is the ANC the only political party that has publicly exploited the strategic utility of Christianity in national politics; however, this example specifically illustrates the intimate albeit informal contemporary enmeshment between religion and governance (see West, 2010 for a more sustained analysis).

The privilege of Christianity has been challenged in various areas of human engagement. Recently, the constitutional court ruled against freedom of religion, as a defence for corporal punishment at home and dismissed this mode of discipline as unconstitutional (*Freedom of Religion South Africa v. Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development and Others*, 2019). Media reporting the matter showed that many Christian South Africans vehemently disagreed with this ruling and saw it as an undue limitation of their religious rights (Sibanda, 2019). Constitutional cases and other state actions which limit the scope of Christian influence on public culture are often framed by concerned Christians as indicative of a Christian crisis in South Africa (Tastard, 2017).

Although the courts have shown to regulate Christian privilege in some legal and constitutional matters, this does not account for the gamut of ways in which Christonormativity penetrates society. The media is a market place for encountering issues around religion and religious diversity. With regards to media expression of

Christonormative tropes in various aspects of public life, issues related to school uniforms and dress code requirements with respect to the rights of non-Christian learners are a constant news feature (Hyman, 2019), reports show the rise of Christian survivalists movements who consider Christianity under threat in South Africa (Simillie, 2019), and the increasing regulation of religious rituals in the interest of public order have reported by the media (Henrico, 2019). Much like in Hollywood, on local television and film the idea that everyone is Christian unless stated otherwise, is part of the *mise en scene* (Steinberg, 2010). It is important to note that Christian privilege does not wholly extend to all those whom claim Christian status, mainline Protestant Churches, mainly English speaking with both deep colonial and protest credentials generally dominate in terms of political and public stature. Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical churches have also grown in terms of public visibility and esteem in part due to its connection with high-profile, political and popular figures and the appeal of prosperity theology in the South African context (Chipkin & Leatt, 2006; Frahm-Arp, 2018).

Statistical data as a measurement of religious affiliation and adherence in general, and in this instance, the internal diversity of Christianity in particular, can only offer limited insight. Notwithstanding the associated limitations, surveys and census consistently confirm the numerical dominance of Christianity (Schoeman, 2017). Given the history of religious oppression by a faux majority during apartheid, in the context of the South Africa's democracy, the simple invocation that majority rules, is not only unconstitutional but also indefensible given the policies, precepts and practices which nuance and expand notions of fairness and equality beyond the mundanity of numerical figures. This essay is not disputing the numerical dominance of Christianity in South Africa. On the contrary, it is drawing attention to how the social, political, cultural privilege that this statistical strength generates has been reproduced within higher education. Unlike scholarship on the United States and Western Europe where (see Beydoun, 2019; Joshi, 2020), religion along with race and gender is more directly engaged as a system of power and privilege, the contested yet pervasive symbolic power of Christianity in society and the academy has evaded the scrutiny of the decolonial turn's calls for the interrogation and critique of power in the pursuit of epistemological diversity and justice in South Africa.

4 | RELIGION AND THEOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

At the genesis of democracy, the dismantlement of Christian National Education was urgent for the nation-building agenda of the new state. According to Chidester (1987) during apartheid, 'religion [was] mandated by law to appear as Christian instruction, Christian biblical studies, Christian morning devotions, and Christian nurture' (p. 5). This Christian conquest of public education was a vital component of the religiopolitical strategy of the apartheid state. In the new dispensation, the question of religion's role in public education was subjected to protracted critical attention by policy makers, politicians, academics, members of the public representing various religious communities and other stakeholders.

Religion Education, the school-based adaptation of Religious Studies has been subjected to much more directed and sustained scrutiny by scholars of religion than its university-based counterpart, Religious Studies. In light of its proximity to important questions of constitutionality, the management of difference, and mass public education, Religion Education developed as a subfield in the academic study of religion and has been taken up as a matter of philosophical reflection, social justice and pedagogical development. The Religion in Education Policy of 2003 ensures that at least in principle and in public schools, religion is taught from a non-confessional and historical perspective (see e.g., Clasquin, 2005; Tayob, 2016).

It would appear that in higher education the same calculated Christian uncoupling of educational programmes and public educational institutions did not take place. There are a total of 26 universities in South Africa. Nine of these institutions are considered universities of technology and one is a health sciences institution. All of these universities receive state-funding. From among the remaining 16 universities, 12 offer degrees, courses, majors and specialisations in Religious Studies, Christian theological studies and various other Christian-oriented subdisciplines

such as Biblical studies and Missiology and so forth. At two institutions, in addition to Religious Studies and theological studies, major or specialisations in Islamic Studies are offered.

Four of these 12 institutions house autonomous or semi-autonomous Religious Studies departments within faculties of arts, humanities or social sciences. In this instance, I am referring to departments of Religious Studies which are not explicitly and operationally associated to departments of theology. The departments are diversely named. At the University of South Africa (UNISA) the department is called Religious Studies and Arabic, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) is home to a department of Religion Studies and at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), religion is hosted alongside philosophy and classical studies. At the University of Cape Town (UCT), the department is simply called Religious Studies.

The Department of Religious Studies and Arabic (UNISA) includes the subdiscipline of Islamic studies in the bouquet of courses that it offers. This department declares as its aim, 'To cultivate citizens that can critically engage from multi-disciplinary perspectives with religious traditions within African contexts' (University of South Africa, 2021, para 1). While no theological courses are offered in this department, individual departments of Biblical and Ancient Studies, Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology and Practical and Systematic Theology operate at the same university.

In the Department of Religion Studies (UJ) despite its Religious Studies orientation in relation to undergraduate courses, in the postgraduate programme one is able to attain an honours degree with theology or biblical studies as major or specialisation subjects. The department claims to prepare students for 'academic research, teaching and ministry' (University of Johannesburg, 2021, para 2). In the Religion, Philosophy and Classics (UKZN) triptych, both Religious Studies and theology are offered as programmes although on different campuses. The Department of Religious Studies (UCT), 'takes as its subject all religions and their interaction with other aspects of life, intellectual, political and artistic. It is essentially pluralistic, committed to no particular faith but endeavouring to understand each religion in its own terms, using the tools of textual, historical, sociological and philosophical analysis' (University of Cape Town, 2019, para 2). This is the only department that does not concurrently offer courses, majors or specialisations in theology or an equivalent Christianity-oriented programme. Controversy around the naming of this department has a long and well-documented history (Jethro, 2007). While the UCT does not host a separate department of theology or equivalent, it is worth mentioning that there is a history of theological research, and teaching offered in the department. However, in the past two decades this has slowly disappeared from the contemporary offerings. The ongoing emeritus status of former member of faculty and biblical scholar, Charles Wanamaker, further illustrates the blurry boundaries that the names of departments and faculties occlude.

Of the eight remaining universities, three claim to offer religion and theology contemporaneously. At the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the University of the Free State, certificates and degrees in theology and divinity are offered as well as professional ministerial training for Christians. Religion Studies and Religion Education courses are offered and students are informed that 'the motivation for Theological students to study other religions is to equip them to better understand and meaningfully engage with other religions, either in discussions or for the purpose of missions' (Faculty of Religion and Theology; University of the Free State, 2021, p. 11). At the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria (UP), the goal is to 'serve the church, community and science bearing in mind our devotion to the African context and sensitivity to the concerns of different Christian traditions of faith'. At the third department of Religion and Theology (UWC), religion features as part of a theologically oriented curriculum. Religious Studies supports a curriculum in ethics, which focuses on questions of morality.

Three universities departments and faculties are exclusively committed to Christian Theological studies and openly declare its confessional status and denominational orientation. The Faculty of Theology at Northwest University (NWU), pledges its allegiance to the reformed tradition, although 'accommodating staff members and students of other theological persuasions who respect the Reformed foundation and inclusive approach of the Faculty of Theology' (Faculty of Theology NWU). The Faculty of Theology at University of Stellenbosch, also takes

reformed theology as a point of departure, but also offers training to ministers from the Anglican Church. The Department of Theology at the University of Zululand claims an interdenominational scope. The Faculty of Theology at Fort Hare University, takes an African-centred approach to the history of Christian theology. At a fourth institution, Nelson Mandela University, a recent prospectus shows that a PHD in Religious Studies or Biblical studies was once offered but has since been discontinued.

The data presented above is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive assessment of the current representation of Religious Studies and Theology Departments and faculties in South Africa. Nor is it meant to overemphasise a false dichotomy between Religious Studies and theology. While this essay has examined the names, prospectuses and course descriptions, a more detailed overview would need to consider and include the history of the faculties, an audit of the staff in terms of professional training, research interests as well as race and gender representation not merely as identity categories but as sites of power and privilege, as well as oppression and exclusion. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully consider the implications for the professoriate that a more equal representation of religious traditions within higher education Departments of theology and Religious Studies might bring, within the context of decoloniality in higher education the recruitment of non-Christian scholars, whether through personal affiliation or research orientation, would only serve to encourage facile diversity. Decolonisation of the professoriate requires a marriage of the political and academic miens of these processes, and the development and recruitment of scholars who are committed to decoloniality within teaching, research and university service would need to be prioritised in order to incur genuine change. As Nye (2019) explains that "Decolonization is not about 'finding space' at the table: it is about changing the room" (p. 4). Furthermore, the content of the academic programmes would need to be subjected to closer scrutiny.

This essay is not implying that Religious Studies is only studied in departments of Religious Studies by those trained in the academic study of religion or that all research emanating from Theology Departments is theological in character, nor is it arguing against the potential for innovative interdisciplinary work. Instead, it is interested in disrupting the notion that the over representation of theology is merely a historical predilection upheld by a misguided sense of majoritarianism. It is clear that Religious Studies occupy a junior status in South African universities. For example, in an article curiously entitled, 'The quest for the understanding of Religious Studies: Seeing Dragons' Beyers (2016, p. 2078) from the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the UP, poses the following question, 'why would any Faculty of Theology entertain the idea of hosting Religious Studies?' While Beyers generally seems to understand the value of Religious Studies, his own bias as a theologically oriented scholar, is evident in his framing of theology as the host and Religious Studies as the guest. Beyer's sentiment is echoed by the dominance of theology in local academic publishing. There are currently thirteen active local journals listed under the category of religion and theology, by the higher education authority in South Africa. Out of these fourteen journals, nine are theological (this includes Biblical studies). Of the remaining five, the *African Journal of Gender and Religion* provides opportunity for the research on nontheological topics and approaches to the gendered intersections of religion and theology, the *Journal of Islamic Studies* features multidisciplinary approaches to the study of Islam, and the journal *Alternation* a multidisciplinary offering which often features research which includes both religion and theology topics and approaches as does the *Journal Religion and Theology*. Finally, the *Journal for the Study of Religion* is the only journal which is explicitly an outlet for Religious Studies scholarship (Department of Higher Education, 2020).

The point here is not to draw sharp disciplinary distinctions, or to debate the ways that Religious Studies and theology can and do overlap, but rather to once more, illustrate how theological scholarship and consequently, theology scholars have much more scope for circulating and disseminating their research than those working on religion from different perspectives. Notwithstanding the internal diversity of Christianity and its various hybrid iterations, it would be disingenuous to exclude the fact that theology in South Africa has a singular religious character which is Christian. Consequently, this means that in a context of religious diversity, freedom and equality, Christianity as a religious and research orientation is favoured. These insights demonstrate how Religious Studies

and Theology do not arrive equally at the point of engagement. Therefore, before genuine interdisciplinary work and decoloniality within teaching and research can be imagined, the ways in which Christian privilege continues to mould both areas of inquiry must be recognised and problematised.

This illustration of the Christian conquest of higher education is rudimentary, however, even this cursory outline, based on information available in the public domain, there is only one university, UCT which offers Religious Studies as an autonomous discipline and orientation towards the study of religion, unrelated to and accompanied by theology. This does not discount the presence of Religious Studies at the universities of South Africa, Kwazulu-Natal and Johannesburg, but it accentuates the fact that the presence of Religious Studies is almost always moderated by the presence of theology. Notwithstanding the fact that three universities (Stellenbosch, Pretoria and North West) have formal links to the reformed tradition, and subsequently the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church), which was infamous for its enthusiastic support of apartheid, more than 25 years after the dismantlement of apartheid to argue that this contemporary arrangement is a historical inheritance is to overlook the ways in which Christonormativity is produced and perpetuated within the contemporary milieu in general and universities in particular. The tenor of theology in South Africa is still deeply connected to Eurocentric paradigms. The marginal inclusion of curricula in black, queer, African Feminist theologies, programmes in the Africanisation of theology, and singular courses on African Indigenous Churches are evidence of the limited and exclusionary scope of the field in its current form.

5 | RELIGION AND THEOLOGY IN CRISIS

In higher education institutions, the study of religion and theology has since the onset of democracy, been on a steady decline and in a state of crisis. Faculties as the largest unit of representation have been downgraded, merged and in some cases closed. Public funding has been redirected to the development of areas of research and teaching deemed more urgent for the betterment of society (Williams, 1998). Although a compelling case for the place of the nonconfessional plural academic study of religion/s over theology could be made over, this essay is more concerned with the conditions which should be considered when imagining the study of religion within the decolonial turn, and against the background of the Christonormative character of society. If changes to the higher education landscape have affected the study and teaching of theology, represented in more than half the total number of universities in the country, to the extent that church historian Pillay (2017) claims under it is under 'threat' then Religious Studies, autonomously represented in only one university and one academic journal is gasping for its last breath.

It is prudent for scholars to remember that while the historical privilege of theology within South African universities is a product of the apartheid regime, the critique and dismantlement of the taken-for-granted continuance of this nefariously earned privilege within a context of religious diversity, underwritten by the principle of equality, is the charge of decolonial scholarship. In a context where access to university education was severely limited and only unconditionally available to South Africans irrespective of race or gender for the past 25 years, Christians, irrespective of denominational orientations are provided with an additional level of social esteem and access as a result of their religion's normative status in universities. By extension, through the intellectual and epistemological privileging of theology and consequently the study of Christianity, the presence of this religion is also favoured above others, who may only be represented in less formal structures, such as worship spaces or extracurriculars. The use of public funds and resources to train Christian religious leaders affirms the legitimacy of this group's social presence in ways which are not offered to other religious groups. Christianity and its internal operations are a part of the intellectual capital production of university institution which confirms its normative status and undermines the spirit of religious freedom and equality that democracy promises.

6 | CONCLUSION

Chidester's exploration of the 'Christian conquest of higher education' took place against the background apartheid state violence, during a time when religious diversity was actively suppressed. Given the religiopolitical ambitions of the apartheid state, the Christian National nature of society and character of education was unsurprising. Within decolonial scholarship in South African religious privilege in general and Christian privilege in particular as an intersection of injustice and has received far less sustained and focused attention such as the issues of patriarchy, heteronormativity and racism. In this essay I hope to have shown that through perceiving and discerning the material and epistemological power and persuasion of Christian privilege in society and research, we are able to better understand the possibilities and limitations of the decolonial turn in scholarship for the study of religion and can begin to map avenues of research that address some of the oversights that this arrangement sustains. In the spirit of collegiality and clarity, it warrants mentioning that a critique of Christonormativity should never not constitute the denial of a legitimate place for Christianity and perhaps even theology, in higher education. Furthermore, Christonormativity does not represent the only kind of religious hegemony and privilege that can shape a society. Hindu Nationalism in India, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand as well as religious minorities in Islamic countries illustrate the contextual nature of religious hegemony and privilege (see e.g., McCargo, 2004; Anand, 2011; Keyes, 2016).

The decolonial turn may benefit from a renewed conversation on the relationship between theology and Religious Studies against the background of issues such as Christonormativity and religious diversity, and other issues related to epistemological pluralism and intersectional social justice. Once the acknowledgement of Christonormativity is recognised for its power and persuasion, then religious diversity not only as a social fact, but as a social, cultural and intellectual value can be affirmed as well as appreciated.

This 'negative moment', along with the decolonial turn into which the student movements of 2015 and 2016 breathed new life, are in many ways underwritten by both the tacit and overt denial of the material conditions of diverse lived realities (Mbembe, 2015). The systemic othering which sustains Christonormativity is not insipid, Christian privilege, although at times contested, still continues to be circulated by the media, public officials, politicians and religious leaders as a social fact and the myth of the Christian country, has negative material implications for the lived realities of those who do not conform to its changing sensibilities. The favoured position of theology in higher education cannot be divorced from the social implications of the normativity that it generates. Universities as aspirational spaces, formal centres of knowledge production, and visionary incubators have an important role to play in contesting the epistemic and material injustice that is Christian privilege in society. A necessary first step, is the recognition that it is in universities where this privilege is heightened and continues to flourish. Against the background of historical religious suppression and contemporary religious privilege, both within society and the academy, this example illustrates the epistemological and material challenges arising from a reflection on the potential and limitations of the Religious Studies decolonial project. The caveat has been for a conceptual pause, that takes cognisance of the ways in which in light of the decolonial turn, the political utility of Religious Studies as a site for the intersectional critique of religious privilege and the affirmation of the intellectual and social value of religious diversity is revealed.

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