

PATRICE HAYNES

Liverpool Hope University

TOWARD DECOLONIZING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION:  
THINKING HERETICALLY WITH AFRICAN INDIGENOUS  
RELIGIONS

'The great powers of the [Western] world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face', Steve Biko<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

Anxious to safeguard the autonomy of philosophy as that which can and *should* be clearly demarcated from theology are those who consider the aim of philosophy of religion to be the rational appraisal of religious assertions, independent of any creedal commitments. For example, in his textbook *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, Keith E. Yandell holds that religious claims are 'neither more nor less open to rational assessment than any other sorts of claims'.<sup>2</sup> Yet it may be wondered whether the rational evaluation of religious (embodied) beliefs should be the crowning aim of philosophy of religion? Since the turn of the twenty-first century a growing number of philosophers have sought to displace questions concerning the rationality and justification of religious beliefs from the centre-stage of philosophy of religion. Grace Jantzen, for example, boldly (and controversially) argues that promoting the 'becoming divine' of women and men ought to be the fundamental task of a feminist philosophy of religion, one that would challenge the 'masculinism' of analytic philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup> Another example is Michael McGhee who, wishing to recover the importance of practice to both philosophy and religion, elaborates philosophy of religion as 'a kind of spiritual exercise,' drawing on Buddhist and ancient Greek thought.<sup>4</sup>

Wishing to contribute to these efforts to re-envision philosophy of religion, my aim in this article is to explore how philosophy of religion might be articulated afresh in ways that begin to extricate the field from the bounds of Eurocentric thinking. It does not assume that the rational inspection of religious beliefs, even given an expanded, contextual concept of reason, constitutes the core enterprise of philosophy of religion (though it preserves a space for such reflection). Indeed, to insist on such an enterprise most likely reflects a neurotic desire to protect disciplinary boundaries. Least it finds itself 'reduced' to the descriptive-explanatory work of religious studies, sociology, anthropology or, worse, the speculative flights of theology, analytic philosophy of religion (at its most extreme) emphasizes the objective, rational evaluation of religious belief

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I like*, (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1987, Revised Edition), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23.

as its distinctive theoretical labour, one that delineates its disciplinary identity. However, I think Richard King is right when he claims that philosophy of religion's apprehension over securing its borders not only overlooks the extent to which the field remains steeped in its Christian history but betrays 'a peculiarly western way of dividing up the world'.<sup>5</sup> A decolonial intervention in the philosophy of religion necessarily reconfigures the field in dramatic ways. It does not simply demand greater diversity in the range of religions to be assessed philosophically but also new modes and trajectories of thinking produced by the effort of engaging with the 'world-sense'<sup>6</sup> of non-Europeans marginalized by colonial modernity.<sup>7</sup>

The article comprises three sections. The first outlines a genealogy of the concepts 'religion' and 'the human' showing their entangled histories and their constitutive role in the project of colonial modernity. In tracing this genealogy, I draw on the work of Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter. Particular attention will be given to the invention of what Wynter calls 'Man' – that is, European Man, white, bourgeois and rational – who serves as the centre of gravity for colonial modernity and must be a target for critique in decolonial thinking. The second section traces the emergence of modern philosophy of religion. Informed by Wynter's genealogical analysis, and with a focus on David Hume's writings, it shows how the idea of 'true religion' – read the 'religion of reason' – promotes Man as the exemplary human. The final section is where my discussion takes a more constructive turn. In conversation with African philosophers Okot p'Bitek and Achille Mbembe, I begin to sketch how decolonizing philosophy of religion might be approached, particularly in light of African indigenous religions. Where there have been developments in broadening the scope of philosophy of religion beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition, these largely focus on Asian religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism or Daoism. Indigenous religions are generally neglected.<sup>8</sup> By treating indigenous religions as worthy of attention, philosophy of religion can begin to challenge Eurocentric developmental accounts of such religions, whereby they are viewed as ahistorical and primordial, and so inherently primitive in comparison to the so-called historical 'world religions'. Taking its cue from Wynter's decolonial theory, this article argues that a central task for decolonizing

<sup>5</sup> Richard King, 'Philosophy of Religion as Border Control: Globalization and the Decolonization of the 'Love of Wisdom (*philosophia*)' in Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, eds., *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Oyérónké Oyéwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 2-3. Oyéwùmí offers this term as an alternative to 'world-view', which reflects a Western privileging of the visual and the detached observer.

<sup>7</sup> Briefly, by 'colonial modernity' I mean, the way in which European modernity and its ideals (autonomous, universal reason; freedom; progress) includes as its constitutive counterpart an underside, namely, colonized spaces and peoples, beginning with the 'discovery' of the Americas. Importantly, the term alerts us to patterns and relations of power that enable Euro-American control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality and knowledge and subjectivity of colonized peoples, even after formal mechanisms of colonialism have been dismantled.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware of only one major study that seriously engages with indigenous religions in doing philosophy of religion, which is Arvind Sharma's *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006). This book is a much needed contribution to the field. However, by using John Hick's model of philosophy of religion as his framework, Sharma's approach may be charged with not going far enough since it only extends the religious material used in philosophy of religion, without rethinking its terms and methods in light of religions that may challenge the prevailing dogmas of the field.

philosophy of religion is re-imagining the human beyond the domain of Man. Moreover, it invites us to undertake this task by ‘thinking with’ the theoretical and practical intelligence of African indigenous religions and indigenous religions more broadly.

#### *Religion in Colonial Context: Inventing Man*

The heliocentric cosmology of Copernicus; the Portuguese exploration of coastal sub-Saharan Africa; and Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the Americas in 1492 would be pivotal moments in Europe’s passage to modernity. As Wynter explains in a number of her essays, such moments challenged theocentric ways of knowing and being, based on the Judeo-Christian order and value code: Spirit (= life)/Flesh (= sin and death).<sup>9</sup> The theological notion that heaven and earth are ontologically distinct would give way to the secular idea that the universe was created ‘for the sake of humankind’ (*propter nos homines*),<sup>10</sup> thereby permitting the rational investigation of both the heavens and the earth according to discernible laws of nature. Similarly sacred geography would be transformed. The division of the earth into habitable and inhabitable zones (the latter held to be outside of God’s grace) would give way to an anthropological distinction between the lands of civilized (i.e. European) peoples and the lands of barbarous (non-European) peoples. Furthermore, and most importantly for Wynter, while the humanism of lay thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) could hardly be viewed as anti-Christian, it nevertheless marked a departure from thinking the human as the fallen, subordinate other to God’s sovereignty. The idea of the True Christian Self (*homo religiosus*) would be increasingly supplanted by the ‘rational political subject of the state’ (*homo politicus*).<sup>11</sup>

According to Wynter, the gradual waning of ecclesial authority and its theocentric perspective in Western Europe – a process she calls the ‘degodding’ or ‘de-supernaturalization’ – enabled the invention of modern genres or modes of Man. The first phase of ‘degodding’ the human (spanning from 1492 to the eighteenth century) would see the construction of what Wynter labels ‘Man1’, that is, Man as ‘ratiocentric’ yet ‘hybridly religio-secular’.<sup>12</sup> The second phase of ‘degodding’ (occurring from the late eighteenth century onwards, with Darwin’s theory of evolution being an especially catalyzing event) establishes ‘Man2’: ‘*homo economicus*’, a biocentric, purely secular figure.<sup>13</sup>

Wynter makes two important observations regarding the process of ‘degodding’ by which Euro-American modernity would be formed. First, while the onto-epistemological orders upholding Man1 and Man2 mark epochal ruptures with theocentric medieval Europe, they nevertheless remain informed by ‘the matrix Judeo-Christian formulation of a general order of existence’.<sup>14</sup> The Untrue Christian Others posited in opposition to the True Christian Self ‘was to be reinscribed, from the sixteenth century onwards, as the new Untrue Human Others to the “true” human that is Man, in its two forms’.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the anthropocentric turn from God to Man

<sup>9</sup> Much of my discussion in this section draws on: Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument’, *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2003), 257-337.

<sup>10</sup> Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,’ 278.

<sup>11</sup> Wynter, 277.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 318.

(both 1 and 2) that ushers in the modern, secular west nevertheless preserves the basic normative orientations of Latin Christianity.

Historian of religion, Daniel Dubuisson suggests that if Christianity were to be characterized by a single notion it would be that of *opposition*. Most likely he overstretches his argument. Nevertheless, he is not without grounds when he claims that Christianity ‘rests on a system of antithetical categories or principles. It is *par excellence* the domain that constituted itself “against” what was external to it (pagans, heretics, atheists, etc.), while at the same time defining itself through a series of clear-cut dichotomies’.<sup>16</sup> In Wynter’s decolonial thought, the representation of difference in terms of oppositionality would govern how Christian Europeans viewed those peoples ‘discovered’ in West Africa and the Americas, namely, as the inverse image of the True Christian Self: ‘Enemies of Christ’. According to Wynter, this oppositional (monotheistic) logic remains operative in the uneven yet insistent shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview.

Wynter’s second observation concerns what she calls the ‘*overrepresentation*’ of Euro-American Man (1 and 2) as the human in general. Whereas being bound to the one true God is the acme of a theocentric Christianity, being bound to humanity by virtue of reason – understood as singular and universal – would be the acme of Renaissance humanism. Crucially, just as an Other to the Christian God is inconceivable for the Latin Christian, equally inconceivable for the Renaissance humanist is an Other to Rational Man. For Wynter, the ‘degodding’ of Western self-understanding, both ontologically and epistemically, would leave it unable to:

[...] conceive of an Other to what it calls human – an other, therefore, to its correlated postulates of power, truth, freedom. All other modes of being human would instead have to be seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are “out there,” but adaptively, as the *lack* of the West’s ontologically absolute self-description.<sup>17</sup>

Concomitant with the invention of Man in his ratiocentric form is, Wynter tells us, the invention of the modern phenomenon of race. Prior to Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection (which would emphatically cement, by means of the biological sciences, the idea of hierarchical racial difference among human beings) Wynter details how modern notions of race first emerge in religio-secular form. Baldly put, she contends that the ‘non-homogeneity’ (i.e. total difference) between Heaven and Earth, which in turn reflected the normative Spirit/Flesh distinction of the Christian worldview, would be replicated as the non-homogeneity perceived in the ‘ostensibly divinely created difference of substance between rational humans and irrational animals’.<sup>18</sup> For Wynter, this difference with respect to reasoning capacities among human populations (such that some peoples are closer in essence to animals than humans) is racialized because it is determined by *Nature* rather than by God (though admittedly not a fully autonomous, i.e. secular, *Nature* since it would still be considered ‘God’s agent on Earth’<sup>19</sup>).

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Wynter, 282, my emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 296.

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection in the nineteenth century enabled both the articulation of a fully secularized conception of race and the transmutation (but not total destruction) of Rational Man (i.e. Man1) into bio-economic Man (i.e. Man2). Displacing the line between rational and irrational nature in the second phase of 'degodding' would be, argues Wynter with reference to W.E.B. Dubois, the 'Colour Line'. This ontologically demarcates 'between the lighter and the darker peoples of the earth',<sup>20</sup> and would be reinforced at the social level in terms of the economically strong and the economically weak.

#### *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion: True Religion in Praise of Man*

Wynter's incisive genealogical account of the invention of European Man through the transmutation of the True Christian Self has much to contribute to the work of decolonizing philosophy of religion. This is because it discloses the complex interweavings traced by the concepts 'religion', 'the secular', 'race' and 'reason', concepts that form a vital nexus in the constitution and enduring hegemony of colonial modernity. To overlook this nexus is to aid and abet the overrepresentation of Man. One way in which we can see the entanglement of philosophy of religion with the interests of colonial modernity is by considering its emergence alongside the terms 'religion' and 'the religions', noting their implication in the aforementioned constellation of concepts.

The Protestant Reformation, beginning in 1517 with the publication of Luther's *Ninety Five Theses*, just twenty-five years after Columbus' first voyage to the Americas, would see Latin Christianity fragment into a plethora of Protestant sects alongside Catholicism. It would be confessional disputes within Latin Christianity (often violent and bloody) that would generate both the generic concept of 'religion' and the plural 'religions'.

For some Protestant thinkers reason could be used as a tool not simply to construct a systematic Protestant orthodoxy but to develop a rationalized Christianity, one that would enfeeble divisive sectarian commitments and magnify unity in diversity. Jenny Daggers notes that by the end of the seventeenth century the rational reconstruction of Protestant Christianity established two clear camps which had diverged over how the relation between reason and biblical revelation should be envisaged.<sup>21</sup> The first camp – the 'rational supernaturalists' – includes thinkers such as John Locke who, in his work *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), argued that the Gospels contain truths that have a rational basis discernible to all (rational) people. Nevertheless, he admits that some biblical truths serve to *enlarge* reason – because they are revealed – but do not thereby contradict it. The second camp are the Deists, those such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury (d. 1648) and Matthew Tindal (d. 1733), who controversially advanced a 'natural religion' based solely on universal natural reason, one which offered rational justification for the existence of a creator God as well as a corresponding ethics, but excised as superfluous appeals to (often conflicting) doctrinal assertions based on revelation.

It would be Deism that paved the way for what Daggers calls 'Christianity transcended',<sup>22</sup> that is, Christianity decentred with respect to thinking religion. In its place would be the idea of an original, natural

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Daggers, *Postcolonial Theology of Religions: Particularity and Pluralism in World Christianity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 22.

religion that is independent of Christianity and held to be the universal genus underlying the various kinds (or species) of religions in their determinate particularity. (Yet putatively non-creedal, natural religion would still resemble a distillation of certain aspects of Protestant Christianity.) The distinction between the terms 'religion' and 'the religions' shaped modern approaches to theorising religion in at least two salient ways.

First, as Daggers points out, it provided the basis for two tracks of thought: philosophy of religion and religious studies. The former would concentrate on universal categories available to rational scrutiny, namely, the existence and nature of God (natural theology) and the ethical principles and values attending ideas of God (natural religion); whereas the latter focused on understanding religions in their distinctive particularity, emphasizing the study of beliefs, myths, sacred texts, artefacts and rituals.<sup>23</sup>

Second, increasing familiarity with particular or 'positive' religions would also begin to challenge biblical or sacred narratives of human history. The notion of 'religions' invited reflection on its emergence in human history thus its natural rather than supernatural origins. The term 'natural religion' would begin to acquire a new sense, one denoting the genesis of the various religions in human nature. What becomes apparent here is that, from the mid-seventeenth century on, the momentum gained by the idea of 'natural religion' – whether conceived as a generic religion established by human reason alone or as particular religions arising over the course of human history – heralds the transformation of 'religion' from a theological to an *anthropological* category.

In 1757 Hume's *Natural History of Religion* is published, presenting his account of the origin and evolution of religion in human nature based on the findings of European travellers and missionaries. According to Hume,

[...] the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature [which through a process of rational abstraction led to belief in the one Supreme Being as the Deists claim], but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind.<sup>24</sup>

For Hume, then, religion (primarily) has its basis in unreflective human emotions, principally hope and fear, and is pragmatic rather than theoretical in orientation, concerned less with truth and more with human flourishing in the face of natural and social contingencies.

Hume's genealogy of religion helped prepare the ground for the critical theories of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim. These nineteenth century thinkers – whose work would underpin modern and contemporary forms of sociology of religion – viewed religion as a wholly secular phenomenon, no more than a set of dangerous deceptions that alienate us from our more authentic human selves, howsoever envisaged. Yet we should appreciate that secular perspectives on religion remain continuous with those of early modern Christianity insofar as both treat religion as an anthropological category, one that can advocate European colonial expansion. The critique

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>24</sup> David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, in *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. John C.A. Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 139.

of religion – an undertaking set in motion by Christian thinkers in response to differences both within and without – forges secular, universal reason by increasingly displacing the authority of religious beliefs with that of Rational European Man. It would be the religious beliefs of ‘primitive’, non-European peoples that epitomized the enslavement of mind to irrational superstition.

Interestingly, though a major Enlightenment thinker, Hume famously demotes reason to the passions. This appears at odds with Wynter’s claim that the first phase of European modernity sees the invention of Rational Man. Now, there is a danger that concepts such as ‘European Man’ or ‘the Western self’ end up advancing monolithic constructions that grossly oversimplify a diversity of contested positions. Nevertheless, such concepts do capture dominant trends of thought that have shaped European self-understanding. Despite some of the radical implications of Hume’s naturalist anthropology, Wynter’s Ratiocentric Man brightly flickers in and out of view in his works, notably in his comments on religion.

Picking up on Hume’s sporadic yet approving references to the idea of ‘true religion’, Andre Willis suggests three pillars on which it may be based: i) genuine theism; ii) moderation of the passions; and iii) the formation of virtuous character.<sup>25</sup> While Hume is usually regarded as an atheist thinker *tout court* this overlooks how his comments on the notion of true religion suggest his willingness to acknowledge the reasonableness of belief in God conceived as the Author of Nature. Nevertheless, insofar as Hume endorses a genuine theism this is strictly a thin or basic theism that assents *only* to belief in an intelligent Author of Nature, without attributing to it personhood, the capacity to perform miracles or even worship-worthiness. For Hume, the most compelling aspect of a basic theism is more anthropocentric than theocentric in focus. Its real value lies in revealing the natural disposition of human cognition when motivated by ‘speculative curiosity’ or the ‘pure love of truth’<sup>26</sup> – with a nod to Descartes, we might call this the calm, philosophic passion of wonder – rather than by disagreeable passions such as fear and melancholy.

The problem, Hume argues, is that more often than not the ‘love of truth’ is too refined an impulse for human religiosity. The mind’s proclivity to posit God as the Author of Nature typically produces a vulgar theism excited by unconstrained fears and hopes. For Hume, genuine theism can direct religion to its ‘proper office’,<sup>27</sup> its truth, namely the enhancement of moral and civic life (achieved through fostering the calm passions and cultivating virtue). And while Hume recognizes that true religion is rarely accomplished, he nevertheless considers it the ideal form of religion. Though Hume’s true religion is not founded on *pure* reason, for it affirms the ineliminable passional aspect of religious beliefs, it is my contention that its emphasis on a genuine theism, the calm passions, and the virtuous, civic person, envisions the human in ways that more or less map onto the contours of Man as described by Wynter. Indeed, Hume’s critique of reason is not in order to abandon it but only to delimit it precisely so that Man can emerge as a free, truly (though not purely)

<sup>25</sup> Andre C. Willis, ‘The Potential Usefulness of Hume’s “True Religion”’, *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2015), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> ‘The proper office of religion is to regulate the heart of men, humanize their conduct, infuse the spirit of temperance, order and obedience’, David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, ed. John C.A. Gaskin (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 122.

rational thinker able to pursue scientific knowledge regarding the workings of nature without becoming sidetracked by irresolvable, and socio-politically contentious, theological and metaphysical mysteries.

According to Hume, the irrationality and superstition of vulgar theists that continued to endure in civilized, enlightened Europe could be explained as a consequence of a lack of proper instruction. The same could not be said for non-European savages whose (perceived) stunted rationality was, for Hume, to be attributed not to the want of education but to immutable racial differences inscribed by nature. In a notorious footnote contained in his essay, 'Of National Character', Hume writes,

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men...to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white...No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences... *Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.*<sup>28</sup>

While Hume does not explicitly use the term 'race' in this passage, it is nevertheless clear that he means to refer to a *natural* distinction between whites and non-whites with respect to reasoning abilities that is unalterable.

Although the footnote is the only place in Hume's writings where he is unequivocally racist, Emmanuel Eze persuasively argues that it is no stray and careless remark but one grounded in his epistemology and his 'science of man'. On Eze's reading, Hume considers the Negro mind to be unable to perform active reasoning, whereby the mind is able to transcend the immediacy of sense perceptions in order to think objects and their relations in abstract ways.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely the inability to think abstractly that, for Hume, prevents the ignorant savage from arriving at the idea of God. We see an illustration of this in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, when Cleanthes explains that the minds of savages are cognitively weak insofar as their causal reasoning is unable to proceed from tangible effects to increasingly remote and abstract causes. In Cleanthes words, and here I quote at length,

It sometimes happens, I own, that the religious arguments have not their due influence on an ignorant savage and barbarian; not because they are obscure and difficult, but because he never asks himself any question with regard to them. Whence arises the curious structure of an animal? From the copulation of its parents. And these whence? From *their* parents. A few removes set the objects at such a distance, that to him they are lost in darkness and confusion; nor is he actuated by any curiosity to trace them farther. But *this is neither dogmatism nor scepticism but stupidity...*your [Philo's] greatest errors proceed not from barrenness of thought and invention, but from too luxuriant a fertility.<sup>30</sup>

The barbarous polytheist is stupid and unquestioning, whereas civilized (i.e. European) Man suffers from an excess of reason that when applied to

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 360, n. 120, my emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuel C. Eze, 'Hume, Race, and Human Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (October 2000), 695.

<sup>30</sup> Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p. 57, the final emphasis is mine. A similar line of reasoning to that of Cleanthes is present in Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, 137.

the idea of God can lead to dogmatism or scepticism, which admittedly carry problems of their own but at least are emblematic of elevated minds.

For Hume, then, the uninstructed savages of America, Africa and Asian remain frozen at the primitive stage of religious consciousness, unacquainted with the idea of God, the supreme Author of Nature. This is because, ‘Such a magnificent idea is too big for their narrow conceptions, which can neither observe the beauty of the work [of nature], nor comprehend the grandeur of its author’.<sup>31</sup> Here we see Hume draw a clear connection between rational capacities and religion: the savage mind is intellectually inferior to that of civilized, monotheistic Europeans.

Even though Hume’s naturalist critique of reason would disconcert Enlightenment rationalists, when we consider his remarks on both religion and race together we can see how reason is extolled in order to reiterate the philosophical anthropology of colonial modernity in which Man is upheld as the human *per se*, its essence fully realized. As the West shifted from a theocentric to an anthropocentric posture, reformulations of ‘true religion’ in the works of those such as Kant and Hegel would variously stage a *pas-de-deux* between religion and reason in ways that served to cultivate and sustain the overrepresentation of Man as the human as such.

Insofar as contemporary philosophy of religion fails to grapple with the entangled genealogies of religion(s), race and reason it neglects its colonial legacy. In doing so, it fails to consider ways in which its canonical texts, methods, contextual and constitutive values implicitly conserve the ‘colonial matrix of power’,<sup>32</sup> its racism and hegemonic Eurocentrism, by which so people are imperilled to this day. Rather than go on to show how much contemporary philosophy of religion (both analytic and continental) remains complicit with the work of colonial modernity, in the final section of this article, I want to take the project of decolonizing philosophy of religion in a more constructive direction. In view of Wynter’s work, I will suggest that reconfiguring philosophy of religion in ways that contest its inveterate Eurocentrism must include re-imagining the human beyond Man as one of its central aims. I hope to show how African decolonial thought and African indigenous religions offer insights that can importantly contribute to such a re-imagining. To this end, I first highlight some methodological issues that must be noted before going on to make some brief remarks on the idea of an ‘animist humanism’ as one that may serve at least as a stepping stone beyond the doctrine of Man.

#### *Toward a Philosophy of Religion in a Decolonial Register*

In *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship* (originally published in 1971), the Ugandan poet and theorist Okot p’Bitek exhorts African scholars of religion to undertake the following two crucial tasks. First, they must ‘expose and destroy all false ideas about African peoples and culture that have been perpetuated by Western scholarship’,<sup>33</sup> subjecting to critical scrutiny vague, tendentious notions such as, ‘tribe’, ‘non-literate’, and ‘animism’. Second, ‘the African scholar must endeavour to present the institutions of African peoples as

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>32</sup> Mignolo, ‘Preamble: The Historical Foundation of Modernity/Coloniality,’ 14.

<sup>33</sup> Okot p’Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions: A Short History of African Religions in Western Scholarship* (New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2011), 3.

*they really are*'.<sup>34</sup> In short, for p'Bitek, African scholars of religion must focus on the 'conceptual decolonization'<sup>35</sup> of African indigenous cultures – which, notably, did not (generally) possess the equivalent of the term 'religion' prior to European colonization – so that they can be articulated in their own voice, rather than that of Christian missionaries and metropole theorists in Western universities. p'Bitek offers the following droll tale as an example of the sort of conceptual and terminological contortion that efforts to foist European categories on African lived experiences produces:

In 1911, Italian Catholic priests put before a group of Acoli elders the question, "Who created you?"; and because the Luo language does not have an independent concept of *create* or *creation*, the question was rendered to mean, "Who moulded you?" But this was still meaningless, because human beings are born of their mothers. The elders told the visitors they did not know... [After more questioning by the missionaries dissatisfied with their answer] One of the elders remembered that, although a person may be born normally, when he is afflicted with tuberculosis of the spine, then he loses his normal figure, he gets "molded." So he said, "*Rubanga* is the one who moulds people." This is the name of the hostile spirit which the Acoli believe causes the hunch or hump on the back. And, instead of exorcising these hostile spirits...the representatives of Jesus Christ began to preach that *rubanga* was the Holy Father who created the Acoli.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of God the Creator is, according to p'Bitek, entirely misplaced in the context of indigenous African thought, where attention is given to 'the good life here and now'<sup>37</sup> rather than questions concerning the beginning and end of the world. Keen to dispel the view that African peoples were incapable of arriving at the idea of God without Western instruction, African Christian philosophers and theologians such as John S. Mbiti and Bólájí Ìdòwú are at pains to point out that most African indigenous religions affirm the notion of God as Supreme Being. But this claim is derided by p'Bitek, who asks: 'What does the term "Being" mean to African peoples?'<sup>38</sup> He charges those such as Wiredu and Ìdòwú with 'Hellenizing' African deities, an 'intellectual smuggling' that stealthily imports Western concepts into discourses on African religions by seeming to discover clear parallels between African and European religious outlooks.<sup>39</sup> It turns out that there *are* good reasons to maintain that African indigenous religions uphold the idea of a Supreme Being. However, its construal as a deity similar to the God of classical theism could be considered more the product of the colonial situation in African religious life and self-understanding rather than a genuine homology.<sup>40</sup>

The above criticisms raised by p'Bitek, along with his two-pronged approach to future studies on African indigenous religions, are important. But they elicit at least two difficulties. First, we must ask, 'Who counts as an African scholar?' Would I count as someone from the African diaspora? Would a white South African count? Second, does the call for 'conceptual decolonization' regarding future studies of African

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3, my italics.

<sup>35</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, 'Introduction: Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion', in p'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, xi.

<sup>36</sup> p'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 39 and 42.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Rosalind Shaw, 'The Invention of 'African Traditional Religion'', *Religion*, Vol. 20 (1990), especially 347-349.

indigenous religions leave us in a double-bind? On the one hand, not to heed the call risks distorting African indigenous religions by viewing them through Eurocentric lenses that invariably display them in an unfavourable light. On the other hand, the aim of presenting African culture and peoples as *they really are* risks manufacturing authenticity by way of uncritical, romantic idealizations of pre-colonial African life.

For the purpose of this article I shall leave in suspense the first difficulty highlighted, particularly as the question of African identity has received much consideration elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> It has been the double-bind that has especially troubled me in my turn to African indigenous religions as one way in which to unravel the colonial orderings of philosophy of religion. How could I – a British, Afro-Caribbean academic – be true and faithful to African traditions? All concepts and theories available to me seem unfit for purpose, irredeemably embroiled in their colonial histories. I found myself in the jaws of a discursive trap. And then, when reading Achille Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, a little phrase struck me. He writes, 'It is impossible to understand the contemporary forms of African identity without taking into consideration the *heretical genius* at the root of the encounter between Africa and the world'.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, the term 'heresy' carries much Christian theological baggage. But no matter because Mbembe's notion of 'heretical genius' suggests a way for me to engage with African religious knowledge without the impossible demand to present this knowledge as it truly is, on its own terms. For those once colonized there is no epistemically innocent standpoint from which to discern uncorrupted, indigenous cultural forms. Moreover, the depiction of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa as temporally static, existing in cultural isolation from the rest of the world, is yet one more colonial fiction.

Mbembe notes that heretical genius is particularly evident in African responses to Islam and, later, Christianity. He explains that Africans would approach these religions as an 'immense field of signs'<sup>43</sup> to be disorganized, disarticulated and 'outfitted in masks and ancestral bric-a-brac',<sup>44</sup> in a process of indigenization that would transform African religious significations in response to changing lived experiences. While admiring how heretical genius enables Africans 'to inhabit several worlds at once and situate themselves on both sides of an image',<sup>45</sup> Mbembe warns that the self-understanding it produces must not become ossified and turned into new orthodoxies that (falsely) claim to capture some authentic African identity. For Mbembe, heretical genius at its most extreme 'produces situations of an extraordinary instability, volatility, and incertitude'<sup>46</sup> from which 'hidden or forgotten energies'<sup>47</sup> may be liberated that could revitalize and reconfigure the existing social order. From the insights of p'Bitek, Mbembe, and Wynter, I identify two primary principles that can serve to guide engagement with African indigenous religions when situated in and across the discursive spaces of both Western studies of religion (including philosophy of religion) and decolonial theory: remembrance and composition.

*Remembrance:* this takes seriously p'Bitek's insistence on 'conceptual decolonization', which calls us to remember i) the colonial violence

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 101-2, my emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 174.

caused by the imposition of Western categories and modes of reasoning onto African religious life; and ii) religious ways of being and knowing affirmed and contested by 'African' subjects.

In the context of decolonizing philosophy of religion, I would suggest that remembrance requires what Mbembe calls heretical genius.

Etymologically, heresy derives from the Greek verb '*hairein*', meaning 'to choose'. The philosopher of religion seeking to decolonize the field is necessarily selective with the concepts (and their sedimented histories) she chooses to examine. Rather than become immobilized by the injunction to retrieve an authentic but alienated pre-colonial past, remembrance as a mode of heretical genius is a hermeneutical practice. It does not aim to represent the past as accurately as possible but takes soundings, as it were, from the past in order to detect and release creative powers by which the world might be imagined and lived outside the ambit of racist, colonial modernity. In his essay 'On the Power of the False', where he criticizes the fixation on African identity and authenticity in what he calls the 'nativist' philosophies of some African scholars, Mbembe writes,

Contemporary African cultural formations have not emerged out of people's experiencing the past as a fate set in stone; rather, they often derive from an ability to treat the past both as open-ended and as an interlude – a negotiation of those aspects or fragments of the past necessary for life to go on in the present.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than seeking to disclose essential truths about African ways of being and knowing, we might instead aim to be true or faithful to African lifeworlds in the sense of attending to what Mbembe calls the 'archives of the present'.<sup>49</sup> These are not limited to works in philosophy, economics or sociology but importantly include 'visual, sung, painted, and narrated texts' that 'form part of the present memory of African societies' by which the everyday lives of contemporary Africans are empowered and nurtured.<sup>50</sup> The task of decolonizing philosophy of religion, particularly when turning to African indigenous religions, (and I suspect other indigenous religions), must open itself to transformative encounters with the study of religion more broadly – histories, sociologies and anthropologies of religion – so that theorizing can find resonances and dissonances with the archives of the present as expressed in the particularities of the daily lives and thought of contemporary African peoples.

*Composition: 'Heresies'*, writes Wynter citing an 1886 comment from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'are at best ethnic; truth is essentially catholic'.<sup>51</sup> The heretic is positioned at the periphery of the prevailing order. Wynter highlights the heretical Renaissance humanists, mostly lay scholars, who founded the *studia humanitatis* that would challenge the theocentric episteme hegemonic in medieval Europe, instituting a new, hybridly religio-secular world. She then argues that undoing the reign of Man requires a similar heretical act: 'The *Studia* must be reinvented as a higher order of knowledge able to provide an "outer view" [i.e. an ethno-other,

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<sup>48</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'On the Power of the False' trans. Judith Inggs, *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 2002), 636-637.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 640.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Sylvia Wynter, 'Ethno or Socio Poetics', *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1976), 79.

liminal perspective] that takes the human rather than any one of its variants as Subject'.<sup>52</sup>

In beginning to decolonize philosophy of religion, with particular reference to African indigenous religions, a double heresy is needed. The first is captured by Mbembe's notion of heretical genius. The second is to transgress the regime of Man by imagining other genres of the human and so contributing to what Wynter calls 'the Human Project'.<sup>53</sup> Wynter (in a manner akin to Mbembe's own re-envisioning of humanism) wishes neither to abandon the category 'human' nor to pursue an inclusivism that assumes Man to be synonymous with the human as such. Rather her model of humanism is polyphonic; it treats the human as inherently multi-textured, hybrid, dynamic and open-ended, and this is because it recognizes the import of what she calls, after Fanon, 'the sociogenic principle'.<sup>54</sup> This principle is important because it highlights how our sense of self, Other and the World, is by virtue of a local, particular cultural narrative (and so cannot be entirely reduced to biology as assumed by the biocentric variant of Man). What the sociogenic principle affirms is that 'the human is *homo narrans*',<sup>55</sup> a story-telling species. The trouble is that Man suppresses this aspect of being human so that it can claim to express the universal entirely and thus control others and the world. Yet in denying the specificity of its sociogeny, its emergence in a particular European context, Man finds himself interned in a totalizing narrative that precludes his own creative transformation and cannot admit the agency of those ethno-others who forever threaten to assert their own stories, undermining the monologue that sustains the entire colonial edifice.

The Human Project treats the sociogenic principle as key to the endeavour of moving towards the human, after Man – though the human understood as multifaceted and plastic. When we (Westernized scholars) study non-Western cultures, Wynter warns that this must not preserve the Man and his ethno-others dynamic of colonial modernity. Instead such cultures must be approached as part of the effort to remake the human, that is, 'to free the Western concept of humanism from its tribal aspect of We and the Other, transforming its abstract universal premise into the concretely human global, the concretely WE'.<sup>56</sup>

Before drawing this article to a close, I would like to hint at how thinking with African indigenous religious could inspire a heretical use of the (controversial) term 'animism' in ways that can begin dismantling Man for the sake of the human. According to Evan M. Zuess, African indigenous religions maintain that, 'Reality is not *being*...but is *relationship*...for power flows through relationships. The goal of life...is to maintain and join the cosmic web that holds and sustains all things and

<sup>52</sup> Sylvia Wynter, 'The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism', *boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring-Autumn 1984), 19-70 and 56.

<sup>53</sup> Sylvia Wynter, 'On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project, in *Not only the Master's Tool: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), see especially 159-164.

<sup>54</sup> Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, 'Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations', in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>56</sup> Wynter, 'Ethno or Socio Poetics,' 89.

beings'.<sup>57</sup> The world-sense affirmed by African indigenous religions can, I suggest, be considered animist in nature insofar as no thing is held to exist wholly independently of others but rather is a sort of rhythm of becoming, shaping and being shaped by the complex relational field that is the living cosmos. Such a view of animism departs from its pejorative depiction in the Victorian anthropologist Edward Tylor's evolutionary typology of religions, where it denotes the primitive belief in the life, soul or spirit of inanimate things.<sup>58</sup> The model of animism that I would wish to develop is more in keeping with the 'new animism' of those such as Graham Harvey, Tim Ingold and Harry Garuba.<sup>59</sup> For these thinkers, animism refers less to a set of beliefs and more to a mode of consciousness and being that takes as its starting point lived relationship with others, including non-human others.

Given the animist emphasis on relationality, the human cannot be understood as an independent entity standing over and against the cosmos but as fundamentally relational. Accordingly, indigenous African accounts of personhood assert, to use Mbiti's wording, 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'.<sup>60</sup> The Bantu word *Ubuntu*, the Shona word (*Hunhu*) or (*Unhu*), and the Yoruba word *Omoluabi* are some examples of terms used to express the fundamental sociality of humanity typical of indigenous African thought and ways of life.

Though I would need to flesh out the details elsewhere, I think that attending to the world-sense of African indigenous religions can inspire what I call an 'animist humanism', an example of a conceptual composition that attempts to induce new habits of thought by encouraging local, European ways of thinking and being to reverberate with those of Africa.<sup>61</sup> An animist humanism, I maintain, does not configure the 'We' as a hierarchical polarity between those humans held to possess a certain attribute (e.g. reason) and those cast as human 'Others' held to be lacking this attribute, thus not *fully* human. Instead, the 'We' is to be understood as an ongoing dynamic of interconnections with a plurality of others – human, animal, natural and spiritual. Put otherwise, the 'We' is not an exclusionary category but open-ended and fluid; it is no less than the planetary 'We' comprising all creatively interrelating being-becomings, human and non-human. According to Patrick A. Kaliombe, the indigenous African cosmos 'is seen as a common heritage, its diverse components as potential partners in the shared project of existence. There is, therefore, a feeling of mutual dependence among the different parts'.<sup>62</sup> By opening the 'We' on to a cosmic horizon, coupled

<sup>57</sup> Evan M. Zuesse, 'Perseverance and Transmutation in African Traditional Religion', in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991), 173.

<sup>58</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Volume 1* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Company, 2005); Tim Ingold, 'Earth, Sky, Wind, Weather', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Volume 13 (2007), S19-S38; Harry Garuba, 'Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature' in *Public Culture*, Volume 15, Number 2 (Spring, 2003), 261-285.

<sup>60</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 108-9.

<sup>61</sup> For a slightly fully sketch of an 'animist humanism' see my 'African Humanism: Between the Cosmic and the Terrestrial', in *Beyond the Doctrine of Man*, eds. Joseph Dreis-Dexler and Kristien Justaert (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>62</sup> Patrick A. Kaliombe cited by Murray Hofmeyr, 'From Hauntology to a New Animism? Nature and Culture in Heinz Kimmerle's Intercultural Philosophy', *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (July 2007), 15, my emphasis.

with a recognition that otherness is not to be mastered by the self – either by banishing others to the margins or by including others in the self’s particular way of being-becoming – it may be possible to work towards what Wynter calls, citing Aimé Césaire, a humanism made to the ‘measure of the world’.<sup>63</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Both contemporary philosophy of religion (analytic and continental) and the academic study of religion are implicated in the coloniality of power that reinforces Eurocentrism within (and without) the academy, which typically remains epistemically oblivious to its own particularity and inattentive to the liminal voices of those on the underside of colonial modernity. What genealogies such as Wynter’s show is that the shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview that propels Europe into the modern age, fundamentally turns on the co-determination of religion, reason (philosophy) and race, providing the co-ordinates for shaping a racist, Eurocentric vision of the human – Man (1 and 2) – acclaimed as the consummation of human being *per se*.

A key claim of this article is that a mandatory task for decolonizing philosophy of religion is re-imagining the human beyond Man.<sup>64</sup> I have touched on the idea of an animist humanism as one that can emerge through a creative engagement with African indigenous religions and which promises an alternative conception of the human to that of Man. It is, I maintain, a mistake to think that simply extending the range of religions to be investigated philosophically is all that is needed. As Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine note, this sort of approach plays out in topics such as, ‘Hinduism and the Problem of Evil’, ‘Daoism and Natural Law’ or ‘God in Yoruba belief’.<sup>65</sup> The roster of topics and questions that have historically proceeded from the philosophical examination of Christianity are thus presumed to be appropriate for the philosophical examination of all other religions. But the very categories ‘religion(s)’ and ‘philosophy’ need complicating in ways that make visible their Eurocentrism and Christian legacy. We are thus invited to practice philosophy of religion differently, heretically.

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<sup>63</sup> Wynter and McKittrick, ‘Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?’, 73.

<sup>64</sup> In this article I have concentrated on ratiocentric Man 1. It is thus necessary to engage with how religious and philosophical discourses have constituted biocentric Man 2 in order to thoroughly begin ‘undertaking’ Man for the sake of the human.

<sup>65</sup> Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine, ‘Introduction: The State of Philosophy of Religion and Postcoloniality’ in *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 3. The final topic is my own example.