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# "THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL": FAITH AND RELIGION IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors argue that faith and religion can and must be exposed to academic scrutiny, and that the best place for such scrutiny is the public university. They illustrate how the great rallying cry of the early feminist movement to make the personal political can help in ensuring that religion does not become a "private" matter. Drawing on empirical research with religious women who experience gender-based violence in various forms, the authors argue that when religious beliefs are put into practice without critical introspection, religion becomes dangerous at both the personal and public levels. In the end, the authors make a case for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of faith and religion at public universities, and they argue that closing down the study of religion and faith at universities, will cause an increase in religious fundamentalism and promote life-denying instead of life-enhancing practices in religion.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The famous dictum "the personal is political" by feminist activist Carol Hanisch[1] (Hanisch 1969:205-205; Shapiro 2007) during the second wave of the movement for women's liberation in the 1960's and 1970's, helped support the acceptance of the belief that, more often than not, "personal problems"

1 Others have argued that some literature suggests that the history of this phrase is much longer than that. It is a sociological theory.

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are the result of a much greater systematic problem.[2] The slogan was meant to communicate to women that their oppression was not individual but, in fact, part of a larger system of sexism and patriarchy by which women were governed. The slogan was used by consciousness-raising groups, so that individual women could identify the "patterns" of problems that existed across the board for women – such as lower incomes, minimalist education, gender violence, etc. The slogan was meant to help to bring to the public, those things society wanted to keep private. In this article, we wish to resurrect this slogan to argue for strengthening the study of faith and religion at public universities because, in recent times, faith and religion have been relegated increasingly to the domain of the private, with some even arguing that there is little space at a public university for such "personal" things such as the study of religion. Nowhere is this truer than in South Africa, which has seen a steady decline in the funding and support from government for the study of religion at public universities. David Williams, in his article "Theology in South Africa: the current situation" (1998) sketches a helpful picture of the dire situation of the study of religion, with many faculties and departments of theology and religion that have closed down since 1994. We would argue that, while the need to move away from the separation of state and religion is understandable in post-apartheid South Africa, given the history of the insidious links between these two, it is precisely because of this insidious link that the critical study of religion and faith at universities should be encouraged.

As African feminist theologians, we see a similarity in the dualistic distinction between faith and religion on one hand and the public university on the other; between the privatisation of women's experience and the political, social and religious structures that govern women's lives. Just as the movement for women's liberation found the split between their personal experiences and the public world unacceptable, we equally find the split between faith and religion and the public university unacceptable. At least the following three reasons why such a split is unacceptable will form the structure of this paper: a) The huge number of people who claim religious allegiance in South Africa forces us to examine the nature of such allegiance; b) To simply "hand over" religion to those who cannot find a rational lens through which to view religion is highly dangerous and contributes to the increasing fundamentalisms we see across the world; c) Both religion and the public university can mutually benefit from a dialogical relationship. Before examining each reason in detail, we shall elaborate on our use of the feminist dictum "the personal is political" as an analytical tool.

2 Hanisch's argument was that an individual's struggle is a group struggle. Furthermore, the slogan "the personal is political" suggests that women as a collective are in bad situations because they experience gender-based oppression and massive structural inequalities.

## 2. A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON THE DISCOURSE ON FAITH AND RELIGION AT THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

"The personal is political" has been used not only as a slogan in the struggle to overcome gender inequality, but also as an analytic tool in gender discourse. African women's theologies,[3] which was established as an academic discipline at the 1989 inauguration of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Accra, Ghana, has relied heavily on this analytical tool. This was particularly so, because the central concern of African women's theologies was a critical engagement with the issue of culture. Out of this concern for a critical engagement with the issue of culture emerged the development of a theory called feminist cultural hermeneutics by Mercy Oduyoye (2001:12) and Musimbi Kanyoro (2002). Feminist cultural hermeneutics acknowledges the importance of religion and culture in the lives of African people as argued by male African theologians (Bediako 1995, and Mugambi 1995, to mention a few). However, feminist cultural hermeneutics warns against the uncritical belief in, and practice of religion and African culture, especially those aspects that are harmful to women. It affirms the life-giving nature of religion and culture and rejects those elements that are life threatening. Because feminist cultural hermeneutics brings a critical lens to bear on the oft-used phrase "it is part of my culture", it provides a model on which we base our argument for the inclusion of faith and religion at public universities, in a context that often relies too heavily on the adage "it is part of my religion" to promote abuse and injustice. In the rest of this article, we shall demonstrate why and how religion and faith need critical reflection and vice versa.

### 2.1 Need for a critical examination of religious belief and practice

First, it should be noted that those who dismiss the study of religion at public universities claim that religion is "irrational" and "unreasonable" in our modern society. To presume that those who subscribe to religious practices are all

3 African women's theologies came into existence during the third wave of feminist theology. The major characteristic of this phase is the concern for particularities in feminist theology. While there is a general agreement among all feminists that all women are oppressed by patriarchy, the way that oppression is experienced differs due to differences in race, class and sexual orientation. Therefore, for African women, issues of women's oppression go together with racism, economic injustice and the practice of religious and cultural practices that can be injurious to African women. The African women theologians bring to global feminist discourse the issues that are unique to the African continent.

"irrational" and "unreasonable" is at the very least insulting, but it also shows a disregard for the significance of religion in Africa (as opposed to largely secular Europe). John S. Mbiti, the imminent African theologian, rightly declared, "Africa is notoriously religious" (1975:1). The 2001 religious census of South Africa reported that almost 85% of South African citizens claim to be religious.[4] Therefore, in general, a huge number of people in Africa take religion seriously. Therefore, we would do much better to attempt to understand why this is so, through rational and reasonable enquiry, rather than simply dismissing religion as having no place at a public university. In a significant op-ed piece in *the Mail and Guardian* newspaper, the late theologian, Steve de Gruchy, correctly observed that South Africa is

> not a secular nation, but a religiously plural one; and the alliances of ordinary people that are necessary in holding together our social fabric require religious literacy and respect (11 April 2009).

Such literacy and respect can be achieved only through a critical study of religion as both a critical sociological and a faith-based phenomenon. While such critical study does not require an "all rivers lead to one sea" approach to religion, in a world that is becoming increasingly intolerant of other religious worldviews, such study is crucial.

Second, other scholars have questioned the existence of religion at public universities because of an argument based on philosophy of education. An example is the position taken by some philosophers of education who have struggled with the question of whether religion is a *form of knowledge* and a *realm of meaning* to be included in a democratic curriculum. Scholars like Raymond Shone (1973:5-8) have argued that religion is not a *form of knowledge*; therefore, it should not be included in a secular curriculum. While Paul Hirst was not so straight-forward to admit that religion is a *form of knowledge* in his 1974 publication, in a response to Shone's article, he was explicit in his views on religion as a *form of knowledge* worth studying at schools and universities. The contribution of T.F. Torrance (1985:59) very clearly validates the importance of inclusivity of human knowledge when he argues as follows:

> If universities ... are really to be today what they ought to be, namely centres of creative cultural unity and progress in the society which sustains them, they must pursue research in all branches of human

4 (The) 2001 religious demography census estimated that 80 percent of the population is Christian. Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of traditional African beliefs constitute 4 percent of the population. Approximately 15 percent of the population indicated that it belongs to no particular religion or declined to indicate an affiliation. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90121.htm accessed on 27/08/08.

> knowledge, and yet in such a way that they open the way for the development of their basic, natural interconnectedness in a creative synthesis. In unitary understanding of the universe, of which the University by its very nature should be an essential correlate, the main specialisations which are inevitably pursued must be bridged through interdisciplinary study, so as to allow for the rise of a creative cultural unity within the University as a whole.

Based on what Torrance has said about human knowledge and the role of the university in pursuing knowledge through research, Raymond Shone is contradictory to the norm of academic dialogue which encompasses all schools of thought including religion. In this case, in line with what Paul Hirst has said, it can be argued that religion must be given a role in the arena of sharing knowledge. Universities and schools must be allowed to engage human knowledge, regardless of gender or religious affiliation. This engagement must put emphasis on an interdisciplinary study of religion.

Third, as an expansion of the second point, the advantage of the inclusion of religion at public universities is the promotion of the link between theologies with social-scientific consciousness in the academy, which has been very crucial in developing the public nature of theology. Kenneth Ross (1998:9) observes the following:

> Christian Theology, (which is a branch of religion), makes it plain that the kind of self-criticism and correction which science demands of faith is not something it finds strange or alien. For built into faith is its own dynamic which drives it towards explanation and definition. This is what was grasped by the early Christian thinkers who described theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. A Christian believer cannot rest content with a faith which is esoteric and out of touch with the total human intellectual endeavour.

This argument is in line with the following conviction of David Tracy:

> A major concern for any religious thinker is that religion often serves as another purely private option with merely private effects. Yet no major religion, properly understood, can accept a privatistic self-understanding. Indeed, theologians of every radically monotheistic religion realize that its fundamental commitment to God demands that we express that theistic belief in ways that will render it public not merely to ourselves or our particular religious group (1981:350).

While Tracy was writing about Christianity, it can be argued that even in the practice of African indigenous religion/s, there was and still is a belief that religion is not private, for it permeates the entire life. It controls political, social, economic and spiritual experiences of individuals and the community at large.

Thus, African indigenous religion is holistic in its practice. It is not something of the past but affects the way African people practise their Christian, Islamic and other religions that came from outside the African continent. Its beliefs and practices are of great importance to many academic disciplines whose focus is on the African people. Collaboration in the study of religion renders itself as the most appropriate way to study religion at a public university.

In addition, Tracy also argues that "a trust to publicness must be present in all theologies, otherwise theology no longer exists" (1981:351). Tracy further argues that when a theologian speaks about God and means it, he or she must also articulate a public position, without which, he or she is not speaking theologically. David Tracy's thinking was a rejection of the offshoot of post-enlightenment thought, which imposed a dualistic distinction between "public truths" and "private values". In modern discourse, on the one hand, it is argued that "public truths" can be proved through scientific investigation, and therefore are accepted by many people, especially at public universities. On the other hand, it is argued that faith convictions are said to "have supposedly no empirical basis and everyone is free to follow their own taste and inclination," (Ross 1989:10). It is categorised as "private values", with no place at a secular university. Modernity emphasised universal truths that are based on rational reasoning. Any truths that are based on revelation and intuition were perceived to be inferior to reason.

Fourth, with regard to the modernity discourse of separation of private and public values, David Tracy speaks of the publicness of theology. For him, a theologian must first pay special attention to the "primary social realities". Second, "theologians must argue how the general "publicness" of all theological language is actualised into distinct but related theological disciplines". Specifically, he says, each theologian "addresses three distinct and related social realities: the wider society, the academy, and the church" (Tracy 1981:5). According to him, the first public, which is the society, covers the domain of techno-economics, politics, and culture. This entails concern for social justice and the poor. The second public, which is the academy, gives the intellectual context of contemporary theology, which involves a responsibility for rational dialogue and interaction with other fields of knowledge and inquiry. The third public is the public of the church, which identifies the theologian's responsibility to the living tradition of a faith community (Tracy 1981:14-24).

Therefore, when religion and faith are included at public universities, the aim is not to promote indoctrination but a critical interdisciplinary dialogue that is based on people's experiences. An example that we would like to work with is studies in African women's theologies, which pushes the boundaries

of the study of religion and theology to be interdisciplinary and multi-faith[5] in their method. By engaging themes of religion/theology and social justice, equity, inclusion, solidarity – across gender, race and ethnic group, African women theologies also aim to be prophetic in the theological sense or activist in the secular sense. This can be done best at public universities and not at "seminaries where students are only taught to think in the parameters of their own faith communities" (Ackermann 1999:5). In the following section, using an example of research on gender-based violence, we will show the dangers of separating religion from rational thought.

## 2.2 Dangers of separating religion from rational thought

The danger of separating religion from rational thought encourages those who seek to promote violence or harm in the name of religion to pursue such aims more vigorously, because they do not have to answer "rationally" for such aims. Blaise Pascal famously declared, "Men [sic] never do evil so cheerfully and so completely as when they do so from religious conviction (quoted in Young, 2007:172).[6] A case study research of domestic violence in Christian homes illustrates this point most clearly. This study was done in Durban in 2000 with 25 women belonging to a Pentecostal church. The details of the research can be found in the article "Domestic Violence in Christian Homes" (Phiri 2000). The results showed that 84% of the Christian women interviewed experienced physical violence; 76% experienced spiritual violence; 67% experienced economic, emotional, verbal and psychological violence (Phiri 2000:106).[7] The question that this research raised was: Why would a Christian husband abuse his Christian wife without feeling bad about it? To respond to this question, the study reflects on the work of Carolyn Holderread Heggen, who argues that there are four Christian beliefs that, when embraced uncritically, leads to Christian husbands abusing their wives without remorse. These are, first,

5 As we have shown elsewhere, African women theologians have taken the inter-faith nature of the African community seriously , although most work has been done in the disciplines of Christian and African religion. See Phiri and Nadar, 2006:20.

6 Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French mathematician, physicist, & theologian; developed probability theory; discovered cycloid; invented an early computing device; stated Pascal's wager. (Blaise Pascal s.a.)

7 The Pietermaritzburg Awareness for Social Action fact sheet 45 describes spiritual violence as follows: "Spiritual violence happens when a woman's faith is used to keep her from finding help or leaving an abusive situation, by telling her that she must endure, submit, return and make sure she doesn't do anything to upset her husband, etc. She is led to believe that the abuse is her fault, and that if she seeks to leave, she is unchristian, and will be condemned by God. The Bible is quoted to her literally and out of context, particularly passages that serve to 'put her in her place'', condemn divorce, or glorify suffering."

the belief that God intends that men dominate and women submit (Heggen 1993:16); second, the belief that a woman is morally inferior to man and cannot trust her own judgement (Heggen 1996:19); third, the belief that '"suffering is a Christian virtue and women in particular have been designated to be 'suffering servants'" (Heggen 1993:22); and lastly, the belief that Christians must quickly forgive and be reconciled with those who sin against them" (Heggen 1993:24). Thus, on one hand, when the churches make domestic violence a private matter, it is fuelled by irrational interpretations of the power relations between husband and wife. On the other hand, when domestic violence becomes a public matter that is engaged critically and academically in the religious and theological discourse, Christian teachings that have the potential to be misinterpreted are challenged and alternative empowering interpretations are promoted. Further, however, if the government makes religion a "private" matter, then violence that happens in religion can be dismissed with the famous adage "it is a part of my religion". Relying on the constitutional right to freedom of religion without allowing religion to be interrogated and studied from a critical perspective is dangerous.

This is another area against which African women theologians have struggled for a long time. Struggling with this axiom led Musimbi Kanyoro (2002) to develop feminist cultural hermeneutics to address this concern. She saw the need for feminists not to fall into the trap of ignoring culture and dismissing it as backward and irrelevant, but to actively promote aspects of culture that enhance the lives of women while discouraging aspects of culture that diminish the lives of women. In the same vein, Mercy Oduyoye says,

> In cultural hermeneutics, one faces the challenge of struggling with one's culture while fencing off those wanting to use our culture to underrate us. Cultural hermeneutics seeks a critique from within and not an imposition from without (2001:12).

Musimbi Kanyoro (2002:18) explains further as follows:

> All questions regarding the welfare and status of women in Africa are explained within the framework of culture. Women cannot inherit land or own property because it is not culturally '"right"'. Women may not participate in leadership because it is culturally the domain of men. Whether the subject is politics, economics, religion or social issues, none of these are safe from the sharp eyes of culture. However, it is not enough to simply analyse culture without reference to the people who maintain the culture and on whom the culture impacts. Here is where the need arises for gender-sensitive cultural hermeneutics because it doubles in addressing issues of culture while being critical of the culture from a gender perspective.

There is indeed a place at a public university, particularly in Africa, for theories such as Kanyoro's feminist cultural hermeneutics because it allows one the opportunity to critically appraise the role of religion and culture, particularly when it is harmful to humanity; in this case, women. We cannot rely on seminaries or faith-based organisations to offer such critical perspectives because that is not their core business. Such critical thinking has the further benefit of not just stopping at the level of theory but developing this into policy change. For example, the critical reflection on the practice of the raping of women and girls in the name of personal interpretation of a particular African culture, can ultimately lead to policy change.[8] The definition of rape goes beyond a cultural construction of what it means to be a man or a woman. Feminst African theologians also take an activist position to speak truth to power for the transformation of structures that propagate injustices towards women and girls. Through media and the court system (based on individual circumstances), societal structures that sustain the oppression of women are challenged to bring about transformation.

Therefore, bringing rational thought to bear on religion is crucial in contexts where religion and culture are used for harm rather than good. To quote again from the article of Steve de Gruchy, which appeared in the *Mail and Guardian* of 11 April 2009 he argues that

> religion is not going to go away in Africa (or elsewhere, actually). Laughing at its excesses, peering snootily at it and pretending that the forces of scientific rationalism are going to sweep away all false consciousness in some kind of atheist apocalypse is unhelpful. It drives religion underground and into the fundamentalisms that are dangerous.

## 2.3 Mutual benefit between religion and the public university

Finally, both religion and the public university can benefit mutually from a dialogical relationship. The feminist slogan that the personal is political is nowhere more true than in the case of religion. The history of the Crusades, the Holocaust, the war on Iraq, the Rwandan genocide, the Nigerian civil wars

8 An example of this is the practice of fisi (hyena). In this traditional cultural practice of the Chewa from Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique, a man is appointed by the chief to sexually "cleanse" a girl who has just finished her first menstrual period. In this community, this traditional practice is not considered as rape. For more about this practise, see Phiri, I.A. 1998. "129-145. See also the work of Sarojini Nadar (2009:85-102).

etc. all point to this fact most poignantly. Religion was the focus of all these wars. Religion cannot and must not be confined to the personal.

> The academic study of religion does not require a religious or theological solution to the competing truth claims of all the religions of the world (Chidester et al. 1994:94).

It has to stand up to academic scrutiny, but at the same time, it must provide some direction and some "humanness" to academic scrutiny, too. By exploring religious ways of being human, religion brings to the studies of the Humanities multicultural and multireligious education. Such studies take into account the dynamic nature of religion and culture. Its aim would be to promote tolerance in the world while being critical of itself as the cause of intolerance. It is more crucial than ever in the 21st century; in a globalised age, that religion and the public university must have a dialogical relationship to guide politicians to make decisions that are life affirming and do not promote death. Ignorance due to the uncritical practice of religion has already proved to be costly.

In a dialogical approach, the study of religion does not only give to the other disciplines, but also receives. Religion also learns from the public environment, which includes the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life. Society has developed structures that sustain just relationships for humanity and the environment. De Gruchy (2009:128-129) points out the following:

> The loss of a Christian voice in the public arena is not usually because the world is disinterested in what Christians have to say and contribute; but rather the world gets fed up with the arrogance of the assumed correctness of the Christian voice because of its privileged reliance on a source of information that is beyond public scrutiny (the Christian Scriptures). It is what I call the 'epistemological privilege of the ordained', namely that because pastors and theologians assume that they have access to divinely inspired knowledge in a holy book, they simply 'know' things. Yet a whole list of contemporary issues would suggest that this is not the case, and that the church has much to learn by first listening to the wisdom that comes from others: abortion, capital punishment, school discipline, same-sex relationships, domestic violence, rape, climate change, food security, safe water, condoms, crime, legalising prostitution, and the like.

It follows that when religion engages critically with other disciplines, it brings transformation to its own interpretation of its faith in relation to issues it is dealing with in society. Religion is practised in society. The problems of society become the problems of religion for that context. If religion does not address burning issues of its society, then it becomes irrelevant.

Using an example of a case study on gender-based violence that was used to teach a course at UKZN in 2008,[9] De Gruchy argues that many churches take the case of domestic violence as a private matter. As shown above, perpetrators of domestic violence are protected by the church based on limited interpretations of the Christian Scriptures. De Gruchy has argued that students of theology should be trained at public universities in such a way that they look to the laws of the land to promote justice for the survivors of domestic violence. Through the public university, students can be helped to see that in the case of domestic violence, when church leaders send a woman back to her abusing husband in the name of what the scriptures are saying, the church leaders should be made to realise that they are breaking the law of the land. As in the time of Apartheid in South Africa, among the South African citizens, religious leaders were in the forefront to demand political justice based on a critical reading of the Christian Scriptures. That spirit of people of faith engaging the public space of politics was nurtured through critical academic study of religion in dialogue with other disciplines. The signs of the times show that the battle is not over yet. As shown in the quotation of De Gruchy, there are still many areas in which religion has to continue to dialogue with society and other academic disciplines at the public university.

## 3. CONCLUSION

Galileo Galilei famously said,

> I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.[10]

We have shown in this article that the biggest argument against the study of faith and religion at a public university has been that faith and religion are private matters related to emotion and feeling, while the university is the benchmark of rationality and reason. To argue that faith and religion have no place at a public university is disadvantageous on a number of levels, as pointed out in this article. It is the central argument of this article that faith and religion should be exposed to academic scrutiny just like any other academic subject. As shown in this article, in the case of Christian theology, it is in its very nature that theology scrutinises itself through academic study because faith always seeks self-understanding. We have argued that the great giants of the Christian faith asserted that when faith is seeking self-understanding,

9 See the JCT 2009 15.1 special issue on Feminist Theological Pedagogy in Africa

10 Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), Italian natural philosopher, astronomer and mathematician who made fundamental contributions to the development of the scientific method and to the sciences of motion, astronomy and strength of materials (Galileo Gaililei s.a.).

it needs to do so in the public arena where it can engage the public, the academy and the church, because when religious beliefs are put into practice without critical introspection, religion becomes dangerous at personal and public levels. By drawing on the dictum that "the personal is political", and by using the dictum as an analytical tool, we hope that we have shown that the study of religion and faith is not only important at a public university, but that it can indeed sometimes be a matter of life or death!

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