On Top of which Mountain does One Stand to Judge Religion? Debates from a Zimbabwean Context

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Abstract

One of the most prominent characteristics of the phenomenology of religion is that the scholar of religion must desist from judging the phenomena under study. The scholar of religion is encouraged to refrain from passing judgement on the truth or ethical status of the phenomena under investigation. Instead, the scholar must concern her/himself with accurate descriptions. While for phenomenology of religion such a stance represents victory against reductionism of various types, it has come under fierce criticism. Critics charge that there are some situations that clearly call for judging religious phenomena. In response, phenomenologists of religion raise the fundamental question: on top of which mountain does one stand to judge religion? This article interacts with this fundamental question in a Zimbabwean context. In the first section, it outlines the phenomenological preoccupation with descriptive accuracy and adopting a non-judgemental approach to the study of religion. In the second section it highlights criticisms that have been levelled against such a stance. In the third section it describes contentious

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religious phenomena in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange in Zimbabwe. In the fourth section it identifies and critiques the different 'mountains' that scholars may climb as they seek to judge controversial religious phenomena in Zimbabwe. The article breaks new ground by testing the possibility of going beyond phenomenology with reference to contentious religious practices in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: phenomenology, independency, judging, human rights, gender, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The academic study of religion has been characterised by numerous debates and controversies. One of the most acute debates has centred on the call by the phenomenology of religion to promote descriptive accuracy and to desist from evaluating the phenomena of religion. This trajectory has been consistent in phenomenology of religion: the business of the scholar of religion is to provide accurate descriptions of phenomena, rather than evaluating the truth value or usefulness of religious beliefs and practices (Cox 2010). On the other hand, critics suggest that such an approach reduces scholars of religion to caretakers, when they should, in fact, be critics (McCutcheon 2001). In this article, we contend that while the call for scholars of religion to be critical is noble, the challenge lies in the scholar's very own location. In other words, where does the scholar her/himself stand in order to grant her/him special epistemological privileges to enable judging religious beliefs and practices?

In order to situate the debate in a more specific context, this article utilises contentious examples from a particular religious tradition in Zimbabwe. This is a deliberate effort to promote contextual relevance within the study of religion in Africa. For the most part, African scholars of religion have tended to embrace theories and debates from Europe and North America, thereby preventing the emergence of African traditions in the study of religion in Africa (Adogame, Chitando & Bateye 2012). In this article, we highlight the challenges of evaluating religion in a Zimbabwean context. We illustrate the value of engaging with local issues in the academic study of

religion in Africa. First, however, we describe the phenomenology of religion.

Phenomenology: A Theory and a Method

This article is not strictly speaking aimed at giving an account of the theory of phenomenology, but rather to explore, in light of criticisms, against phenomenology as a method, the mountain on which one stands in judging religions. We therefore make no claim to offer a survey of the theory of phenomenology, a task too ambitious to undertake in a single article. The focus of the article is to take issue with the central motif of phenomenology; phenomenological descriptions of things as they are, in the manner in which they appear. This involves challenging its concern with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual , bracketing taken for granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving and its epistemological basis in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity and emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation as its ultimate goal.

The literal meaning of phenomenology is the study of phenomena: appearances of things, specifically things as they appear in human experience. Thus it concerns ways that humans experience phenomena, particularly experientially realized things have for them. Therefore the call to the things themselves as they are given in experiences marks in a nutshell the program of phenomenology. Phenomenology therefore is fundamentally a philosophy which attends to phenomena.(Kupers 2009:54) The term phenomenology is derived from two Greek words phainomena (an appearance) and logos (reason or word). Accordingly phenomenology is a reasoned inquiry.

> It is a method of scientific philosophy in general which tries to discover essences of appearances which are anything which human beings can become conscious. It approaches phenomena without theories about their causal explanations and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions (Kupers 2009:54).

Phenomenology refers both to a philosophical inquiry and a specific research methodology. Methodologically it tries to portray phenomena from the personal contextual perspectives of those who experience them. It therefore

approaches phenomena by studying conscious experience from the subjective of first person point of view (Kupers 2009:55). Our focus in this article is not so much on the theoretical grounding of phenomenology as it is on the acclaimed methodological goal of ending at the descriptive level. A major assumption we make, however without trivializing the relevance and importance of description as first step and explanation as a second step, or without claiming therefore that phenomenology is redundant, is that if phenomenologists of religion do not want to remain content with description and explanation and engaging in judging religions as good or bad on top of which mountain should they stand in order to do this?

The Phenomenology of Religion and the Call for Descriptive Accuracy

Although the phenomenology of religion has been criticized for failure to clarify its identity there is agreement on its descriptive stance. This enables phenomenologists of religion to achieve their commitment to understanding religious phenomena in context, as they are lived, using context derived terms and categories. This characteristic of the phenomenology of religion revolves around *epoche*, empathetic understanding and evocative description. We shall discuss each of these concepts briefly below.

Epoche

The word *epoche* is 'derived from the Greek *epecho,* I hold back. In effect it means 'stoppage', suspension of judgment, the exclusion from one's mind of every possible presupposition' (Sharpe 1986: 224). Sharma (2001: 232) observes a further dimension. He links *epoche* to empathy. He argues that *epoche* does not only involve suspension of one's belief but, it 'involves an active participation in the experience which is being encountered, unencumbered by preexisting or superimposed ideas, beliefs, presuppositions or suspicions'. Van der Leeuw (1963:646) succinctly explains *epoche* when he says:

> The term *epoche* is a technical expression employed in current phe-

nomenology by Husserl and other philosophers. It implies that no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed between brackets, as it were. All phenomena therefore are considered solely as they are presented to the mind, without any further aspects such as their real existence, or their value being taken into account; the observer restricts himself to pure description systematically pursued, himself adopting an attitude of complete intellectual suspense, or of abstention from all judgment regarding these controversial topics.

Empathetic Understanding

This step involves 'both imaginative re-experiencing and systematic introspection of the contents that are imaginatively experienced' (Twiss & Conser 1992:31). This is important to religious studies' concern to understand the particular ethos and worldview of the religions under study. Phenomenology focuses on the empathetic understanding of data related to the religions made available by historical and social scientific inquiry. The empathetic inquiry into religious data is controlled by, and shaped by, and in constant conversation with the work of other disciplines. Twiss and Conser give a penetrating description of empathetic understanding. They write:

> Phenomenology so conceived provides a means of effectively 'passing over' into the religious situation which one wants to investigate and 'coming back' with a clearer understanding of it. It is a means of passing over to someone else's religious world so that we may try to see how things appear when viewed through that perspective… Phenomenology viewed as such seeks to offer to its sufficiently competent practitioners as a non-secondhand and insight as it is possible to achieve into what animates different vitalities and movements of meaning within any particular religious outlook. Its basic motivating idea is quite straightforward; to try to apprehend someone else's religions as it appears to them, rather than focusing attention on how their religion appears to us from a non-phenomenological viewpoint (1992:31-32.)

The method of empathy brings one into contact with the antireductionist thrust of the phenomenology of religion. For '[i]n any case, it is accepted on all hands that an antireductionist thrust characterizes the phenomenology of religion, a thrust it shares with philosophical phenomenology' (Sharma1994:132). This points to the position that phenomenologists of religion approach religious data in a specific antireductionist manner. In relation to the phenomenology of religion, 'reductionism refers to a mode of explanation or interpretation in the study of religion which deviates from the believer's understanding of it'. Kristensen captures the importance of this step:

> Let us never forget that there exists no other reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the believer's testimony. What we believe from our point of view, about the nature or value of other religions, is a reliable testimony to our own faith, or to our own understanding of religious faith; but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluations of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and are concerned only with ourselves (Sharma 1994:133-134).

Rudolf Otto also shares this view. He emphasizes 'the numinous quality of religious experience per se' (Sharma 1994:134). He is against the intellectualistic and rationalistic bias in the interpretation of religion and the reduction of religious phenomena to 'the interpretative schema of linguistic analysis, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and various historical approaches'. Eliade (1963:xiii) is succinct on this issue. He writes:

> A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false.

The concerns that these citations raise for phenomenologists of religion is the danger of trying to reduce and trivialize religious phenomena to purely

sociological, psychological, economic or environmental terms. This, for a phenomenologist, is a fundamental mistake. The argument is that '[S]uch reductions ignore the complexity of the human experience, impose social values on transcendental issues, and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant' (Scott 2000:4).

Evocative Description

This approach is crucial for attaining the goal/aim of qualitative understanding of religious data. We agree with Arthur's position that evocative description is absolutely crucial to the attainment of truly qualitative understanding (Twiss & Conser:33). Phenomenology, therefore, in the first step does not seek evaluative judgments. It seeks accurate and appropriate descriptions and interpretations of the religious phenomena. So one of the goals of the phenomenologist is to allow each religion to speak for itself and temporarily suspend issues of external validity. Cox (1992:32) captures the import of this method well in his concept, 'describing the phenomena'. He writes:

> In his observation of the activities of any religious group and by his getting inside them, the phenomenologists will encounter a wide variety of religious data. His first task in this process is to describe the data as accurately as possible, paying careful attention to the various aspects so as to avoid premature interpretations…Moreover the descriptions obtained must correspond as faithfully as possible to the believers' own testimony.

Overall, the phenomenologist of religion attempts as much as possible to describe as accurately as possible the religious data. This enables the phenomenologist of religion to come out with 'emic', that is, first person, insider and intentional perspectives and understanding.

'Thou Shall Not Judge'? Criticisms against the Phenomenology of Religion

The phenomenology of religion has attracted a lot of criticisms, despite it

wide usage. This section seeks to look at some of the dominant weaknesses that have been laid against this method. First and foremost, scholars converge on the argument that there are as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists of religion. The phenomenology of religion is not very clear regarding its nature and task (Sharpe 1986:221). According to Bleeker, as stated by Allen, the scope of the phenomenology of religion is not clearly distinguished from that of philosophical phenomenology (Allen 1978:59). As such, the problems of using this method stem from the fact that there can be quite a number of phenomenologies that one can use. Jackson (1997: 7) mentions this when he suggests that

> [P]henomenology of religion has been presented in different ways by different authors. Phenomenology of religion is a family of approaches rather than a tightly definable single approach.

This difficulty in finding an all-encompassing definition of what phenomenology of religion has also been pointed out by Arthur (1992: 147) when he argues as follows:

> … anyone who wants to find out what phenomenology of religion is and how it is applied 'will find the search a frustrating one'. To illustrate the cause of such a frustration would not be difficult, for rather than any embarrassing silence it is the sheer number of conflicting replies to the question 'what is phenomenology of religion?' which makes it so difficult to reach a satisfactory answer.

Apart from the problem of defining what the phenomenology of religion itself is, there has also been a dilemma regarding the possibility of practising some of its steps, in particular *epoche*. According to Segal, phenomenologists do not prescribe how to perform *epoche*. He says unless they explain how it should be done, 'it will remain a forlorn ideal' (Segal 1989: 19). He argues further that:

> Phenomenologists invariably neglect to explain how to practice it. To prescribe the suspension of bias is one thing, to achieve is another. Until the actual means of riding oneself of all biases gets

explained, the *epoche* must remain only a forlorn ideal (Segal 1989: 19).

This means the practice of *epoche* is less practical and may only represent an aspiration to desist from judging religions. In addition, 'the method is solipsistic' (Bettis 1969: 26). It does not explain how one can grasp intuitively the essence of religious phenomena. Thus, Sharpe (1986: 42) observes that it has been questioned whether there is a yardstick to measure if one has grasped the essence religion or not. The question stands as: how does one know s/he has practiced *epoche* and eidetic intuition?

It is from such weaknesses as identified in the preceding discussion that Pannikar (1999:76) argues, in the context of religious dialogue, that, '[*E*]*poche* is psychologically impractible, phenomenologically inappropriate, philosophically defective, theologically weak and religiously barren'.Despite the criticisms highlighted above, phenomenology of religion retains its value in the study of religious traditions, including African Traditional/Indigenous Religions.

Challenging Religious Beliefs and Practices in Zimbabwe

The foregoing sections have highlighted debates regarding describing and evaluating religious beliefs and practices within global religious studies. These have had a bearing on the academic study of religion in Africa. For example, the phenomenology of religion has generated immense interest in African religious studies (Chitando 2005b). In particular, African scholars of African Traditional/Indigenous Religions have been attracted by its call for descriptive accuracy, upholding the believer's point of view, as well as respecting the integrity of particular religions. These key tenets of the phenomenology of religion have been regarded as liberating the religions of Africa from dismissal by reductionist scholars. In addition, the call to refrain from evaluating religions has been seen as protecting indigenous beliefs and practices from unfair criticisms by 'outsiders'. Mutema (2003) argues that the phenomenology of religion can be utilised to retrieve indigenous knowledge systems.

The Zimbabwean religious situation is characterised by a number of beliefs and practices that highlight the complexities of adopting the dogma of non-evaluation of religious phenomena uncritically. In the following sections,

we describe some of these issues. We do not contend that these are the only contentious issues in Zimbabwe in the contemporary period. In fact, the examples could be multiplied. However, we have selected the ones described below to assist us in illustrating the challenges brought about by insisting on describing religious phenomena accurately and refraining from evaluating them. Although we could have provided examples from other religious traditions, we have concentrated on the ones from one particular form of religious expression found in Zimbabwe, namely African Initiated/Indigenous/Instituted/Independent Churches (AICs).

Early Female Child Marriages in Some African Initiated Churches

Some beliefs and practices found in some AICs have provoked scholarly debate and controversy. While space considerations prevent us from engaging in a detailed analysis of the terminology (Chitando 2005a), we understand AICs as African Christian movements that seek to ensure that Christianity is not experienced as a foreign and alienating religion in African contexts. In Zimbabwe, the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange is one such movement. It emerged in Zimbabwe in 1934 to oppose colonial interpretations of Christianity. The movement has sought to infuse indigenous beliefs and practices and Christianity to formulate a peculiar African Christian identity.

Whereas the efforts of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange (and numerous other AICs) have been celebrated to the extent that they demonstrate the creativity of Africans, some scholars have been highly critical of some of their beliefs and practices. In this section, we shall concentrate on the phenomenon of the marriage of young girls (under 16) within the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange. In a report entitled, 'Married Too Soon: Child Marriage in Zimbabwe', Maureen Sibanda (2011) of the Research and Advocacy Unit charges that the Apostolic Church of Johane Marange has oppressed young girls and women. She writes:

> To start with, the Holy Spirit is used as an intimidating tool, instilling fear in members not to do certain acts as they are threatened with curses. The same Holy Spirit is used to validate child

> marriages as prophets would have been '*directed*' by the Holy Spirit to marry young girls. They also believe that girls should have only minimum schooling, and therefore, as soon as a girl reaches puberty they are married off. The lack of education often disempowers the girls. They do not question certain harmful practices in the church such as the practice of not taking children to health institutions. The cross-generational nature of marriages in the church is also problematic because young girls cannot stand up for themselves in the marriage to demand safe sex or take part in decisions that affect their health such as child spacing (Sibanda 2011: 5).

While Sibanda addresses a number of related themes in the foregoing citation, we seek to draw attention to her charge that the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange is not upholding the rights of the girl child. For her, it has promoted child marriages within the movement under the guise of upholding 'freedom of religion'. Operating from within the framework of advocacy, Sibanda insists that the movement should embrace the international human rights approach and abandon the practice. For her, Apostolic church groups should not be allowed to continue enslaving female children by giving them up for marriage too early. Political will must be mustered in order to address this serious challenge, she avers.

The theme of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange as abusing children's rights has been taken up by other Zimbabwean scholars. Sibanda and Marevesa (2013) have argued that the movement essentially forces children to 'march or die'. These scholars of religion and philosophy contend that 'no one should be allowed to be above the law to the extent of sacrificing life at the altar of conservative religious beliefs and practices that violate human rights' (2013: 173). Taking up the same theme, Chakawa (2010: 41), a historian, maintains that the young girls 'have become enslaved in religion and undergo such abuse and still suffer in silence'.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange has come under serious scrutiny for its practices relating to the girl child. In particular, the issue of child brides has been highlighted as requiring urgent attention. The African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange stands accused of violating children's rights. However, a strict phenomenological approach would argue that scholars who proceed to level these accusations have gone beyond describing the phenomena of religion.

They have moved into the realm of evaluation. The trend of recommending strategies of 'liberating' the female child in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange belongs to activism, not scholarship, phenomenologists of religion would maintain. Such a stance would also apply to another contested practice, namely polygamy.

Polygamy in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange: A Contested Practice

Alongside female child marriage, polygamy is another heavily contested practice within the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange (alongside other AICs). It is vital to acknowledge that other religions, such as Islam, allow polygamy. Furthermore, other forms of polygamy, such as the phenomenon of 'small houses' where some married men support girlfriends, have emerged (Ndlovu 2013). Nonetheless, it is the polygamy in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange that has attracted scholarly attention and criticism in the media.

Francis Machingura (2011), a scholar of religion, maintains that the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange practice of polygamy exposes men and women to HIV and AIDS. According to him, the deep-seated patriarchal belief of having a 'diet of wives' should be dropped in the face of the devastating epidemic. Machingura is convinced that the movement is patriarchal and exposes women to the negative effects of HIV and AIDS (2011: 204). He calls upon government and civic society organisations to be actively involved in transforming the beliefs and practices of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange. According him, the new era requires a rethinking of polygamy and the empowerment of women.

Elizabeth Vengeyi (2013), a biblical studies scholar, is in basic agreement with Machingura in relation to polygamy and the status of women within the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange. Adopting a feminist perspective, Vengeyi argues that the movement has not opposed sexual and gender-based violence that women experience. Vengeyi argues that the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange must abandon its oppressive ideologies and embrace modernity. She argues:

The struggle against gender-based violence should be continued by

all means possible. Even if the Johane Marange Apostolic Church is secretive about its beliefs, activists and theologians should continue writing and publishing works on their practices. This will help shed light on these contentious beliefs and practices to the majority of people over the long run. There is also need to establish centres where people report cases of gender-based violence, especially in the rural areas, where a large following of the Johane Marange Apostolic Church live. This will enable women to report easily on how they experience gender-based violence in their respective churches and communities. Currently, these centres are only established in urban areas (Vengeyi 2013: 73).

Machingura and Vengeyi are two scholars of religion/biblical studies who challenge the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange's practice of polygamy. They are united in their criticism of the church's gender ideology. They challenge the marginalisation of women and call for intervention. As we observed in our discussion on female child marriages, these scholars go beyond describing the phenomena of religion. They actually comment on, and evaluate, the practice of polygamy in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange. For them, it is not enough for scholars to provide thick descriptions of the phenomenon: they need to proceed to judge the value of religious beliefs and practices. In the following section, we focus on another controversial aspect of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange, namely, its resistance to Western medicine.

Resistance to Modern Medicine in the Apostolic Church of Johane Marange

Emerging during the colonial period, the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange sought to challenge modern medicine and education. The contention was that the oppressor had to be resisted on all fronts: the political, economic and the spiritual. Consequently, converts to the movement had to engage in self-employment and starve the colonial economy of their labour. Furthermore, they had to avoid modern schools and health institutions in order to protect their spiritual autonomy. These convictions have persisted in the postcolonial period. Although there have been some changes, for the most part members of the movement shun modern schools and medical facilities.

The attitudes towards modern medicine and education in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange have been criticised by some scholars of religion and civic organisations. In a report entitled, 'Apostolic Religion, Health and Utilization of Maternal and Child Health Services in Zimbabwe', UNICEF (2011) maintains that the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange belongs to the 'ultra-conservative' wing of AICs in Zimbabwe. This has seen the movement resisting modern medicine and placing emphasis on healing by the Holy Spirit. However, this has had negative consequences as many children and women are vulnerable to preventable diseases. Thus:

> The findings clearly demonstrated that the ultra-conservative Apostolic religions may risk the risk of (sic) certain illnesses or death among their members by discouraging actions that may be health promoting (i.e., taking modern medication, getting medical assistance or use maternal and health services). Such proscriptions, by discouraging acceptance of medical treatment or acceptance of public health principles, may increase risks to diseases and death which could be easily avoided through uptake of modern medical services (UNICEF 2011: 42).

Molly Manyonganise (2013: 483), a scholar of religion, charges that children in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange are prevented from accessing modern health facilities. In turn, this affects their school attendance. Vengeyi (2013: 66-67), whose views we outlined in the foregoing section, also criticises the movement for increasing the vulnerability of women and children to disease and death by denying them access to modern medicine. She maintains that some women and children have died as a result of upholding church doctrines that prohibit the use of modern medicine.

Slippery Mountains: The Challenges of Evaluating Religious Phenomena

In the sections above, we have outlined three of the major contentious issues emerging from studying the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange in Zimbabwe. These relate to early girl child marriages, polygamy and resistance to modern medicine. We have cited Zimbabwean scholars of

religion, activists and international organisations criticising the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange and calling for transformation of the beliefs and practices. We have also argued that these positions clearly violate the phenomenological principles of neutrality and refraining from judging religious phenomena. Would we then be right to conclude that these scholars are, therefore, 'wrong'? We hesitate to uphold such a verdict and below we outline some of the possible platforms that have been used to evaluate the beliefs and practices of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange. However, we also highlight the challenges associated with evaluating religious phenomena.

Appealing to the Law/Human Rights

Scholars of religion and activists who call for the transformation of contentious beliefs and practices of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange appeal to the law and human rights. They highlight that Zimbabwean laws are clear that the rights of women and children must be upheld. For example, Vengeyi (2013:71) argues that senior police officers and politicians such as President Robert Mugabe have collaborated with patriarchal authorities in the movement to stifle the rights of women and children. Lack of political will to effect the laws emerges as a major talking point. Machingura (2011: 200) declares, '[C]hild marriage is a violation of human rights and such marriages are a disgrace to our society and Christianity as they infringe on the rights of women as well as expose young girls to HIV and AIDS'.

The appeal to the law and human rights when evaluating religious phenomena is quite interesting. While it is true that all religious beliefs and practices must be expressed within the confines of the law, the issue is never that simple or straightforward. First, the interface between religion and the law remains tenuous. It is not clear whether the law has the last word on religion, as in many instances adherents of religion make claims beyond the physical realm. In other words, does the law, whose epistemological foundation is based on the observable world, have jurisdiction over the external world?

The second challenge is that contemporary laws tend to be biased against African Traditional/Indigenous Religions. Although the Zimbabwean

Constitution seeks to uphold the integrity of all religions, it has an underlying Christian ethos. This is a direct outcome of the Western Christian impact on contemporary Zimbabwean institutions (Chitando, Chiwara & Shoko 2013). Consequently, contemporary laws are not neutral; rather, they reflect the dominance of Western Christianity on the national consciousness. To expect such laws to be fair to the beliefs and practices of AICs, which emerged in opposition to Western Christianity in the first instance, is to expect too much. We contend that the appeal to national laws to evaluate the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange does not settle the matter with any degree of finality.

Third, the international human rights framework needs to be interrogated in postcolonial African contexts. It would be naive to assume that there is consensus on human rights. Historically, the West has tended to set the agenda and to define 'universal' human rights. To say this is not to condone the abuse of human rights by some African dictators and religious leaders. However, there is need to acknowledge that human rights remain contested across cultures. The example of polygamy in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange is a telling one. For most activists, polygamy is an affront to women's rights and dignity. Without supporting the oppression of women, we maintain that cultural values are relative. Consequently, they may not be used across cultures without taking into account local values and sensibilities (Mndende 2013).

Upholding Modernity and Contemporary Ethical Values

Critics of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange's practices such as resistance to modern medicine contend that the movement must 'move with the times' and embrace modern medicine. While embracing the international human rights discourse, they also suggest that resisting Western biomedicine is a form of backwardness which must be challenged. This also applies to the movement's negative attitude towards modern education systems. In simple terms, they call upon the church to embrace modernity. The UNICEF report is emphatic in its call:

> Do we allow women and children to die from preventable conditions in our quest to advance African religions? Do we let ultra-

conservative religious groups deny the rights of young girl to 'childhood' as they are exposed to early marriages and pregnancy in the name of religion? Do we ignore Apostolic makeshift 'maternity hospitals' to deliver babies and care for pregnant women 'under the carpet' or explore innovative ways of layering the health delivery system so that it is hospitable to women and actively promote health outcomes? What religious tenets and practices are antithetical to universal rights of women and children? (2011: 49).

While we acknowledge the urgency and the concern expressed in the report, clearly motivated by the unnecessary deaths caused by conservative Apostolic religious beliefs and practices, we seek to point out the need for extreme caution. It is difficult to intervene and cherry pick beliefs and practices of AIC groups such as the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange, classifying some as 'progressive' and others as 'backward'. This is because the so-called modernity and contemporary ethical values are not straightforward. They are themselves contested, hence the need for caution.

One of the dominant concerns of activists and scholars who critique some of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange's practices is the need to uphold the idea of religion as civil and progressive. The underlying notion is that religion is a positive force in society. When religious beliefs and practices are deemed negative, as in the case of some of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange, they must be transformed in order to enable religion to recover its legitimate function. When responding to the question whether religion is dangerous (Ward 2006), most scholars of religion provide an optimistic response and maintain that religion is a positive force in society. When it shows some perceived negative traits, for example contentious practices such as those found in the movement under analysis herein, they insist that these are aberrations that can be transformed.

We are convinced that the assumption that religion is a positive social force is only that: an assumption! To argue that 'negative' religious phenomena betray 'true' religion is to overlook the many documented instances when religion has been dangerous in Zimbabwe in the Southern African region (for example, the case of apartheid) and globally (for example, in motivating terrorism in different traditions). Consequently, it is difficult to criticise some AIC practices on the (mis)understanding that there are some commonly held values that religions are meant to promote. This is because

such commonly held values do not exist. Scholars of religion must, therefore, contend with the fact that calling upon the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange to uphold modernity and contemporary ethical values is problematic as these are contentious.

An Appeal to Ubuntu

Although a separate narrative is required to do justice to the concept of *ubuntu* (see for example Ramose 1999), it is possible for critics of girl child marriages, polygamy and opposition to modern medicine to evoke the spirit of *ubuntu*. Essentially, *ubuntu* is an African ethic that seeks to uphold and promote the dignity and integrity of other person by appealing to solidarity. Such a critique would be difficult to confound as it would be steeped in African values. Practices that threaten the well-being of women and children, such as child marriages and resistance to Western medicine, could be classified as running contrary to the spirit of *ubuntu*. Consequently, critics may evaluate the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange on the basis of the extent to which its beliefs and practices either promote or threaten *ubuntu*.

The move towards utilising the concept of *ubuntu* to evaluate religious phenomena in Africa might contribute towards the emergence of African traditions in the study of religion on the continent. It would placate those African scholars who are searching for indigenous categories in the study of religion in Africa (Lugira 2001). However, it too does not escape the challenges associated with evaluating religion. While the term *ubuntu* has considerable rhetorical significance, its heuristic value remains open to debate. Secondly, it is not clear how a decision to ascertain whether religious phenomena promote *ubuntu* or not would be made. Essentially, the term tends to promote ideological convictions more than it contributes towards clearer analysis of religious phenomena in Africa. Appealing to *ubuntu*, therefore, does not settle the question of where one stands in judging religious phenomena in African contexts.

Conclusion

Must scholars of religion refrain from evaluating religious phenomena? In the event that scholars of religion dare to evaluate religious phenomena, on top of

which mountain will they stand to do so? In this article we have examined the stance taken by the phenomenology of religion in relation to the abiding question of whether scholars are obliged to judge religious phenomena. We described how the phenomenology of religion has placed emphasis on descriptive accuracy, while discouraging evaluating religious phenomena. We highlighted the criticisms that have been levelled against such a stance. Using examples from the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange in Zimbabwe, we illustrated the challenges of evaluating contentious practices. Clearly, the search for uncontested mountains upon which one may stand to judge religion continues unabated: globally, in the region and in Zimbabwe. More work needs to done in terms of exploring the problem of the location of the scholar.

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