

The Ambivalence of Freedom of Religion, and Unearthing the Unlearnt Lessons of Religious Freedom from the Jonestown Incident: A Decoloniality Approach

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[I]n the long run, society should find ways to protect people [against] religion-related abuse, and help religion evolve in the direction of the better treatment of people (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman & Qin 1995:109).

Abstract

The article interrogates and problematises the concept of freedom of religion in South Africa by drawing on unlearnt lessons from the Jonestown incident. The South African constitution provides for the right to freedom of religion; unfortunately, the implementation of this right has evoked various unforeseen trajectories, such as abuse, commercialisation of religion and violation of human rights. The article argues that freedom of religion is being misinterpreted and misunderstood; as a result, religion, as it is practiced, has caused it to become a social pathology. To problematise religious freedom, we earth this article in decoloniality, of which one agenda is to challenge all forms of coloniality as manifested through religious discourses. The main argument of the article is that freedom of religion in South Africa needs to be redefined, reconceptualised and reconstructed, not only through the lens of theological orientation, but also sociologically, constitutionally and with respect to human rights.

Keywords: Jonestown, decoloniality, commercialisation of religion, freedom of religion

1. Introduction

South Africa is to be commended for championing freedom of religion, which is premised in the bill of rights and enshrined in the constitution. Section 15(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) states that, ‘everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion’. In addition, Section 31(1) (a) states,

Persons belonging to a cultural, religious, or linguistic community may not be denied the right ...

(a) to enjoy their culture, practise their religion, and use their language.

While this provision is applauded, freedom of religion has created various trajectories that threaten the beauty of religion in a society; thus, the need to problematise it. Those of us who have studied religion know that there are inherent practices in all religions, which, when allowed, can be dangerous to society. These threats include terrorism, the promotion of patriarchal tendencies, violence and various human rights abuses (Alexander & Alexander 2001:133; Basedau, Vullers & Korner 2013:860; Cyril 2008:38; Velasco 2007:78). Given abuse tendency, freedom of religion becomes complicated, in spite of being desirable in a democratic society. Therefore, we engage in a struggle to reconstruct the contested terrain, by problematising and suggesting a definition for religious freedom within the milieu of respect for human rights. We are cognisant that some religious movements may be classified as cults or occults. Chidester (2003:xx) defines a cult as a ‘deviant social organisation masquerading as religion, it is the opposite of legitimate religion, evil, dangerous, mind controlling, brainwashing, financially exploitative and politically subversive’. While we appreciate this definition, the challenge posed by this interpretation is that it accommodates people who possess knowledge of religions, particularly Christian religions; however, an outside observer views cults as churches or religious groups. To avert this confusion, this article focuses on all religious groups that practice abuse, whether cults or

not, in an attempt to propose ways religion can respond to lived realities. The challenges posed by cults are also protected constitutionally, because freedom of religion is not defined clearly – this claim will be discussed as the article unfolds. In the following section, we focus on the theoretical framing of the article, and its argument.

2. Theoretical Framing: Decoloniality

The paper is couched within decoloniality. This theory is not a singular theoretical school of thought, although it is grounded in the earlier works of Enrique Dussel and Anibal Quijano. Instead, it is a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem of the modern age (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:13). While the school of decoloniality is diverse, our arguments are based on the theorisation of Sabelo Gatsheni-Ndlovu. He suggests that the centre of decoloniality is the idea of remaking the world such that enslaved, colonised and exploited peoples can regain their ontological density, voice, land, history, knowledge and power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015:23). Undoubtedly, some religious expressions practiced today suggest coloniality, through a sense of uncontrolled, abusive tendencies. According to Huerfano, Caballero and Rojas (2016:78), decoloniality should challenge and reformulate the communicational scientific discourse by criticising the mediating power of Anglo-American hegemonic thinking, to obtain a native cultural paradigm. The theory rejects modernity, which is located in the oppressed and exploited side of the ‘colonial difference’, and rather argues ‘towards a decolonial liberation struggle to a world beyond eurocentered modernity’ (Ramón 2011:12), spiritual hegemony and commercialisation of religion. Decoloniality is,

re-emerging within a context of crisis of imagination of liberation [religious oppression], freedom, development and the future. The crisis is mainly manifesting itself at the ideological, theoretical and epistemological levels (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015:21).

The theory aspires to break with monologic modernity, through an invitation to engage in dialogue (Torres 2007:261) to end harmful religious practices, in order to create and allow a conducive religious environment that has the

impetus to contribute to sustainable development and peaceful and harmless religious practices. Decoloniality also involves a search for better ways of theorising and explaining the meaning of religious liberation and freedom, as well as taking the struggles forward in contemporary surmising (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015:23). Coloniality refers to, ‘long-standing patterns of power that emerged because of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations’ (Grosfoguel 2007:243). In short, the core of decoloniality, as suggested by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:13), is the agenda of shifting the ‘geography and biography of knowledge’ to native people, who have the potential and knowledge to address their own vulnerabilities. Decoloniality is an endeavour by people to critique religious practices in relation to human rights. Decoloniality becomes, in this sense, a way of thinking, doing and imagining a better future (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015:46) through non-abusive religious freedom and practices. Decoloniality is the ideal theoretical framework to couch this article, because it ‘encompass[es] various domains and realms simultaneously, simply because [of] global imperial designs and colonial matrices of power’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:44) to decentre oppressive religious rhetoric.

3. Unpacking the Jonestown Episode: Exposing Religious Abuse

To advance the argument of this article, we refer to the Jonestown incident to reveal various trajectories of freedom of religion that have not been theorised, conceptualised and interpreted through the lens of decoloniality, or respect for human rights. By navigating through the incident, we attempt to identify lessons that have been missed in defining freedom of religion. The Jonestown incident remains one of many examples of how freedom of religion that is poorly defined disrupts human rights initiatives, creates uncontrollable individuals, commercialises religion and causes human lives to be lost.

In November 1978, America was confronted by a shocking convergence of religion and violence, at Jonestown (Chidester 2003: xvii). Jonestown is named after Jim Jones, the founder of the People’s Temple. He influenced and convinced his followers to leave their homes to settle with him in the wilderness of north Guyana; this settlement was later called Jonestown

(Sanua 2007:332). Jim Jones had founded the People's Temple in Indianapolis in 1955. By 1961, it was known as the People's Temple Full Gospel Church, and it became part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which ordained Jones in 1964 (VanDeCar 2003:23). During his high-school years, Jones had preached on the streets in an industrial neighbourhood of Richmond, Indiana, to a multiracial audience. In the summer of 1949, he had married Marceline Baldwin, a young nurse from a Richmond family of Methodists and Republicans (Hall, Schuyler & Trinh 2000:28). Soon after marrying, Jones moved his operations to Ukiah, California, near San Francisco, and, by 1971, he was active in San Francisco and Los Angeles (VanDeCarr 2003:24).

In consolidating his religious empire, Jim Jones,

isolated his followers from outside media and subjected them to near constant haranguing. He used propaganda to blackmail the US government and their families back home. The news media, according to Jones, sought to destroy his community (VanDeCarr 2003:24).

Chidester (2003) describes this practice as 'strategic distancing'. To ensure total control, Jim Jones,

adopted practices derived from wider cultural sources. These included pseudo-Pentecostalist practices of discernment that Jones transformed into a vehicle of intelligence gathering whereby he used Temple staff to monitor members (Hall *et.al.* 2000:34).

The people of Jonestown were also involved in sexual harassment incidents, perpetrated in the name of God. The congregants forced into sexual activities were, 'traumatised but the escape mechanism was narrowed down to leaving the victims at the mercy of the perpetrators' (Wise 2014:1). According to Bottoms, Nielsen, Murray and Filipas (2005:94) Jones' behaviour caused confusion, induced guilt and betrayed the victims. Through his actions, followers, 'acquired a sense of purposelessness and disconnection from life coupled with unbearable loneliness, isolation and alienation' (Damiami 2002:46). The children of Jonestown were indoctrinated to mistrust their parents, and to become more and more secretive (Zablocki 1979:18), ultimately children died, and escaped from capitalism (Chidester 1991). To ensure that he dominated his followers completely, Jones insisted that

followers give up their previous lives and engage in a struggle that had no limits, and preserved Jim Jones's status quo (Hall, Schuyler & Trinh 2000:44). Furthermore, as argued by Chidester (2003), Jones 'promised his followers that they will become like God, deified, by dying to capitalism in order to be reborn to socialism'. In this way, Jones became, according to Henze (1996:1), 'legalistic, mind controlling, religiously addictive, and authoritarian', as well as abusive. Henze's (1996) observation of Jim Jones's mind control is buttressed by Larsen (2010:44), who argues that,

He put them into hard labour and subjected them to physical pressure as well as mental stress when he had them work long hours, participating in public meetings that would last until past midnight, giving them four to five hours sleep at best, while his speeches were repeatedly broadcasted via the public speaker system.

Followers were subjected to physical pressure, including food and sleep deprivation; he exerted mental pressure, inculcated fictional fears and then instilled a sense of guilt for clinging to life's luxuries, recognition and reward (Zablocki 1979:17). To Jones, physical punishment was necessary to maintain standards of acceptable conduct and to prevent internal dissension from taking hold. Through the lens of decoloniality, this manipulation, physical abuse and brainwashing (Hall, *et al.* 2000:43) overshadows the beauty of religion in society.

Information about the events and life in Jonestown started to leak to the relatives of the Jonestown residents. The concerned relatives portrayed the People's Temple as, employing physical intimidation and psychological coercion as part of a mind-programming campaign, in violation of the United Nations Human Rights Declaration of 1948 (Hall 1987:229). This prompted US Congress to investigate allegations of abuse at Jonestown raised by, especially, Concerned Relatives (a group of people who were worried about their relatives at Jonestown). A certain congressman, Leo Ryan, together with journalists representing the San Maleo district of northern California, took up the challenge of mounting an official congressional investigation into Jonestown (Chidester 2003:11). Unfortunately, as Hall, *et al.* (2000:99) argue, at Jonestown, Jim Jones had, over days, already coached his community on how to respond to the visitors. On the evening that Ryan and his party arrived, Jonestown gave them an orchestrated welcome at the main pavilion, serving

up a good dinner and musical entertainment from *The Jonestown Express*. However, the visit did not end well, as the congressman and a journalist were assassinated by Jim Jones loyalists. Hall (1989) is of the view that the congressman had an ‘anti-cult’ perspective, long before he was approached by the Temple’s countermovement, the Concerned Relatives.

After the death of Ryan, Jones manipulated and persuaded his followers to ingest cyanide. The majority drank the poison as an act of obedience, and out of fear of Jim Jones. On that day alone, more than 914 people, including children, died of cyanide poisoning. Chidester (2003) describes what was perceived as a redemptive act and revolutionary suicide, validating the observation by Enroth (1992:41), that the holders of spiritual power become strong role models through their dogmatic teaching, bold confidence and arrogant assertiveness, which, in the case of Jonestown, led to unnecessary loss of life. In summarising the historical unfolding of the Jonestown tragedy, Chidester (2003:11) says this, ‘incomprehensive outburst of violence, destruction, death led to an end of Jonestown but marked the beginning of the struggle’ to propose solutions to circumvent the reoccurrence of a similar tragedy, caused by unrestrained religious freedom. Hence; in light of the Jonestown incident, we join the struggle, with other scholars, to problematise religious freedom that negates human rights, constitutional rights and freedom to have an individual response to God. To do so, in the following section, we unearth various lessons that were/are overlooked in constitutional rights in relation to the freedom of religion.

4. Unlearnt Lessons from the Jonestown Incident Regarding Freedom of Religion

The critical question, which is, of course, open to debate, is why we refer to Jonestown, in light of freedom of religion in South Africa? Why recount the Jonestown incident in the South African context? The reason is that the incident serves as one of the best examples of the consequences of freedom of religion being a poorly defined concept, that does not take into consideration respect for human rights, and serves as an impediment to national and global mindsets and development (UNESCO 2011:17). While this incident is a traumatic report of the implementation of freedom of religion in the world, we argue that certain lessons have not been learned, and this is manifest in

contemporary praxis of religion in South Africa; if it is not problematised, it could lead to loss of life. The first unlearnt lesson is the commercialisation of religion and abuse.

4.1 Commercialisation of Religion

One of the emerging trajectories of religion in contemporary South Africa this article refers to is commercialisation of religion. Commercialisation of religion means using religion to make a profit, by selling hope. Often, contemporary prophets are characterised by amassing wealth, which they obtain from church members through religious narratives. The *Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities* (2015) (henceforth CRL), defines commercialisation of religion as,

exposing tendencies of refusal to take the prescribed oath. It is also the refusal to the required documents, including financial statements, AGM minutes, constitution or code of conduct, disciplinary codes, statement of faith, signatories to the bank accounts, deeds or leases of the land they were operating from and organograms. It is also the obfuscation and refusal to answer questions posed by the panel.

Cognisant of the above definition, within the poorly defined concept of freedom of religion, religious leaders justify their manipulation and extortion of money as obedience to God. In Jonestown, Jim Jones forced members to turn over all their material assets, including their children (Klenetsky 1983:26). Larsen (2010) explains that Jim Jones gave his followers hope, and made them believe that change was possible; it became easy for them to entrust their wealth to Jones.

Similar practices are evident in some churches today, and this leads to outsider observers to consider the church to be a profit-making scheme in the guise of religion. Epondo (2015) believes that emerging ministries are run like insurance companies owning sanctimonious spiritual powers, playing on the hopes and fears of their followers, in exchange for generous tithes. In addition, Epondo (2015) argues that prophets, or 'men and women of God', want better lives for themselves too, and will continue to exploit people's hopes and fears.

There is a joke about a Nigerian man (no offence to Nigerians) who phoned his father, and told him that life is hard, and he wants to come back home. The father asked the son where he was. The son said he was in South Africa. The father responded by saying, ‘Sonny, don’t worry, just open a church, all will be fine’. The implication is that, in the context of freedom of religion, South Africa has, arguably, ignored or failed to deal with the commercialisation of religion, which puts people at the mercy of individuals who use religion to extort money. Decoloniality, as a lens for the study, allows us to challenge such practices and calls for transformation of the way freedom of religion is defined and conceptualised.

4.2 Covertly Oppressive Religion

Another trajectory of freedom of religion that is poorly defined is that it houses oppression in disguise. While the government promotes social justice, equality, gender equality, and respect for all, a blind eye has been turned to religious practices that covertly champion oppression. The blind eye is due to the interpretation of religious narratives as religious freedom; in the process, people lose their lives, property, and selves at the expense of religious freedom. As we explained above, Jonestown was characterised by oppression, and the followers were subjected to physical pressure and mental stress (Larsen 2010:44). However, the fact that these practices were enforced in the context of religion, was ignored or not given enough attention Chidester (2003) concludes that it culminated in brainwashing and ushered in the mass suicide at Jonestown. There is a need to challenge brain manipulation in religious circles. In addition, oppression at Jonestown was consolidated by a pervasive apparatus of monitoring. Jones used Temple staff to collect information on individuals' lives and their social relationships and used the information in prophetic strategies (Hall *et al.* 2000:43).

In contemporary South Africa, various practices have been suggested as representing oppression, including making believers eat snakes, spraying them with insecticide, or forcing congregants to drink various fuels (Mapumulo 2017). However, the challenge lies in interpretation: According to our approach, this is oppression, while others deem it to represent obedience to the prophetic mandate – this difference complicates efforts to decolonise faith narratives.

Another angle of religious oppression is what Chidester (1991:179) refers to as a ‘strategic distancing’. Strategic distancing cuts congregants’ relations with their family members, the leader becomes the centre of decision-making, and any other opinions are evil and destructive. Under such conditions abuse becomes inevitable. A local example is that of Pastor Timothy Omotoso of Nigeria, who was arrested for sexually enslaving young women from his church in Durban (Mthethwa 2017) after offering them accommodation and gifts; his actions served as strategic distancing, and provided him the opportunity to inflict abuse. We use decoloniality to negate enactment of social systems that, in the end, become oppressive and manipulative, which favour only a few people in the community, and end up being, ‘symptomatic of a madness’ (Chidester 2003:37). Omotoso arguably used religious hegemony and abused the trust that the girls had for him as a religious person. In light of the above, Larsen (2010:17) believes,

oppressive religious hegemony emanates from black traditions. There is a tendency to give a religious leader the designation ‘Father’ or ‘Daddy’. This implies giving an individual absolute authority and consequently, his followers will owe him absolute obedience.

While obedience is a religious virtue, through the lens of decoloniality we argue for obedience that originates from self-will, which is free of manipulation, and lacking abuse. This kind of obedience is critical, inquisitive and accountable to everyone. Failure to ground obedience creates individuals who have excessive power, and who believe they have monopoly of God. Jim Jones had this uncontrolled and excessive power, which ultimately contributed to the demise of many innocent lives. In fact, according to Larsen (2010:37), Jim Jones wanted to be above criticism, and those who dared oppose him were punished. Nobody was spared and even the elderly risked being punished if they dared talk back (Larsen 2010:37).

In decoloniality, we believe that religious leaders who support human rights must be motivated to investigate, expose and question hegemony, that is, traditional power assumptions held about relationships, groups, communities, societies and organisations, to promote social change (Given 2008:140). In short, the unlearned lesson being unearthed here is that religious freedom covertly houses oppression, which must be challenged by redefining freedom of religion in light of human rights and other constitutional rights.

4.3 Freedom of Religion and Harmful and Questionable Practices

Freedom of religion has also lead to harmful and questionable practices, which overshadow the beauty of religion in society. In South Africa, freedom of religion has lead to new practices that people would never have imagined could be practised in the context of religion. While novelty and freedom of engaging in religious practices is noble, desirable and, perhaps even, someone's constitutional right, it is disturbing that some practices are dangerous. For example, a dangerous pesticide chemical, Doom, is used for religious purposes. In response to the use of the chemical, the Doom spokesperson said,

We want to make it very clear that it is unsafe to spray Doom Super Multi Insect Killer... into people's faces, the packaging has very clear instruction and health warnings for humans which must be adhered to (*Jamaica Observer* 2016).

It is clear that, in this case, freedom of religion violates human rights, and endangers human life. The Doom incident is not the only report of harmful practices. There are examples of people who were told to eat snakes or grass, which, it was claimed, would taste like chocolate (CRL 2015:7). People trust that religious leaders give spiritual guidance and lead them; however, preachers are also human and sometimes they take things too far (*Sowetanlive* 2014).

5. Decoloniality of Religion: What it Means and the Way Forward

Having highlighted the trajectories of freedom of religion in the South African context of praxis, it is logical to suggest ways to unmask and challenge the problem of religious coloniality, to pave the way for a freedom of religion that seeks to promote human rights, freedom and social justice. By taking such an approach, we affirm the understanding of Bottoms *et al.* (1995:109), that, 'in the long run, society should find ways to protect people from religion-related abuse and help religion evolve in the direction of better treatment of people'. Decoloniality, as an approach to religious practices, offers an opportunity for

reframing freedom of religion in the milieu of human rights. The time has come for a decolonial turn, in order to transform and rethink the religious narrative (Zondi 2016:20).

Decoloniality is centred on the notion that no mind-control technique is without weakness and, even in the Jonestown commune, the idea of total and absolute control over cult members was unachievable, regardless of how hard Jones and his inner circle leadership tried to discourage and avoid the development of dissenting opinions (Larsen 2010:37). Decoloniality argues that religious people have to participate in their own liberation from oppressive leaders. This is possible when religious leaders engage in a spiritual journey of religious literacy and of modelling religion as a desirable institution meant to improve the human condition, instead of perpetrating the colonial legacy of oppression and abuse. There is a need for better ways to theorise religion, of critiquing and taking religious struggles for the liberation from hegemonic forces forward in contemporary religious conjecture (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015:23), to improve the human condition and eliminate coloniality.

5.1 Reintroduction of Religious Education in Schools

The success of the decoloniality project provides hope for human-rights oriented freedom of religion, and is hinged on educating the nation on various religious practices. The removal of religion from basic education was, to some, a noble way of dealing with the problem of religion in the curriculum and in society. Its removal brought new religious trajectories, which are reinforced by religious illiteracy and poorly defined freedom of religion. It can be argued that South African society is reaping the fruits of removing religion from schools. Removing religion from schools made religious knowledge a privilege of the few who have the liberty to misinterpret, abuse and use it to justify oppressive actions. The critical question, which other scholars can engage in, is why developed countries have not extricated religion from their school curricula? Could removal of religion from the school curriculum be the reason for weird religious practices under the auspices of freedom of religion? Our argument, based on this conjecture, and informed by decoloniality, is that the re-engagement of religion in school can facilitate ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mignolo 2009:3), and this requires the involvement of interventions at the level of power (Torres 2007:262), such as the CRL.

5.2 *Emancipation of the Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities*

One of the South African government's responses to the commercialisation of religion has been the introduction of the CRL Commission, which deals with issues of religion and culture. While the CRL has admirable aims, it must work within parameters that do not infringe on the right of religion, worship and expression, yet at the same time, make firm decisions when there is clear evidence of violations of human rights, such as making people eat snakes or drink engine oil, or spraying them with Doom. While setting up a commission is appreciated, there is a need for the Commission to rework and reframe the understanding of religion, before it engages in prosecuting religious leaders. Prosecuting abusive religious leaders requires an amendment of the constitution, to align religious practices with other human rights obligations of which South Africa is a signatory. As it stands, and as has been argued in this article, freedom of religion is poorly defined, and in some quarters of society, characterised by destructive practices. An external power, such as the CRL Commission, if emancipated and supported, can be geared to mitigate the problem of religious abuse. Furthermore, the Commission should have the power to prosecute abusive people, even if religious followers oppose it.

6. Trajectories of Redefining Freedom of Religion

While the lessons have been unearthed, we identify challenges that complicate the redefining of freedom of religion in contemporary South Africa. Pointing out these trajectories also serves as a space for other scholars to continue with the debate on how to navigate through the challenges to create new discourses in the study of religion.

6.1 *Support of Oppressive Leaders*

The critical question that we raise is, why do people who are oppressed by religion support the oppressive system? In many cases, oppressive religious practices go unreported to the police; usually because people fear the religious leader, or believe that unusual religious practices are a manifestation of the presence of God. This failure to report abuse makes the prosecution of religious

leaders, defending human rights and understanding religious freedom very difficult. A classic example is the attempt by the CRL to redress abusive religious practices. They faced challenges, especially from the people they intended to protect. The CRL Commission (2015) reports that, during hearings, they faced several challenges and impediments from certain religious persons who appeared before them, which,

Manifested in several ways, among other things, attendance of an entourage of members or supporters and in certain cases armed bodyguards, undermining or defying and misunderstanding of the statutory objectives, powers and functions of the CRL Rights Commission.

Given this scenario, we can argue that, if the oppressed do not see the value of being liberated, then efforts to achieve liberation are fruitless. This confirms the observation of Freire (1970) that, when the oppressed acquire the mindset of the oppressor, they become fearful of freedom. Often, according to McClure (2014:3), ‘victims of spiritual abuse may continue to support the abusive leader because of their naïveté or loyalty to the leader’. One typical example relates to the prophet Hadebes. The CRL Commission summoned him to appear before them, but he refused, and church members wore T-shirts bearing the message, ‘Hands off our spiritual leaders’ (eNCA 2015). Prosecuting the prophet was difficult, because religious members supported the practices from which the Commission sought to protect them. This implies that any case raised by the Commission against the prophet is likely to fail, since no-one is willing to testify against the prophet. This experience complicates the whole concept of freedom of religion. If we want religion to make a positive contribution in South Africa, there is need to find a crack code that enables the abused to speak out, even in the context of religion.

6.2 Lack of Critique of Religious Practices

It is evident that many Africans, despite being religious, are religiously illiterate. Some religious practices can be prevented if people possess a general understanding and knowledge of religion. Religious illiteracy is propagated by the fact that the majority of religious followers rely on a priest or pastor for

religious information, creating a sense that religious leaders are superheroes and custodians of the absolute truth (Powell & Clarke 2012:15). In addition, there is a generally uncritical approach to the study and practice of religion. More often than not, people may not question, disagree with and express displeasure about religious practices. Often, as Prothero (2007:6) argues, religious illiteracy is dangerous, in the sense that critical evaluation of religious practices is suppressed by intimidation and unquestionable histories and identities.

Religion, as practiced and manifested today, despite freedom of religion, which is ambiguous, produces religious followers who are unable to engage in religion. We agree with Damiani (2002:45), that religious practices that are not critiqued, ‘destroy[s] any individual personality and replace the void with a cultic personality that no longer questions, thinks critically, or feels the impact of an abusive system’. This produces a new coloniality that needs to be challenged. It produces new colonial masters, not the West, like in the past, but African colonial masters who use religion to push an agenda of coloniality. Informed by decoloniality, McConaghy (2003:11) argues that there is a need for a religion that does not only console, but which provokes people to think through religious practices. In this way, freedom of religion can be reconceptualised and practised within parameters that champion social justice, equity and freedom.

7. Strength of the Article

While various authors have problematised the Jonestown incident, among whom Chidester (2003), Hall (1989), McConaghy (2003), Sanua (2007), VanDeCarr (2003), Wise (2014) and Zablocki (1997), the uniqueness of this article is that it has problematised the Jonestown incident in light of the constitutional right of freedom of religion in South Africa, notwithstanding other scholars’ contributions. To present a contemporary understanding of new religious movements, the article presents examples of scenarios that are vivid in people’s minds. Some of the scenarios were never considered in the problematisation by scholars such as Chidester and Hall – such as spraying Doom on congregants. Furthermore, the article takes a bold stance to challenge both religious groups and the government on the need to regulate religious activities, cognisant of the human rights charter. The article does not attempt

to solve the problem of religion from a theological perspective only, as suggested by Chidester (2003) and Tull (1989), but also from a sociological perspective (how religion is viewed by society), a constitutional perspective, and also from a human rights orientation. Moreover, Chidester (2003) took a more historical approach, while this study is interpretive, and relates to contemporary practice of religion. The article is couched in decoloniality, as an emerging theory, to problematise freedom of religion, new religious movements, and oppressive religions as part of the struggle to reconstruct the contested religious terrain in order for religion to contribute positively to the wellbeing of the people of South Africa and elsewhere, who face similar religious trajectories.

8. Weakness of the Article

The article appears to be silent on the positive contributions made by new faith movements in South Africa. As the saying goes, no matter how thin one slices the bread, there are always two sides. The article focuses only on negative aspects, which might not be appreciated by other religious players. In this regard, we invite other scholars to problematise this topic of this article, with the goal of unearthing benefits of new religious movements that are cognisant of democracy, and who respect human rights and freedom of religion.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to problematise freedom of religion by arguing that it is poorly defined in relation to its implementation and, as a result, various religious pathologies are becoming the order of the day. We reflect on Jim Jones, who, under the auspices of freedom of religion, cause the demise of many people. Through this incident, we investigated unlearnt lessons that evoke the need to redefine religious freedom. In conclusion, and informed by decoloniality, we declare that freedom of religion should be reframed, so that it champions social justice, equity and freedom. Freedom of religion should be understood as allowing religious practices that support the improvement of the human condition, deconstructs coloniality and shows respect for human rights. Under such circumstances, we are in agreement with Mignolo (2008:16), that

we are working towards a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of religious coloniality.

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