1 Institution and Religion: Directing a Debate to a Different Contextual Reality

Judged by the debate among some of the most prominent scholars in the field of international practical theology today, the topic of institution and religion may well be regarded as of lesser importance. Here I particularly have in mind the prevailing debate conducted under the rubric: “Practical theology as a hermeneutical science of lived religion” (Weyel 2014; see also Ganzevoort 2009; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014; Gräb 2014; Schweitzer 2014). Under this topical focus, the argument developed is that practical theology is assigned the essential task of illuminating the concept and practices of “lived religion”. Ruard Ganzevoort and Johan Roeland, two exponents of this approach to practical theology explain:

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 93; italics added).

It becomes necessary to emphasise that Ganzevoort and Roeland’s reference to “the turn away from institutes” should not be understood as a complete turn away from such institutes. This emerges in the way in which the institution of the church is recognised as a prevailing site of lived religion in more than one contribution to the debate. Of particular significance, however, is that this recognition is at the same time relativised by the relatively small role afforded to the church in the production of religion in everyday life (see Miller-McLemore 2012, 105 – 107). It is postulated that much, if not most, of what is produced as lived religion happens outside the realm of the church. “Lived religion does not refer primarily to forms of belonging to a Christian community or to the church. Lived religion is a sense of the religious dimension of human life” (Gräb 2014, 109; cf. Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 96; Schweitzer 2014, 144; Weyel 2014, 154).

The direction in which I am seeking to take the discussion in this chapter should not be understood as an attempt to devaluate or undermine the claims and perspectives on lived religion arising from the international debate on practical theology. The insight that religious meaning, experiences, and practices can be found outside the institutional domain of the church, and that as such they remain distinctive features that are by no means being dissipated as a result of processes of secularisation and deinstitutionalisation (Weyel 2014; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014), is compelling and
relevant. Yet I want to argue at the same time that this insight needs to be understood and appreciated in terms of its *situatedness*. While scholars from the Global North are not the sole contributors to the practical theological debate on lived religion (see e.g., Charbonnier et al. 2018), it is nevertheless a debate that is dominated by scholars from this part of the world – i.e., noticeably from continental Europe. Clearly, it is this group of scholars whose ideas on the matter are mostly advanced in prominent outlets such as the *International Journal of Practical Theology*, and whose situatedness is constituted through their self-orientation within their contexts of advanced secularisation and deinstitutionalisation (see e.g., Ganzevoort 2009, 2; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 97; Weyel 2014, 158).

My point of orientation in this practical theological debate – which predominantly reflects an outlook on institution and religion in the Global North – leads me to direct the deliberation towards a conspicuously different reality in the rest of this chapter. This is the reality of the Global South, Africa, and South Africa, which determines my own situatedness. As such, I am a South African scholar of practical theology and religious studies who cannot deny my own upbringing in a theological and ecclesial tradition that has to a large extent looked northwards for generating its own ideas and its socio-institutional location. Yet at the same time I have found this orientation to be increasingly challenged by my own growth in decolonial sensibility, my related exposure to the academic and social worlds across the South-North spectrum and, not least, my own plain observation and sense-making of the dynamics of far-reaching religious and social change in my own society and beyond. From this vantage point, I want to advance the thesis that a situatedness such as my own calls for a far more pointed practical theological concern with the *institutional* dimensions of lived religion. Contrary to what may be offered as a wholly legitimate perspective by practical theological scholars from the Global North in the light of their own situatedness, the argument that I want to proffer is that my own contextual reality is one where the institutional dimension ought to be taken very seriously as a major, if not *the* dominant, domain where lived religion is practised and produced. As such, this is a context of ongoing religious change where a religious institution such as the Christian church is flourishing in multiple, diverse, and fluid ways; by implication, it is a context where lived religion ought to be sought and studied more than anything else inside or within the institutional domain.

I will now continue to in the rest of this chapter draw selectively on perspectives from the broad field of religious studies research that I perceive as significant to support and inform my line of argumentation on institution and religion. These are perspectives that are in one way or another all concerned with the contemporary reality of far-reaching religious change that accordingly take us to a contextual reality far removed from the one presented by practical theological scholars from the Global North. Representative of my own situatedness, this is the world of Global South...
Christianities,¹ in which the churches of Africa occupy a central place; but closer to home, incorporated is also my own South African religious context where scholarly undertakings to track (or map) the sacred and carry out other forms of empirical work reveal images of an institutional geography and dynamics reminiscent of developments within a larger southern Christian presence, not least on the wider African continent.

2 Looking South: Fragments of a New Christian Synthesis

If the Christian church, historically the most powerful religious institution in that part of the world known as the Global North, is in decline because of ongoing processes of advanced secularisation and deinstitutionalisation, this is not the case in that part of the world referred to as the Global South. This is the message conveyed by a growing chorus of commentators and scholars in the field of religious studies internationally, which in a very direct way supports the argument I am pursuing in this chapter. In a nutshell, it is a message that (at least in the explicit case of some contributors) does not ignore the presence of another major force shaping the contours of ongoing religious change, namely Islam (Jenkins 2007, 189–221; Kim 2012, xxxiv, 19–20, 78, 364–65; Mwashinga 2016, 35, 48–49). Yet, at the same time, it is a message that wants to open our eyes to an epoch-making transformative moment in the history of religion worldwide whereby the centre of gravity of the Christian world is shifting from the Global North to the Global South, to Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia (see e.g. Anderson 2013; Daughrity 2018; Jenkins 2007; Johnson and Chung 2004; Johnson and Kim 2005; Johnson and Ross 2009; Kim 2012; Lampport 2018; Mwashinga 2016; Tryggestad 2010). To quote from Philip Jenkins’s magisterial work (2007, 1–2) theorising about this shift in the centre of gravity:

Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions. If we want to visualize a ‘typical’ contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria, or in a Brazilian favela. In parts of Asia too, churches are growing rapidly, in numbers and self-confidence. As Kenyan scholar John Mbiti has observed, ‘the centers of the church’s universality [are] no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London, New York, but Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila’.

The important point arising from this quotation does not only reflect the fact about Christianity’s extraordinary growth in distinctive parts of the world known collective-

¹ I accept the premise that there “is no single southern Christianity” and that the plural reference far more appropriately does justice to “the vast and diverse world” of Christianities in the Global South (Jenkins 2006, 13; Jenkins 2007, 8; see also Johnson and Ross 2010, 12).
ly as the Global South. It also affirms a larger scholarly recognition that such growth becomes manifested first and foremost in the ongoing proliferation of the *church* as institution (see e.g., Johnson and Kim 2005, 80; Kim 2012, 4). In other words, through this scholarly recognition we encounter a perspective on religious change that is steeped in socio-historical reality and for this reason can be considered as of paramount importance for a contemporary practical theological scholarship that rightly aspires to prioritise the practice of lived religion as its object of study. For such scholarship it implies that a concern with lived religion in those parts of the world where the Christian religion is flourishing ought to take us back to prioritising research and study of practices *within* and *by* the Christian church. Unmistakably, however, this has become a daunting task, perhaps more than ever before given the myriad of manifestations that may count as church within the domain of institution and religion.

The recognition of the immense diversity and plurality of what may count as being church in the Global South today (Jenkins 2006, 13; Jenkins 2007, 8; Johnson and Ross 2010, 12; Kim 2012, 8, 20–21) – in other words church as a carrier of lived religion in its plurality of expressions – brings us to the important question then of whether it may in fact be possible to draw any converging lines from this diverse but proliferating institutional phenomenon. In this respect, I find compelling the idea or thesis of a “new Christian synthesis”, which is central to Jenkins’s (2007, 7) argument, but also finds resonance in a considerable body of complementary literature. In what can be considered at the most as addressing fragments of this *synthesis*, I am confining myself to a few observations in trying to capture essential elements of the phenomenon of the rising churches of the South.

A significant point of departure is that one can only come to a reliable understanding of the phenomenon of the rising Southern churches by not projecting onto them the “familiar realities and desires” (Jenkins 2007, 15) emanating from the Global North. This highlights the expectation of Western liberal but socially committed Christians that the rising churches from the Global South could become the vehicles of a kind of emancipation and leadership that, in the mould of liberation theology, “would be fervently liberal, activist, and even revolutionary” (Jenkins 2006, 13; Jenkins 2007, 7). Jenkins, however, explains why this expectation could be considered a fallacy:

In this view, the new Christianity would chiefly be concerned with pulling down the mighty from their seats, through political action or even armed struggle. All too often, though, these hopes have proved illusory. Frequently, the liberationist voices emanating from the Third World proved to derive from clerics trained in Europe and North America, and their ideas won only limited local appeal. Southern Christians would not avoid political activism, but they would become involved strictly on their own terms (2006, 13; 2007, 7).

The fundamental issue is that it has become crucially important to recognise that while many Southern Christians and their churches have embraced the cause of political liberation, they have “made it inseparable from *deliverance* from supernatural evil” (Jenkins 2006, 13; Jenkins 2007, 7). It is this distinctive feature – an emphasis
that reverberates in a considerable body of literature – that should be regarded as the “single key area of faith and practice that divides Northern and Southern Christians” (Jenkins 2007, 143): the belief in spiritual forces, the effect of such forces on everyday human life, and the way they shape the existence of the churches (see e.g., Adogame 2004; Anderson 2003; Chitando, Gunda, and Kügler 2014; Ilo 2018; Jenkins 2007, 143–147; Jenkins 2006, 16; ter Haar 2009). While such beliefs may be rejected by a Northern secular mindset as superstitious and a manifestation of a pre-Enlightenment worldview, they align with a cultural orientation and worldview that perceive the realities of evil, sickness and repression to be directly influenced by supernatural forces. This explains, for instance, why the practice of healing – through spiritual means – takes such a central place especially in the newer Southern churches. But it also explains these churches’ fervent identification with biblical worldviews, which in turn give rise to ritual and worship practices that emulate the practices of the ancient Hebrew and early Christian communities of the Bible. As observed by Jenkins, “(c)ultural affinities with the biblical world” lead many contemporary Christians from Africa and Asia especially to see the Old Testament “as their story, their book” (2006, 14; see also Gunda 2014), an identification that in turn finds concrete expression in the way in which worship and social events frequently evolve around practices of animal sacrifice (see Wepener et al. 2019) as well as in celebrations of key events in the ceremonial year (Jenkins 2006, 14; cf. 151–153). At the same time, however, this does not rule out the New Testament as equally influential, since texts such as the Letter to the Hebrews, the Book of Revelation and the Gospels all in their respective ways appeal to a Christian life world in which veneration of the living dead, ritual practices of blood sacrifice, and the power to perform prophetic revelation, miracles, exorcism and faith-healing constitute core ingredients of a lived religion (Jenkins 2006, 14–17; cf. Jenkins 2007, 148–149, 151–153; see also Gunda 2014).

A major argument advanced by Jenkins therefore is that we may today find ourselves at the beginning of a new epoch whereby the rising churches of the South will in fact take us “back to the future” (Jenkins 2007, 6–9). The dominant churches of the future, he contends, may well be seen as sharing many commonalities with those of the medieval or early European period (Jenkins 2007, 8; cf. 2006, 17). In what I consider to be a valuable part of his discussion, he also introduces the distinction between churches and sects in support of his argument (Jenkins 2007, 156–160). By drawing on the related theoretical distinctions of sociologists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, the thrust of the argument is that the newer churches of the South could be seen as holding much in common with the classic features of sects vis-à-vis those of churches. These include the inclination of sects toward overt emotionalism, spontaneity and mystical experience that are not easily accommodated by the intellectualism, suppressed emotionalism and formalism that characterise the teachings and liturgical arrangements of churches. Moreover, they also include the way in which the members of sects are typically voluntary converts, often from a lower educational and social status, whose lives are strongly controlled by the organisation, in comparison with the members of churches whose members are often better edu-
cated and as a rule born into the organisation. And, last but not least, a prominent feature crucially also pertains to the nature of leadership, in the way in which sects demand that their leaders demonstrate spiritual and charismatic gifts, compared to churches who are run by formally trained ministers within a distinctively bureaucratic framework (Jenkins 2007, 157–158). Jenkins summarises the significance of this perspective:

In terms of the sociology of religion [...] [the rising churches of the South] are classic sects, with all that implies for leadership, worship style, and degree of commitment. They are fundamentalist and charismatic by nature, theologically conservative, with a powerful belief in the spiritual dimension, in visions and spiritual healing. With their claims to prophetic status, figures such as Simon Kimbangu and Isaiah Shembe exactly fit the classic profile of sect leaders. In practice, leadership roles in Pentecostal and independent churches are open to anyone who is accepted as having spiritual gifts, regardless of any form of education or theological training (Jenkins 2007, 158).

To conclude this part of the discussion, it certainly is worth alluding to another pertinent observation in Jenkins’s argument. His prediction is that Southern churches may over time, as they grow and mature, “loose something of their sectarian character, and become more like the major churches” (Jenkins 2007, 159). He even contends that the “new churches” could become “key agents” of modernisation themselves (Jenkins 2007, 159). And yet, as the argument above suggests, what will remain an influential force for a considerable time to come are the “sectarian features” that are giving rise to the unparalleled institutional proliferation and presence of Pentecostal and so-called independent churches² (Jenkins 2007, 8, 70–76, 78–84). In this respect, here it could meaningfully be noted how Jenkins’s analysis corresponds favourably with that of many other academic commentaries that identify the latter churches as the institutional representatives that will to a large extent dominate the face of global Christianity in the future (see e.g., Anderson 2013; Cox 2009; Johnson and Ross 2009; Kim 2012; Pew Forum 2007). These are expressions of ‘institution and religion’ that are flourishing in their great variety in the Global South today, are increasingly also expanding their reach toward the Global North and will continue with this dual dynamic for the unforesseeable future, albeit with some qualifications.

² According to Jenkins, “independent churches” are flourishing in the Global South. They do not fit the label of being Protestant, Catholic, Anglican, or Orthodox, but are comprised of “a wide variety of denominations, often (but not always) included under the label of Pentecostal.” This may include churches that “are affiliated with Northern Hemisphere denominations”, although a large majority “are indigenous with roots entirely in Africa, Asia, and Latin America” (2007, 70). In this respect, Jenkins also devotes considerable space to singling out the importance of the African Independent Churches (AICs) (which may otherwise also be referred to as African Indigenous or African Initiated Churches) (Jenkins 2007, 56–62, 78–80). He emphasises the fact that the AICs “collectively represent one of the most impressive stories in the whole history of Christianity”. They have been successful in adapting the Christian faith to local cultures and traditions. As such, “[t]hey are African churches with African leaders for African people” (Jenkins 2007, 61).
According to Jenkins, such flourishing does not mean that the so-called “mission” or mainstream churches will simply disappear. He highlights the fact that “leading churches” in the Global South will continue to be Anglican, Methodist and most prominently Roman Catholic (Jenkins 2007, 8, 65–70, 76–78, 226–231), though in a garment much different from their erstwhile mainstream manifestations. As a result of processes of “inculturation” and “Pentecostalisation”, they will increasingly take on features of the newer Global South churches (Jenkins 2007, 8, 65–69, 76–78, 125–142).

3 From the Global South in General to Africa and South Africa: The Case of Institution and Religion in the Unsecular City

I would like to continue briefly with Jenkins’s commentary at this point in my discussion by drawing on another captivating idea from his work: the notion of the unsecular city (Jenkins 2007, 107–108). One of the important themes running through his work – a theme that effectively reverses Harvey Cox’s famous coinage, the “secular city” (Cox 1965) – is that the dynamic of the rising Southern churches will to a large extent play itself out in the cities of the Global South (cf. Johnson and Kim 2005, 80). Jenkins stresses the fact that most of the population growth in the coming decades will be urban, albeit with some qualification as this will by and large be a development in the Global South, giving rise to an increasing number of vast metropolitan complexes with populations totalling tens of millions. He writes:

We think of cities such as Cairo, Mumbai (Bombay), Dhaka, Karachi, Jakarta, Lagos, and Mexico City, each with perhaps 30 to 40 million people, and next to nothing in working government services. Tens of millions of new urban dwellers will in effect be living and working totally outside the legal economy or any effective relationship with officialdom. And there will be other future colossi, giant cities with names hitherto unfamiliar to Westerners, centers such as Kampala, Kinshasa, Dar-es-Salaam, and Sana’a (Jenkins 2007, 107–108).

It is against this backdrop that Jenkins gives an account of the striking urban presence of the rising churches of the Global South, especially of the Pentecostal and independent type. He comments that the success of these churches can be seen as a by-product of modernisation and urbanisation (Jenkins 2007, 85). While there are among them also denominations that cater for sections of the middle classes, it is among the very poor that these churches are finding special appeal. Accordingly, it is at the fringes of the cities of the Global South – in the city margins and shantytowns where millions of illegal squatters, migrants and socio-economically disenfranchised try to eke out a living – where the rising churches are particularly visible and mushrooming. In these environments – in addition to performing their spiritual functions – they emerge as providers of “functional alternative arrangements for
health, welfare, and education” (Jenkins 2007, 85), as “radical communities” (Jenkins 2007, 87) where their members may find a sense of family and fellowship, but also the social network support to improve their lives (Jenkins 2007, 85–90; for a similar perspective cf. Rakodi 2014). As postulated by Jenkins, this is the way that the new churches of the Global South play a role strikingly similar to that of the early Christian communities in offered support to their members, in situations similarly devoid of any official aid. He makes the significant point:

As historian Peter Brown observes of the third and fourth centuries, ‘The appeal of Christianity still lay in its radical sense of community: it absorbed people because the individual could drop from a wide impersonal world into a miniature community, whose demands and relations were explicit.’ Every word in this sentence could be wholeheartedly applied to modern Africa or Latin America. The provision of social services that were otherwise unobtainable also goes far to explaining the growth of urban Christianity during Roman times, just like today [...] To be a member of an active Christian church today might well bring more tangible benefits than being a citizen of Nigeria or Peru (Jenkins 2007, 90; cf. 2006, 17).

I find in the above notion of the unsecular city and the perspectives that inform it a significant point of connection to also bring the discussion home to my own immediate South African context, a society that in its own right features a high level of religiosity and a considerable but diverse Christian institutional presence when compared to other societies elsewhere in Africa and the Global South (see e.g., Chipkin and Leatt 2011). In making this connection, I find no better way than to start doing this by drawing from one of the outstanding more recent scholarly books on the social place and significance of religion and its institutions in contemporary (post-apartheid) South Africa. This is David Chidester’s *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in Southern Africa* (2012), in which his aim to “track the sacred” has led him to also undertake a “preliminary mapping of the religious meanings” (Chidester 2012, 17) of the city where he has worked as a distinguished professor of religious studies for many years, namely Cape Town.

What Chidester’s tracking of the sacred in Cape Town strikingly reveals is an image that does not differ much from Jenkins’s notion of the unsecular city. One of the prominent themes running through his analysis is that of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ to make the point that any ‘mapping of the sacred’ cannot escape the heritage of Cape Town’s colonial and apartheid history. He states as a key observation: “While a European Architectonics seems firmly established at the city center, most Christians have been relegated to the periphery, the urban townships around Cape Town, where the so-called African-initiated churches in particular have redefined the meanings of urban space by sacralising not only ordinary homes but also what may be called the leftover spaces³ of the city” (Chidester 2012, 18).

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³ Such “leftover spaces”, Chidester specifies, included open lots, the areas beneath motorways and even beaches, “where a ‘line on the ground is often the only edge between sacred space and the city’” (Chidester 2012, 37).
Chidester’s undertaking has therefore led him, in a way remarkably similar to Jenkins’s, to also appreciate the city margins as the space where institutional expressions of religion are flourishing and leaving their mark. He acknowledges that this identification should not ignore the prevailing dominant presence of the European mission churches in Cape Town’s city centre – churches from the Reformed, Anglican, and German Lutheran traditions (2012, 36–37). Yet he emphasises in the same breath that by the late twentieth century this was not the space where most Christians (and also Muslims) in greater Cape Town practised their religion. They were practising their religion in the black townships, informal settlements and peripheral neighbourhoods that included the Coloured residential areas of the Cape Flats. These areas had become the spaces where Christian churches of a great variety – noticeably of the African Independent and Pentecostal charismatic types – were not only flourishing, but where European mission churches were themselves “essentially converted to African Christianity” (Chidester 2012, 37, 48–49). As a result, Chidester significantly concludes that “although it might appear to be anchored at the city center [...] Christian space in Cape Town was actually dispersed through multiple centers that had emerged on the city’s periphery” (Chidester 2012, 37).

I want to begin closing this part of my discussion by also relating to James Cochrane’s similar focus on Cape Town in a contribution some years ago in order to (re)frame “the political economy of the sacred” in post-apartheid Christianity (Cochrane 2009). A close colleague of Chidester’s at the time and in his own right a distinguished South African scholar of religious studies, Cochrane arrived at a perspective that shows strong similarities with that of Chidester. For Cochrane, a “proliferation of religious phenomena that claim some kind of Christian identity” had become an outstanding feature of the “religious spaces of the city of Cape Town”. Yet, in a way even more explicitly than Chidester, he found it necessary and appropriate to assert that such multiplying painted “a picture that may be generalized across contemporary South African society” (Cochrane 2009, 103–104; italics added).

I take from Cochrane’s claim to generalisation a valuable pointer to in conclusion also allude to a wider body of ever-growing empirically based research work offering insights into the dynamics of religious and social change across a broad South African urban reality. Including contributions that beyond those of Chidester and Cochrane take us to other major South African metropolises such as the cities of Johannesburg and Tshwane (Pretoria), this body of research work may be valued for its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary span across the disciplines of religious studies, practical theology, and the social sciences and humanities more broadly speaking. Of even greater significance, however, at the centre of the different explorations is also a similar interest in how a multitude of institutional representations from the Christian church are especially from the margins transforming their city environments and in the process providing spaces of refuge, belonging and support for their members, albeit with an important qualification. Whereas in the case of Chidester and Cochrane’s mappings, the so-called migrant-dominated Pentecostal charismatic churches are recognised as a part of the institutional representation, these churches
constitute a *dominant* focus in much of the ongoing research work (see e.g., Landau 2017; Nzayabino 2010; Ribbens and De Beer 2017; Wilhelm-Solomon et al. 2017).

## 4 A Brief Concluding Word

My aim in this chapter was to show how the conceptual framework of ‘institution and religion’ acquires new relevance for practical theological scholarship when the focus is directed to the contextual reality that determines my own situatedness: the Global South, Africa and South Africa. While practical theological scholars especially from the Global North may, for understandable reasons, find lesser relevance in this conceptual framework, my discussion has attempted to make clear why such lesser estimation cannot hold in contexts where the rise of prolific new institutional formations points instead to churches across the Pentecostal-charismatic, independent and inculturated mainline spectrum as *privileged* sites of lived religion – perhaps most pointedly for the very poor and disenfranchised.

I want to take into account, however, that my line of argumentation could easily be read as a presentation of an oversimplified South-North juxtaposition. This, I want to make clear, was not the intention. Rather, my aim was to present an argument from my own situatedness, an argument that is of *limited scope* and cannot give account of how contemporary global processes of social and religious change are also impacting on societies of the Global North. As Jenkins acknowledges himself, secularisation and religious deinstitutionalisation cannot capture the full story of the Global North today. In this story account has to be given of how a new Christian institutional presence is affirming itself in the heartlands of Global North societies through ongoing processes of mass migration from the Global South (see Jenkins 2007, 111–124). And, not least, in this story a specific chapter also needs to be written on how, within European Christianity in particular, the decline of “national or folk churches” coincides with “the survival of belief among smaller, often very committed, groups of believers”, both Catholic and Protestant (Jenkins 2007, xiii). These are parts of the story that my chapter could in no way do justice to, but that nevertheless call for the serious attention of a practical theological scholarship prioritising the concept of “lived religion” as its subject focus (cf. Weyel, 2014, 153).

## Bibliography


